

## The Oral Reality: Reaching and Discipling Oral Learners

At the beginning of the last decade, I was traveling through Mozambique and was requested to speak in a town to an audience who had traveled some distance for this gathering. While preaching through a portion of the Nehemiah passage, I noticed that the audience was falling asleep. I changed my mode of delivery. There was a momentary jolt, but they managed to fall asleep again!

My communication was ineffective. After the trip, I was determined to find out why the audience was not hearing. This sojourn of discovery radically altered my thinking, and sent me into a journey of learning—exploring the world of oral communicators.

### I. The Orality Universe

Orality as defined in Webster's New World College Dictionary (2009) is a noun with the following entry:

oral·ity (ô ralə tē)

- a reliance on spoken, rather than written, language for communication
- the fact or quality of being communicated orally

For the purpose of this paper, we define orality: as those who can't, won't or don't communicate through the written word and those who are literate but prefer to communicate in an oral manner.

For over 560 years, since the time of the Gutenberg Bible, Christianity “has walked on literate feet” and has directly or indirectly required literacy of others<sup>1</sup>. But, a majority of all people in the world are oral communicators--those who can't, don't, or won't learn through literate means. Over 4,350,000,000<sup>2</sup> people in our world are at risk of a Christless eternity unless literate Christians make significant changes in how they do their evangelism, discipleship, leader training and church planting.

The numbers may seem large, and even UNESCO is trying to wrap their arms around the matter of literacy and oral communicators. In the 2010 publication<sup>3</sup> they revealed a sense of bewilderment as they cautioned users of the data that it is based on two different definitions. They explained that they have abandoned reporting literacy data based on educational attainment. Basically, they have resorted to the ‘household’ declaration method for statistical reporting (essentially trusting each household to declare if they are literate or not, without definition, verification, or testing). And again, they vigorously cautioned the users that the data contains both actual reports, as well as estimates<sup>4</sup>.

There are many ways to slice the data of the conservative estimate of 4.35 billion people who are oral learners. This includes 3 billion adults, 900 million very young children, and 450 million children between the ages of eight and fifteen. All of these have basic or below basic literacy skills. They are oral learners because of their limited literacy skills<sup>5</sup>.

Some people ask how many illiterates are there? 1.45 billion<sup>6</sup>. Not realizing how rich oral cultures really are, this method of categorizing often places literacy in a non-neutral role as it relates to power structures<sup>7</sup>. Mission organizations engaged in community development, primary health care, HIV/AIDS, micro finances, etc., could further slice the numbers differently.

For the Tokyo 2010 Congress, we note specifically that out of the 4.35 billion people, there are 2.7 billion who are counted as the world's unreached peoples<sup>8</sup> resulting in approximately 3,500 unengaged unreached people groups. The sobering wakeup alarm is that there are approximately 2 billion people without the Old Testament. Furthermore, there are 2,252 unengaged unreached people groups, composed of 350 million people without a single verse of Scripture! These people are known as 'primary oral learners.'

Furthermore, in this postmodern era of the iPod generation, visual and audio communications are also gathering momentum not only in the West, but also globally. Within the next three years, the number of mobile phones that will have access to the internet will outpace the number of PCs connected to the internet. This is a population sample of approximately 3 billion people who connect, transact, and communicate differently<sup>9</sup>. Visually based learning and communications have given rise to 'secondary oral learners, meaning they might be literate, but prefer to communicate in an oral manner'<sup>10</sup>.

## II. The Orality Perspective

The spectrum of primary and secondary oral learners ranges from illiterates, semi-literates, and functional literates to literates, post-literates and the visually literate. Are oral learners really different?

