

Addressing a Blind Spot in Missions

BY RICK LEATHERWOOD

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Ah, dear brothers and sisters there is a blind spot in Christian missions today. The mere mentioning of the blind spot at this point could lose ninety-five percent of those of you reading this first sentence. That would be both unfortunate and unproductive to the purposes of God. Consider the many tools used for prayer and mobilization toward reaching unreached peoples. Most lists include statistics on religions, languages, populations and access to available Bible translations. No blind spot so far.



Most readers of *Mission Frontiers* are familiar with the term *mother tongue* which means the primary language a person grows up speaking. This differs from the local *trade language* which is used in the market to do business with people who have a different mother tongue. But it is through their common trade language which both of them know that they can talk and do business. For the last 100 years in their quest to produce the Scriptures in every language in the world, Bible translators have now translated the Bible into every trade language in the world. What does this mean? **This means that the Scriptures are now available to every person in the world in a language they can understand.** And so the issue is no longer a matter of having access to the gospel and the word of God. **Because most of the unreached people in the world are illiterate,** whether they have access to a Bible in a language they understand or not, **the main issue is now literacy.**

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Morris Watkins was the founder of the Lutheran Bible Translators and during his career Morris came to see the blind spot. How's that for an oxymoron? Morris had come to understand that even when the Bible was made available in a people's language, the majority of the people in most unreached groups were unable to read it. The blind spot is simply that there is **massive illiteracy throughout the unreached peoples of the world.**

In missions we've glossed over the illiterate by calling these people the more positive sounding term *oral learners*. Having done this for 14 years, I am now convinced this is not the way to go. I no longer want to leave an oral learner as an oral learner. That person needs to learn to read. If storytelling missionaries like me had spent a fraction of their time the last 14 years starting literacy classes to teach oral learners how to read, the people in Africa and Asia and South America and elsewhere **who had been illiterate would now be literate** and so much farther down the road toward being disciples and enjoying the abundant life Jesus wants us all to have. (John 10:10)

Our national co-workers in the country where we've been working are using our book of Bible stories and say they are seeing great fruit, but **that fruit is occurring among people who can read.** These evangelists and church-planters are telling us the people who can't read do not feel confident to share the stories with others and depend on someone else to come and re-tell them the stories. We've learned and we believe that storytelling is an excellent

methodology for making disciples **IF** the person can go home and read and re-read the stories over and over again just like we do. Acts 17:11 says, “The people in Berea **examined** the Scriptures **daily** to see if what Paul said was true.” Literacy is an essential component for making disciples. Jesus said, “If you continue in my word you are truly my disciples.” (Jn 8:31) But it is pretty hard to continue in His Word and examine the Scriptures, **the written Word of God**, if you don’t know how to read. But what if the people *prefer* oral learning? I will now answer that by asking a question. What does God prefer?

There are many issues in the world of missions today. One that is not often mentioned is the low self-esteem of perhaps 400 million men who are the heads of their households yet do not know how to read. John the Baptist cried out, “Every valley shall be lifted up.” What do you think he meant? I believe this verse could be interpreted that through John, God is talking about people with low self-esteem who need to be lifted up, just as every mountain of pride needs to be brought low. (Luke 3:5) So let’s say an illiterate man is in the market where he hears of a literacy class that’s beginning in which he can learn to read his trade language in just four months. Two hours a day in the evening after work, six days a week for four months and the life of this man can be completely changed. And what can this man do after that? He can come home and gather his family around him and begin to read to them, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Some people will argue it is best for people to hear the word of God in their mother tongue. Yes that’s true. But if someone has learned to *read* in their trade language, they can then translate the word orally into their mother tongue. So using their mother tongue, this man begins to lead his family in a discussion of the passage he just read to them in their trade language. This father’s esteem in the eyes of his wife and children and their community just went through the roof. This man has learned to read and has a new life.

