

**A CASE FOR NAVIGATOR INVOLVEMENT**  
**WITH DISCIPLING ORAL LEARNERS**  
**PILOT PROJECTS**

*By Bill Moritz and Paul Krueger*

The Navigators in cooperation with Thailand Ambassadors of Christ is currently conducting a pilot project in Thailand, training 40 pastors who work with village people who cannot read or write to use an Audio-Bible in a small group discipleship program. The materials that are being used have been translated into the Lisu and Thai languages and are basically the **Operation Starting Line** beginning material, *Running The Race*, that has been so successful in the prisons here in America. Since as many as 85% of the inmates in prison are oral learners **Operation Starting Line** will be conducting two pilot projects in the spring in U.S. prisons using an English and a Spanish version of the Audio-Bible materials. In addition, we will be returning to Thailand to review the effectiveness of the program with the pastors that participated and training them in phase two of the **Operation Starting Line** material as well as some of the other materials developed by the organizations involved in the Orality Network. These pilot projects will produce significant research data which can be utilized to further develop and refine discipling materials and methods that reach the oral learner. In addition to being an important ministry for the body of Christ, I believe that our donor constituency will find our involvement in this area particularly compelling as they have the prison ministry of **Operation Starting Line**.

Discipling Oral Learners is not just a new ministry area that should be developed in the organization, it is a new paradigm shift for the whole organization. Every ministry area of the Navigators is touched by these issues. Many people who are entering the military these days are doing so because they are oral learners and do not wish to pursue more formalized education. Many college students today are becoming what is called "Secondary Oral Learners." They can read and write, but they choose to form their beliefs and organize their worldview through oral learning. They are highly influenced by music, movies, television and other sensory experiences. Many ethnic communities in the United States are oral communities and we will not be able to disciple them effectively or give them tools that they can pass on in ministry if we do not include oral learning techniques. Even business schools are changing the way that graduate students are being trained. Harvard Business School no longer uses textbooks but focuses almost entirely on learning through case studies (stories). In churches today, George Barna's research has shown that only 17% of the people sitting in the pews currently have a Biblical worldview.

This is not a case of "either/or" but of "both." In addition to the literate strategies that we have used so successfully over the last 50 years we need to develop and apply oral strategies to supplement our approach to literary learners and to expand our ministry to oral learners. We cannot leave so many behind as we move forward in the Great Commission. The remaining material in this paper is a discussion of the nature of the problem and what has been discovered so far about making disciples of oral learners.

## **MAKING DISCIPLES OF ORAL LEARNERS**

Excerpts from “Making Disciples of Oral Learners” for  
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60 – 70% of the world’s population, over 4 billion people, are oral communicators; people who can’t, don’t or won’t take in new information or communicate by literate means. Yet, ironically, an estimated 90% of the world’s Christian workers presenting the gospel use highly literate communication styles. To effectively communicate with the oral learner our presentations must match their oral learning styles and preferences. Instead of using outlines, lists, steps and principles we need to use culturally relevant approaches they would understand.

Many groups transmit their beliefs, heritage, values and other important information by means of stories, proverbs, poetry, chants, music, dances, ceremonies and rites of passage. Those that have grown up in highly literate societies tend to think of literacy as the norm and oral communication as a deviation. Oral communication is the basic function on which writing and literacy is based. When literacy persists in a culture for generations, it begins to change the way people think, act and communicate. The members of a literate society then tend to communicate the gospel in the literate style that speaks to them. But, oral learners find it difficult to follow literate-styled presentations, even if they are made orally. It is not enough to take materials created for literates and simply read them onto a recorded format. Making something audible does not necessarily make it an “oral” style of communication. Not everything on a cassette or CD is “oral” and the same thing is true of other media products created for literate audiences. These materials may have literate stylistic features that confuse oral learners.

Some people are oral learners because of their limited education, however many oral learners can read but prefer learning by oral means. If their culture is traditionally oral, people frequently prefer to learn through oral methods. Many literate nations are facing an additional phenomenon. People in the society who may have previously been educated, even highly educated are choosing to get most or all of their information from oral sources. These people do not read to establish their beliefs, but rely on media like television news, movies and music to help them formulate what they believe. This situation is referred to as secondary orality and encompasses a growing population in the United States and well as other developed countries.

