

Great Commission

A Ministry of OC International
By Sheryl Montgomery Wingerd

Update

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ION Plays Advocate for Oral World

Last of a four-part series on discipling the oral cultures of the world

The 4.2 billion oral communicators of the world have an advocate. In fact, the growing International Orality Network's sole purpose is to see the Church around the world make a major shift toward more oral forms of communicating the Gospel. "In the same way that literacy is commonplace now," says Avery Willis, director of ION, "we would like oral communication methods to become commonplace in missions practice."

Through consultations, project-oriented partnerships and speaking engagements, the twenty organizations that are fully engaged with ION aim to "influence the body of Christ to make disciples of all oral learners." Another 80 to 100 organizations have taken part in one of their consultations or projects. And ION is always looking for more people to get involved.

Avery Willis' interest in oral cultures was sparked back in the year 2000 by a simple question. A man approached him, knowing that he had written a very literate-style program on discipleship.

"How do you disciple *oral* learners?" he asked.

"I don't know," Willis replied. "People have asked me that for 20 years."

Then the man said, "Listen, you know something about discipling. Figure out how to do it."

That's what prompted Willis to call together a group of people who had been doing theological storytelling around the world. They spent the next years developing a resource called, "Following Jesus: Making Disciples of Oral Learners," using over 400 Bible stories.

In 2001, Willis, along with Paul Eschleman, also started the Oral Bible Network, a conference-based attempt to help organizations understand the situation of oral communities.

But the opportunity came at the 2004 Lausanne Congress with the Orality Issue Group to create something with broader representation and greater coverage. Seeing how crucial it was for the church in every continent to become aware of the oral majority, they formed the International Orality Network. It came into sharper focus in 2005 with several task forces and a plan for implementation.

Until recently, ION's yearly consultations have met in the United States. But in October, 2007, the network assisted Indian leaders to hold India's first National Orality Consultation. ION leaders hope to see these national conferences spread, starting with three in 2008 that are planned for Kenya, South Africa and Ghana.

Although ION organizations have together developed specific projects, Willis says, "the network is trying to recruit people to oral *strategy*—not to just a single effort, but to any effort to get the Gospel out in oral form.

In the end, the hope and work of ION organizations is to see the world and all its oral people groups covered—with no one left out.

"I had been a pastor ten years, a missionary 14 years, and had written 20 books and a discipleship course. Finally, in 2000, it dawned on me that we missed two-thirds of the people."

Avery Willis

Indians Weigh Effectiveness of Storying

Storytelling is passing the test in India as a fruitful church planting tool, according to pioneers who shared their experiences at the October 2007 India Orality Consultation. Indian practitioners and international ION representatives shared the platform in New Delhi, India where they reported on various projects that are reaching oral communities.

Although India is the first nation to partner with ION in a national conference on orality, Indian missionaries have been experimenting with oral strategies for many years. S.D. Ponraj, of the Bihar Out-Reach Network (BORN),

described what he called the “humbling journey” he and his wife embarked on when they first entered a tribal village in Gujerat with two shoulderbags of books on their backs.

The villagers themselves were the ones who taught them: “Come back tonight when we’re back from the fields and sing for us,” they said. Eventually, Ponraj said, “we threw away the sermons and literature and started writing songs and preparing stories. Village after village started

turning to Christ. A dozen church planting movements started and were sustained.”

Then they turned to the challenge of North India. In 1997 several organizations, banded together in the North India Harvest Network,

realized they needed 50,000 “grass-roots church planters” to make an impact on the region. Jim Bowman offered to help, and the state of Bihar became a testing ground for the

“We need Oral Bible Schools for each of the 600 districts of India.”

Indian delegate

Scriptures In Use strategy. From 2004 to 2007, four thousand new churches were planted. “God

A Few Thoughts from Avery Willis on Orality

GCU: *What's an example of an ION project?*

Willis: One of the better ones is called One Story, a partnership between Wycliffe, Southern Baptist International Mission Board, Campus Crusade, YWAM and TransWorld Radio. They send a couple of people to a particular people group for two years, with Just In Time training, to produce 50 to 60 stories from Creation through Christ. They get them translated and recorded, and then get the people telling them in small groups.

GCU: *Is storytelling only for unreached people groups?*

Willis: I'm working with a church in Idaho, U.S.A. that's grown from four people to 8,000 in eight years. In August 2007, their 600 small groups began to go through the whole Bible, from Genesis to the Second Coming, in 35 stories. Most U.S. evangelicals don't have an understanding of the Scriptures, but once they story through the Bible, they have a framework to build on.

GCU: *I grew up learning all the stories in Sunday School – is that not so common anymore?*

Willis: No, it's not. And if they do learn, they don't know the order—did Joseph come before Abraham or after him, before or after Daniel? The Bible is one story. People need to see the whole panorama of Scripture and how the stories inter-relate. It's amazing the understanding that accompanies that.

