

CHURCH PLANTING MOVEMENTS AMONG *Oral Learners*



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Church-Planting Movements are one of the major ways God is moving today. In fact, these movements are the only method of church reproduction that seem to move faster than population growth in our twenty-first-century world where everything is “mega”—mega-cities, mega-populations, mega-economies. There appear to be perhaps as many as twenty-five Church-Planting Movements in the Arabic-speaking world today alone.

For such movements to take place, several vital elements seem necessary. Although it is true that these movements are ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit, there are several ways church planters can either help or hinder the work of the Holy Spirit in how we go about our work of co-missioning with the Father.

One of the ways Church-Planting Movements can be either helped or hindered is in how we approach oral learners. If church planters insist that those who are naturally oral learners become print learners to be good followers of Jesus, then Church-Planting Movements (and therefore the move of the Holy Spirit) will be inhibited. This article details how Church-Planting Movements and orality work hand in hand.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ORAL LEARNERS

It has been estimated that two-thirds of the world are oral learners. This does not mean that two-thirds of the world cannot read. Although it is true that some oral learners cannot read, the main way oral learners are identified is through preference—not through ability. For example, many people in the West are capable of reading, but do not prefer to learn through reading. Instead, they prefer to learn through oral formats, primarily through video and movie in the industrialized West.

Ask any group of Europeans or North Americans if they would rather read the book or watch the movie and their preference becomes obvious almost instantly. The vast majority of westerners are oral learners, but they are capable of reading. Therefore, principles of orality are not just things that apply “over there,” but are extremely relevant to pastors and others promoting discipleship in developed contexts as well.

In fact, it could very well be that a realization of the needs and preferences of oral learners in Western contexts could be critical to a revival of the Western Church. The National Adult Literacy Survey conducted in the United States in 1992 determined that “90 million adults, almost all of whom can read, have difficulty using the written word to accomplish everyday tasks with consistency and accuracy.” Add to this those who are able

to accomplish everyday literacy tasks but do not prefer to read and write and the number of oral learners in the United States could soar as high as 80%.

This has profound implications for our traditional methods of discipleship in the West, which are based on reading. In fact, the first thing that usually happens when westerners become believers is that they are given one or more books to read.

On the other hand, in the Developing World, many oral learners are not able to read or may read at only very low levels. In the past, church planters coming primarily from the industrialized West and trained primarily through institutions of higher learning assumed that everyone in the world wanted to learn to read and write.

However, this assumption has not turned out to be true. Not everyone has the desire to read and write. Interestingly enough, this becomes almost irrelevant in the early stages of a Church-Planting Movement because stopping to create a literacy program would certainly take too long and be too slow to help spark a Church-Planting Movement. This is not to say that there is no place for churches to run literacy programs, but the early stages of a Church-Planting Movement is not the ideal time for reasons that will be outlined below.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CHURCH-PLANTING MOVEMENTS

For churches to reproduce rapidly, certain key elements must be in place. This is not to say that planting churches is formulaic. Indeed, it may be possible to have all the right elements in place but not have the spark of the Holy Spirit and not see a Church-Planting Movement. On the other hand, it is possible to have that Holy Spirit spark but to put inhibitors in place, thereby limiting through poor principles the rapid move of the Holy Spirit, or at least initially slowing that move of the Holy Spirit.

Researchers have identified a list of ten common characteristics of Church-Planting Movements:

1. Extraordinary prayer by missionaries, prayer for new believers, and prayer by new believers
2. Abundant evangelism that includes over-sowing and a buzz in the air about Jesus
3. Intentional planting of reproducing churches
4. The authority of God's word, which demonstrates that the answer to almost every question is, "What does God's word say?"
5. Local leadership

6. Lay leadership
7. House churches
8. Churches planting churches
9. Rapid reproduction
10. Healthy churches that worship, love each other, love the lost, and love the word of God

Several of these factors have direct implications for oral learners, orality, and storying.

First, abundant evangelism can take place only if young believers feel empowered to share Jesus immediately after beginning to follow him. If young believers are made to feel that they are inadequate to share Jesus for any reason whatsoever, they will hold off and develop a fear of mistakenly sharing Jesus. Ultimately, even if they are told to wait for a short period of time to go through a small introductory Bible study before being allowed to share



Jesus, this inhibits abundant evangelism. To tell young believers that they must first learn to read and write before being allowed to share Jesus would slow down that process so much that abundant evangelism would simply not be possible.

