

Great Commission

A Ministry of OC International
By Sheryl Montgomery Wingerd

Update

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Missionaries Find 'Bridges' into Tribal Group

When the translated New Testaments arrived in the Tarahumara village, everyone rejoiced, including Jim and Carla Bowman — until Jim saw that the people were unable to read them. That's when it began to dawn on him that there was still a gaping chasm between the riches of the Scriptures and the Tarahumara's hearts. They had to find a way to cross it.

GCU: *What first led to you attempt some kind of oral strategy?*

Bowman: We slammed into the problem of not being able to communicate! My wife Carla and I worked with the Tarahumara people in Chihuahua, Mexico, who at the time, were a completely unreached group.

After we saw some of the first few believers coming to the Lord, we tried to initiate Theological Education by Extension (TEE), a really simple literacy tool to help a believer understand a basic Bible principle. He would be referred to a certain verse in the Bible. He would have to read that verse, understand it, and then fill in a blank to answer a question about that verse.

We recognized right away they were having a lot difficulty filling in those blanks. They just couldn't do it. They always preferred to have it explained to them in more concrete terms.

Literacy forms of communication tend to be fairly abstract. Storytelling is very concrete. When we tell a story from the book of Acts, we see real people doing real things. The Tarahumaras seemed to learn best when they could see examples—living examples first, and then from the stories—and be able to imitate those that came before. So Acts became a very important storybook for us in those early days.

GCU: *What were some of your victories and failures?*

Bowman: The Jesus Film was very effective, because it's a story, obviously, dramatically presented. So, we started helping these newly emerging believers learn those stories and then retell them. Then we went on to do other things like putting one story on one cassette. They seemed to respond better to some stories than others. They liked certain stories a lot, like the story of Zaccheus, for example. They related to him. Or the women often really related to the woman at the well.

It was a trial and error process. We tried this, we tried that. And because we were a small team, we had flexibility to experiment.

Our failures were when we tried to make oral people into literates. A translation had been done in the Tarahumara's language, but in written form it was a treasure that was locked up. *(continued)*

Crossing the Chasm

Bridge 1: Learn how traditional oral cultures learn.

Bridge 2: Use the mother tongue.

Bridge 3: Imitate Jesus' oral methods.

Bridge 4: Learn to be storytellers.

Bridge 5: Work in teams.

Bridge 6: Use a locally reproducible church planting model.

Bridge 7: Use God's Story as a whole, unified collection.

Bridge 8: Use the Parables.

Bridge 9: Illustrate principles with stories.

Bridge 10: Put the Scriptures into music and poetry.

From *Communication Bridges to Oral Cultures*
by Scriptures In Use

Where will the storytellers come from? page 2

Missionaries Find Bridges, continued

We tried having them read stories to one another. But it wasn't natural. It was halting. They couldn't get the sense of what was happening.

So then we tried having them memorize the stories and retell them. This worked. We found that these people had amazing memories! And not just one group. We translated the Jesus film into 50 languages in Mexico and they all demonstrated an unusual ability to memorize.

That initial discovery led us to try it more and more. In the fall of 1997 my wife and I locked ourselves away for three months and developed the Bridges Course. We had learned that imitating Christ was important, and that there was an oral system by which they could learn.

During the time we were developing our course we researched things written by others on orality. Then in 1998 we were invited by a group from the Southern Baptists to a meeting on orality, which took place in Cypress, and had the chance to

interact with others who were learning similar things.

Something we contributed to the overall development of the storytelling strategy was the use of Scripture in song and drama. The narrative, combined with these other elements, is as powerful or even more so than straight storytelling.

GCU: *After nearly ten years of use, have you added anything new to your first "Bridges" idea?*

Bowman: The main idea remains unchanged. From the beginning, we systematically tested our

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Where will the storytellers come from?

Yes! We are beginning to see oral communities disciplined through strategic, chronological Bible storytelling. Yet a key question remains—how will we ever get a sufficient number of skilled storytellers? For there are still hundreds of thousands of communities that need them.

Scriptures In Use is one of a growing number of organizations that is pouring itself out to prepare this huge force of workers for the oral world. In doing so, they have become very intentional about making partners and training trainers.

To date, the team has partnerships with 28 non-western agencies that have formally adopted the Communication Bridges to Oral Cultures program. And the number of BRIDGES master trainers, which was 308 by the end of 2006, continues to grow.

SIU's team started at the grass-roots, traveling from place to place in Asia, Africa and Latin America, teaching its BRIDGES seminar for church planters. In the process, they found that the best possible church planters were those from an oral culture themselves. An oral person that has gained some basic reading skill becomes the perfect "bridge" between the written scriptures and the oral community.

After at least 10,000 leaders and grass-roots church planters had gone through their program, resulting in hundreds of house churches, the ministry began in 2005 to put its focus on developing master trainers. The idea is for these regional trainers to equip hundreds of local trainers who will then see

thousands of storytelling church planters prepared and sent out to the communities around them.

