

Audio-Communications and the Progress of the Gospel

Seeing breakthroughs in the history of communication can launch us into the future with greater fervor promising a greater harvest than ever before.

by Allan Starling

The Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, is the most important message we can and must share with mankind. There are many different ways of communicating this message. In this article, I would like to discuss the audio method. However, in order to get off on the right footing, we have to take a moment to define basic concepts. While *oral* pertains to the mouth, and *aural* to the ear, *audio* relates to the technology involved in transmitting the message from the *mouth* to the *ear*. This process is jeopardized when the *foot* is in the mouth! We should always strive to use the most appropriate or effective method of communication, bearing in mind that when the Gospel has been effectively communicated, the final responsibility rests with us. Jesus said “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says.” (Rev. 2:29 NIV)

The definition of “*audio-communications*” includes recordings of Scripture and cross-cultural messages that do not require reading skills in order to be understood. These recordings may be on audio-cassettes, videos, films or other audio related media.

All media have an important part to play in the spreading of the Gospel. Because written communication and radio are closely allied to audio-communication, we will refer to them throughout the article even though they do not strictly fit our definition of audio-communications. Let’s take a brief look at the *past*, *present* and *future* aspects of this field.

Past Developments

The Book of Acts is a description of how the early Church communicated the Good News; first to the

Jews, and then to the Gentiles. This was no easy task. The message was new and strange and in some cases, threatening. Language, cultural, prejudice and geographical barriers had to be overcome before the message could be received. Their challenge was to get people’s attention, and communicate the Gospel to them in a way that they could be understood and to be accepted.

Aural-Communication

In Acts 2:1-11 we hear an amazing account of how God used a few disciples to communicate the “Great things that God has done” to people who were visiting Jerusalem from all over the known world. Luke tells us that “they were all excited, because each one of them heard the believers talking in his own language.” When you are far from home there is something exciting about hearing your own language spoken. God used this situation to get their attention in a way that nothing else could have done.

Often the two methods of communication, written and aural, are used side by side. An interesting example of this interplay is found in Acts 8:30. Philip approached an Ethiopian official who was reading from Isaiah. In answer to the question: “Do you understand what you are reading?” The official answered, “How can I, unless someone explains it to me.”

Acts also introduces us to Paul, who ministered to the Gentiles and wrote letters to the churches. In Paul’s day, very few people could read, but his letters were read aloud to assembled believers, underlining the complementary nature of spoken and written communication.

Communications in History

Down through the centuries, the communications challenge for the Church remained unchanged, but as the population grew and new horizons were opened, the challenge became more difficult, and a new kind of “mass media” was needed. From time to time, the steady growth of the Gospel was accelerated by technological breakthroughs in the realm of communication.

Printing

Fourteen centuries after the birth of Christ, Gutenberg invented a process of printing that used movable type. This, of course, did away with the tedious and painstaking process of hand copying manuscripts, thus making the printed page available to everyone—everyone, that is, who could read. Many societies adopted literacy as an integral part of their communication process. People like John Wycliffe soon realized that this new invention presented them with a way to get the Scriptures into the hands of all who were now learning to read.

Some cultures however, did not adopt literacy, opting instead to retain their system of oral-communication. Many missionaries have concentrated their efforts on the major language groups who were at least partially literate, leaving many minority, non-literate groups without the message.

Audio

In 1887, Thomas Edison invented the “talking machine” or phonograph, thus making it possible to multiply the spoken word. Unlike the invention of printing, the Church took no notice of this invention, except for those who may have considered it a worldly device. It was in 1939 that a sick

missionary, recently returned from the field, came up with the idea of using the phonograph to present the Gospel to non-literate people.

Joy Ridderhof founded a small group called "Spanish Gospel Recordings" to produce recordings of Gospel messages and songs in Spanish, and send them to missionaries and radio stations in Latin America. These records were so well received, that soon they began making recordings in other languages, and the name of the ministry was changed to Gospel Recordings.

The Tape Recorder

In 1947, sixty years after the invention of the phonograph, the first tape recorder was used for recording Gospel messages. Up until then, master disks had to be cut live, leaving no opportunity for editing by those who didn't get it right the first time! Two years later the first battery operated tape recorder was invented by Gospel Recordings staff. This made it easier for recordists to work in remote areas. It took another ten years before a high quality professional tape recorder was available. However, tapes still had to be sent back to central locations for processing into records.

Untiring Production

By 1954, 1,000 languages had been recorded, and by the following year over one million records had been sent around the world. All this by less than 35 staff members. Five years later over 2 million records had been sent out to 150 countries. By the 25th anniversary of the ministry, over 3,000 languages had been recorded, and five million records distributed.

The Compact Audio Cassette

The introduction of the audio cassette in 1970 eliminated the long delays that occurred when records had to be pressed in central locations and then shipped back to the mission field. Now high speed cassette duplicators could reproduce the messages on

location. Even so, it would be many years before records were phased out. In the meantime, the use of cassettes multiplied. In 1977 a special cassette player was field tested. It needed no electricity or batteries, but was operated by a small built-in generator. Now people living in remote areas could listen to cassettes in their heart language without great expense.

Specialization in Communication

Media-ministries have tended to specialize in different types of communication, such as print, audio and radio. Bible translators have methodically and painstakingly reduced many languages to writing and spent years translating the Scriptures into each language. The resultant New Testament or Bible has then been printed and presented to the people. Before this valuable resource could be utilized in written form, it has been necessary for some of the people to learn to read, and others to be trained to explain the contents.

