

Dependence on Literacy Strategy: Taking a Hard Second Look

If we are serious about reaching the unreached peoples of the world, we cannot afford to rely on a strategy that half the world does not use or understand!

by Herbert Klem

“Half the world has no Bible.” So read the banner at our mission conference. It is thrilling to see the growing focus on reaching the remaining unreached people groups of the world. We now recognize that identifying with the local language and customs can be extremely helpful. The very idea of “people group strategy” is that evangelism is more productive when outreach to people takes place using their own familiar methods of communication rather than using those foreign to them. Even so, have we considered rethinking our approach to our most basic communication tool—the Bible? How can you communicate the message of “The Book” without using the printed page?

One thing is clear, most Bible characters in their day, used books and literature far less than we do in ours. So are Bible songs, and Bible story-telling as well as Bibles on cassettes a radical shift away from being biblical? Perhaps it’s more like going back to the basics. Would we do anything differently if we discovered that Jesus and David did not write any of their teachings in books, but rather used oral tradition, including poetry, to keep their teachings alive?

Literacy in a Non-Literate World

If we trace the roots of the modern Evangelical mission movement back to William Carey’s great efforts to reach the world of his day, modern missions is about 200 years old. Most of us involved in this movement have always thought of the Bible as the main book for communication. We have believed and taught that a person has to learn to read the Bible for him/herself

in order to become spiritually mature. Many of us believe that as long as people do not read, they will remain spiritually immature, and certainly cannot become leaders in their churches.

In the time of Jesus, some people did believe this, but Jesus did not. Although He could read, He did not write any of His teachings, but taught His disciples to recite from memory. In the early days of the Church, Christ’s message was preserved orally and came into writing 15 to 30 years later. The extent to which we use books to teach the Bible is a cultural choice, not a biblical requirement. David sang the Psalms, he probably did not write at all. Others later gathered the Psalms from singers and wrote them down to preserve them. Some parts of the Bible were clearly developed through writing, and others are the product of an oral tradition that was spiritually mature, but probably not highly literate.

Literacy and Spiritual Growth

Most of the modern mission movement has worked on the assumption that literacy is essential to evangelism, spiritual maturity and church growth. Theodore Tucker summarizes the general strategy of missions in regard to the vision of reaching a community to establish a church. It has been a characteristic Protestant method of evangelism and education to seek to teach everyone to read in order that they may find for themselves in the Bible, with the help of the Holy Spirit, the Word God has given to them.

J. F. Ajayi and E. A. Ayandele have both written extensively on how they interpret the impact of this policy on their

country. Both are Nigerian historians and agree that the introduction of literacy to West Africa, along with the other pressures of modernization, such as industrialization and commercial relations with the wider world economy, have led the forces that have transformed all of West Africa, and Nigeria in particular, into modernity. They are thankful for the mission contribution to the development of education in the region, but are also profoundly troubled by these events for several reasons. Pastors and missionaries have encountered similar serious problems, and question how much these are the result of our use of literacy in settings where most people do not appreciate reading. What follows in this article are results of using literacy in non-literate areas, together with some of my observations and suggestions.

Division and Conflicts

The major impact of missions in Nigeria was the introduction of literacy and schools, with the result of dividing their homogeneous communities into a two or three class system separated into literates and non-literates consisting of upwardly mobile educated groups, and the non-reading more traditional segments. These historians see benefits from the development of churches and hospitals, but note the creation of a new elite as an unintended, yet much more important result. Parsons makes a similar point for Ghana, and missionaries from around the world have lamented this development in similar ways, although from different perspectives.

Both Ajayi and Ayandele complain

that the primary effect of mission literacy and educational policy was not the advancement of evangelism, but the division of society. There were already too many ethnic and tribal divisions to allow smooth development of an economic region. With the growth of schools and “education” inside each village and community new divisions came about as well. Communities were now divided into “haves” and “have-nots.” The difference in wealth was not the biggest problem, but the fact that the two groups within the community did not know the same things, nor did they think the same way even when they had the same information. Each developed very different value systems. The “educated” youth, including some of the High School students I taught, did not even know how to communicate with their parents who had sacrificed to send them to school, due to the limited education their parents had. The gap between how they thought and how their parents thought was just too wide, and the longer they went to school the worse the gap became.