### **GOD’S WORD FOR THE WHOLE WORLD**

Jesus chose his teaching style to match his listeners’ capacities. The world that Jesus came to 2000 years ago was an oral society, 90% of the people could not read or write. Jesus used familiar oral means that the people could understand. One straight forward way to communicate to oral learners in a way they will understand is for them to hear the stories of the Bible in an oral, sequential pattern that they can absorb and remember. The communication of stories in this way has come to be referred to as “chronological Bible storying.” It is a proclamation of God’s word in a culturally relevant way that oral learners can understand and to which they can respond. A “storying” approach to ministry involves selecting and crafting stories that convey the essential biblical message, in a way that is sensitive to the worldview of the receptor society.

The stories are faithful to the biblical text, and at the same time told in a natural compelling manner in the heart language of the people. Those who respond need to be able to reproduce it—to share it themselves with others who can, in turn, share it with others, with this pattern being repeated many times over. This does not mean that we discourage literacy or neglect literates. Experience shows that once oral learners accept the gospel, some will have the desire and persistence to become literate in order to read the Bible for themselves. But requiring non-Christians to learn to read just so that they can consider the Christian faith or grow as disciples puts unnecessary obstacles in their path. This is not a matter of “either-or” but of “both.”

We envision a systemic approach to evangelism, discipleship, church planting and leadership development that can involve oral, audio, audio-visual media and print. The process might start with biblical storytelling, songs, dramas and include a video presentation and move eventually to small group study using an Audio-Bible. In a sequential approach like this, the initial focus is on the unique cultural perspective of the people and will move to strategies that provide ever-larger portions of the Bible, shifting from the culturally specific to providing complete books of the Bible auditorily to study. God’s word has transforming impact on people’s lives when it is presented in ways that they can understand it. Storying is not confrontational. It is not preaching. It is not overt teaching. It is merely conveying the stories of God’s Word, dialoguing about them and leaving the results to God. These stories can go where the printed Bible sometimes cannot go.

## **ORAL COMMUNICATORS AND ORAL CULTURES**

In the early 1990s the National Adult Literacy Survey administered by the U.S. Department of Education found that 48-51% of adults in the United States scored at the two lowest levels (out of five levels) of measurable proficiency at a range of literacy skills. While results of the NALS study showed that only 4-6% of U.S. adults were totally illiterate, 46-53% were identified as being unable to function adequately in a highly literate society or they were unable to process lengthy written information adequately. Those functioning at the level 2 could perform simple analysis, but were unable to integrate information from longer texts or documents or carry out mathematical skills when necessary information was contained in the directions. Interestingly enough all of these people described themselves as being able to read English well or very well! When the International Adult Literacy Survey tested adults in 22 developed countries they found similar results even though, like the US, they claimed a 90% + literacy rate. Such people live day to day largely by oral means even if they are able to read simple brief materials.

The Bible is certainly not simple, brief material. If half of the population in developed nations, with longstanding literate traditions, is unable to integrate information from a text like the Bible, what is the situation of those in oral cultures with no such tradition, when it comes to gaining spiritual truth?

James Slack of the IMB has come up with a continuum that describes five levels of literacy to be considered in presenting the gospel:

1. **Illiterates** – cannot read or write. They have never seen a word or read a word. In fact, the word for illiteracy in the Indonesia language is “buta huruf”, meaning “blind to

letters”. For oral communicators, words do not exist as letters, but as sounds related to images of events and to situations that they are seeing or experiencing.

2. **Functional illiterates** – have been to school but do not continue to read and write regularly after dropping out of school. Within two years, even those who have gone to school for eight years often can read only simple sentences and can no longer receive, recall or reproduce concepts, ideas, precepts, and principles through literate means. They prefer to get their information orally. Their functional level of literacy determines how they learn, how they develop their values and beliefs, and how they pass along their culture, including their religious beliefs and practices.
3. **Semi-literates** – function in a gray transitional area between oral communication and literacy. Even though these individuals have normally gone to school up to 10 years and are classified in every country of the world as literates, they learn primarily by means of narrative presentations.
4. **Literate** – learners understand and handle information such as ideas, precepts, concepts and principles by literate means. They tend to rely on printed material as an aid to recall.
5. **Highly Literate** – Learners usually have attended college and are often professionals in the liberal arts fields. They are thoroughly print-culture individuals.