Second, local leadership and lay leadership are critical to Church-Planting Movements. If leadership is only turned over to those with high literacy levels or to those who are good at reading and writing at high levels, then it is likely that the group outsider will remain in leadership for too long. The young churches will begin to believe that reading is necessary to leadership and the entire movement will slow down.

Since lay leadership is also critical to a Church-Planting Movement, many of these early leaders will work at other jobs. Very few pastors and elders will work full time for

the church. This means they will have very little time to devote to a literacy program. It also means that if a highly detailed discipleship and leadership training program is introduced, many of these young leaders will lose heart and give up. The requirements will be more than they can meet.

Third, none of this need for rapidity is in conflict with the absolute need for these Church-Planting Movements to understand the written word of God. However, it bears remembering that the written word of God was first the oral word of God. Even people who cannot read the word can listen to it and can receive the stories of the Bible through oral formats.



Many languages have oral Bibles in recorded formats that are available. Where these are not available, someone can teach the Bible in ways that oral learners can remember and then pass on to others. Even people who could potentially read the written word of God may not prefer to receive it in that way. For the word of God to advance rapidly, we must cooperate with people's natural learning styles. This might mean using drama, stories, video, artwork, and songs even when the written word is available, but not preferred.

Fourth, Church-Planting Movements are vulnerable in the early stages. One of the main reasons they are undermined is because the person sparking them uses a means or technology not available or easily accessible to the locals. For example, a westerner opens his or her laptop every time he or she studies the Bible. The locals quickly understand that if they do not have a laptop, then they cannot lead others to Jesus.

The same problem can come with literacy when print learners begin to spark Church-Planting Movements. Oral learners will see a model of sharing and following

Jesus that requires high levels of literacy. When they realize that they are not good readers, don't read much, or don't like to read, they recognize that they are not qualified to lead others to Jesus or to lead churches. When this signal is sent, two-thirds of the world becomes ineligible for leadership and Church-Planting Movements become impossible to spark.

Last, the early stages of a Church-Planting Movement are particularly vulnerable to anything slow. Even the simplest of literacy programs will take months or years to get off the ground. Likewise, complicated Bible classes or seminary classes will work contrary to this principle of rapid multiplication.

This does not mean that literacy programs, Bible colleges, or seminaries are off the table for Church-Planting Movements, but it does mean that they will be contrary to what is needed at the initial stages. They are also likely to kill a movement if introduced too early.

TRANSMITTING THE WORD OF GOD ORALLY: CASE STUDIES

How can the word of God be transmitted quickly from oral learner to oral learner while still preserving the integrity of the word? How can pastors and other leaders become teachers without learning to read and write?

Case Study #1: Central Asia

The first case study comes from a persecuted church area in Central Asia, so some of their details have been suppressed. The people are a minority in the country in which they live. They speak a Persian language with no writing system and come from a folk Muslim worldview. When they first became actively engaged with the gospel nearly twenty years ago, there were no known believers among them.

The church planters in the area knew that they had to adopt an oral approach to sharing Jesus stories because there was no writing system for the language and many people could not read or write in any language. However, it soon became clear that even those who could read and write did not prefer to do so. All seemed to prefer to hear Jesus stories in their own mother tongue (as opposed to the trade or national language), which meant that the oral means of transmission was the only possible method.

This particular people group had almost no Bible translation at that time, so a small number of Bible stories were prepared in an oral format and distributed in extremely limited quantities. The church planters adopted a stance of telling Jesus stories whenever they could and encouraging

the locals to do the same. Due to the location of this people group, access was difficult and only possible during certain times of the year due to extreme weather. Thus, transmission of the gospel had to be fast and accurate.

This particular people group had heard of Jesus in the context of Islam, so it was easy to have conversations about Jesus. Church planters simply said, “Tell me stories about Jesus or some of your other prophets.” The idea behind this was to learn as much as the locals knew about their prophets and therefore where their hearts were. Most locals knew very few stories about any of the prophets. In fact, the stories locals often knew about Jesus were not biblical; however, the church planters simply listened, nodded, and thanked them for the stories.

The church planters were also interested in and collected local folk stories and proverbs. This was simply part of the process of discovering the local culture and values. The church planters wrote down and recorded the stories and soon gained reputations as people who loved stories. The process of recording local stories revealed many important aspects of the culture that were helpful in sharing the gospel.

For example, the local culture already had a concept of “blood brothers” and how exchanging blood can seal a relationship. This concept was used as a bridge to the gospel. The stories revealed a real and deep belief in witches and witchcraft and opened conversation to spiritual forces in the area. The stories revealed that there was going to be an “end of time,” which meant that part of their worldview already coincided with the biblical worldview that time will end.