We began life as 'oral' learners<sup>11</sup>. As we went off to school, many of us learned shaped items called alphabets. In sequencing these letters we made sounds and words. By stringing them together, we composed sentences<sup>12</sup>. We learned to read. As we progressed through the august halls of educational institutions, we read to learn. In general, the printed world became our source of information, and the formation of how we learn. Thus, there are distinct differences between oral and print communicators, and the resulting oral and literate perspectives. This is succinctly captured by Dr. Orville Boyd Jenkins in the chart<sup>13</sup> below:

Contrast of Oral and Literate Perspectives

Oral	Literate
Event-Oriented—Experience is what is real, integrated concept of knowledge, practical experience; you do what you can, you enjoy the moment	Task/Goal-Oriented—Abstract, rational view of reality, you can make happen what you can imagine, knowledge is rational, objective ideas, represented in writing, accessible to all; you can make it happen
Relational—Values based on what is required or expected by the group	Pragmatic—Values based on what works, or what was agreed in writing, focus is the specific written agreement
Functional Knowledge—What is needed to maintain relationships, community, accepted values	Factual Knowledge—What is needed to understand details, analyze, organize, control, manage and change the structure or system
Word is Bond—My identity is tied up with my action and statements	What is written can be renegotiated—What is written has precedence over what was said or meant; words on a paper are the third party in any relationship

Truth—Dynamic, relates to relationships; concrete knowledge valued over logical deduction	Truth—Objective, relates to rational analysis of facts, descriptions, repeatable events and patterns (all of which are recorded for reference); linear logic valued
Life Skills—Practical functions, professional or artistic expression	Knowledge—Information oriented
Memory—History, legends, stories handed down by memory, publicly told, extensive memory capacity. Knowledge may be a sacred commodity, for only certain people	Information—Recorded and collected, externalized, for general knowledge; valued skills are referencing, analyzing and manipulating, reconfiguring known facts
Tradition, Heritage	Change, Innovation, Self-Expression
Morality—Personal integrity, relational obligation determined by what people and community expect of you	Morality—Fulfilling formal, stated promises; promises and commitments are dependent on what is known at the time; more information can change the obligation

We have better information but we still cannot reach all the unreached people groups. With resource bases across the world, we are allocating infinitesimal resources<sup>14</sup> towards the world of oral learners which is the majority of the world’s unreached population. We have strategies, but they presuppose a print-based communications strategy, or a literate perspective. We see the comparative charts and we realize that we have missed the mark. Thus, we ask ourselves ‘what must we do differently to disciple oral learners, and in particular, primary oral learners?’

### III. Orality and the Language of the Heart<sup>15</sup>

Most people involved in ministry understand ‘heart language’ as the language we learned from our mothers or fathers. It is the local language, or that which we speak fluently with strong expressive emotions, or the language which we speak while dreaming in our sleep. Thus, heart language is also known as our mother tongue. For example, in the Chinese language, the character for ‘heart’ is a part of up to 18 different uniquely written characters. These written characters represent 18 different stories, idioms, or expressions of the heart, mind, and emotions that include: love, hate, anger, think, agitation and alarm.

Our societies have made popular the idea of the ‘heart language’ and have generally accepted that a story is the way to the heart. We all recognize that heart language linkage takes place when a good story that’s well told goes straight to the heart. Just ask any good filmmaker or a pastor illustrating his Sunday sermon. Theologian Dr. N. T. Wright, in his book *The New Testament and the People of God*, even makes the point that we all have an internal store of stories that provide our framework for experiencing the world. To change people at the deepest level we must change their stories<sup>16</sup>.

If stories in our mother tongue are important, and they frame the way our hearts see the world, is there tangible evidence of how this insight affects mission? In a landmark book on missions and church planting among Muslims, *From Seed To Fruit*, Dudley Woodberry<sup>17</sup> and his team drew a statistical inference that among the workers they surveyed, there was an 82% probability of a church or multiple churches being planted if the three following fruitful practices were honored:

1. At least one person on the team is highly skilled in the local language;
2. The learning preferences of the people group (i.e. oral vs literate) are incorporated into the team’s strategy;

3. The work is done in the heart language of the people.

This is exactly what the orality movement in missions has found to be true. Using the heart language or mother tongue together with an oral approach to learning (e.g. storytelling, drama, etc) is transforming hearts and communities all across the world. And in this we are only following the example of Jesus who, on the road to Emmaus after His resurrection, spoke to His disciples from the Scriptures in such a way that their hearts burned within them.

