On Cross-Cultural Evangelism
The Little Phone That Could: Mobile-Empowered Ministry

by Keith Williams and Leith Gray

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T he impact of new media is transforming the nomadic people I have worked among. Ageless traditions are shifting with the introduction of new technologies. I realized recently that these nomads were no longer making decisions about where to set up camp on the basis of where they could find water. Rather, campsites were determined by where they could get mobile phone coverage.

It took meeting Abu Mohammed at my neighbor's funeral to realize just how far things had developed. As it turned out, he was a man who fulfilled all the noble ideals of his people—living in the remote desert in a black goat hair tent, having a reputation for hospitality and generosity, and excelling as a big-game tracker and hunter. After the commemorative dinner in the mourning tent, Abu Mohammed took the role of emcee for the evening, regaling us with tales of his hunting exploits and the skills he had used to track down and kill his prey. I was amazed when he produced a mobile phone from his pocket and pulled up a video showing him brandishing his scoped hunting rifle as he posed next to various animals he had bagged. Wow! Not only had this forty-something "man's man" embodying the ideals of his people taken his video clips and assembled them into an impressive show on his phone, but he had even added a popular local tune in the background. Yes, I had known that the mobile phone was making tremendous inroads among these people, but this meshing of all that was truly and agelessly representative of their culture with the latest and greatest of the 21st century took my breath away!

Keeping Up With the Mobile Revolution

What a strange world we live in, a world where we highly literate, technologically savvy expatriates who live and work with "backwards" illiterate tribal peoples find ourselves lagging years behind those same people in our use of portable communications and media technology. My western co-worker, for instance, still purchases his mobile phone on the basis of whether or not it has a built-in flashlight with little concern for the fact that the phone has no camera,

memory, or Bluetooth connectivity (that's not to say I haven't often wished my phone had a flashlight too!). Meanwhile, the local youth among our people are trading in their phones every few months for the latest model and spend hours each day using them to view and send one another songs, videos, and poetry. This is not something unique to the people I work with—the U.N.'s International Telecommunications Union estimates that there are now more than five billion mobile phone subscriptions worldwide! (Wireless Intelligence 2010). The world population currently stands at 6.8 billion. Africa, the world's poorest continent, has seen a phenomenal 550% growth in mobile phone usage in just the last five years (Smith 2009)! Every month twenty million people are connecting to the wider world for the first time ever via new mobile phone lines in India alone (Ribeiro 2010). In fact, a recent U.N. report bemoaned the fact that the people of India now have better access to mobile phones than to toilets (UN News Center 2010).

A Revolution in Capability

The phenomenal uptake of the mobile phone in the last decade has been propelled by the fact that the mobile phone has become so much more than just a phone. The mobile phone today has thousands of times more computing power than the systems that guided the Apollo space program to the moon 40 years ago (Quadir 2009)! For your average citizen of the developing world, the mobile phone wraps up the capabilities of a computer, TV, music player, camera, video recorder and game system into one affordable and easy-to-carry package.

The powerful new capabilities delivered by "smart phones" with apps (applications) were demonstrated to me last summer while visiting my family in the United States. One relative used her mobile phone to scan the barcode on the back of a book and an app on her phone instantly brought up the cheapest prices for it on the internet as well as the cheapest price it was being sold for in the local area (her phone contained a Global Positioning System (GPS) chip). Another relative showed me how he could put his iPhone up to the radio and instantly have it display the name of the song being played, the name of the singer/band, and a picture of the album cover. These kinds of capabilities were not dreamed of just a few years ago, but they will be the next generation's "bread and butter" that they can not imagine living without.