Trying to reach the first three categories using customary means presents two major problems: Almost all missionaries and other Christian workers are literate or highly literate and they communicate primarily by literate means. They think that if they can just simplify their outlines and exposition oral learners can grasp what they are saying. When missionaries try to reach illiterates, they believe that one of their primary tasks is to train a corps of literate nationals (who then face the same problems communicating).

In general, there is a cluster of features that oral learners have in common in processing information. They most readily process information that is concrete and sequential, and which is presented in a highly relational context. Using culturally appropriate oral forms improves the impact of the message. Oral learners “enter” the story and as they absorb sensory data they live the story in the present tense—seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling and feeling what the persons in the story are experiencing. The most effective ministry strategies among oral cultures occur when the communication is done in the heart language, the mother tongue. It is often easy to overlook the fact that people speaking over 4,000 different languages are still awaiting God’s word in their heart language.

Stories told in mother tongue are easily memorized and retold to others. Because stories possess the power to actually change how people think, feel, and behave, and to change the way they see the world, it is important to have a sequential step-by-step process that leads them to a new, biblical worldview. This is what is known as chronological Bible storytelling. Buddhists and Hindus have a hard time understanding that a God who is only 2,000 years old should be authoritative in their lives. Buddhist monks refer to Jesus as Buddha’s little brother because Buddha lived 500 years before Christ. Telling the story of creation and the fact that Jesus was

there at that time has helped many Buddhists and Hindus accept the gospel in cultures where age is an important factor.

## **DISCIPLES TO THE CORE**

Syncretism is “the mixing of Christian assumptions with those worldview assumptions that are incompatible with Christianity so that the result is not biblical Christianity. Syncretism weakens the church, warps non-Christians’ understanding of Christianity and withholds from God the full devotion and complete obedience that is rightly due to Him. Several key elements can contribute to discipling oral learners with a minimal amount of syncretism.

1. The first key element in avoiding syncretism is communicating with people in their mother tongue. They house their innermost thoughts in their mother tongue, so it is the language through which their worldview is most likely to change. In using the mother tongue, one must carefully consider the key biblical terms to use in a language if there is not yet a Bible translation. Concepts like love, grace and sin, or even the basic notion like the names of God. When pastors do not teach and preach in the local language, they are leaving the important task of choosing the correct term to interpreters who do not have the benefit of the pastor’s training. The people may nod their head in agreement especially in Asian cultures where politeness is important but they will be missing many key points.
2. A second key element in reducing syncretism is to develop discipling resources that are worldview specific. Generic discipleship materials are insufficient. Certainly there are biblical essentials that every new Christian needs to know such as prayer, worship, witness, fellowship and ministry, but these practices, should fit the local culture under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. The best discipling resource among oral communicators is not a printed booklet but an obedient Christian. Oral communicators learn by observing. The teaching is conducted more by watching and doing rather than just learning facts. Ie. 2 Timothy 2:2, *“the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.”*
3. A third key in discipling oral learners in order to limit syncretism is to recognize the importance of stories in transforming a person’s worldview. N.T. Wright says that stories constitute the core of every culture’s worldview. A culture houses its central convictions in its fundamental narrative, whether its narrative is implicit or explicit. The ancient mythologies that we find in cultures around the world are explicit examples of this. Those stories answer four fundamental worldview questions: Who am I? Where am I? What has gone wrong? What can be done about it? Every culture uses stories to tell us what it means to be human, what kind of world we live in, why there is suffering and pain, and what, if anything, we can do to deal with that suffering and pain. Christianity has its own distinctive answers to those worldview questions. In order to influence the worldviews of disciples, we need to tell biblical stories that offer alternative answers to the fundamental worldview questions. Biblical stories, and the view of the world embedded in them, can replace or refine the cultural stories and the worldview embedded in them. Wright argues that this is why Jesus so often told stories, particularly parables.