Thus, we advocate heart language with two infused meanings: story is the language of the heart and mother tongue language is the language in the heart. The observable phenomena are that heart language, both stories and mother tongue, is transforming hearts and communities all across the world. Is it possible that we need to re-examine our print methodologies and literate perspectives so as to create space for heart language (mother tongue and stories) approaches to oral learners?

#### **IV. Oral Strategies and the Church**

Our dataset is informing us that approximately 70% of the world's population are oral learners. Independent research has demonstrated that three critical elements provide greater opportunities for fruit to appear: mother tongue translation; communication strategy; and learning preference. What is holding the Church back? Is the cost to change too expensive? Are the incentives for change non-existent?

Are we willing to use oral strategies to disciple oral learners? When we use oral strategies, we mean that we are communicating in such a way that oral audiences can understand, respond to, and reproduce what we are communicating. We are in essence communicating in the way that they communicate. This enables everyone to carry the message and to teach others to carry the message as well<sup>18</sup>.

Using oral strategies to make disciples of oral learners means using communication forms that are familiar within the culture: stories, proverbs, drama, songs, chants and poetry. Literate approaches rely on lists, outlines, word studies, apologetics and theological jargon. These literate methods are largely ineffective among two-thirds of the world's peoples. Of necessity, making disciples of oral learners depends on communicating God's word to varied cultures in relevant ways. Is it possible that we must re-examine the oral arts, and shift both our attitudes and strategies so that we might become relevant to reaching oral learners<sup>19</sup>?

The heartbeat of this Congress looks at how to redeploy, redirect, restructure resources so that the 2.7 billion unreached can be reached. And, there is great urgency for approximately 350 million people disbursed among 2,252 people groups to have their first oral format of the Bible. This is not a new concept. In fact, it might have been practiced as early as the 1970s<sup>20</sup>. Is it possible that Oral Bible Storying could be part of the future of your mission strategies to reach those who are without one single verse of the Bible?

We further recognize that there is another global generation of youth that is before us that are vastly different. Some call them 'digital natives.' Most of us that are at this Congress are 'digital immigrants.' But media is not something that God shied away from. Shane Hipps reminds this generation that "God spent over 200 verses and six detailed chapters to describe the 'media' items used as a part of worship, including: Lamp stand, tabernacle, Altar of Burnt Offering, Priestly Garments, Atonement Money, Anointing Oil. (Of course, while God and Moses were working on the media technology, the people of Israel decided to freelance, and out of that emerged the Golden Calf. God was not amused, and the consequences were severe<sup>21</sup>.)" We, too, need to consider better media 'stories' so that the next generation of secondary orality learners may be disciplined. Is your organization willing to collaborate to reach the digital natives?

## V. How Orality Works at the Local Level<sup>22</sup>

Storying strategy seems to be one that is particularly appropriate with unreached people groups. However, many established churches, especially in relational cultures, have found significant benefits to the chronological storying approach.

**A. In Evangelism:** Oral Bible stories were told to one of the most unengaged and unreached Muslim people groups in East Africa. As a result of this approach, 30 people came to know Jesus Christ. They are rapidly forming groups to reach their own people group of 153,000 people. In turn, they have also provided 4 key story-tellers to train another 16 indigenous missionaries to another, much larger, unengaged and unreached Muslim people group of 5 million people.

**B. In Discipleship:** The Puinave people needed to be ‘re-discipled’ when missionaries discovered syncretism. Although the Puinave had become culturally “Christian” in the 1950s, they mixed magic with Christian do’s and don’ts. Many misunderstandings resulted from using the trade language, Spanish. When New Tribes missionaries spent seven years learning the difficult Puinave language in the 1970s, they were surprised at the actual beliefs held among the people. At first, the missionaries tried teaching the Bible using traditional teaching methods. The Puinave nodded their agreement, but obviously missed many of the key points. It was only through a chronological presentation of God’s Word, Old Testament and on to the Gospels, story by story, that they were able to vividly portray the holy nature and character of God, the sinful condition of man, the grip that Satan has on this world, and the redeeming solution to man’s predicament found in Jesus Christ. Later, the village elder observed, “I came just this close from going to hell...” holding up his thumb and forefinger. In 1998, New Tribes Mission made this story into a movie titled *Now We See Clearly*.