In East Africa the highly educated poet Okot p'Bitek, in his *Song of Lawino*, laments the division of his people by the education system charging that the mission had “crushed the manhood of his people with books.” Indeed most of Africa’s leaders of the independence movement in Africa from the 1950’s onward, were trained in mission schools. However, many were not particularly thankful, partly because they experienced pain in a certain separation from their own culture and roots by the very education that offered them the hope of progress.

Ayandele is particularly upset with the narrowness of mission motives for introducing literacy. He documents that the goal of many was the introduction of sufficient training and literacy to enable teachers and pastors to interpret the Bible correctly. However, he points out that if the mission

truly cared about the people and the need to develop a viable and competitive economy, they would have sought to introduce the same levels of education considered necessary for Europeans. He feels education was restricted as an approach to holding power.

On the other hand, the missionaries became frustrated also. The primary missionary goal in supplying education was the preparation of more pastors and teachers to spread the Gospel movement. To their frustration, students were eager for education, but much more to advance their careers and personal wealth than to spread the Gospel. It bothered some missionaries that only a minority of the population cared to become literate. There are large segments of all societies that do not care much for schooling, literacy and Western forms of Christianity, nor care much for any development geared to book learning. After over 100 years of literacy oriented missions, more than 75% of Africa does not read well enough to manage basic Bible passages, and many more who can read, simply do not enjoy the process.

Failing to Reach Half the World

I believe it is correct that nearly half the world has no real access to the Bible because they do not read. More than a billion people do not read at all. Another billion can read, but are not fully literate. That is, they can read familiar and elementary things, but they cannot read a short, simple piece of new information with any real understanding. Then there are others who can read, but find it uncomfortable, or feel so different from others that they do not read as a matter of habit. It becomes a matter of lifestyle, identity, and social preference which works against messages and communications in print.

It is possible that the literacy based approach applied in non-reading communities reaches best those who most want to escape from the traditional

culture into the modern world of wealth and technology, but it may not be successful in reaching the majority of the people and the poor in many regions. It is clear that one of the great tragedies in much of the world today is the division of communities into rich and poor. Literacy based mission policy has assisted the establishment of this emerging middle class in the developing world, which has become socially distanced from the larger uneducated community. Some of the very people missions had hoped to reach and help are the least interested. Others are very interested in education, but are more drawn to advanced technological and economic progress than to church work of pastors, teachers or evangelists.

Mission School Problems

Mission schools helped many to become leaders, but also stirred resentment. Ayandele and Ajayi tell of the frustration of Nigeria’s emerging leaders who wanted advanced education to help them attain positions of leadership in the land. Mission policy focused on training only up to the level of pastors and school teachers, dissuading mission school graduates from going off into other careers. Some missionaries and pastors noticed that evangelism often prospered best among those with the least education, and some of the most educated were the least interested in the sacrificial life-style of pastors and evangelists. At one time, the vast majority of Africa’s independence movement leaders were graduates of mission schools. Most were troubled by conflicts experienced in mission schools, even though others have been deeply thankful.

Missionaries have commented to me, even as Donald McGavran has argued, that evangelism spreads most rapidly among poorer folk and less educated people. Those with more education and wealth are less interested in spiritual things in general, and the financial

and social sacrifices necessary to live out a Christian life-style in a traditional or secular society do not appeal to them. Several missionaries have complained to me that many of their brightest seminary students were in school for personal advancement and education, and often left the ministry with the first promising opportunity. These educators are asking how to best limit education so that this will not happen.

