



# Strategizing to Reach the Unreached

## Communicating Christ through Oral Tradition

### A Training Model for Grass Roots Church Planters

*by James Bowman*

**A**t God's command, from the Tower of Babel till this day, mankind has been struggling with the colossal barrier of language and cultural distinctives. God chose to reach out to the Jews of Israel, who we might consider the very first unreached people group that the Lord turned his attention to. Within the cultural context of first century Israel, Jesus seemed to understand these barriers quite clearly. His communications policy of storytelling and parables and the clear demonstration of his power and love served to move his audience toward a new understanding of the Kingdom of God. In order to achieve his communications policy, he chose to incarnate as flesh and blood, to take up residence among his beloved the Jews—an unreached group identifying closely with them, and speaking the local language of the people who lived in that community.

When the Apostle Paul received a Macedonian call, the Gospel of Jesus headed West and flourished for centuries. However, while demonstrations of God's power and love remained, we do not observe the Apostle Paul using stories and parables. Instead, his communications policy centered on the dominant Greek worldview of reason and logic. He chose to argue the merits of faith in Christ among the Greek speaking Jews and Gentiles of Asia Minor. Still during the first 70-100 years, the Gospel was largely communicated through oral tradition. The early church fathers in Italy and North Africa followed the effective model of the Apostle Paul. The role of literacy played a minor role.

Also back in the West, Guttenberg greatly accelerated accessibility to God's message through the invention of moveable type and the printing press and choosing the Bible as the first book printed on his press. Subsequently, a literacy revolution took place in order to make the Christian Scriptures accessible to the masses, at least in the West where Christianity had broader acceptance. Oral communication of the Scriptures took on a very diminished role. To this day, the church in the West continues to model Paul's communications policy to defend and propagate faith in Jesus largely through the eyeglasses of Greek worldview moving throughout the world on the printed page.

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However, the acceleration of God's message in printed form while having served the West so well for centuries is now being looked at through a new set of glasses. In these last days the Holy Spirit is directing the church to look Eastward. The church in the developing world is growing rapidly and is taking on greater importance. The 10/40 window is a representation of the Holy Spirit's direction taking the message of the Good News east toward the great civilizations of Asia, North Africa and the Middle East. The communications policy of Jesus, the use of stories and parables now take on greater importance once again.

The modern missions movement has attempted to expand the use of printed forms of communication to traditional, oral cultures. Back in about 1917, the founder of Wycliffe Bible Translators William Cameron Townsend began his work during a missionary journey to distribute Spanish Bibles in Guatemala. A Cakchiquel Indian first issued the challenge: "Why, if your God is so smart, hasn't he learned to speak my language"? Since that Cakchiquel Indian first uttered that challenge, thousands of dedicated men and women from Wycliffe and other organizations have served the Lord with zeal to complete the task of Bible translation in printed form. Bible Translation is vital in order to preserve and defend God's Word and ideally needs to be available in a multitude of languages. Some experts say that the Scriptures are available in about 1,000 languages, with another 4,000 to 5,000 languages to go, if not many more. How ironic that God's command at the Tower of Babel would also seem to serve as a major barrier to the propagation of God's message. Our long held tradition about the importance of the transmission of the Word of God in written form starts taking on gigantic, complicated proportions. In light of all this we may want to re-visit the early church's use of oral communication of

the Scriptures and the importance of memorization of the Scriptures.

I confronted these issues head on early in my missions career. Back in 1982 my wife Carla and I began our involvement in missions with several short-term trips to Oaxaca to work among the Mixtec Indians living in the highland mountains of southern Mexico. Our first encounters with the Mixtec people and the Mixtec language made it clear that we were in for massive adjustments to effectively communicate God's Word. In the state of Oaxaca alone, there are almost 80 distinct dialects of the Mixtec and Zapotec languages not to mention scores of others. The government of Mexico has a long history of strained relationships with the indigenous populations of that region. Outsiders are given very limited access. The Indian communities themselves look on foreigners and even non-Indian Mexicans with a great deal of suspicion. We were allowed only short-term visits. This greatly limited our ability to learn the language and the culture of the community. This experience showed us what a complex, enormous task it is to work cross culturally. It was here that we recognized the greater effectiveness of grassroots, indigenous workers and our opportunity to lift them up. Limited access, multiple dialects of each language, lack of literacy, strong oral tradition, and a hostile political situation created in the Mixtec villages a series of barriers to providing access to the Scriptures. As the years passed and we learned more about missions that situation seemed to be a microcosm of the larger global obstacles and issues we would continually confront of linguistics, literacy, orality, mother tongue, eastern vs western worldview, etc.