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A Revolution in Realms of Application

The versatility of the mobile phone is quickly extending its use into new realms of application. They are currently being used for money transfer and banking, as e-book readers and movie players, and in their more familiar uses as video and still cameras and music players. Mobile phones offer exciting new possibilities in the fields of health, education and development, with innovative new uses being implemented in these fields almost daily. In Malawi, Community Health Workers (CHWs) scattered throughout an entire governorate are notified of new cases and assisted in patient diagnosis and treatment through the FrontlineSMS (www.frontlinesms.com) hub at the regional hospital (Banks and Nesbit 2008). Researchers at UCLA have found a way to turn mobile phones into portable water quality and blood testing devices that allow for water quality monitoring and patient diagnoses in the field far from laboratories (Eisenberg 2009). Students in India are now learning English through mobile phone games (Kam et al 2009) while teachers in Kenya take part in in-service training via an SMS (Short Message Service) texting service (Traxler 2007). Fishermen in the Kerala district of India now use their phones to compare market prices and then sail to the port where they can get the best price for their catch (Jensen 2007). Disaster relief following the recent earthquake in Haiti was coordinated through a mobile-based SMS system known as Ushahidi (www.ushahidi.com) and more than 40 million dollars in donations was raised within weeks via a "text-to-give" campaign (Financial Times 2010).

Social and political activism has also been radically affected. Just as the Iranian Revolution of the 1970s was ushered in by the strategic use of the "new media" of cassette tapes carrying the teaching of Ayatollah Khomeini, so too, at the beginning of the 21st century, the protest movement in Iran is being fueled and carried forward by the "new media" of mobile phone originated videos, Twitter posts, and crowdsourcing announcements. Yes, the spread of mobile phone technology in the last decade has been truly "revolutionary." Its effects on many varied aspects of human life will continue to grow in extraordinary ways.

A Revolution on the Internet

The Internet giant Google has made itself the preeminent internet company worldwide by keeping a pulse of where the web is going and what its users want and then being the first one there with the services needed. In February Eric Schmidt, Google's CEO, announced that Google, from hence forward, would be a "mobile first" company—all its new products and services will be designed first for the mobile phone and second for the

PC. To explain the rationale behind this decision, he noted that:

1. By 2013 smart phone sales would surpass PC sales
2. Mobile phone data traffic will increase 66 times by 2013
3. More than half of all new internet connections are now via mobile phone
4. There are more Google searches from mobile phones than from PCs in emerging countries

Schmidt went on to say "It's now the joint project of all of us to make mobile the answer to pretty much everything" (Schmidt 2010). Google's decision to go "mobile first" is bolstered by findings from the Gartner research firm which state that "by 2013, mobile phones will overtake PCs as the most common Web access device worldwide." They also predict that "there will come a point in 2015 when the mobile phone will overtake the PC as the most common primary device for Web access worldwide" (Gartner, Inc. 2010). Among the unreached peoples of the developing world that point has already been passed.

Sharing Gospel Media Relationally and Widely

When a dramatized audio "panoramic" Bible[1] was produced a few years ago in the language of the people we work among, my co-workers and I were very excited and immediately sought to distribute it by whatever means possible. Our first impression, though, was that most of the nomads we worked with did not have access to any form of media player—whether using cassette, CD or DVD. Within weeks we realized that, if we wanted to get the audio Bible stories out among these people, we would have to provide a media player for them. We ended up purchasing MegaVoice solar-powered audio players which seemed perfect for the task. However, at $35 a unit, we were hesitant to distrib-

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ute them unless we knew there was solid interest.

What we had failed to notice was that these nomads already had media players—their mobile phones! They were using them to listen to music and poetry as well as view videos. This realization changed our strategy, so we now start out by sharing individual Scripture stories on our phone during a visit, and then transfer it by Bluetooth to those who are interested. If a person shows enough interest or has come to faith, we can then provide a mobile phone memory card (quite inexpensive and entirely natural for a nomad to have) containing the entire panoramic set of Bible stories.

A Ready Explanation for the Hope Within

How many of you always go out your door with a tract in hand? A Bible? A computer or portable DVD player with scripture video? The chances are good that most of us are much more likely to leave the house with a mobile phone in our pocket than any of the other items mentioned! How convenient would it be if the mobile phone you carried had a veritable toolbox of songs, poetry and/or videos that point to Christ and which you could share with people you came into contact with throughout the day? When I walk out the door these days I'm blessed to have short selections of the audio panoramic Bible in the language of my people, as well as 40+ videos of Bible stories from creation to the crucifixion. In addition, I have numerous spiritual poems and musical Psalms ready and waiting in my pocket should the right opportunity arise. The great thing is that viewing and sharing photos, music, and videos on mobile phone is now so common among the people group I live among that whipping out my phone and sharing one of

these video or audio files with them is completely natural!