Frequently it is best if the mission strategy adjusts, by supplying the best seminary education possible in confidence that it will be a blessing in the lives of those who attend. Some of those who attended a school where I taught in Nigeria have gone on to become senators, professors and teachers, and entered other careers. They have done these things for the good of their people and to lift their struggling families from painful poverty. When we congratulate and affirm them it helps to keep them in the ministry—in both their professional involvements and in pastoral activities that many continue to perform. Some very capable Nigerian pastors I know who serve both humble and growing city congregations do this as a free service to the church, and also earn a “secular” income which the church would never be able to pay. When we have tried to limit this career development, we have seen some very angry people push on to higher education but with markedly different attitudes toward the mission that gave them their start in school.

Cultural Resistance

The late Dr. Allan Tippett has written concerning the transmission of cultural innovations such as literacy, conversion to Christianity, and technology among traditional societies. He has devel-

oped a concept called “ethnic cohesion.” According to Tippett, community leaders tend to accept or reject innovations based on whether they perceive the proposed changes as contributing to the general unity and well being of the community. The unity and self-esteem of a community—its

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sense of being a group—is a major factor in determining the acceptance or rejection of any change. In contemporary language, “Is this us? Does it fit our case?” If innovation threatens this sense of group identity and unity, then they will tend to reject those innovations. It is similar to the attitudes that surrounded the congressional “Un-American Activities Committee.” Reflecting on the significance of the name itself, it is obvious that there was an effort to weed out and reject from America ideas that were seen to be destructive to the morale, values and identity of our national society. Certain innovations were seen as threatening the core values upon which the community economy were formed.

In many traditional communities, that which sustains this sense of identity and cohesion is the language and the oral literature of songs, proverbs, wise sayings, stories, epics and rituals. In instances where the mission agency is

seen as preserving the language and being supportive of these oral traditions, it is possible for the Bible in written form to be a key force in unifying the people and standardizing the language in a wider area. Luther's German Bible is given credit for this as only one of many examples. However, in cases where literacy is perceived as competing with the traditional culture, literature, wisdom and/or leaders, then those prominent in the traditional segments of the society can actually be opposed to literacy and modern education.

It is clear that in traditional farming communities in Asia, Latin America and Africa, literacy and schooling can be the leading edge of modernization which divides the community socially, economically and often culturally.

Jack Goody and Francis Hsu, among others, have suggested that the introduction of literacy into a traditional society is the most fundamental cultural change possible to establish. This is because it changes not only *what* people think, but also changes *how* they think.

Jack Goody's theory is that most traditional non-reading societies are much more right brained, holistic, communally oriented, and are less supportive of individual critical thinking. However, literacy is the strongest conditioner for linear, left brained, critical thinking. He credits literacy with the beginning of the scientific revolution in critical thought, and with the capability to regularly question authority and the traditions of the community. Hence he feels literacy not only shapes the mind, but also changes the value system, particularly for younger people. Reading ability creates different values and attitudes. This sounds great if you come from a literate, technological society that thrives on open debate and rapidly

changing leadership. But if you come from a stable, traditional society, both the questioning of authority and the introduction of a new power group of critical thinkers can be very threatening to the traditional values of the community or society.

While there are large numbers of people around the world bent on self advancement, there are also many traditional societies and groups of people who do not compete very well in the modern world nor want to. After a century and a half of literacy based evangelism, there are still large numbers of people who cannot read, and perhaps more, who can but do not read. It is possible, therefore, that we are actually not dealing with an inability to read, *so much as a resistance to literacy and education out of loyalty to the group* to a set of traditions, which are seen to be in conflict with books and book learning. It is not just the content of the books, but the values and assumptions that go with a reading culture and literate society.

Traditional leaders who sense that literacy can divide their communities, while introducing many new values, (eventually requiring new leaders with new skills and other loyalties), may have some real justification in being slow to embrace literacy and religious changes that support it.

In his lectures Charles Kraft has suggested that there are at least two ways to deal with traditional leaders who resist literacy and change. Plan A is to appreciate the positive values these leaders may be protecting by resisting change, then work with them to preserve these values by adjusting the way literacy is introduced. Plan B is to overpower the traditional leaders with technology and modernization, developing new leaders through schooling who will displace them. In some cases, when the traditional culture cannot regulate or explain modern innovations, modernization breaks down the tradi-

tional culture with its values and opens the door for people to accept Christ. Plan B often seems to work, but it breaks the soul and backbone of the traditional culture turning the new generation loose with new technology, but without the constraints of either the traditional community or of Western Christianity. The resulting dislocation and pain can be considerable.

