

American Bible Society looks back, ahead

by [Celeste Kennel-Shank](#) in the [August 31, 2016](#) issue

As the American Bible Society marks its 200th anniversary, and after a series of leadership changes and a recent move to Philadelphia, its leaders are looking to the nation's past in planning for the future.

"When you turn 200 and you're looking at another century, you ask really big questions," said Geof Morin, senior vice president for ministry mobilization.

One question is, Who in the world today cannot read scripture in their own language?

There are about 1,800 languages in which scripture does not exist, Morin said. The ABS estimates it will take about ten years to provide scripture to them.

While translation has always been part of the society's work, there is now "a sharpened focus" on it thanks to current president Roy Peterson, Morin said. Peterson, who spent decades working on Bible translation, joined the ABS in 2014.

The mission of the organization remains what it was in 1816: making the Bible available to all people in a way they can understand and afford. But "the work of doing that is slightly different in 2016 than it was in 1816," Morin said.

The ABS continues to distribute Bibles, currently through partnerships in 200 countries and territories.

After 199 years in New York City, the society moved last year to new headquarters in Philadelphia, with a 25-year lease on two floors of a building shared with Wells Fargo.

The building is just off of Independence Mall, which attracts 2.5 million visitors each year. The society has been getting to know its Jewish neighbors: on one side of the building is the National Museum of American Jewish History and on the other Congregation Mikveh Israel, the oldest continuously meeting synagogue in the United States.

Albert E. Gabbai, rabbi of Mikveh Israel, shared with the ABS an idea he first had about 25 years ago, a few years after he became the leader of the congregation: to create a Religious Heritage Trail, like the Freedom Trail in Boston. Nearby Christ Church, where many revolutionary leaders attended, would be another stop on the trail.

Partnering with the ABS is among the latest efforts in Mikveh Israel's history of interfaith collaboration, dating back to its founding in 1740, Gabbai noted.

"It is nice to have two old institutions that are still around, two spiritual institutions that care about the spiritual aspect of the nation," he said of working with the ABS.

The influence of both Jewish and Christian scripture on U.S. history will be highlighted also in another project the ABS is planning to launch in 2018: a 40,000-foot Faith and Liberty Discovery Center on the first floor of the building housing its offices.

With the center, the ABS hopes to counter some of the negative ideas about the Bible, Morin said, noting a specific finding from research the organization did with Barna Group. The percentage of adults 18 and over who have a negative perception of some kind about the Bible doubled from 10 percent in 2011 to 21 percent in 2016.

That group is among those the Bible society wants to reach by showing how the Bible shaped not only the nation's founding, but also the abolition of slavery, civil rights, women's rights, education, health care, and care of the disenfranchised in our society, Morin said.

"What if they could see something of the role of the Bible in something they see as important, our nation?" he said. In this way the society hopes to break down bias and preformed ideas, Morin said.

"In the U.S. the issue is not access," he said. "The challenge is, What is the popular perspective of the scriptures?"

Morin, an Episcopal priest, sees similar challenges for mainline churches, Catholic churches, Orthodox churches, and evangelical churches.

"Inside and outside of the church, people are getting the same media messages about the Bible, the same distractions that pull them away," he said.

The society aims to aid people in engaging scripture, including through the use of technology. One project involves biometrics, such as in a Fitbit bracelet, to show people Bible verses attuned to whether they are feeling anxious, for example.

“We see again and again and again that scripture has a wonderful ability to engage people,” Morin said.

John Fea, author of *The Bible Cause: A History of the American Bible Society*, noted that the emphasis on engaging people in scripture can alter the society’s mission. A focus on single verses, for example, is a shift from the society’s focus on publishing and selling Bibles.

For a large part of the society’s history, Fea said, “tonnage was the measure of success, based on the number of boxes they distributed.”

Beginning in 1816, the society published the Bible “without note or comment,” leaving interpretation to denominations, Fea said. In one case, a group of Baptists wanted the ABS to translate the Greek word baptizo as “immerse.” The society refused because that was seen as endorsing a particular mode of baptism, Fea said.

For most of the 20th century, the ABS was associated with Protestant ecumenism, working closely with mainline denominations, the National Council of Churches, and the World Council of Churches, Fea said. That began to shift in the 1990s, when Eugene Habecker was president.

“He saw the future of Bible reading as in the evangelical churches rather than in the mainline,” Fea said.

The ABS board was made up mostly of liberal mainline Protestants, whom Habecker saw as not representative of American Christianity, Fea said. So when some board members’ terms ended, he replaced them with evangelicals or conservative Catholics.

“There was not a rejection of mainline Protestants by any means,” Fea said. Yet the ABS “will gravitate to those within the mainline denominations who take a more evangelical approach to Christianity.”

The decade culminating with the society’s move from New York was rocky.

The board of trustees let go of Paul Irwin, president from 2005 to 2008, after an investigation into financial mismanagement. With the recession of 2008, the ABS faced financial difficulties, including the need to bring its 12-story building up to code, Fea said.

The board fired another president, Doug Birdsall, before his inauguration in 2013. Birdsall represented the group who wanted the ABS to stay in New York City, Fea said. Birdsall had promoted a plan to get the ABS out of debt by creating a conference center and hotel. But the board decided to move, selling its property for \$300 million.

After that tumult, the current president, Peterson, is seen as bringing stability, Fea said.

Today, in addition to working on scripture translation, the ABS is also publishing study notes that are specific to a denomination.

“They are now a ministry designed to help people engage the Bible,” Fea said.
“They’re open to working with anyone who is interested in promoting the Bible, anyone who thinks the Bible can transform individual lives and American society.”
—the *Christian Century*