

*Quality of Life Issues for Oral Communities:
A Strategy for Moving from Challenges to Transformation*

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Before we begin to address the kinds of issues that challenge the quality of life in oral communities and how subsequent transformation can occur, it would be beneficial to define the term “oral community.” The International Orality Network (ION), which convenes under the auspices of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, describes it as follows:

(It is) those people who learn best and whose lives are most likely to be transformed when instruction comes in oral forms. Many groups transmit their beliefs, heritage, values and other important information by means of stories, poetry, proverbs, chants, music, dances, ceremonies, and rites of passage. The spoken, sung, or chanted word associated with these activities often consists of ornate and elaborate ways to communicate. Those who use these art forms well are highly regarded among their people. Cultures which use these forms of communication are sometimes called “oral cultures.” The members of these societies are referred to as “oral learners” or “oral communicators.”¹

It is also useful to know that oral communities are found within every culture in the world and comprise about two-thirds of our global population, or nearly 4 billion people. In India this number is estimated to be 4 hundred million. Yet, despite their vast numbers, these cultures often remain unreached, mysterious and virtually anonymous to mainstream societies.

With this understanding we can now consider some of the many issues that challenge them: Within the context of our work with Scriptures In Use (SIU)², experience confirms that typical oral communities are impoverished; diseased; socially dispossessed; marginalized; and commonly lack access to beneficial community services. Accordingly, community members are often, if not always, malnourished; unhealthy; uneducated; angry; fearful; and out of touch with conventional knowledge & information. For many residents of these communities, life can be a long, futile struggle filled with dread, misery and absolute desperation. Although many of these individuals fear death, ironically, they also recognize that it brings an end to their struggles.

Through field research and extensive training experience with a variety of diverse indigenous people groups we know that, in addition to these profound human needs, virtually all traditional oral communities suffer from even greater barriers rooted in their ignorance of spiritual truth. These barriers include, but are not limited to, *a lack of hope, peace, and love; fear of death; fear of spirits;*

¹ Willis, Avery, et al. **Making Disciples of Oral Learners.** (Bangalore, India: ION Orality Network, 2005), 4-5.

² **Scriptures In Use** trains and equips indigenous leaders and church planters throughout the world how to communicate Christian Scriptures through the use of traditional storytelling strategies to evangelize, disciple and plant churches among unreached oral communities and people groups. Its three course curriculum is entitled, “Communication Bridges to Oral Cultures.” Website: www.siutraining.org

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*troubling dreams; idolatry; reincarnation; and, most significantly, an abiding belief that God is distant & incomprehensible.*³

Moreover, as intolerable as these conditions are what is more alarming is that these communities are often the object of extremists and radicals who target them with their oppression and tyranny, frequently expressed through persecution and violence. Yet, despite these many hardships and deprivations there is still cause for optimism.

For years, the world of Christian missions has been laboring diligently in these fields. Numerous international mission agencies have long recognized the plight of these remote unreached communities, extending their help in a variety of ways. Most often their aid is demonstrated through the provision of medicines, clinics, educational programs, food, water and related community development initiatives. However, as generous and well-intended as these programs are, they only scratch the surface of real need unless they are applied after a Biblical foundation for the Gospel has been laid.

For nearly 25 years, Scriptures In Use has been working in and among traditional, oral, tribal peoples and communities. As you might imagine, there have been many lessons learned. As a faith-based Christian organization, SIU has had the distinct advantage of drawing upon what is, arguably, the most profound example available for impacting the lives of poor, disenfranchised, non-literate, oral learners – that model being revealed in the person & teaching of Jesus Christ.

With an audience that was 95% non-literate, Jesus ministered through a strategy specifically designed to heal and restore them - first, by transforming their lives, then their communities. This model, replicated by Christ's disciples and followers, proved to be highly effective as demonstrated by the explosive growth and far-reaching expansion of the early New Testament church. Unfortunately, sometime around 300 AD, this strategy, which had been so effective, became either neglected or simply dismissed as no longer relevant.

But exactly what was this strategy for change and transformation that was so influential, that one man and a handful of His followers could literally turn the known world upside down; a movement that began - not among the privileged, the scholarly, or the religious - but among the poor, the ordinary, and the most common of men?