GCU: *What other arenas are you trying to influence?*

A huge area is the *post-modern generation*, who are oral preference. They grew up on video, television, audio, so they like to get their information that way.

Another effort is to get orality into the *theological education system* by making seminaries aware of the need. A couple of U.S. colleges are already involved. Oklahoma Baptist University has an Orality Major and Minor, and at Liberty University they are doing orality courses. It's a slower process at higher education. We have trumpeted the superiority of literacy for 500 years, so everything defaults to that.

In September, 2007, we had a consultation for *CEO's and executives of missions and denominations* to help them understand how to use oral strategies in their organizations.

GCU: *How can we be sure the next generation will have a solid biblical understanding?*

Willis: I was just reading about somebody telling a Bible story, and people were trying to correct him using the Veggie Tales cartoon version which is only a knock-off of the story. It's better just to tell the story and have them act it out. One small group leader got his group involved in a story by asking, 'If you were there at the Sea of Galilee, what would you be doing?' An 8-year-old boy said, 'I'd be skipping rocks.' After it was over, the boy went home and told his grandparents the story, just like he'd been told, and planned to tell his friends the next story he learned.

GCU: *Storytelling doesn't necessarily fit with the typical style of worship service, does it?*

Willis: It could. I do it. In a Sunday worship service I will tell a story. Then I'll randomly pick five people, get them on the stage, and ask them questions. I also call volunteers up to re-enact the story—and if possible, write a song about it. They don't forget that easily.

honored the simple church planter,” explains Ponraj.

Now an Oral Bible School offers training to non-literates in Bihar with a program designed especially for them. Over a period of six months, students immerse themselves in 150 biblical stories, not only memorizing them, but

“Many are not interested in reading; ‘What will I do with this?’ they say. Only the Gospel gives them a reason to learn to read.”

Indian delegate

plumbing their depths as they sing them, dance them, act them, ponder them, pray them, love them and live them. With this manifold approach, these scriptural accounts become the source of instruction, meditation, worship and life changes.

Two Indian women also shared their experiences with conferees.

Bindu Choudhrie of Starfish Alliance has 40 women Master Trainers working with her. Together with their disciples, they have planted 3,000 gatherings.

“In India, women are not allowed to have an opinion,” says Bindu. “We use discussion groups in teaching which gives them the opportunity to express themselves. I have noticed that in a village there are always women who are known as gossipers. If they are saved and changed, they become a real asset to the kingdom.”

“Oral methods require the whole mind and body, the storyteller is an actor.”

Indian delegate

Two of Bindu’s trainers are non-readers themselves. These ladies have 1,100 trainees that are out in the villages using the storytelling method where they have seen at least 20 home gatherings started. “The village women are very strong,” says Bindu. “Once they become believers, they can stand up to anything.”

Monica Paul, of Samarpan, demonstrated the power of a story by opening her session with a moving drama of the Good Samaritan parable. She had set the goal in early 2007 to train 240 ladies during the year who would go to villages with storytelling. The training was so popular that by October, 2007 the number of trainees had grown to 305 women who had started 765 house groups between them. “We build relationships first,” said Monica, “find out their problems, then begin to tell stories relating to their problems. We teach them to tell the story correctly, then ask for testimonies. Once the relationship is established, we move on to chronological storying.”

“We can reach people through oral methods. But we want them to not be dependent on the outside, which requires literacy.”

Indian delegate

Many Indians have been storytellers through generations of ministry. But the fresh challenge for this time in India is to use Bible stories, not only as attention-grabbers and illustrations, but to develop in the people groups they are discipling a deep, scriptural understanding and worldview.

GCU Readers Respond, Interact

“How like God!”

The technique of sharing the Gospel by telling stories has the earmarks of God’s way: simple, pure, sensible, direct, touching.
D.H.

How thrilling! How simple! How like God! I admit, I have forgotten how to tell a good story. But your ministry has inspired me to practice until I find the art coming back.

Virginia Gasper

Like preachers of all time

I have long believed that it’s not just non-literate peoples who learn the Gospel through stories. The preachers of all time who are the most effective in Western society paint word pictures and concepts in ways that feed the mind and spirit more than cold rhetoric does.

Studies in education show that people who enjoy what they are taught will learn better.

Ev Sims

Entering home and heart

We are ministering the Gospel among the Muslim community, and I am telling you, the Muslims love stories and folk dance and songs. It is quite easy to enter into their home and heart.

R. L.

They seem to be taking up the challenge. Says Yashwant Paul, of Samarpan, who organized the event, “We have been thrilled by the letters of participants who want to be trained. The Orality movement will shape the church planting movement in the unreached people groups of India.”

For more information on ION, go to www.oralbible.com

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Oral Cultures Have an Advocate

If you thought that oral strategies for discipling oral cultures were only being considered in a few isolated cases, you'll discover in this issue how a network of some of the most well-known ministries worldwide is spreading the vision wherever it can.

Sheryl Montgomery Wingerd