Jesus intended them to challenge the existing Jewish worldview and to provide an alternative picture of reality that Jesus called “the kingdom of God” or the “kingdom of heaven”. If stories anchor people’s existing perspective on the world then the best thing Christians can do in order to displace that perspective is to tell better stories, and we have them! Stories lie at the core of a worldview; formal belief statements, including propositional and theological statements, grow out of those stories. Thus discipleship that offers only propositional teaching does not reach to the centre of the worldview. We wind up with the tragedy of professing Christians who assent to biblical propositions, but whose essential worldview and value system is deeply tied to worldview stories that have gone unchallenged. That mix of contradictory religious beliefs and practices is the essence of syncretism. It constitutes a failure in discipling. By using new stories where a people’s worldview is contrary to the biblical ideal the discipler guides converts to replace the existing belief or practice with the biblical one. When their core stories are not challenged and replaced, the traditional mythology will continue and may over time infuse the Christian practices with meanings from the traditional religion.

4. A fourth key element in order to avoid syncretism is to provide a recorded “oral Bible” for each people group in their language. This starts with a recorded set of stories, biblically accurate and told in the worldview context. In addition, if the Bible is translated into the heart language then the scriptures in audio form can be introduced. By telling Bible stories in a straightforward way, we give new converts an opportunity to engage biblical truth directly and discover its message for themselves. This approach is significantly different from the approach that presents a concept and then tries to support that concept with a story or illustration or has people read numerous individual verses sequenced according to the curriculum writer’s sense of importance and logic and largely divorced from their biblical context. The practice of keeping the story *pure* (separate from our own comments and interpretive remarks) protects the oral learners from the syncretism that might come from embracing a polished system of ethics, theology or pastoral philosophy that has a significant dose of European, North American or Korean cultural baggage.

## **REPRODUCIBILITY**

Many people accept the idea that an oral approach like chronological Bible storying may be appropriate to initial evangelism, but they wonder whether a storying approach is viable for a sustained, indigenous-led church planting movement. Is it adequate for sustaining discipleship among second, third and successive generations and for the leadership development in the church? For a spiritual movement to be engaged, we must consciously choose strategies that oral learners can easily reproduce. The first and most basic aspect of ensuring reproducibility in a storying approach is crafting and telling stories in a way that the hearers are able to readily learn and tell themselves and thus effect a reproducing evangelism. When the gospel is communicated to an oral learner in a way that shows dependence on a written or recorded presentation, it inhibits this reproducibility. In an oral society, the gospel is best presented using oral methods which include stories, visual aids, dramas, songs, dances, and testimonies. When oral methods are used, people are more open to ask questions and to interact with the information. As people are asked questions and in listening to the

questions that they ask you can determine what previous teachings might be holding them back or creating problems with their worldview. As these methods have been tried, questions during the sessions have made it clear that people who had been involved in church had not understood many things from the Bible that had been presented. In order to effectively disciple, one must first determine how one's people learn. The methods that are too often being used work well among highly educated people but do not work well in other contexts. Teachers trained with this methodology have been frustrated by the people's lack of response. The conclusion is that the problem is with the people, that they are not intelligent enough to grasp the material.

A more comprehensive way of looking at what are called "orality" features is to realize that they are not crucially or exclusively associated with what is spoken by mouth. They are instead a correlation of ways of processing that are common to face-to-face, highly relational societies. The correlation of ways of processing and communicating involve concrete rather than abstract notions; sequential rather than random expressions of events; and relational as opposed to individualist contexts.

One important aspect of storytelling involves the disciples telling the story of their own experience of coming to faith in Christ. Those from face-to-face societies readily testify to their personal, daily relationship with Christ, where in western worship services testimony times are limited or non-existent. When friends and neighbors hear these testimonies and see the change in new converts' lives, they often want to follow the "Jesus road." Discipling oral communicators involves identifying what the new believers need to know and do and then communicating these truths using appropriate methods. These methods include modeling, telling a Bible story that communicates a truth, discussing it, perhaps memorizing a Scripture related to the matter and applying the truth together or individually. This is most effective when the modeling is done by an in-culture or close-culture believer. Discipleship is primarily a matter of obedience to everything that Jesus commanded and revealed in Scripture. Discipleship also involves being held accountable to report back. Discipleship emphasizes accountability for application in two crucial dimensions: living it and share it with others. Oral communicators are more dependent on relationships than are literate learners. They believe people more than abstract truths, which makes the spiritual life and modeling of the messenger crucial. Making disciples of oral communicators requires maintaining a loving relationship with the ones being discipled.

