

Some reflections on the life of the man we knew as Dad . . .

by *Dan Elliott*

14 Nov 08 Memorial Service

Ray Elliott died at peace in the early morning of November 12, 2008, three weeks after his 84th birthday. Ray's wife of 63 years, Helen, and their children gathered around his bedside as he was promoted to heaven. Exactly three months before his death, on August 12, Ray and 33 members of his family were in Guatemala to celebrate the dedication of the New Testament into the Nebaj Ixil-Maya language. What a joy for Ray and his family to see the completion of his life's work 55 years after it was started!

Ray and Helen arrived in Guatemala in the summer of 1953 and moved to the highland village of Nebaj, where they began to learn Spanish and Ixil simultaneously. This move followed years of preparation, during which both Ray and Helen had graduated from Wheaton College in Illinois, Ray had completed a master's degree in theology at Wheaton, and both of them had studied linguistics and joined Wycliffe Bible Translators. (Much later, Ray also earned a master's degree in linguistics from the University of Chicago.) Ray and Helen also had survived missionary "jungle camp" in southern Mexico with three children: Linda, Marsha, and Steve. Over the next ten years in Guatemala, five more children were added to the family: Debbie, Jan, Shari, Dan, and Karen.

Nebaj was just like Ray and Helen's hometown of Independence, Kansas, in that it was a rural small town and the county seat. Here end the similarities. In those days Nebaj had no paved streets, no telephones, no evangelical churches, no high school, no hospital, no electricity during daylight hours, no written Ixil language, and therefore no Ixil reading materials of any kind. What Nebaj and the surrounding communities did have was their rich Mayan culture and language, intricate and extensive family relationships, subsistence farming on steep mountain slopes, pervasive fear of evil spirits, tens of thousands of people who had not heard the good news of Jesus Christ in a language they could understand, economic and political oppression by the Spanish-speaking minority, and violent civil strife that left the people deathly afraid of outsiders.

The story of how Ray and Helen gained the trust of the people of Nebaj has many elements that could sound like Mayan folklore: an explosion in a nearby fireworks shop; two boys with third-degree burns over most of their bodies; emergency medical treatment by Helen with topical antibiotics and sterilized strips of precious bed sheets; the discovery of these dressings cast aside by the local shaman in favor of a healing balm consisting of motor oil, ashes, and chili peppers; a challenge from Helen to the boys' parents to decide who, exclusively, would treat the boys; the parents' bold choice to resist the shaman and allow the foreign woman to treat their sons; and then many weeks of intensive care by Helen while she was also caring for her young family. The boys recovered, and soon Helen—without medical training beyond first aid—was being called upon to deliver babies and treat the sick. Gradually, the Elliotts gained people's trust and became welcome in the community. As relationships grew, Ray heard more and more of the Ixil language.

Eventually Ray felt he had gained sufficient grasp of Ixil to begin translating the Gospel of Mark. This arduous task pushed the limits of his training in phonology, phonetics, grammar, Greek, hermeneutics, New Testament cultural backgrounds, and translation theory. How do you translate "wilderness" for people who live in verdant tropical mountains? How do you translate "be baptized" when the word for baptism used by the Catholic church for centuries and further adapted by the Mayan mind bears little resemblance to the work of John in the Jordan River? How do you express the idea of God's forgiveness for people who understand "God" to be malicious and vindictive? These and other translation challenges occur in a single verse, Mark 1:4.

While in Guatemala, the Elliotts were far away from their roots. Both Ray and Helen felt concern for their mothers. Raymond's brothers Richard (married to Jacqueline), Roland (Clare), and Rodger (Mary) had children of their own. The same was true of Helen's sisters MaryLou (Albert), Mona (Henne), Virginia (Gerry), and Norma (Jim) and her brother, George (Cora). The Elliotts' infrequent trips to the United States—always driving overland through Mexico—were spent catching up with the extended family, introducing the children to dozens of cousins, and visiting many churches and individuals who supported them.

In Guatemala, the eight Elliott kids attended a missionary boarding school, Huehue Academy, operated by CAM International. But since Huehue went through only 8th grade (later, 9th grade), each Elliott child in succession moved to the States for further education after graduating from Huehue. Over the years Ray and Helen did what they could to drive to the States to attend high-school and college graduations, weddings, and other family milestones. The family experienced exceptional amounts of separation, which was countered by exceptional efforts to be present for each other on significant occasions.

Back in 1942, when Ray graduated from high school in Independence, he was considering two careers: printing and music (brass instruments as well as choral music). He was also “considering” his high-school sweetheart, Helen. Although she was two years younger, she was a bright student and had been promoted beyond her grade level. Ray wrote many letters to Helen from Phillips University in Enid, Oklahoma, and she followed him to Phillips a year later. Ray was exempted from military service in World War II due to unusual vision problems, and while at Phillips he decided to pursue the ordained ministry. Ray and Helen were married on June 10, 1945, when he was 20 and she was 18, and they had their first child a year later. Ray was pastor of a church when the young couple heard the gospel message from a circuit-riding preacher. Soon they went to Wheaton College to prepare for missionary work in China. But when China was closed to American missionaries in 1948, their attention was directed to Bible translation and particularly to following Cameron Townsend, founder of Wycliffe Bible Translators, to work in Guatemala.

Ray put his interests to good use. His knowledge of printing was helpful as he produced Scripture portions and other booklets in Ixil. His love of music was expressed in his home and in his participation in many choirs, most recently during his nine years in the Bass Clef Ensemble at Go Ye Village. Ray developed other interests, including photography and wood carving. And he developed a library of thousands of volumes, providing ample reading material for himself and his family for the years when they had no access to libraries, bookstores, television, or the Internet. For decades the Bible he carried with him at all times, in his green shoulder bag, was his Greek New Testament. Wherever he lived he was called upon for church leadership, teaching Bible classes, and guest preaching. He thought deeply about the messages in Scripture and loved to explore them with others. He was growing personally and developing relationships with his children, grandchildren, and friends all the way to the end of his life.

Two more characteristics of Ray will be readily affirmed by all who knew him. First, he was a patient listener and a gentle encourager who spent countless hours listening to Ixil people and anyone else who came to see him. Second, he always found humor in words and seemed to have a pun for every occasion. The last e-mail message Ray wrote, on October 22, was a reply to some good news from his daughter Karen: “Hooray! Praise the Lord!” And in the signature: “If you are serious about learning to play the violin, you can't just fiddle around.”

Goodbye, Dad. We miss you. Have you already settled into a new home prepared just the way you like it? Have you seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ? joined a new choir? gone to lunch with the author of Hebrews? Are the people around you quietly chuckling at your witty observations? We look forward to catching up with you in God's time.

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