Near Neighbor Evangelism

The previous anecdote is but a seed. It is what George Patterson called *near neighbor evangelism* as **the teachers of these literacy classes would be local believers**. For many years, Dr. Patterson’s teaching of *The Spontaneous Multiplication of Churches* was a favorite of the various lessons in the Perspectives course and probably still is. In

the summer of 1987 at the U.S. Center for World Mission, just as the Perspectives class was about to take a break, Dr. Patterson said, “Oh and by the way we are not the ones who are going to complete the Great Commission. I was planning to go to Mongolia at that time and was out of my seat in a shot exclaiming, “What do you mean we’re not the ones who are going to finish the Great Commission?” Little did I know I had fallen right into Dr. Patterson’s trap and he calmly said, “You ask that question when we come back from the break” and he dismissed the class. After the break, even as the students were still taking their seats, Dr. Patterson was at the front of the class. He looked at me and said, “Now you ask that question again.” So in a much calmer voice I repeated what Dr. Patterson had said and my question. No one in the class had ever heard of near neighbor evangelism. But as George Patterson unpacked this true and beautiful thesis being one of the keys to the spontaneous multiplication of churches, no one could object. Near neighbor evangelism is simply equipping and releasing believers who are **culturally closer to your focused unreached people than you are. These disciplined believers will then be the ones to bring the gospel to their unreached neighbors** across the river, over the mountain or on the other side of town, etc. These believers are culturally near to the unreached tribe and speak the same trade language they do.

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According to Literacy Evangelism International (LEI) it takes an adult four months to learn to read their language. Four months of focused and determined attention and a previously illiterate adult can learn to read and write. It was the missionary Frank Laubach back in the 1950s who developed the methodology of literacy training, associating pictures with sounds and words, a modification of which is now in use by LEI and others, and has been used to teach adults how to read in over 40 countries. Millions and millions of people have learned to read as a

result. Still literacy statistics reveal 800 million of the world's 1.4 billion Muslims remain illiterate. And all together, over a billion people in the world are still functionally illiterate and the overwhelming majority of these people are unreached.

Only 19% of the people in Niger know how to read. Chad is second lowest at 25%, then South Sudan 29%, Guinea at 30%, Mali 35%, Burkina Faso 36%, Central African Republic 36%, Benin 38%, Ivory Coast 43%, Liberia 47%, Sierra Leone 48%, Ethiopia 49%, Mauritania 52%, Gambia 55%, Senegal 57%, Mozambique 58%, Nigeria 59%, and Guinea Bissau at 59%. These figures come from individual governments reporting to UNESCO and their figures are probably inflated so not to look too low. UNESCO also has Afghanistan at just 38% and Pakistan is at 57%.

Very little is being written in mission literature today regarding this issue of illiteracy. Most certainly this blind spot is holding back the growth and spread of the gospel. Learning to read through **relational literacy classes** can build relationships with neighbors and enable people's lives to become more fulfilled. Furthermore, the skill of reading will significantly **accelerate evangelism, discipleship, church-planting and the completion of the Great Commission.**



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What is it that needs to be done? It's pretty simple really. Though we didn't know it, we have been trying to jump from kindergarten directly to the second grade. We have been trying to disciple people with written material they couldn't read. So now we add one more step, the all-important first grade, four months of literacy training, into our discipleship programs. The teachers of the classes will be **local literate believers** who can become near neighbor evangelists. Church-planting mission organizations around the world need to envision how literate disciples who have been through a simple three-day training can be used of God to teach literacy. These believers can be empowered and equipped to be used to spread the blessing of God to their neighbors down the road who speak a different mother tongue, by teaching them to read and write their common trade language.

Lifetime relationships can begin in literacy classes, as near neighbor believers suddenly find themselves involved with people in one of life's most crucial and important transformations and as their students learn the life-giving skill of reading. It would be hard to imagine this relational four month process taking place without a loving bond having been created through which the gospel can be shared. **Literacy training is the vital instrument.** And who do these adult students have to thank for this amazing blessing that has opened and changed their life but that Christian teacher who also talked to them about Jesus, their newfound Lord and Savior... and His book. May God turn the evil of illiteracy to good as movements to Christ take place through the humble service of ordinary near neighbor evangelists who have been equipped and challenged to become literacy teachers.

“And Jesus went to Nazareth where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath He went into the synagogue. **And He stood up to read.**” (Luke 4:16) 