Gospel Recordings, leaving the translation of the Scriptures to linguistic experts, has produced culturally contextualized, biblically based vernacular recordings containing evangelistic and basic Christian teaching. Non-literates and those in oral cultures, have been able to listen to the messages again and again. Missionary radio has done an outstanding job of reaching peoples locked away behind those literacy walls as well as political and religious barriers.

It is interesting to note the differences in priorities between various media-ministries, dictated mainly by the type of technology used. Missionary radio targets *large* languages of over one million speakers. Translation ministries work in *smaller* language groups. Audio-recording ministries are suited for reaching even the *smallest* language groups. In some cases messages have been recorded for less than 50 speakers.

Present Challenges

Learning to cooperate

In more recent years we have seen the various media-ministries firstly recognizing the worth of other types of approaches, and also, recognizing that inevitably we cannot get the job done alone. We can, however, accomplish the work together! A good example is Every Home for Christ, whose purpose has been to systematically distribute tracts with the Gospel message to every home in a given country. Their new aim is to give tracts to those who can read, and audio-cassettes to non-literates.

In Culiacan Mexico, a ministry among indigenous migrant farm workers who speak as many as ninety languages, has been very effective by using a *combination* of mediums:

* *Scriptures and tracts* are made available to those who are literate.

* *Movies and video* (like the "Jesus Film") are shown to those from oral cultures, mainly in the trade language (Spanish).

* *Audio-cassettes* in the vernacular are put into the hands of those who speak indigenous languages. Each year, thousands are converted.

More recently, Bible Translation Ministries have seen the advantage of putting their Scriptures on audio-cassettes. A number of new audio-ministries have been started, some for the purpose of recording and distributing these translations in audio form.

Networking

This goes a step further than cooperating. For example, the Global Recordings Network recently united ministries in twenty countries to produce and distribute vernacular Gospel recordings.

Accomplishments

What has been accomplished so far in the audio-communications field? We can say that:

* *Audio Messages* have been pro-

duced in over 4,600 languages and dialects.

**Audio-Scriptures* are being recorded in a growing number of the approximately 2,000 languages that now have some portion of Scripture in written form.

The Future Goal

To reach the goal of a "Church for every people", audio-communications workers must overcome some major barriers:

1. The Illiteracy Barrier represented by approximately two billion people who either cannot read, or do not have the reading skills to understand spiritual truth from the written page must be overcome. We must also face the fact that many do not see the need for literacy, and therefore have no incentive to learn to read the Bible or any other print.

2. The Language Barrier. This barrier embodies 8,000 to 12,000 languages and dialects. Audio-communications offers the unique opportunity for these peoples to hear the Good News spoken by one of their own people in their own language.

3. The Prejudice Barrier. Missionaries are not welcome in the isolated villages of the Trique Indians in southern Mexico. However, this barrier has been penetrated by Gospel cassettes in their own dialect, carried home by migrant workers.

4. The Geographic Barrier. Tribes tucked away in the mountains of Nepal are not visited very often by missionaries. This barrier is overcome by special hand-wound cassette players and audio tapes that are left with the villagers of Nepal.

5. The Political Barrier. When borders are closed and visas are difficult to obtain, cassettes find easier

access than people in crossing these political restrictions.

6. The Manpower Barrier. Jesus reminded us that the harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Audio-communications negotiate this barrier by multiplying voices.

Their challenge was to get people's attention, and communicate to them in a way that they could be understood and accepted.

Conclusion

* Audio-communications is a tool that all missionaries and Christian workers can use. It provides a pre-church planting strategy. It allows missionaries to reach groups whose language they cannot yet speak. It assists new believers to share the Gospel.

Even so, the challenge to make recordings in every language still looms large. If we continue at the present rate, it could take as long as 50 years to make audio-recordings in all of the languages and dialects of the world. However, the process can be speeded up only as we work hand in hand with the Lord and with each other.

Thanks to the AD2000 Movement we now have the ability to do just that, through the formation of the *Audio-Communications Network*.

The Audio-Communications Network will seek to facilitate communicating the Gospel to every language, tribe, and nation:

* By encouraging a united strategy among audio-communication ministries,

* By promoting the benefits of

using audio-evangelism among non-literates.

* By showcasing all available audio-evangelism tools and providing effective training in their use,

* By mobilizing prayer for those still waiting to hear the Gospel in their own language,

* By recruiting 70 to 100 teams to make audio-recordings in the least reached languages and least reached peoples.

The last goal envisages a *partnership* project designed to cross the remaining language barriers with the Gospel, using audio-communication methods. In order to record the remaining languages by

AD2000, an additional 70 to 100 recording teams (each consisting of two persons), are needed. This can only be accomplished as mission agencies and churches, with God's help, work together.

Gospel Recordings is offering to train men and women in recording techniques. These missionaries will then be assigned by their agency to specific geographic areas in which they will continue working after the recordings have been completed.

As we network together, ministries can enhance each others work, and finish the task through focused prayer, planning, and partnership. May we reach the goal by AD 2000!

Allan Starling is the former International Coordinator of Gospel Recordings International. He is now on the staff of Gospel Recordings USA, and is also helping to establish the Audio-Communications Network under the auspices of the AD2000 and Beyond Movement.