THINGS HOME MISSION CAN LEARN: STORIES

Posted on November 29, 2017 by Eddie

Taking one of Jesus' amazingly creative parables and turning it into an alliterated, three-point, logical sermon has to be the ultimate in literate processing.
Category: Church: UK

It didn't take me long to work out that three point sermons didn't really work well amongst the Kouya. If I wanted people to pay attention to my preaching and to learn from it, I had to have more or a narrative shape to my sermons. I had to tell stories.

In some sections of British evangelicalism, this might be seen as close to heresy. Sermons should be well structured, logical expositions of Scripture, they shouldn't involve story telling. Except, of course, that Jesus told lots of stories and he knew what he was doing.

One of the things that mission experience and research has shown us is that there is a significant difference between people who are primarily oral learners and those who are literate learners. This goes much deeper than a simple preference for reading over listening. Oral learners, like the Kouya have a number of distinct characteristics.

Stories: Oral learners prefer to learn through stories and narrative, rather than in a point by point logical presentation of information.

Community: Oral learners process information in community or group settings. The key question in a Bible study, is what does this passage say toÂ *us*? Not, what does it say toÂ *me*?

Experience: The act of listening to a text or to stories can often draw oral learners more deeply into the text than written learners. They experience a connection to the stories and to the story tellers that literate learners often miss.

It is important to note, that being an oral learner doesn't necessarily mean that you can't read, it just means that you have a preference for one way of processing information over another. It is estimated that over three quarters of the world's population have a preference for oral learning.

With this in mind, it is worth noting that British Evangelicalism is highly literate in the way it functions. It is assumed that people will read a lot; getting into Christian books as well as the Bible. We are taught to preach and listen to sermons which are orientated towards literate learners. Taking one of Jesus' amazingly creative parables and turning it into an alliterated, three-point, logical sermon has to be the ultimate in literate processing. As I noted above, even our group Bible studies tend to have an individualistic focus, rather than a corporate one.

The problem with this is that many of the people we are trying to reach on mission in the UK are oral, rather than literate learners. Most people in Britain do not read great amounts, they prefer to digest information in small, story-led, soundbites and shy away from long-analytical pieces. Many traditional approaches to evangelism leave people in the UK cold, not so much because of the content, but because of the way that it is presented. We have to learn to communicate with oral learners.

Thankfully, the cross-cultural mission community has produced lots and lots of resources which can be of help to people in the UK.

- Reading the Bible With the Global Church: a paper by me which explores some of these issues (and more)
- The International Orality Network: an affiliation of agencies and organizations working together with the common goal of making Godâ€™s Word available to oral learners in culturally appropriate ways. I would particularly highlight the Lausanne book, Making Disciples of Oral Learners, which is free to download on this page (in numerous languages).
- Scripture Engagement Website: this is a wonderful set of resources for anyone looking to help people get to grips with the Bible.
- Chronological Bible Storying is a way of presenting the message of the Bible in story form. Redcliffe College offer an intensive five day workshop for anyone who wants to learn to use this method.

There are numerous places where you can get hold of audio Scriptures; which are ideal for people who prefer not to read or who process information orally.

Literacy is so deeply engrained in evangelical sub-culture that many of the ideas in this post may make some people uneasy. However, it is worth remembering that for most of its history, Christianity has been transmitted orally. Mass literacy is a relatively new (and perhaps passing?) phenomenon. It's also important not to throw the baby out with the bath water. Written texts function have a permanence and a function that cannot be replaced by oral methods. There will always be a need to study the written text of the Bible; but this may not be always the best place to start in the UK, today.

Posts In This Series

- Introduction:Â I believe that the skills and experience of cross-cultural missionaries are crucial to the future of the church in the UK: the start of a blog series....
- Go:Â When push comes to shove, there is one basic difference between long-term, cross-cultural missionaries and the average church member. ...
- Study:Â How well do we understand the culture that surrounds us?...
- Contextualise:Â When Paul spoke to a Jewish audience, he started off with the story of the Jewish nation, when speaking to Greeks, he worked from inscriptions on statues and Greek poetry. ...
- Serve:Â If you just preach the word but donâ€™t do the deeds then you are not credible, if you just do the deeds without preaching the word then you are not audible....
- Don't Look Down: Looking down on a class of people, and holding them in contempt for their reading habits, has far more to do with liberal, middle-class prejudice than it has to do with Christianity.Â ...
- Speak:Â To a newcomer, a phrase such as "we will now enter into a time of worship" conveys far more background information about the person using it than it does about what is going to happen next in the service. ...
- Religion:Â Learn from people who have been there and done that....

- Stories:Â Taking one of Jesus' amazingly creative parables and turning it into an alliterated, three-point, logical sermon has to be the ultimate in literate processing. ...
- Pray:Â It would be easy - very easy - for a Western rationalist to dismiss all of this. I'm a biologist, I know what causes diseases! ...