Disciples grow best when, from the beginning of their Christian experience, they take responsibility for evangelizing, nurturing new converts, establishing new works and overseeing the development of their own converts. Providing orally based leader training for oral learners and equipping them to continue in leadership with their people group is one of the greatest challenges facing the church. Leadership materials must be easily reproducible and not highly technological which makes story telling and the use of a audio-Bible so effective.

The following is a ten step process for the discipling of oral learners as set out in *Following Jesus: Making Disciples of Oral Learners*:

1. Identify the biblical principle that you want to communicate simply and clearly.
2. Evaluate the worldview issues of the chosen people group.
3. Consider worldview, what are the bridges, barriers and gaps that need to be overcome or addressed.
4. Select the biblical stories that are needed to communicate the biblical principle.
5. Plan the story and plan the dialogue that is going to follow the story, focusing on the task to be accomplished.
6. Communicate the story in a culturally appropriate way, using narrative, song, dance object lessons and other forms.
7. Apply the principle by facilitating dialogue with the group, helping them to discover the meaning and application of the story to their own lives.
8. Obey the discovered principle by implementation steps to be taken by the individual.
9. Establish accountability between group members by mutual and reciprocal commitments to implement the biblical principle in the conduct of their personal lives between members of the group, their families and other personal relationships.
10. Encourage the group to reproduce the biblical principle, first by demonstrating the principle in their own witness of life then in sharing the principle with others.

## **WHEN LITERATES STOP READING**

There is a growing number of people in the world today who are choosing to learn by oral methods as opposed to literate ones, in spite of their literacy. These people are known as secondary oral learners and they are people who have become literate because of their job or schooling, but prefer to be entertained, learn and communicate by oral means. Secondary orality has become prominent today because of the present-day high-technology culture, in which a new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print.

Many of the same characteristics that apply to oral learners who cannot read and write also apply to the secondary oral learner. If the church is going to reach this new generation of secondary oral learners it must change its strategy or they will not be reached for Christ or helped to grow spiritually or mobilized for involvement in ministry. This is becoming increasingly important. A 2004 study reported that “literary reading in America is not only declining rapidly among all groups, but the rate of decline has accelerated, especially among the young. This reflects a massive shift toward electronic media for entertainment and information.” Consider the following statistics:

- 58% of the U.S. adult population never read another book after high school.
- 42% of U.S. university graduates never read another book.
- Adults in the U.S. spend four hours per day watching TV, three hours listening to the radio and 14 minutes reading magazines.
- British teenagers’ pleasure reading declined by about a third from 1991-1998.
- In Denmark one-third of adults do not do any significant amount of reading.
- More than half the adults in the Netherlands hardly ever read a book.

Professor Jim Dator of the University of Hawaii puts it this way, “Reading and writing are clearly dying arts, something which fewer in the world are doing. More important is the fact that

reading and writing are something fewer and fewer people need to know how to do. Most people in the world, even most of the literate people in the world in fact, do not get much of their ideas about the world from reading. They get them from watching television, going to the movies, listening to the radio and other forms of audio-visual communication.”

Ravi Zacharias has made the following observation, “The ability for abstract reasoning is diminishing in our time, because people come to their conclusions on the basis of images. Their capacity for abstract reasoning is gone. We are now in a time where there is a humiliation of the word and an exaltation of the image.”

In their book *Church Next: Quantum Changes in Christian Ministry* Eddie Gibbs and Ian Coffey also conclude that people today are more influenced by audio and visual media than print media. “Theirs is a post-literacy culture for which sound and image have largely replaced the printed word.” The two argue that “instancy” and intimacy are the distinguishing features of today’s non-print media, and that seeing, not reading is the basis for believing.

