

Are We There Yet?

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Date: 11.08.2010

Category: Orality

We are living in an age when people are in a hurry to get where they are going. Even our children soon begin asking the question before we travel very far: Are We there yet? When I was first beginning to work with tribal and rural people in several of the southeast and south Asia countries I soon found myself on a journey into orality that I had no idea where it was heading or when I would arrive. The Lord was gracious to allow me to make many mistakes in those early days which helped me to learn from the people. It was frustrating at times as I was learning what worked and what did not. And I often thought that I was far in over my head in trying to teach people that I did not understand how they learned. But little by little I began to see progress. I had to humble myself to become oral so I could teach as the people would themselves teach others.

Some of the early progress came from some tribal evangelists who said to me, "I can do this!" and, "This is what my people need." Then some of the interpreters I had to use repeated similar words saying they could do what I was doing. Then one day I returned to one of the countries and was met by a smiling local co-worker who began to tell me how he had returned home after our last teaching time together and taught his wife and children to tell the Bible stories and had planted a church. Then I had visited a mud and thatch church in a remote part of a south Asian country and witnessed a young man telling the story of Creation and Adam and Eve. I asked where he had learned to do this. It was from a pastor I had trained several years before. Then one afternoon as I was reaching the concluding stories of Jesus in another training session, several men arrived and joined the trainees. After I finished, the men told us that they had heard about the training for telling the stories of Jesus and they came to ask if someone would come to their village of some 600 families and tell the stories. One of the men in the training session said, "I'll go!" Then I began to hear missionaries in other countries asking for information about telling the Bible stories. I was privileged to share with many who were from different mission agencies.

Two years ago I returned to Karnataka State in South India and found that the leader of our Baptist work had a vision for working with all the evangelical groups in that state with a goal to plant 50,000 new house churches by the year 2025. And at that time they were nearing the 5,000 mark. After visiting a number of these new house churches and sharing the Creation to Christ story at least a dozen times, I was witness firsthand at how they planned to reach their goal. The evangelical groups had covenanted to use Storying Training for Trainers as a methodology to train entire church congregations to take the stories to their neighborhoods and communities. In recent months I have received requests from a number of Africans and those in other south and southeast Asian countries for information and resources so they, too, might learn to be competent in telling their people the Bible stories.

So as I have asked myself the question, "Are we there yet?" I realize that we are getting there. We've come a long way since the 1980s when the chronological Bible teaching methodology was evolving into chronological Bible Storying. I was initially concerned about field reproducibility. Soon I realized the orality factor and its implications. Then I saw the value and role in overcoming hostility toward traditional witnessing and teaching. And now I see shared vision and growing competence, variety in methodology, enlarging vision, unreached and formerly unengaged peoples being reached, and now a growing vision for the Bible stories in the U.S. Is all of this just a coincidence? I see the presence of God's Spirit in opening the doors to make Scripture accessible to all peoples whether oral or literate. I see a fresh wind blowing through the family of God as evidenced by those willing to learn the stories and patiently teach them. There is new vision, a growing competence in sharing God's Word in creative and fruitbearing ways. I don't think we are there yet, but we are getting there. All who have opened new conversations or commented on conversations thrill me. I long for that day when our Lord says to the church, "You are there! And we no longer need to ask ourselves if we are there yet?"

