

# Organizations partner to bring Bible to unreached people

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Texas Baptist churches that filled shoeboxes with toys last year for [Operation Christmas Child](#) not only helped introduce children to Jesus, but also played a role in bringing the gospel message to unreached people.

Last year, Operation Christmas Child—a ministry of Samaritan's Purse—distributed more than [10.6 million gift-filled shoeboxes](#) to children in 112 countries. That included evangelism and discipleship among 109 previously unreached people groups in 46 countries. The organization considers a people group unreached if its population is less than 2 percent evangelical Christian.

“We are grateful to Texas churches—and to Baptists in general—for participating,” said Jim Harrelson, vice president of Operation Christmas Child.

This summer, villagers in the Ombaka area of Namibia dedicated the first church serving the Himba people. The Himba—who had been identified as an unreached people group—received Scripture in their language through a partnership between Operation Christmas Child and [Seed Company](#), a North Texas-based affiliate of Wycliffe Bible Translators.

## Translating Scripture for unreached people

About six years ago, leaders of Operation Christmas Child met Samuel Chiang, who at that time was executive director of the International Orality Network. They talked about the need to make the Bible accessible to

unreached people.

Specifically, Chiang emphasized the need to translate Scripture into the “heart language” of people who live in a predominantly oral—rather than written—culture.

When Chiang became president and chief executive officer of Seed Company, his organization partnered with Operation Christmas Child and Samaritan’s Purse on an oral Bible translation project in Namibia.

Seed Company began meeting with the Himba people in the Ombaka area to learn the language and begin the translation of selected Scripture.

“We used a multi-generational translation approach,” Chiang said. Translators met with village elders, parents, young people and children to make certain the translation could be understood by all ages, he explained.

Seed Company translated 40 Old Testament stories, the first two chapters of Luke’s Gospel and all of Mark’s Gospel.

“Mark is a highly oral gospel,” Chiang explained, noting it is particularly well-suited to people from a storytelling culture.

The recorded Scriptures were loaded on solar-powered MP3 players, along with two other Operation Christmas Child resources translated into the Himba language—*The Greatest Gift* evangelistic booklet and *The Greatest Journey* discipleship curriculum.

## **Delivering gift boxes and recorded Scripture**

Operation Christmas Child delivered 170 MP3 players to the Himba people, along with gift-filled shoeboxes for the children.



Operation Christmas Child delivered 170 MP3 players to the Himba people, along with gift-filled shoeboxes for the children. (Screen capture from Operation Christmas Child video)

Because Seed Company representatives already had established relationships with villagers during the translation process, the Himba people eagerly awaited the arrival of the recorded Scripture. Children and their families eagerly gathered around the players to hear the Bible in their own language.

“When a predominantly oral people hear a story once, they already begin to memorize it,” Chiang said. “They live in the stories, and they are etched into their minds. So, they are eager to talk about the stories.”

That desire leads naturally to opportunities for the previously unreached people to profess faith in Christ and to begin discipleship programs, he noted.



New Himba Christians initially met under a large tree on land a village chief dedicated for worship. (Photo courtesy of Operation Christmas Child)

The initial distribution of gift-filled shoeboxes and MP3 players spread from one community to five surrounding villages.

New Christians initially met under a large tree on land a village chief dedicated for worship. However, the new believers recognized they needed a covered building if they were to continue worshipping together during the monsoon.

Samaritan's Purse constructed a cinderblock church building next to the tree where the new believers had been meeting. The villagers dedicated the building during a three-day celebration in June.

Working with churches—congregations in the United States that collect gift items for children and congregations in developing nations that disciple new believers—is central to Operation Christmas Child's philosophy, Harrelson stressed.

"Everything we do is done in and through local churches," he said.

# Responding to critics

In recent years, Operation Christmas Child has encountered some [criticism](#)—including from some congregations that previously supported its ministries.

Some critics have focused on [political statements by Franklin Graham](#), the outspoken president and chief executive officer of Samaritan's Purse.

Others have criticized Operation Christmas Child for being [culturally insensitive](#) or for practicing "[toxic charity](#)" that creates dependence rather than fostering economic empowerment.

"We believe sustained development only takes place when hearts are changed," Harrelson said, noting Operation Christmas Child is focused primarily on evangelism and discipleship, not economic development.

The organization has heard the criticism that sending cheap Western "trinkets" to children in developing nations is inappropriate and insensitive, he added.

"The gifts are small, but they are impactful. It's a way for children to connect with the idea that Jesus is the greatest gift of all," Harrelson said. "I don't know of any time when they have been anything other than a positive blessing."

Last year, more than 2.8 million children completed *The Greatest Journey* discipleship program—the greatest number since Operation Christmas Child launched it.

Proponents and critics of Operation Christmas Child agree on one point: Selecting gifts and packing boxes provides young families a tangible, hands-on opportunity to connect with missions—including delivering the gospel to previously unreached people groups.

Operation Christmas Child and Seed Company are collaborating now on a project to reach the Karaboro people of Burkina Faso in West Africa.

“We’re deeply grateful for the churches that make it possible,” Chiang said. “Without the work of churches, we wouldn’t be there.”

*More than 250 Baptist churches in Texas have committed to serve as drop-off sites for Operation Christmas Child this year during National Collection Week, Nov. 18-25.*