**C. In Church Leader Training:** In a Northern Africa Muslim-dominated country, 17 indigenous young men (many of whom could barely read and write and some not at all) underwent a two-year leader training program using chronological Bible storying. At the end of two years, students mastered approximately 135 biblical stories in their correct chronological order, spanning from Genesis to Revelation. They were able to tell the stories, compose from one to five songs for each story, and enact dramas about each of the stories. A seminary professor gave them a six-hour oral exam. They demonstrated the ability to answer questions about both the facts and theology of the stories and showed an excellent grasp of the gospel message, the nature of God and their new life in Christ. The students quickly and skillfully referred to the stories to answer a variety of theological questions.

**D. In Church Planting:** In South America, a cross-cultural missionary joined a larger team that included Wycliffe translation workers. Working with stories adapted from a neighboring language, Jeremy instilled vision for the storying process in two mother tongue storytellers and coached them through learning the stories and telling them to others. Jeremy’s two-year involvement has been a significant contributing factor toward a church-planting movement that now has resulted in as many as 20% of the people group becoming believers. In the two years since Jeremy’s departure, storytellers continue to go to new, unreached villages up and down the river, telling the stories and evangelizing.

**E. In Organizations:** Many organizations have seen increased effectiveness in many regions of the world. For example, one organization did a comparison of ‘before’ and ‘after’ effects of orality training. The results were startling: in a five year period fifty non-literates took an average of 2.67 years to lead 815 people to Christ, and planted 22 churches. After they were trained in oral methods to tell 85 Biblically accurate and culturally relevant stories, the same fifty non-literates led 9,122 people to Jesus, and planted 370 churches in just one year<sup>23</sup>. We are witnessing the 22 Old Sending Countries and New Sending Countries desire to retool their missions approach. They are moving from ‘here is the Gospel message’ to ‘what is the worldview of the unreached, and how can we reach them more effectively?’ They are requesting training, resources and personnel to meet the overwhelming needs.

**F. Among Denominations:** Around the world, God is moving His servants to respond to the strategy and tool of orality so that the Gospel can be effectively communicated. Disciple-making of oral learners is both fruitful and multiplying. Bishop Njuguna of Kenya caught the vision of orality and what it meant for reaching unengaged and unreached people groups. He personally took training, led the vision of reaching out to unengaged people groups, and actually adopting them. He brought the oral stories of the Bible to them in their own heart language and began to plant churches among them. But he did not stop there. He leveraged his influence so that 8 other denominational bishops could also receive training and some of them have already started to adopt these unreached people groups.

**G. In Collaborative Partnerships:** SIL/Wycliffe and The Seed Company, along with New India Evangelistic Association and other indigenous ministries in India formed partnerships. Ten months after the work started, they were able to make available mother tongue Scriptures to 65 million people in the form of biblically accurate, culturally relevant, oral stories<sup>24</sup>. In three languages these stories represented access to Scripture for some for the very first time!

## VI. Orality, Tokyo 2010, and Recommendations<sup>25</sup>

The Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization included “Making Disciples of Oral Learners” as an issue group for the first time in 2004. An estimated 90% of the world’s Christian workers who work among oral peoples use literate communication styles. Orality issues raised an urgent cry for effectiveness.

What a challenge! More than 4,350,000,000 people in our world still need a customized strategy -- delivered in a culturally appropriate manner -- in order for them to hear, understand, respond and reproduce. The church today must embrace oral communicators as partners—making disciples together of all peoples to the glory of God!