I'd like to suggest that this paradigm for transformation was based upon a set of principles intrinsic to the very nature and condition of man and; therefore, the reason why it had such an astonishing impact on the social order of that time.

³ Bowman, James, and Carla Bowman. Communications Bridges to Oral Cultures II: Advanced Course for Grass Roots Church Planters and Scripture Storyteller Practitioners. Scriptures In Use, International. Arizona, USA, 1999.

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The first of these principles, observed in Jesus' own personal teaching style, is found in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 13; verse 34, which states:

*Jesus always used stories and illustrations like these when speaking to the crowds. In fact, He never spoke to them without using such parables.*⁴

As we have just seen, Jesus was a storyteller. In fact, as this verse indicates, He seldom taught His audience without using a story because He recognized that, in every culture, stories have a universal attraction and appeal. His stories were designed to help the common, ordinary men and women of His day discover and understand specific truths about the Kingdom of God for themselves; not by giving them spiritual advice, but through the content of the story which instructed by example.

Jesus' stories reflected the life and times of His audience; so He often used examples from familiar, daily experiences to illustrate important truths. In other words, He "contextualized" His message to make it more meaningful to the listener. However, He never expected His listeners to become literate. In fact, because Jesus understood that oral learners acquire knowledge differently than literate learners do; He knew becoming literate was not necessary for them to comprehend His teachings or to become more mature in their understanding of spiritual truths.⁵

In today's world, with the priority it places on education and technology, there are some within the Christian community who would argue that non-literates simply cannot learn about their faith through storytelling only - let alone become mature believers or leaders through such a methodology. However, Scripture, itself, squarely contradicts this point of view. In the Book of Acts, Chapter 4, verse 13, it says:

*Now when they saw the boldness and unfettered eloquence of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and untrained in the schools - common men with no advantages - they marveled; and they recognized that they had been with Jesus.*⁶

We should also remember that New Testament Scripture, by most estimates, was not committed to written form until sometime between 30 to 50 years after the resurrection of Christ. Therefore, the early church and its founding leaders had no other option but to learn, receive, and transmit these teachings through unrecorded, oral traditions.

⁴ New Living Translation. Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1996.

⁵ It has been established that traditional oral learners receive their information and learn differently than literate learners. For example, oral cultures learn best from storytelling, repetition, and narration. Refer to the Miao UPG website (www.miaoupg.com/storying.htm) for more information.

⁶ The Amplified Bible containing the Amplified Old Testament and the Amplified New Testament. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1982.

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We can now begin to understand why Jesus used storytelling as His primary teaching method. But, this begs the question: Why was it so effective? The reason is because stories change worldview. This, then, is the second principle for transformation:

For a change in the social or communal order to occur, there must be a change in its worldview which is defined as how a particular culture, people group, or individual, consciously or unconsciously sees the world – in other words, (their worldview) is what they truly believe is real. It forms the very core or heart of a group or persons belief system.⁷

The worldview of most, if not all, oral communities consists of a wide range of physical and spiritual needs & challenges as described previously. Although we have absolute evidence that worldview can be transformed, this does not occur overnight. It requires the patience, hard work and dedication of those who are willing to pay the price of servant-hood and self-sacrifice.

How, then, is a change of worldview possible? You may find the answer improbable. However, before you dismiss it, remember that this is exactly the same method Jesus used – a model that, over the course of just 300 years, transformed the worldview of the Roman Empire from that of a ceremonial, pagan, polytheistic society into one based upon Judeo-Christian monotheism. To further illustrate this point, imagine if you will an India nearly completely converted to an entirely different belief and value system in a 300 year period. This suggests just how far-reaching Rome's paradigm shift really was.

This remarkable cultural shift was advanced through the consistent application of the third principle, which is an extension of the first:

It is the systematic repetition of many carefully chosen Bible stories, told accurately and consistently over a period of time (by well-trained and committed Oral Bible storytellers and church planters) which address the felt human and spiritual needs, fears and problems of a particular culture or social group.⁸

Again, changing worldview is an absolutely critical element in this process.