The Power of Video

A friend of mine told me the other day about how she tried to teach her daughter a math lesson, and how she was met with a blank, uncomprehending and disinterested stare. Many of us working cross-culturally in oral-based cultures know that stare. My friend later found a fairly simple and not-too-engaging video on YouTube teaching the same math lesson. Her daughter proceeded to watch it with rapt attention and quickly caught the concept. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a video makes mere spoken words nearly obsolete!

Many of us working among oral-based cultures have learned the importance of orality and chronological Bible storying. We put our utmost effort into learning how to story the Bible only to be interrupted halfway through our presentation with that blank uncomprehending stare. It probably doesn't help that a lot of us aren't the best storytellers in our native language let alone in the language of our host culture! This has often been our experience working amongst the people group we have been called to! Praise the Lord that materials are now available that enable us to bridge the gap.

It might be helpful to consider the impact of mobile media materials that use a-storytelling approach. Sabeel Media (www.sabeelmedia.com) recently introduced a series of twelve short (2-5 minute) mobile phone video clips dramatizing episodes from different Old Testament prophets' lives, and the response among our friends has been fantastic. We have used these along with other short clips we have selected from Campus Crusade's *Jesus* and *Magdalena* films on our mobile phones, and we've

been thrilled to see new interest and comprehension in people we thought completely closed and immune to the gospel. There's the case of Kalya, a woman who had, in the past, reacted angrily whenever one of us would share a message from the Bible with her. She would respond by turning the tables on us and preaching about her religion. However, Kalya was so taken with seeing and hearing the story of Solomon and the two mothers in her own language that she immediately asked to have the video sent to her so she could watch it again and show it to her friends and family.

Viral Replication

Missions strategists tell us that our outreach should be reproducible by those we are seeking to reach. The ubiquity of the mobile phone's presence and Bluetooth phone-to-phone connectivity make mobile media ministry eminently reproducible. We simply send Bluetooth videos on to those interested in them and they can then replay them and show them to others. Those other people, in turn, can show them to their friends who in turn can send them on to their wider circle of friends. Rather than solely reaching our limited circle of acquaintances and friends, mobile phone media has the potential to reach thousands and even tens of thousands.

The local-language media we have been using is now being shared in several countries throughout our region. It has been particularly exciting to see the intense demand it has generated in Chad, where it found a "sweet spot" in mobile phone adoption among a population that has a sufficiently high ownership of mobile phones.[2] While mobile media in that area is available, it is still relatively rare for the mobile phone, especially media in their heart language.

So, we must then ask what kind of media products will reach such wide audiences? First, they must be so appealing to our audiences that they will *want* to pass them on and view

them with family and friends. The dramatized audio Bible series mentioned above is a good example. It was recorded by well-known local artists, and it used the normal terminology that non-Christians in this community use when talking about religious topics. It also employed Scripture passages cast in local poetry, with background music in local style. Similar audio Bible dramas in the language of a Middle Eastern country ended up becoming widely available through street vendors and in shops selling CDs, MP3 players and music cassettes.

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In general, materials that spread virally will focus on the essentials of the Biblical message, in a descriptive or even documentary manner. They should not make use of negative assaults on the beliefs of the audience or make inappropriate demands of them. Generally, successful materials use a story-telling approach and this leads users to feel comfortable in sharing these materials with others. In some cases small adjustments can make a huge difference in usability. In one country, viewers were extremely uncomfortable with the "evangelistic ending" on a film version of the life of Jesus. They would turn off the television at this point, and a national broadcaster cut off the offensive ending, even though they were happy to show the film itself. When the ending was reworked to be less preachy and more descriptive of what a person should do if he or she would

like to follow Christ, it was found to be more acceptable to viewers.

Furthermore, materials should appeal to local tastes and aesthetics. It is important that our materials convey that the Bible narrative is a message for all peoples, a universal heritage. But foreign music and alien literary and visual forms communicate that the message does not belong to this particular audience. Local music, storytelling, and poetic forms make the material familiar, and easy to share with family and friends, and potentially viral in replication.

