

EMPOWERING WIDOWS

with Orality-Framed Training




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A few years ago, a not-for-profit group conducted research on the village of Ambam in order to understand some of our major problems. In the process they found that in this village of 1200 people, there were over 100 widows, 90% of whom were illiterate! Their husbands had died of various causes (e.g. snakebites, violence and disease), and in most cases, the widows' in-laws confiscated their property, leaving the widows to care for their children alone with little or no income. So how do we increase economic opportunities for them and empower them through skills acquisition and a cooperative? Using the holistic model,¹ we set out to empower widows with their own cooperative farms raising coffee, chickens, pigs, goats, and other income-producing crops.

1. Promoting Dialogue: Widowhood dons a veil of silence. The stigma marginalizes you so that no one talks with you anymore. Social boundaries inhibit direct interaction between the common people, especially widows, and their leaders. The isolation intensifies your pain. A faithful application of Jesus' model² calls for a different approach. First, our initial investigation of the widows' needs enabled us to build some rapport with them that led to a forum where each widow expressed her needs to plead for community change. In order for this ministry to succeed, the head chief needed to embrace the vision. When we visited him in his chambers and shared the vision, he not only embraced the vision, but gave some of his own land to aid the widows and now attends some of the forums. In sum, orality demands collective dialogue to empower community change.
2. Telling their Story: We encourage widows to tell their stories. For most of them, it is one of the few times they get to share their grief with others. Talata tells her story of when the snake bit her husband on the farm and the nightmare of how he died on arrival at the hospital. She tells about the unbearable burden of providing for her children. She has no education and just gathers firewood to sell in the market. As she tells her story, tears of hopelessness stream down her cheeks. Soon, she is surrounded by people comforting her by drying her tears and assuring her of their support from now on and this becomes her new story. By sharing their stories, each widow is empowered by getting a chance to be heard. The only way to (re)create a new story in an oral culture is to tell the old one, and verbally dream the new one.
3. Replacing Rituals: Prior to this initiative the widows had only one perspective of their status: abject poverty. Their rituals were based on community memories that recalled the lack of resources versus the creation of resources, and being a burden versus an asset to society. Our goal is to reverse such mindsets. Esther, a widow and a trained schoolteacher, fully grasped the value of the cooperative and since the other women held her in high esteem. Her instruction changed the widows' perception of widowhood. Her participation is a major reason why after planting trees last year, we now embark on poultry farming this year.

Through promoting dialogue and storytelling, and replacing rituals, we empower these widows as we journey alongside them. The widows' ministry has benefitted tremendously through the oral model as it empowers these women to rise above their sense of powerlessness. 

¹ See Madinger, Charles. 2010 "Coming to Terms with Orality: A Holistic Model." *Missiology: An International Review*, 38:2, 201-213. Also, Madinger, Charles. 2013 "A Literate's Guide to the Oral Universe". *Orality Journal*, 2:2, 13-40.

² Widow of Nain—Jesus stopped to talk with her and discern her grief more fully (Luk. 7:11-17), Mary and John—Jesus entrusted the care of his mother to John (Joh. 19:26-27), importunate widow—seen as unimportant, but makes her voice and needs heard (Luk. 18:1-8).