

Taking the Orality Plunge: Confessions of a Print Addict Unawares

By Phill Butler

It was about seven or eight years ago. Somewhat wide-eyed, I was talking with Jim Bowman, who, along with his wife Carla, pioneered oral Bible training of non-literate, oral-communicating, grassroots church planters. Working with remote Indian tribes in Mexico, they were frustrated with scripture gathering dust in warehouses inaccessible to the Indians because they were exclusively oral communicators. They were what we in the West call “non-literates.” Mentally inferior? Hardly. They have just never had access to learning how to decode a printed page.

Training Leaders for the Local Church with No Bible?

For a one-time professional broadcaster and a person who has depended on the seemingly indissoluble link between print and oral communication, what they were saying seemed almost impossible to me. “Come on,” I said. “I can see leading someone to Jesus without ever having to open a Bible. You can share passages from memory and tell your own story and stories from scripture. But doing discipleship? How do you disciple without reading from the Bible and doing studies on key themes?”

“Oh that’s not all,” Bowman said, responding to my incredulity. “Not only do we teach non-literate, oral communicators how to do evangelism and discipleship, we also teach how to develop and train leaders for the local church—all orally. No printed Bible.” I argued: “But how do you do that without tools like PowerPoint, workbooks or at least white boards or overhead projectors? And, what about the Bible itself?”

The Bowmans' journey to a solution was a long one. As Bowman will tell you, “We tried just about everything. Story cards, old-fashioned flannelgraph, picture sequences. You name it, we experimented with it.”

I, being the product of a society with a nearly 400-year history of progressively accessible information from external sources (books, tapes, libraries, computer data bases, etc.), of course viewed all this as pretty strange, if not improbable.

“Think about it this way,” Bowman said. “Imagine you are in a culture where there is no external reference material—no books, libraries, magazines or computer databases. The entire database of your life and the world, all history and explanation of things around you, is between your ears. Now imagine you are in a leadership position in a culture like this. No external reference books to fall back on. No written legal or historical precedents. No place to ‘look up’ what you need to help you make a tough decision. Everything you’ve got is between your ears—and those of peers in the culture.”

With a wry smile, he continued, “I think of Jesus. Most of his men—in fact, most of his audience—were oral communicators. The one thing we know he wrote, a message in the sand, was lost. Jesus left nothing behind in writing. But, look what’s happened because of his oral communication strategy.”



Long steeped in print-based systems, you can imagine my surprise when Jim Bowman approached us and asked, “Can you folks help us develop an oral partnership training course?”

Trying to Comprehend the Immensity of the Issue

According to UNESCO, about 2.5 billion in the world are absolute non-literates. However, another 1.4 to 1.5 billion are functional non-literates and receive at least ninety-five percent of their information orally. Not surprisingly, these people are concentrated in areas still considered the least reached with the good news: Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist and Animist cultures. No wonder we have not seen the massive breakthroughs we have prayed for—hundreds of millions coming to know Christ and walk in his power and grace.

More than two hundred years of the modern missions movement has been led by literates with largely literate-dependent strategies. Instead of reflecting on what our audience needs, our strategies have too often reflected who we are. We have done what we know how to do. A hallmark of Western culture has been an upwardly mobile, ever-growing demand for literacy in all forms of media: print, film, how to use libraries, how to use computers, how to access databases, how to do email, how to “Google.” And these are only the most basic.

However, the Bowmans found that there were several keys to getting around this type of focus.

1. **Identify the handful of semi-literates who most likely have a fourth to seventh-grade equivalent education.** By using simple scriptural material and related training, these individuals can reach the masses.
2. **Study scripture.** Jesus’ teaching methods and a careful look at traditional cultures point toward the centrality and power of stories. Jesus told them constantly. By word count, scripture is over seventy-five percent stories. The rest is divided between wisdom, poetry and more traditional, Greek-influenced “Western style” content such as the New Testament epistles.
3. **Identify with repetition.** “In the West, we hate repetition,” Bowman remarked. “In traditional cultures, repetition is the backbone of continuity of the culture—of making sure the norms, the history, the rules and expectations are all understood and accurately passed down, generation to generation. So, we build a lot of repetition into the training.
4. **Place great emphasis on accuracy of stories.** Being able to tell a story with absolute precision, time after time, is vital. “You can imagine, they have pretty amazing memories!” Bowman exclaimed.