When producing new materials, it is important to include people from the intended audience group on the project team as soon as possible, and in as many different aspects as possible: scriptwriting, translation, editing, testing, recording, and distribution. Involving the audience in this way leads to the materials being user-friendly and shareable. Furthermore, the wider the involvement of people from the community, the greater the sense of "ownership" on their part. This holds true even for those who are not yet followers of Christ.

We will undoubtedly need to experiment with many different products and approaches, "letting a thousand flowers bloom," to find the ones that are most appealing and viral. The best approaches will not necessarily demand large infrastructures, or have to be complicated and expensive. In fact, some of the most successful technology products in recent years have been deliberately simple and user-friendly (Capps 2009). This is likely to be true of content as well.

Pointers for Mobile Outreach

Since the mobile phone is increasingly being used as the primary video screen by people in the developing world, whether it be for viewing home videos, music videos, or even Hollywood movies, it provides a new means for the unreached to interact with media both on-demand and with privacy. Media outreaches can and

should take advantage of this potent micro screen. Opportunities for doing this include:

1.   Analyzing and segmenting existing media products to produce 1-5 minute clips that "stand on their own"

2.   Producing new media products specifically designed for the three inch screen, taking into account the limited attention span of those watching on such a screen. Production purists may cringe at these parameters, but the cost effectiveness makes such efforts eminently worthwhile. Low-budget media has the potential to reach a much wider audience than larger budget big-screen projects.

3.   Ensuring that new big-budget media projects can be broken down into 1-5 minute segments that will stand on their own when viewed on a mobile screen. In combination with other 1-5 minute

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segments, a viewer can hear the whole story.

We must realize that the unreached are more likely to find Christ while surfing the web on a mobile phone than on a PC. One can see this demonstrated on Campus Crusade for Christ's Global Media Outreach Great Commission 2020 website (http://greatcommission2020.com/) which allows you to view from where in the world people are viewing their evangelistic websites, and what websites they are accessing. Scroll down below the map and read the names of the website noting how many end with .mobi- mobile phone optimized websites! Are our outreaches ready for this "mobile first" world? Do our internet outreaches and outreach websites work as well or better on a mobile phone screen than they do on a PC? This doesn't happen automati-

cally—our internet outreach needs to intentionally strive for optimal user experiences on mobile phones.

Other Possibilities for Mobile Phone Ministry

The possibilities for mobile phone ministry run well beyond those already mentioned and also include:

1.   Text and/or audio Bibles for mobile phones (many text versions already exist).

2.   Evangelistic conversation-starting ringtones (for instance chanted Bible verses or worship music), celebration greetings or screen images and "wallpaper."

3.   Discipleship/TEE through mobile-capable audio and text materials.

4.   SMS text messaging based evangelism/discipleship.

Reproducing Communities of Faith

As we consider using mobile media for outreach, the question arises about what we can do for the person who is separated by four degrees of contact from the original people sharing the video. How can we help that person if God is tugging on his or her heart? Thinking strategically we need to make sure that those same songs, poems and videos are designed as part of a comprehensive outreach strategy. One part of such a strategy would be to include a follow-up website address (such as a web chatroom), SMS text phone number, or other contact information that acts as a door opener to ongoing conversation with the wider body of Christ.

It is important to remember that such viral transmission will only occur if the audience is enthusiastic about the material and wants to share it openly with friends and family. If we produce materials that are truly viral, it will be impossible for us to follow up or contact all the users. For this reason, we need to find a way to make our materials support small groups of viewers or listeners who respond. Rather than expecting people who respond in faith to contact a central node and eventually be gathered into one large community with others they don't know (sometimes called an attractional model), we should consider how we

can modify materials in ways that will help users to form their own small communities of faith with others whom they already know and trust (an approach known as a transformational model).[3] Some radio ministries, such as the "Church in My Home" broadcasts, have already seen very successful results from promoting the formation of local faith communities with programs that model community life and gatherings.

Transformational church planting follows the same logic as viral media distribution, and ultimately plays on the same dynamics. People live within extended webs of relationships, or social networks. They spend the bulk of their time relating to and communicating with people in their networks, and these are the people they trust the most and learn from the most. Successful viral media distribution spreads through such networks of relationship, and reproducing communities of faith spread through the same networks in much the same way.