The Scripture stories chosen and shared must address the cultural-religious context of the community; its spiritual barriers and strengths; and issues specific to what the community truly believes. When we speak of individual or community transformation, we really need to see profound change in the inner core of the individual or community; otherwise we will not have true and lasting transformation.⁹

⁷ Bowman, James and Carla Bowman, Lesson 2

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

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During our SIU workshops with trainers and church planters throughout Africa, India, Nepal and Latin America, we have repeatedly witnessed the success of this approach. Moreover, we have documented countless, enthusiastic testimonies of pastors, organizational leaders, and storytelling church planters, who are implementing the Bridges Oral Bible strategy, and testifying to its impact on targeted unreached people groups – one person, one family, one village at a time.

All successful strategies, whether secular or sacred, require the help and support of committed, like-minded allies, joined together in partnership in order to achieve the desired objective. Consequently, this leads to the fourth principle for communal transformation: Partnership.

The church, in particular, was designed to function with a unity of purpose in order to reach the world with the good news of the gospel. In fact, Jesus implored the Father, saying:

I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me because of their testimony. My prayer for all of them is that they will be one, just as you and I are one, Father – that just as you are in me and I am in you, so they will be in us, and the world will believe you sent me.¹⁰

The Apostle Paul clearly understood the intent of this prayer & its utter and absolute necessity. Listen to what he writes to the Church of Corinth:

Now, dear brothers and sisters, I appeal to you by the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ to stop arguing among yourselves. Let there be real harmony so there won't be division in the church. I plead with you to be of one mind, united in thought and purpose.¹¹

In agreement with Paul, no less contemporary an authority on missions partnerships than Dr. David Bennett writes:

As we read the opening chapters of the Book of Acts, we see the amazing unity and harmony that marked the church in Jerusalem during the first few months of its life. In the upper room they joined together to pray in one accord. They all received the filling of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday. The expanded circle of believers devoted themselves to the same priorities of teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer.¹²

¹⁰ New Living Translation. John: Chapter 17, verses 20 – 21.

¹¹ Ibid. I Corinthians: Chapter 1, verse 10

¹² Bennett, David W. Biblical Models for Partnership and Networking. Chennai, India: Mission Educational Books, 2007. 8.

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Bennett continues:

In Acts 4:32 we find the summary statement, “All the believers were one in heart and mind,” and then a vivid illustration: “No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.”¹³

In the context of the oral community, through collaborative partnerships, complete communal transformation can begin to take place. As we have emphasized, the process must begin with the insertion of God’s Word into community life. We cannot overstate this point. There are numerous stunning examples of the transformational power of God’s Word. I would like to share just two for the sake of reinforcing our premise:

In the first chapter of the Book of Genesis we read:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth...Then God said, Let there be light and there was light.¹⁴

In this profound split second of time, through the power of His spoken Word alone, God transformed complete nothingness into a vast, tumultuous ever expanding universe. In his book, The Case for a Creator, author Lee Strobel, quotes Nobel Prize winner, physicist Steven Weinberg, who states:

In the beginning there was an explosion... not an explosion like those familiar on Earth, starting from a definite center and spreading out to engulf more and more of the circumambient air, but an explosion which occurred simultaneously everywhere, filling all space from the beginning with every particle of matter rushing apart from every other particle. Within the tiniest split second, the temperature hit a hundred thousand million degrees centigrade... This is much hotter than in the center of even the hottest star, so hot, in fact, that none of the components of ordinary matter, molecules, or atoms, or even the nuclei of atoms, could have held together... The universe was filled with light.¹⁵

Finishing this train of thought, Strobel quotes Bill Bryson from his book, A Short History of Nearly Everything:

In three minutes, ninety-eight percent of all matter there is or ever will be has been produced. We have a universe.¹⁶

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ New Living Translation. Genesis: Chapter 1, verses 1 – 3.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

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Our second example is more mundane but, perhaps in its way, no less dramatic. Historians tell us that the period from approximately 400 AD to 1100 AD came to be known as the Early Middle or Dark Ages. A brief description of this period has been excerpted as follows:

(The Dark Ages was) a period in human history representing collapse of Roman control in the West. The term implied a suspension in time and, especially, a suspension of progress – a period of cultural stagnation.

The Dark Ages drew to a close with the invasion of the Vikings from the north and the Magyars from the Asian steppes and the weakening of all forces of European unity and expansion. The resulting violence and dislocation caused lands to be withdrawn from cultivation, population to decline, and the monasteries to again become outposts of civilization.¹⁷

The world, indeed, had become very dark and continued to be characterized in this way into the early to middle 1400's. Although these "outpost monasteries" became the guardians of God's Word, unfortunately, as a result Scripture became inaccessible to the people. Bible interpretation and study were reserved strictly for the monks, priests and religious scholars. However, these dismal conditions began to change with the invention of the printing press by Johann Guttenberg in 1452.