Collaboration in Ministry to Oral Cultures

The Bowmans are doing leading edge work through their ministry, [Scriptures In Use](#), which has grown to be a worldwide training and materials resource for the Bridges Training Network (BTN). BTN consists of over thirty-five mission agencies committed to using oral strategies for evangelism and church planting. Most of these mission agencies are non-Western, indigenous agencies.

Among more traditional Western ministries, awareness of the orality issue saw great growth only several years ago. Today, over 110 mission and evangelism agencies are working together to implement new approaches as part of the [International Orality Network](#) (ION).

Developing an Oral Partnership Training Course

At [visionSynergy](#), our specialty is helping ministries form strategic partnerships and networks for all types of evangelism initiatives. It has been our privilege to serve both the BTN and the ION as they have begun to see real breakthroughs in Asia, the Middle East and Africa. The BTN (the name comes from the oral Bible training course, “Bridges to Oral Cultures”) has already trained over twelve thousand grassroots church planters.

Literally thousands of "oral Bible churches" have already emerged in India and Africa. BTN has set a goal of at least fifty thousand trained grassroots church planters by the end of 2010.

Along with others, like [Interdev Partnership Associates](#), visionSynergy trains both Western and non-Western leaders in the skills needed to develop effective, sustainable ministry collaboration, strategic alliances, networks and project-specific partnerships. Long steeped in print-based systems, you can imagine my surprise and challenge (to put it mildly) in mid-2006 when Jim Bowman approached us and asked, "Can you folks help us develop an oral partnership training course?" When I asked him why he wanted us to help, he responded, "These emerging Bible churches are rooted in cultures where community is important. But everything around them—political, economic and religious systems in many cases—actively seeks to discourage their working together. We've got to have a training module for our 'Bridges' training course that will help them see how to work together, practically and energetically. Working together in open, trusting relationships was God's original plan in his creation. We need to help these people regain the power and joy of this."

All I knew was a world of whiteboards, PowerPoint presentations, printed handouts, written case studies (basis for group discussion, of course) and written partnership strategy project papers. And I had even written a book on this last subject! Prepare grassroots church planters to understand and be able to pass on real, practical, durable partnership principles that could be applied at the village level? With *nothing* in writing? Whoa!

Truth be known, I'd been concerned about somehow getting partnership training to this massive group of unreached for many, many years. We just didn't know what to do or how to help. Thanks to Bowman and his team, however, we are on our way. Here is a short explanation of what we are doing:

We are depending solely on biblical stories that contain a core principle. Then, we have the participants:

- memorize the story
- do a drama of the text
- make up a song
- develop a traditional chant based on the story
- feed back the principle of what the story means about working together

Based on feedback we have received from the grassroots level, we have settled on four applications for the local churches working together in partnership. Imagine a district of one hundred villages in which eight of those have seen oral Bible churches emerge in the last two to two and a half years. Many questions have emerged.

- **How can these eight small, local fellowships work together for evangelism and church planting among the other ninety-two villages in the district?** They are all led by non-literate, oral-communicating elders and volunteer leaders with a semi-literate grassroots church planter/encourager who visits every ten days to two weeks.
- **How will the church flourish unless its people are economically viable?** Many of these people live on less than US\$.50 per day.
- **How will the people work together for community development?** Issues like health, clean water and education haunt the world's illiterate poor.
- **What do we do about persecution?** By banding together, we need to speak to political leaders and

more effectively represent our views and needs.

Stay tuned. This is a work in progress. First drafts of the "oral partnership course" are complete. I have just returned from India for a week of intensive work reviewing the material with Indian leaders experienced in oral evangelism and church planting. Revisions are now underway. In a few months we expect the first field tests to occur. The message is critical. The audience is massive. It's a God-sized task!

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Phill Butler serves as Lausanne Senior Associate for Evangelism Partnership Development. He is also director of [visionSynergy](#). He can be reached at: pbutler@visionsynergy.net.

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