SIU's latest projects are raising up more oral church planters than ever. In India, they are developing three regional training hubs, a strategy created to come alongside the Indian Church in its attempt to disciple 20 million new believers by the year 2020.

In 2006, Carla Bowman developed a powerful curriculum designed especially for women. With 120 Bible stories about life issues that profoundly affect women, thousands of female workers will be learning to open up the Scriptures to non-reading women for the first time.

Most recently, SIU is testing their model with nomadic groups who, after generations, still transmit their valued history, genealogy and traditions by telling stories as they sit around the fire and under the stars. "Church on the Back of a Camel", as it is called, is a joint venture with Partners International and some of their regional partner ministries in Niger, Mali, Ethiopia and Djibouti. Churches and agencies have struggled to find a viable expression of church for these extremely mobile people. The BRIDGES model could be just the right match.

Altogether, since 1998, SIU has taught BRIDGES to over 18,000 grass-roots church planters and leaders in Asia, Africa and Latin America. And with the commitment of more and more national partners and master trainers, it's a number that will soon be multiplying exponentially. ✨

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Bridges One course and very thoroughly thought it out—it has remained a staple. We later added Bridges Two which focuses on choosing the right story and telling it at the right time. It was developed as we helped workers think through the obstacles they were facing, when the stories just weren't getting through because of some barrier in the people group's culture or experience.

The idea is to choose a story that goes after that particular problem, things like idolatry, sickness and disease, and poverty. In these cases you would concentrate on telling stories of God's authority over sickness and his provision. We developed story collections—a sort of Bible concordance of stories for young, inexperienced church planters to draw from.

GCU: What are your favorite things happening in orality today?

Bowman: It's been a long haul getting people aware of the challenge of orality. We've had the mindset of bringing people to Christ and discipling them through literate means. Some still believe that it is not possible to be a mature believer and illiterate.

Going back 25 years, nobody was talking about orality. Now, everywhere you hear people saying, "I need to learn about that."

Orality has now made it to the "big four"—WYAM, IMB, Campus Crusade and Wycliffe—which represent the vast majority of missionary effort from the West. And they are very committed to orality. This is a God thing!

GCU: What impact do you hope to see in a generation or two from this movement?

Bowman: I see Africa, Latin America and Asia as the emerging powerhouse of the gospel. They are going to be part of a third wave, a major spiritual awakening.

The numbers in these regions are astronomical. And the majority of the unreached of those regions are oral communicators—that's 4.2 billion oral communicators, women also being a huge percentage of the unreached.

We want to see that community rise up and take ownership of something that belongs to them—it will transform the world.

We also want to see a movement of people memorizing the Scriptures in a new way. Stories change our worldview; we should memorize stories that mean something, that have significance for our lives. In George Barna's book, *Revolution*, he says that 51% of pastors in America do not have a biblical world view. Why? Because they are biblically illiterate. They do not know or understand the stories.

What would all of our churches look like if the majority of those attending had committed 50 to 75 Bible stories to memory? We're going to see a tremendous outpouring of God's Spirit as the world sees that there are people who know the story, and are living it. ✨

To learn more about *Scriptures In Use*, go to www.siutraining.org

GCU Readers Respond, Interact

New Concept in Southern Africa

Dear Sheryl

We are planning to have an Orality working group at MANI Southern Africa 2008 in Feb of next year. This is a relatively new concept in Southern Africa that we'd like to see promoted and utilized for the Kingdom. Orality experts from West Africa will be coming to provide instruction.

Dean Carlson, South Africa

Learned it from Grandmamma

Dear Sheryl,

Today my two children, Godly and Stutee, were laughing and running from one place to another. I asked them, "Come to me. I will tell you stories."

I started with the Prodigal Son. As soon as I started, my son said, "I know that story." I told him, "OK, I will tell you another story." When I started my son said, "I know this story too." I asked, "From whom have you learned all these stories?" My son smartly replied, "I learned all these stories from grandmamma." I asked how many stories he knew...My six-year-old son knows at least 20 stories which he has been learning from my mother. I asked him to tell me the story of the Prodigal Son. He told the story perfectly, just as we found in the scripture.

I realized I had failed to communicate with my little one, but my mother did it in a very wonderful way. Storytelling is a powerful key to open the door for the gospel. It runs from mouth to mouth and reaches deep in the heart of the people. The Church and para-church organizations should understand and think seriously about this approach. If once we take it by heart and make it a lifestyle, then within a very short period we can reach many people around the globe.

C. D. Moses, Orissa, India

It may be up to the *oral community* to see the world transformed.

Look at the contrast between these two realities, observed by experts and practitioners in the growing orality movement:

- Two-thirds of the world's people are oral communicators by preference.
- But three-fourths of our methods for communicating the gospel are literate.

This issue is the second in a series about those who are working to change that dichotomy. Jim and Carla Bowman's story begins in a small group in Mexico and spreads to three major regions of the globe. Jim's dream is "to see the oral community of our generation rise up and take ownership of something that belongs to them." And when they do? "It will transform the world."

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