The Lausanne’s orality issue group challenged churches and other Christian organizations to ride the next wave of Kingdom advancement by developing and implementing effective oral strategies. Partners, networks, seminaries, mission agencies, conference and workshop leaders, as well as other Christian influencers are called upon to recognize the issues of orality in the world around them. We all need to become intentional in making disciples of oral learners. We need to raise awareness, initiate oral communication projects and train missionaries and local leaders in orality as an effective church-planting strategy.

We recommend that:

- A. Tokyo 2010 Congress celebrate the new discoveries through research and knowledge and make known descriptive fruitful practices of breakthroughs through orality, heart language, and Oral Bible Stories, and oral strategies that include storytelling, dances, arts, poetry, chants and dramas.
- B. Tokyo 2010 Congress cast the vision of ‘Finishing the Task’ with great urgency! We cannot wait for another generation to pass to see the 350 million Bibleless people receive the Bible. We humbly pray, plead, and request that an oral format of Bible Stories be made available in the heart language for the 2,252 unengaged, unreached people groups by the end of this decade.
- C. Tokyo 2010 Congress be the lightening rod to envision a global network of collaborative structures to focus on the 4,350,000,000 oral learners. This will enable Churches and other Christian organizations to learn, develop and implement methods, communications and strategies such as:
  1. Local churches in the Global South to become advocates for specific unreached people groups and promote an engagement with those people groups by using worldview-specific oral methodologies.

2. Seminaries to provide curricula to train pastors and missionaries in oral methodologies.
3. Local churches and denominations around the world to utilize oral methodologies as they disciple their own members.
4. Mission agencies to develop oral strategies for their missionaries and partners to use among oral learners.
5. Regional partnerships and agencies to develop a network of trainers to train other trainers in oral methodologies.
6. Churches and agencies to record and distribute oral Bible stories for evangelization, discipling and leader training.
7. Broadcast networks and agencies to broadcast and narrowcast chronological Bible stories and recordings of discipleship groups in communal settings. They should include dialogue which reflects culturally appropriate ways of processing the story and interacting with it.
8. Funding organizations to make resources available for oral methodologies to be implemented with the thousands of language groups, people groups and segments of societies that are still unreached. With the insights gleaned from research and collaboration, Christians have the opportunity to keep billions of unreached people from a Christless eternity in our generation.

My own journey finally led me to tell my first story in Ethiopia in September 2008. I remember sitting with fellow storytellers as we were telling oral stories from the Book of Acts. I recalled one moment when Acts chapter one was being told, then translated into the local language. There was a lot of dialogue going back and forth among the new younger leaders and the translators. Finally, we interrupted the translators and asked why there was so much conversation as we were not even finished telling the story from that first chapter. Referring to verses four and five, he told us that the new leaders said ‘now, we understand.’ We have been waiting for 2000 years, and now we no longer have to wait.’ This was the church being born in real time. Eventually, this also represented one less unengaged and unreached people group as a church planting movement has commenced since that time!

Would we dare to dream of the day that we reached ZERO unengaged and unreached people groups? Would we dare to dream that all languages of all people groups can have biblically accurate, culturally relevant, oral stories from the Bible in their own heart language? Would we dare to dream that oral learners from different sectors of society can be discipled?

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**Notes:**

1. According to Mr. Jim Slack, International Missions Board, their internal research have shown that a community moving from illiteracy to literacy of only 30% has generally taken 125 years.
2. Grant Lovejoy, “The Extent of Orality,” *Dharma Deepika: A South Asian Journal of Missiological Research* 25 (June 2007): 24-34; republished online in the *Journal of Baptist Theology and Ministry* 5 (Spring 2008): 121-33. This number is further collaborated in *International Journal of Frontier Missions* XXXVIII:2 (April 2010), where an entire issue is devoted to Orality, and the article titled “Coming to Terms with Orality: A Holistic Model”, by Dr. Charles Madinger

