Malagasy, the language of Madagascar

Madagascar, the world’s fourth largest island, lies off the south east coast of the African mainland, 400 kilometers from Mozambique. Because of its isolation most of its mammals and plants and half of its bird species exist nowhere else on earth.

The official languages are Malagasy (which is related to Indonesian and spoken by approximately 10 million people) and French local dialects are also spoken. The Malagasy population is composed of 18 ethnic groups who all speak Malagasy, albeit with different dialects. Madagascar, which was colonized by France in 1896 and regained its independence in 1960, is one of the poorest countries in the world. Seventy percent of the population lives below the poverty line and the majority of people are dependent on subsistence farming.

Madagascar became a French colony in 1886, but regained its independence in 1960. During 1992-93, free presidential and National Assembly elections were held, ending 17 years of single-party rule. Mark Ravalomanana was declared President in April 2002, after a contested Presidential election in 2001.

Over half of the population of Madagascar (52 percent) retains indigenous beliefs and customs. The most basic of all traditional beliefs and the foundation for Malagasy religious and social values lies in a firm belief in the existence of close ties between the living and the dead. All the Malagasy peoples have traditionally accepted the existence of a supreme God, known commonly as Zanahary (Creator) or Andriamanitra (Sweet, or Fragrant, Lord). The dead are thought to be intermediaries between this supreme God and humankind and can affect the fortunes of the living for good or evil. Sometimes described as "gods on earth," the dead are considered the most important and authoritative members of the family, intimately involved in the daily life of the living members. Razana, or ancestors, are the sources from which the life force flows and the creators of Malagasy customs and ways of life. The living are merely temporary extensions of the dead. Great hardship or trouble can result if the dead are offended or neglected. Besides these traditional beliefs, a large portion of the Malagasy are Christian (41 percent) or Muslim (7 percent).
Portuguese Roman Catholics were the first missionaries to Madagascar, arriving in 1600. After the British became interested in Madagascar in 1814, the young king Radama I made treaties with them and welcomed all aspects of British culture, including religion. The London Missionary Society arrived in 1818 as the first Protestant mission agency. Upon the king's death in 1828, severe persecution of Christians began under the reign of his wife, Queen Ranavalona. Missionaries were forced to leave the island; Christians were killed, and Bibles were burned. Despite this intense resistance, many of the believers held to their faith. Mass conversions to Christianity again took place after the death of the queen when missionaries were allowed to return to Madagascar. Quakers, Anglicans, and Lutherans joined the London Missionary Society, and Madagascar was considered the most successful mission field the world had ever seen from 1861 to 1895. In 1895, though, the French violently took over the island nation and imported a strong hatred for anything British and Protestant, closing down schools and churches.

For many years, the Assemblies of God did not have missionaries in Madagascar. Finally, in the 1970s, the Assemblies of God in France sent George Burki, who established the Bible-in-Hand Bible school in Antananarivo in 1978. In 1990, the United States Assemblies of God sent Joel and Marie Watson to work with Burki and other French missionaries as well as with the national Malagasy church. Africa Task Force Evangelism chose Madagascar as their target country in 1993, holding a series of 8 major church-planting evangelistic crusades. As a result of this year-long effort, seven churches were planted and many new believers joined the congregations. The final crusade was a children's crusade in the community of Isotry. Hundreds of children accepted Christ, and local pastors pledged to hold children’s crusades of their own.
In an effort to reach out to the growing population of street children in the capital city of Antananarivo, the Assemblies of God opened Narda Orphanage. It provides shelter, clothing, food, and an education in an atmosphere of Christian love for children who would otherwise have no hope. Besides the orphanage, the Assemblies of God also operates a clinic and two elementary schools; a new Bible school opened in 1998 to help train more ministers and workers. The Malagasy government has given the Assemblies of God access into all the public schools so that they can distribute an AIDS awareness booklet. The Malagasy Assemblies of God also conducted an AIDS Awareness Seminar to introduce the booklet to education and health officials, as well as to national pastors.

Through these humanitarian efforts, believers in Madagascar are able to spread the truth and love of Christ to their people. This combined with Bible teaching and evangelism, continue to make an powerful impact on the Malagasy people. Your part in helping with the Malagasy FIRE Bible provides a strong Pentecostal emphasis for pastors and leaders to use in teaching their people.