In these situations pastoral leadership prepared in Christian theology and appreciative of the traditional cultural values, the cultural dynamics of Western thought and Christian values, can be of great assistance in helping their people to adjust to the problems of modernization. Frequently both seminaries and literacy agencies are aware of the power of the written page, but less aware of the cultural implications and their link to the acids of modernity as they work together. There are many social groups around the globe that, in spite of their simplicity, sense that sending their children off to school, is to risk sending them off into another world—a different world which is guided by different values, perhaps not completely good, even if the pastor or the missionary means them good.

Alienating Adult Leaders

Those of us who have worked in communities where there are significant numbers of mature non-readers have been delighted to see adult leaders accept Christ, and as part of that growth become interested in Bible study. Sometimes it is very satisfying to hear them work their way painfully through a simple passage, but gain the satisfaction of being able to read the Bible for themselves. We rejoice even more when young children of these same elders go to school. It is not long before these young children are reading smoothly and quickly through these same passages. We notice that people who learn to read earlier in life develop a certain skill and facility for

excellence that later converts to reading do not attain. Some of those who have studied the traditional oral communications systems based on memorization and pungent imagery, compared to the more linear logic of the written system, agree that most people seem to excel in one or the other, but few people can manage to be skilled in both. So it is no wonder that when we hear of a person who has memorized the Gospel of Mark or the whole New Testament, it is probably a non-reader or a new reader who has the enthusiasm and the skills to do such a thing. It is likely a combination of both skill and culture that directs people's energies.

While doing house to house evangelistic visits in a village in Nigeria, I was struck many times by the politeness and attention given me by the older leaders in some of the homes as they listened to what I said. Even so, at the end of our conversation many would gently counter that they were quite willing to allow their children to go to school and become Christians, but that they themselves were too old. I could not believe that they thought they were too old to become Christians! Some actually said that it was because they were too old to learn to read. They had identified becoming a Christian with learning to read, and they wanted to do what they did well. They did not want to enter a group as mature leaders if young people were likely to easily outperform them in key leadership skills. To say, "I am too old to become a good Christian" is very sad and makes little real sense. Of course, to say, "I am too old to become a good reader," makes a great deal of sense.

In 30 years of mission experience, I have frequently observed that when people are selected for leadership training programs, the younger people with better academic and reading skills are the ones chosen. This tends to exclude the more mature leaders who may have superior evangelistic or moral

qualities. Although the community recognizes the abilities of these young people, they may not recognize them as leaders until they have greater age or have demonstrated other more traditional leadership skills, such as the ability to resolve community conflicts, practice generosity, display moral superiority or form relationship ties with other existing community leaders. This preference for the young and the literate may be so basic to our Western mission policies that we have perhaps avoided the very best leaders who could have given the churches the best stability and greatest growth and integrity.

Many times I have visited pastors and missionaries who have told me that the best evangelists in their area were non-literates, both men and women, old and young. In some cases some of the preachers could not read. They either recited from memory or had other people read the text they would expound upon. These people were respected for their abilities and gifts. They were rarely given training and preparation for further development of leadership gifts they possessed. I have heard of a few cases where such people were accepted in a school, allowed to listen in class, take oral exams, and return to ministry with greater ability. I have not heard of such a person graduating though. There are a variety of denominations in which they can serve as pastors, prophets and evangelists. They usually function in rural and traditional societies and where the churches are growing rapidly. It is my opinion that this is most likely one of the teaching strategies that Jesus and David actually used, including some of the apostles Jesus trained.

All of this leads to suggest that there is a role for audio-Scriptures and other literature on tape, as well as in other art forms, for the communication of

new ideas to existing adult leaders in largely non-literate communities. It allows the adults to participate, to lead and regulate wisely for a healthy transition into literacy and other modern innovations.