In 1987 Carla and I joined a team of Western missionaries working among the Tarahumara Indians of Northern Mexico in the state of Chihuahua. Our team consisted of a trained anthropologist, a medical personnel,

and a water resource development specialist. My wife Carla is a trained literacy specialist and my background was in mass media communications. Our role was to work in coordination with the team to help plant a church among the Tarahumara people. In the beginning we felt that our immediate task was to develop an effective literacy program to disciple new believers and promote Scripture Use. After a time of initial stone clearing and relationship building, we saw the first 10 Tarahumaras become followers of Christ through the translation of the Jesus Film in the Tarahumara language. We realized the important role of Bible translation, and of course, the use of the native language. But we also realized that the Jesus Film represented a very effective means of communicating the "Story of Jesus" to those of another culture. Very few of the team members were proficient speakers of the language. Limited access and government policy required that we could remain in the village only 2-3 weeks at a time. This, of course, greatly frustrated and slowed down our efforts to advance the Gospel. We again recognized the need to raise up effective workers from within the culture.

The first ten believers were eager to know more about Jesus and we struggled to teach them through a simple TEE training program, as most of them were semi-literate. But the levels of comprehension and their ability to reason through the programmed, analytical text were so limited that we ended up abandoning the program. We finally decided on teaching them by reviewing the stories of Jesus from the Jesus film. We also told Old Testament Bible stories using colored posters and artwork from Gospel Recordings. Each week we would teach Ventura, the key leader in the community, a story from the Bible, and he would in turn tell the story to the others in their native language. This process worked well. The church began to grow and today there are about 150 believers in the little com-

munity of 350 people where the work began. The Tarahumaras themselves took the Gospel to their extended family members and surrounding communities. Today, the Tarahumaras themselves have spread the Gospel to over 30 indigenous communities. The storytelling strategy began by default, but soon we realized that we needed to look further into developing a story-based methodology. Also cultural adaptations of Scripture in song and the parables of Jesus in drama were to become a focus of our work.

In 1997 after a short sabbatical leave from our work in Mexico, my wife and I decided to write a training course using storytelling meth-

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ods. It has come to be known as "Communication Bridges to Oral Cultures: A Narrative Method for Grass Roots Church Planters." We formalized the training course and in 1998 we trained our first 100 grass roots church planters in North India in the state of Bihar. Luis Bush has said that India is the core of the 10/40 window and if India is the core then Bihar state is the core of the core. In 1998 we developed a partnership with SD Ponraj and the Bihar Out Reach Network (BORN). BORN is a partnership of several indigenous mission agencies working in Bihar State, India. They are actively working together to plant churches among the unreached of this difficult part of the world. Our role was to develop the initial training model, training materials and provide funds to help BORN run a systematic training program. During the past 5 years we have systematically run about 10-12 training events each year for grass roots church planters. To date, the

BORN partnership has trained over 1500 grass roots church planters using Bible Storytelling, and contextualized music and dramatizing the parables of Jesus. In '98 there were only 10 partner agencies participating, today there are over 50 indigenous agencies and 11 international partners working together. The results have been amazing. In 1998 there were about 500 house churches; today there are over 1,500.

Grass roots church planters have reported to their field leaders that ...

people in the villages develop a higher interest in the Bible storytelling, such that anytime when I arrive in the village, the news spreads quickly that the Storyteller has come and people quickly gather because they say they are going to learn new things about life through stories, music and drama.

I learned how to communicate the Gospel orally. I have attended many seminars, but this one is quite different. I learned practical things here. Before I didn't give importance to storytelling, now I understand its importance. Now, I can easily plant churches through the Oral Bible.

The church in the East and West, North and South is excited about the new possibilities of a return to learning the way of communicating Christ through traditional oral communication methods like those used by Jesus. Many are expressing an eagerness to return to important Biblical values about the Kingdom of God through Scripture stories, music and drama. Many are excited about returning to the ancient way of memorizing the Word of God. We are living at a time in history that many have only dreamed about. In our lifetime, we are experiencing a return to the day spoken of by the prophet Joel. God is pouring out his Spirit on all flesh. Let's rejoice in seeing God's final plan for the end times roll out before every tribe, nation and people. **UJFM**

*For more information, please visit the Scriptures in Use web site at [www.siutraining.org](http://www.siutraining.org) or contact them by e-mail at [siu-info@siutraining.org](mailto:siu-info@siutraining.org).*

# Serious.



Buddhism  
10:3



Hinduism  
1:4, 18:4



Islam  
11:2, 13:3 & 4, 17:1 & 4



Nomadic Peoples  
17:2 & 3



Tribal Peoples  
14:4, 15:2

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