Proverbs were deeply held and highly regarded, so the church planters began to focus on translating the Book of Proverbs. This appealed to the culture and provided a way to talk about David, a prophet in whom the locals already believed. As the church planters collected stories, they eagerly began to share similar biblical stories. When stories were from the shared prophets, they stressed that these were real historical accounts, different from the other stories.

Sometimes, the church planters met a person only one time and knew that they were not likely to get another chance to meet the locals, so they immediately asked the locals to tell them stories about the prophets. They explained that the two cultures held these stories in common, since Muslims already hold the Gospels and prophets in high regard. Typically, the locals only took a minute or two to tell their stories.

The church planters would then ask, “I know a lot of stories about Jesus. Would you like to hear some?” The

locals always agreed. Sometimes the church planters used pictures to illustrate the stories. The church planters occasionally read the stories from notes, but sometimes told them from memory.

After sharing a few stories, usually including the creation account, locals were invited to follow Jesus based on what they knew of him. Most agreed Jesus was worthy to be followed and prayed a brief prayer. This was not considered a prayer of salvation, but rather a step toward Jesus. For many, it did end up being their prayer of salvation, but this was judged later based on the fruit of the Spirit in their lives.

After the prayer, the church planters asked, “Which of the stories I told you today did you like the best?” The local would identify one of the stories and the church planters would acknowledge what a great story it was and tell it again. Often, at this point, they would ask some of the children to help act out the story as they told it. This was fun for both the kids and the adults.

The church planters would then ask if any of the locals thought they could tell the story. If no one could, the group would practice until everyone was able to tell the story. Finally, the church planters would ask, “Who do you know needs to hear this story? Jesus people tell Jesus stories. That’s what Jesus people do.” They would help the locals to identify several people who needed to hear the story about Jesus. They would then pray and ask God for opportunities to share the story.

Sometimes, the church planters never saw the person again. However, in every case where follow up occurred, people told Jesus stories to the rest of their villages. In this way, the gospel spread among this people group through a simple method of telling and practicing stories. To the best of

our knowledge, there are now forty churches among this small people group, and the churches have reached multiple generations.

There are several key principles to be noticed in this case study:

1. The church planters were interested in stories of all types and explained from the beginning that they wanted to hear all stories. They felt this opened people’s hearts and established the right tone in the relationship from the beginning. It also helped them bond with the locals and learn their language.
2. Biblical stories were highlighted as being special and different from other stories.
3. Locals were invited to tell Jesus stories from the

beginning and were not corrected when they told non-biblical Jesus stories.

4. People practiced telling the stories, and pictures and drama were used in story-telling.
5. When possible, stories were memorized rather than read to emphasize that it wasn't about reading, but about the story itself.
6. Locals practiced telling stories and were told that this was a normal part of the Jesus life.
7. Locals were released to tell Jesus stories immediately after beginning to follow Jesus.

There are several other points worth mentioning.

First, the church planters made use of gospel portions in the trade language. Those who could read would usually read the stories and then translate them “on the fly” into their own mother tongue. Usually, the very formal version of the Gospels was considered intimidating, but most people readily embraced the “comic book” version of the Bible.

Second, the church planters would translate the stories into the mother tongue for those who couldn't read the trade language, so literacy was used at some level in the movement. However, most people who were following Jesus were listening to the stories as a bridge person translated them from the trade language. Since there was a minimum literacy level and the Bible was available, this was deemed most expedient to allowing a rapid spread of the gospel. Waiting for a complete preparation of the Bible into their mother tongue would have violated the principle of speed and slowed down the movement. Sometimes in Church-Planting Movements church planters cannot aim for “purity of philosophy,” but must simply do the most expedient and practical thing possible.

This “union” of literate and oral approaches worked well for this people. It allowed those who didn't read to be immediately empowered and it elevated the mother tongue. On the other hand, introducing the written Bible portions in the trade language meant people didn't have to rely on outsiders to gain access to new Bible stories. The group of outsiders who were the church planters knew that their access would be limited and that providing new stories would not be practical.

Case Study #2: Southeast Asia

The second case study also comes from a persecuted church area. These people come from a Buddhist background and number around three million people. Their Church-Planting Movement was catalyzed by several cross-cultural

church planters who decided to train the locals to plant churches rather than to plant churches themselves. Orality was a major part of their strategy. In the past nine years, 365 new churches have been planted among them.

As a part of the church-planting training offered in this movement, local believers were taught Bible stories and asked to practice the stories until they were able to tell them well. They were given pictures to go with the stories since pictures are a normal part of the culture. The pictures were initially brought from another country and then adapted with the help of a local artist.