There are alternatives to literacy

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based evangelism, discipleship and leadership development. There is a growing use of memorization, oral literature, narrative teaching, story-telling, (sometimes called storying), recorded Scripture portions, taped Scripture songs, and programs for listening by tape to the whole Bible.

A Personal Experience

The following is part of my own experience in West Africa that occurred a few years ago. This incident happened after several villagers had told me they were too old to become Christians. Others had suggested that Christianity was a “white man’s religion” that did not belong in Africa. Then there were those that said that Christianity did not suit their people as well as other religions. While there were many Christians in these towns, there were also others who clearly had “attitude problems.” Years before, one of my teachers had told me that when adult students don’t want to learn or change,

the teacher must change first—then the change in the students would be surprising.

So with the help of some of my students we prepared a special translation of the book of Hebrews, using only very short sentences, similar to the structure of the local traditional poetry. We then found a choir master who arranged the wording and phrasing of the lines so that they were poetic enough to sing. We ran it back to the translation committee to check for accuracy and worked out the changes to keep the original thoughts. Then we recorded some choirs singing the first six chapters of Hebrews. We were doing Bible study test groups with church members to see how much people learned from a more “oral” approach, mixing readers and non-readers.

One evening I came to a study which was crowded out with visitors. I could tell many of the visitors were Muslim elders from the very community where I was told so often that people felt too old to become Christians. I did not want all those visitors spoiling the structure of my test group, so I politely asked the visitors to leave these Christian test lessons. The wise old elder had a twinkle in his eye as he gently and politely suggested that they were having a wonderful time hearing God speak to them, and that perhaps I should be the one to leave. I did not know what to do. I was thrilled to have a Muslim man in a Bible study, and he was an elder leader, but I did not want to spoil the structure of my test. When I asked him politely to leave a second time, he grinned and challenged me to a true test of ownership of the singing Bible tapes. The one who could sing the least of the tape from memory would leave, and the one who could sing the most could stay. That was the indigenous method of proving cultural ownership.

Because of the tonal intricacies of singing oral art in that language, he knew he had me beat cold—no contest! The group cheered and proclaimed him the owner of the tape. He boasted that only a wise Yoruba man could compose and sing this kind of poetry; insiders loved it and outsiders could admire from a small distance.

The elder had been warmly attracted to the text because it had been identified with his culture, employing art forms that marked it as his cultural property, even though it was played on a tape recorder supplied by a meddling foreigner. He was pleased with the form of the message, but he was also bonding with God's Word from the book of Hebrews. He was no longer telling me this was "foreign religion" but was defending his right to hear the Scripture. Best of all, the whole group loved the entire event.

Conclusion

We can choose to make Christian teaching and Christian maturity dependent upon literacy by the forms of worship and communication we use, even if it is foreign to half of the community we are trying to reach. We can predict certain sections or certain percentages of non-reading communities will be put off by our media choice well before they even know what the message is about. However we must understand, that it is not the Gospel that is turning these people away. They are issues not related to the cross of Christ, namely, our love and preference for the power of literacy. The latter is turning whole communities off to the Gospel.

If we enter each community respect-

fully, arriving with a variety of approaches based on local communication methods, using styles people can trust and identify with, we will find ways to gain a hearing for the message. We may also find ways to help them maintain the greater group unity, encountering the modern world with the

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least disruption of leadership and community structure. It will also yield a stronger, healthier church. It most likely will facilitate a smoother transition into full literacy, and a greater use of the written page in general.

I am convinced that the Bible on tape is one of the great tools of our time. If we can learn to use it wisely, we can reach all the people of the world with a solid understanding of the Word of God, which is our primary goal. After over 150 years of literacy based mission strategy, we will still miss half the world if we continue believing that people must read in order to receive the Word. Great Bible leaders such as David the singer of songs, Moses the composer of songs, (Deut. 31:9-13 and chapter 33), and our Lord who worked through unlettered fishermen as well as with scribes, were not tied to literacy as the only way reach the world with the Gospel.

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