In a reasonably short period of time, Bibles were being more easily reproduced and finding their way into the hands of the common people; and its effect was dramatic. As access to God's Word flourished and its Truths became evident, the Dark Ages became illuminated through exposure to this great light. So spectacular was the ensuing social revolution that by the mid-15th Century the Renaissance, or "rebirth," was in full flower. Once again, the world bore witness to the transformational authority of God's Word which, when given its rightful preeminence, can form or reform anything.

Abraham Kuyper, the Dutch prime minister, theologian, and a devout Christian understood that whole cultures were transformed during the reformation as people were given access to God's worldview through the Bible. Christianity's worldview is consistent with reality and thus useful on a pragmatic level... Every area of human life is to be under Christ's lordship, and every aspect of culture is to be redeemed for God's glory, the advancement of His kingdom, and the development of nations.¹⁸

In an oral community, when Scripture stories are introduced through a consistent and systematic strategy, over a period of two or three years, this same transformation occurs. The resultant change in worldview leads inevitably to more productive collective thinking, motivations, and desires. Soon, the community becomes ripe to receive and act upon new ideas. Now, old notions about "witches (that) are

¹⁷"The Dark Ages." Funk and Wagnall's New Encyclopedia (2005)

¹⁸ Miller, Darrow L. Discipling Nations, The Power of Truth to Transform Cultures. Seattle, Washington: YWAM Publishing, 1998. 37

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invisible... (and) fly around at night and bite people's backs"¹⁹ causing sickness and disease are replaced with relevant Scripture stories that teach the truth about health, healing, and how diseases are actually transmitted.

Even poverty, often one of the most grinding aspects of a repressive worldview, is not outside the redemptive power of God's Word - its brutal stranglehold abated when the right stories are told.

*The Bible is clear enough... God has a special concern for the poor... Yet God did not create poverty; man did. The problem is usually rooted in mindsets that retard and resist development, trapping people in destitution.*²⁰

*Transformational development is a dynamic process. It begins through the proclamation of the gospel and involves the exchange of lies for truth (repentance) and death for life (regeneration). But... that is just the beginning. God intends that whole cultures be reformed to reflect His goodness and glory. To get there, individual Christians must begin thinking about worldviews and laying a kingdom foundation for cultures.*²¹

After the groundwork represented by the first four principles has been laid with appropriate follow-through, an oral community usually becomes enthusiastic, motivated, and eager to improve its quality of life. It not only becomes open and ready to receive the Gospel, but also to new ideas and strategies for greater social progress, advancement, and independence.

Thus, the fifth and final principle to be presented for transformational change is the establishment of a sound plan for community development. Some of the best models of collective social development for these rural locations often consist of programs similar to those found in organizations like World Neighbors.²²

Begun in 1951, World Neighbors has been involved in 18 countries throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Its instruction focuses on skill building, leadership, and self-reliance. Its training curriculum addresses the importance of developing sustainable agricultural programs; community and reproductive health initiatives; environmental and natural resources management; and local capacity building. In the process, specific guidance and instruction is provided in such areas as low cost resources and conservation techniques; water management and sanitation; identification of potential income sources; seed and grain storage; adequate food and nutrition; health education; and local capacity building leading to self-management, to name a few.

¹⁹ **Ibid. 33**

²⁰ **Ibid. 67**

²¹ **Ibid. 74**

²² **For more information refer to the World Neighbors website: www.wn.org**

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In conclusion, Scriptures In Use's field training experience confirms, time and again, that traditional oral communities will respond decisively to the transformational power of God's Word when it is presented in agreement with the first four principles outlined above, and in accordance with an effective Oral Bible strategy such as SIU's "Communications Bridges to Oral Cultures." Further, once a sound Bible-based storytelling foundation has been laid, it inevitably leads to the community's Holy Spirit-motivated desire to improve its quality of life through collaborative partnerships which provide basic community oriented education, training, and skills building programs leading to greater autonomy, freedom and self-governance.