The implications of this have ramifications not only on what we do in evangelism, discipleship, leader training and church planting but also on how we do it. We must make adjustments in the way we communicate the message of the gospel, acknowledging that our goal, responsibility, and desire are to communicate truth in the most effective ways possible. The inability to systematically apply scriptural truth produces a spiritual superficiality or immaturity that is reflected in behavior. We must develop new forums and formats through which people will experience, understand and serve God.

Tommy Jones, author of *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, urges us to tell stories. “Narrative is becoming the primary means of telling beliefs. Since propositional logic has fallen on hard times, stories carry more weight in carrying truths. They feature “abductive” reasoning, as opposed to deductive or inductive methods, when you tell a story, you “abduct” listeners from their known worlds into another world.”

Campus Crusade for Christ is experimenting with a method of follow-up and discipleship using storying verses written materials. They utilize four types of stories:

- God’s stories (narratives from Scripture)
- Their stories (stories from the discipler’s own experience with God)
- Others’ stories (stories from other people’s lives and video clips from movies and TV programs)
- Disciples stories (immediate practical applications of biblical truth so that the new disciple can develop his or her own stories that can be used to minister to others, thus promoting spiritual multiplication)

Another example is that many graduate programs in business administration use case study discussions to teach essential leadership principles. We possess the knowledge of the greatest story ever told. We must increasingly understand how to communicate that knowledge better with the two-thirds of the world’s population that will receive it best through oral means.

## **A GROWING INVOLVEMENT**

Orality is still a relatively young academic discipline, but even so, there is enough confidence in the effectiveness of oral approaches to making disciples that reputable organizations are investing resources in an ever-growing involvement with the approach. Over the past six years, an alliance of international agencies which has come to be known as the International Orality Network has sponsored consultation aimed at sharing insights and experiences in orality and storying and promoting the approach. Sponsoring agencies are Campus Crusade for Christ, Faith Comes by Hearing, International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, God's Story, Progressive Vision, Scripture in Use, Wycliffe International, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Youth With A Mission and Trans World Radio. Epic Partners International is a partnership formed by Campus Crusade, IMB, Wycliffe and YWAM which is engaged in a storying approach among unreached peoples.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

From the time of the Gutenberg Bible, Christians have led the literacy movement because of desiring to read the Bible for themselves. Yet many people still cannot or do not choose to read and learn from the printed page. Effective discipling of oral learners allows them to embrace biblical patterns of Christian life and belief and utilize communication forms that are familiar within their culture. Of necessity, discipling oral learners involves communicating the unchanging message of Scripture into varied and every-changing cultures in worldview-sensitive ways. The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization highlighted several proposed actions to investigate, embrace propagate and utilize in finishing the task of reaching the unreached peoples of the world.

1. The LCWE should highlight this issue as essential for the evangelization of the world, especially the unreached people groups.
2. The LCWE endorses a "Lausanne Task Force on Making Disciples of Oral Learners" to explore and implement all practical means to advance the cause of making disciples of oral learners worldwide.
3. The LCWE and others should publish material to permeate the missions world with information about oral strategies.
4. Churches and other Christian organizations should develop and implement methods, communications, and strategies such as:
  - a. Local churches becoming advocates for specific unreached people groups and promoting an engagement with those people groups by using worldview-specific oral methodologies.
  - b. Seminaries providing curricula to train pastors and missionaries in oral methodologies.
  - c. Local churches around the world utilizing oral methodologies to disciple their own members as a way of avoiding syncretism.
  - d. Mission agencies developing strategies for their missionaries and partners to use among oral learners.

- e. Regional networks hosting conferences in strategic locations around the world for awareness building about oral methodologies.
- f. Regional partnerships and agencies providing training in strategic locations to train local leaders and missionaries in implementing oral strategies among the unreached.
- g. Regional partnerships and agencies developing a network of trainers to train other trainers in oral methodologies.
- h. Churches and agencies recording and distributing Bible stories for evangelization, discipling and leader training.
- i. Broadcast networks and agencies broadcasting chronological Bible stories and recordings of a discipleship group in a house church setting, including dialogue reflecting culturally appropriate ways of processing the story and interacting with it.
- j. Funding organizations making resources available for oral methodologies to be implemented with the thousands of language groups, people groups, and segments of societies that are still unreached.