3. UNESCO: Education For All Global Monitoring Report: Reaching the Marginalized. Oxford University Press, 2010 <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001866/186606E.pdf> (last accessed 11/April/2010)
4. UNESCO 2010 , pages 296—297
5. Grant, pg. 12
6. David Barrett, Todd M. Johnson & Peter Crossing, “Christian World Communions: Five Overviews of Global Christianity, AD 1800-2025,” *Int’l Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Jan. 2009, Global Table 5, p. 25
7. The Next Generation Of Literacy Statistics: Implementing the Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Program (LAMP), UNESCO, Institute For Statistics, 2009. P. 19 [http://www.uis.unesco.org/template/pdf/LAMP/LAMP\\_Rpt\\_2009\\_EN.pdf](http://www.uis.unesco.org/template/pdf/LAMP/LAMP_Rpt_2009_EN.pdf) (last accessed 11/April/2010)
8. Envisioning A Global Network of Mission Structures, David Taylor, *Mission Frontiers*, March—April 2010, p. 16
9. Gartner: Mobile to Outpace Desktop by 2013 [http://www.mediapost.com/publications/?fa=Articles.showArticle&art\\_aid=120590](http://www.mediapost.com/publications/?fa=Articles.showArticle&art_aid=120590) (last accessed 11/April/2010)
10. Making Disciples of Oral Learners, International Orality Network & Lausanne, 2005, p.58; also, see Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1982)
11. Samuel E. Chiang, ‘Oral Communications and The Gospel’, *Connections—The Journal of the WEA Mission Commission*, September 2009, pg. 34
12. A body of literature and studies has matured on ‘Multiple Intelligences’. See link available as of 12/April/2010 at [http://www.newhorizons.org/future/Creating\\_the\\_Future/crfut\\_gardner.html](http://www.newhorizons.org/future/Creating_the_Future/crfut_gardner.html) for an overview primer on this subject.
13. Courtesy of Dr. Orville Boyd Jenkins <http://orvillejenkins.com/orality/orallitbible.html> (last accessed 11/April/2010). For a comparative chart of oral and print communicators by Richard D. Brown, please see a soon to be released book: Koehler, Paul F. *Telling God’s Story with Power: Biblical Storytelling in Oral Cultures*, William Cary Library, 2010
14. According to Todd Johnson indicates the amount of money going to the unevangelized is 0.3%, or about US\$1.7 billion per year. Source: *Atlas of Global Christianity* (Edinburgh 2009), p. 296-297
15. Portions of this section will appear in chapter 1 of a soon to be released new book *Orality Breakouts: Using Heart Language To Transform Hearts*, 2010
16. N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Fortress Press, 1992, pg. 38—41
17. “For the Fruitful Practices Track, 280 practitioners of thirty-seven nationalities and from fifty-seven different organizations gathered. They were from teams that had planted 738 fellowships, and they evaluated ninety-four practices that had been gathered from surveys of 5,800 field workers.” J. Dudley Woodberry, ed., *From Seed to Fruit: Global Trends, Fruitful Practices, and Emerging Issues among Muslims* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2008), will be updated and re-released in 2010
18. ‘Orality Breakouts: Using Heart Language to Transform Hearts’, ION/Lausanne, ch. 10, to be released in 2010
19. Grant Lovejoy, ‘All That May Hear’, to be released for Lausanne Cape Town 2010 Orality Multiplex paper, pg. 4



20. Gilles Gravelle 'Why This and Why Now', Lausanne Global Conversations, 11/March/2010 Blog Entry
21. Hipps, Shane. Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith. Zondervan, 2009, pg. 164—165
22. A small selection of examples first appeared in the Executive Summary of Making Disciples Of Oral Learners, published by International Orality Network and Lausanne in 2005
23. As reported by Dorothy Miller, Executive Director, in Timothy Church Planters Training, 08/2008
24. Orality Breakouts: Using Heart Language to Transform Hearts, ION/Lausanne, ch.2, to be released in 2010
25. A selection of the recommendations first appeared in the Executive Summary of Making Disciples Of Oral Learners, published by International Orality Network and Lausanne in 2005