After decades of empirical research on successful religious movements across many different religious groups of the world, sociologist Rodney Stark concludes that "conversion tends to proceed along social networks formed by interpersonal attachments" (Stark 1996: 16).

Ninety-nine percent of all mobile phones are capable of SMS texting and approximately 5.5 *trillion* text messages were sent last year (Portio Research 2010), making texting the most widely used electronic communications method on the face of the planet! This is an area where the missions world needs to get creative as well as learn from other fields (including development, health, and marketing).

5. "Bluetooth Broadcasting." A friend was in a local bus one day when his phone beeped at him indicating that someone he didn't know wanted to send him a message. A minute later, after agreeing to receive the message, he had a new video on his phone. Apply this to our outreach and you can imagine workers, whether short term or long, taking public transport or finding active mobile hotspots (malls, cafes, etc.) where they can send appropriate outreach materials to others via Bluetooth.

6. The equipping and resourcing of cross-cultural short-term teams and local immigrant/refugee outreach workers with mobile media materials, providing those lacking the language the ability to effectively share the gospel with those they interact with.

It's All Good–Right?

Wrong! No technological innovation will ever change the fact that, unless God moves by His Spirit, people will not come to Christ. There's no silver bullet out there—our faith will always need to remain in God rather than in technique or technology. Prayer will always have the ability to reach and change more people more deeply than virally transmitted videos or any other wonder program we devise.

We also need to be aware of the danger that our "distance" technology can cause people to be isolated in their faith rather than drawn into deeper and richer relationship with God and with other people. Communications technology on its own will never communicate the fullness of Christ as well as close personal relationships expressing and demonstrating God's love to unreached peoples. God's desire is for people to belong to local Christ-centered communities of faith, and our technology needs to support and enrich that glorious purpose.

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We should also be wary of being dazzled by the "whiz-bang" of such new technologies. I have deep concerns about missions, seeing the explosive growth of the iPhone in the U.S. and European markets, spending untold hours and money developing apps for it when it is almost guaranteed, due to price and distribution issues, that it will never be used by more than the smallest fraction of the unreached. We have also seen end-users more dazzled by the medium than taken with the message we are trying to share. Some of our friends have been more interested in the sleek new touch screen phone we're using than the materials we're showing. Concerns have also been noted as to the security issues of having outreach materials on one's mobile phone and the personal safety issues of using high end phones in low-income/high crime areas. No, this is not a silver bullet for every ill

in reaching the world for Christ! Yet we are excited about the potential of this technology.

Conclusion

Whether you live and work in the largest city in Asia or in the darkest jungle in Africa, your lives and the lives of those you work with are being transformed by the intersection of mobile phones, audio/video technology, and the internet. As those who proclaim the message of Christ, I believe it is incumbent upon us to take advantage of this new opportunity, especially as we see our intended audience being swept up by the mobile revolution. Mobile phones are the most widely used media technology among the unreached today. Mobile phones will become the main device accessing the internet within the next five years. Mobile phones will be increasingly important worldwide in the next two decades as more and more services (direct payment, banking, navigation, instantaneous voice and print translation, augmented reality, etc.) are added to its already expansive list of capabilities. Are we investigating the amazing new abilities that mobile phone technology brings to the table? Do we recognize that the mobile is the next generation of mass media subsequent to TV and internet, and that its abilities surpass those of the previous generations? Are we finding ways to use these new capabilities to spread the glory of God among the unreached? I challenge you to think strategically while acting quickly to harness the potential mobile phone outreach offers in bringing the gospel of Christ to the lost. **IJFM**

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Endnotes

[1] A "panoramic Bible" is a series of selected narratives about characters from the Bible (also known as "biographical portions"). These portions are chosen to present themes of the biblical message in a balanced way, presenting the "whole counsel of God." For example, the Bible Society in one country has been successful in selling a series of booklets on the prophets. Each booklet consists of translated biblical passages that together present the story of an Old Testament prophet or biblical character. Readers learn to appreciate the Bible, and many eventually seek to learn more.

[2] According to International Telecommunications Union 2009, this area had 16% mobile penetration in 2008.

[3] See more discussion of these models in Gray and Gray, IJFM 26:2 (Summer 2009), p. 63; and Gray et al, in IJFM 27:2 (April-June 2010), p. 89.