While testing the usefulness of the pictures, the church planters discovered that if Jesus had a beard, then the locals thought Jesus was a Muslim. This was because the only people in their context with beards were Muslims. So new pictures were drawn of a beardless Jesus and these have proven very popular. These pictures have been key to the Bible storying strategy.

When preparing the stories, the church planters were taught to use terms that were appropriate to the worldview of their Buddhist audience. This was accomplished as the foreign church-planting coaches encouraged the locals to indigenize local Buddhist worship forms to the worship of Jesus. This led to a change in how some terms had traditionally been used. For example, older versions of Bible stories in the area had used the local word for “sky” to refer to “heaven.” However, the local church planters felt that “sky” was not a place to which people wanted to go. Instead, they chose to use the term “Golden City of Nirvana,” because this was a place of no more sin and suffering in the Buddhist worldview.

Orality and storying training were not taught separately, but were always an integral part of the training. Church-planting training also included instruction in obedience-based discipleship, instruction on how to carry out the nine basic commands of Jesus, and an introduction into how to share the story of Buddhism first before sharing the story of Jesus. These trainings were normally held in Buddhist monasteries.

This integration of church planting and storying can be seen in the basic structure of how the first churches multiplied.

When asked to describe her training process, TT explained it this way:

At 11 a.m. on Sunday we strike the *gyizee* three times as the lawyer showed me and pray to Abbot Jesus. My 9-year-old daughter tells a Bible story using the pictures and then I ask the questions to help seekers and new believers find the truths from the stories. Then, I tell the house church members and seekers to repeat this same story and pattern of worship in their homes. So at 2 p.m.

that same day most of these members meet in their own homes. There are fourteen churches now.

The 9-year-old Bible storyteller is the best preacher out of fifty house churches in that area. The *gyizee* is a bell struck in the Buddhist cultural context to initiate worship. In the case of the followers of Jesus, they struck the bell three times for each of the members of the Trinity. Buddhists not following Jesus also strike the bell three times, but for different reasons.

During the process of indigenization, the local church planters felt this method of worship was most appropriate for their local context. In addition, rabbis are foreign to their context, but an abbot is well understood, so Jesus is referred to as an “abbot.” This is the local cultural equivalent of a rabbi, as abbots are religious teachers and leaders in the local context. The lawyer refers to the person who led her to Jesus and trained her in church planting.

In this context, the church planters felt it was important to not only tell the good news of Jesus, but to first tell the bad news of Buddhism. Young believers were taught to talk about how one achieves freedom according to Buddhism before telling stories about Jesus. This was because the locals were familiar with Buddhism, but didn’t really understand the full implications of the path of salvation in Buddhism. When the story was told and pointed out that Buddhism demanded perfection, most people realized that they would never be able to achieve perfection.

Realizing their need for a better way, the church planters then told the story of Jesus. As in the earlier case study, church planters here also started with stories that were not Jesus stories but instead were familiar to the locals.

There are several key principles to be noticed in this case study:

1. The process of adapting the language of the Jesus stories to the local culture was led by locals. They decided what words needed to be changed or adapted.
2. Orality was simply a part of a church-planting strategy, not a separate component.
3. Local stories were studied, understood, and adapted to new purposes.
4. Storytellers began with stories the locals already knew and then moved to new stories.
5. Pictures were an important part of telling stories, but they had to be adapted to the local context. Pictures were also tested for intelligibility and cultural appropriateness.
6. During the church meeting, all believers practiced telling Jesus stories and had an expectation that they

would share the stories with others. They immediately went and shared the stories that same afternoon.

7. Lay people, women, and children were included in the process and even empowered to become some of the best preachers in the area.

CONCLUSION

In each case study, orality was not a separate strategy; it was simply a part of an overall church-planting strategy which involved learning local stories, indigenizing the gospel, training locals to lead churches, and storying. Spreading the gospel orally was not a particular philosophy, but a pragmatic answer to a pragmatic question: How can the most number of people hear about Jesus in the shortest amount of time?

Church-Planting Movements are the fastest-growing expression of Jesus on the planet today. They seem to give more people a greater chance to hear the gospel, respond to it, and get plugged into a fellowship than any other current vehicle. For these movements to continue to expand rapidly, they must be led by lay leaders who can create a general buzz in the air about Jesus.

They must also have a love for God’s word. If the only way to know and love God’s word is to learn to read and write well, then much of the world will not be able to effectively follow Jesus. Orality is simply a way for new disciples to effectively engage with Jesus and his stories and then to effectively engage others with Jesus and his stories. 

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