

Training indigenous pastors from oral traditions

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Since the early days of modern missions, there has been a trend towards training national pastors who would be the leaders of the Assemblies of God in their home countries. The largest evangelical churches owe much of their global growth to the training of national pastors. Many pastors in the Assemblies of God of Latin America have been trained using the literacy-based methods of the “Plan Basico.” However, there exists many indigenous persons who have been called by God to become pastors. Many of these brothers and sisters come from oral tradition societies that are non-readers, whether by choice or lack of access. If God is calling these servants to His work, we must begin to examine the best way to train indigenous pastors from these oral traditions.



In my field of work in Oaxaca, Mexico, I’ve discovered a great need for pastoral training that addresses the needs of students with low levels of literacy from indigenous oral traditions. Oaxaca has over 120 indigenous languages; these linguistic groups can be classified as oral tradition communities. My work in Oaxaca has been greatly influenced by my time teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) in Southern California. When I arrived in Oaxaca and started to train indigenous pastors, I found I had to employ many of the same teaching strategies that I learned teaching ESL. As a result of my experience teaching ESL and working in Spanish Bible Institutes with Hispanics Mestizos and Indigenous students, I will be addressing the challenges I’ve seen in these different settings, and how it relates to the question of how best to train the oral learner.

To discover the best methods for training indigenous pastors from oral tradition

societies, I will first examine the unique challenges that oral tradition pastors face as they try to prepare for their calling. Then we must examine the literacy-based institutes they encounter, which have been established since the founding of the Assemblies of God in Latin American countries. With an understanding of the literacy-based teaching strategy that is systematically entrenched, I will then examine the unique issues facing pastoral students from oral traditions. After carefully looking at both subjects, both of the learner and the institutional systems in place, I will attempt to put forth ideas for modified training methods that I believe will best serve indigenous pastoral students.

Unique Challenges



Given the extensive use of literacy in pastoral training throughout Latin America, we can safely say that literacy becomes mandatory for pastoral candidates. This issue inevitably creates a division among those that can become pastors and those who cannot. Those who do not attend Bible Institutes often cannot achieve the title of Pastor; they become known as Christian Workers, or will be given a lower title. The consequence from this exclusion is a codependency on non-indigenous credentialed pastors to perform the basic ordinances of the church. Clearly, indigenous pastors must be trained to meet the needs of new believers and plant churches in unreached towns even if they can't read. If we are to be missionaries who value indigenous church principles, we must find a way to bridge the gap between the needs of oral learners and the literacy based training methods that are currently in place.

Literacy Based Methods

Every missionary educator in LAC is familiar with the "Plan Básico" developed by the "Servicio de Educación Cristiana" (SEC). The Assemblies of God in Mexico has created their own version of this document; both documents have many similarities. To their credit, the local Bible Institute in Oaxaca has used this plan to train over 200 pastors, many of whom have become district and national leaders. In my opinion the "Plan Básico" works best when a student has the equivalency of a high school degree. Even though it has created some standardization for Bible Institutes, it is being implemented in institutes that accept all students, not just high school level graduates. In his ACLAME article, missionary Dave Godzwa gave a great description of the average student that comes into our classrooms.

The Bible College system in Latin America accepts all students who feel called to the ministry, regardless of their educational background. They need only a letter of recommendation from their pastor in order to gain entrance into the program. This means that many of those who study lack the essential tools that they need in order to complete the requirements of the classes that they enter. I have found that the majority of students have never written a paper or done an investigation. One of my students admitted to me that her studies only reached as far as the fourth grade!^[1]

Many students with a pastoral call enter these institutes with a low chance of success. An unbalanced system can be established when a Bible Institute does not have the preparation to deal with literacy issues. On page 14 of the “Plan Básico” it states that it should be used as a suggested program and that Institutes need to modify themselves in order to meet the needs of their students.^[2] It would be wise of Latin American Bible Institutes to have literacy plans in place to help students experience a full measure of success. The greater issue at stake is increasing awareness and engaging our national colleges in talks over improving tutorial helps for emerging readers.

Understanding Oral Learners

Considering the large number of non-literate people in the world today, a surprising number of students have received training using literacy-based methods. UN statistics show that 775 million people lack minimum literacy skills.^[3] Two issues converge here, first the issue of literacy and secondly, people who have a preference for oral-based instruction. According to the book “Making Disciples of Oral Learners,” there are four billion oral communicators “who can’t, don’t, or won’t take in new information or communicate by literate means.”^[4] To understand these students better it would be helpful to be familiar with the following terms created by Walter J. Ong known as the father of the modern orality movement:^[5]



- **Orality:** Almost two-thirds of the world’s population is illiterate (non-literate, preliterate) or has an oral preference (can’t, won’t or don’t read and write.) The quality or state of being oral.
- **Primary orality:** The state of persons totally unfamiliar with writing. People who have never ‘seen’ a word
- **Residual orality:** This describes those who have been exposed to literacy, even learned to read in school, but who retain a strong preference for

learning by oral rather than literate means.

- Secondary oral communicators: Those who depend on electronic audio and visual communications (multimedia).

Many missionary educators have studied these terms and are experts at adjusting communication styles to meet the needs of oral learners. Given the fact that these issues affect more than just indigenous people, we should all be willing to adjust our teaching methods to meet our students needs.

Modified Teaching Methods

To prepare these men and women for pastoral roles in Mexico, missionaries in Mexico must accept two realities; first, the requirement of the "Plan Básico" by the national church has to be respected. Second, the needs of oral tradition pastoral candidates can no longer be ignored. These two issues were the impetus for the creation of an education model that combines literacy and oral based assessments. This model works in Mexico, because most of the population can identify with residual or secondary orality. The current exposure to technology and literature is such that most people groups live with undercurrents of literacy. This makes it possible to use literacy, along with oral tools, to create a more effective learning environment. This new educational model, founded recently in Mexico, uses orality methods and explores modified teaching methods, uses audio recordings of all books, includes access to audio players, and gives the option to be evaluated through informal assessments.

Teachers of indigenous pastors need to address teaching from the student's level of understanding and style of learning. This may require a change from the standard lecture and homework routine. To discover our students' style of learning may require leaving the classroom setting and getting involved in their lives. With indigenous students, relationship and trust are important; only through the building of relationship can literate teachers connect with oral learners.



Another issue regarding teaching, is the paradigm shift in the approach of teaching for mastery to teaching for exposure. When it comes to indigenous students from oral traditions, I propose that mastery should not be the focus in all classes. Since the “Plan Básico” is literacy- based students with low levels a literacy cannot be expected to show mastery in the normal allotment of time given

for a class. However, the exposure they receive to new subjects should be stimulating enough so that in the future students are aware of how to continue to develop their understanding of those subjects. Rather than mastery, they become life-long learners and instigators of their own learning, knowing where or who to access to grow according to their own needs. For example, the recommended book for systematic theology in Mexico is “Teología Sistemática Pentecostal” by Stanley Horton which has 702 pages. After about 60 hours of class time our indigenous students were not able to show mastery of this book; however, by the end of our class they were familiar with the contents of every chapter, and they had a good working knowledge of our 16 Fundamental Truths. They also knew where to access more information if they wanted to learn more about this topic.

The way in which we give assessments should also be reevaluated. Many indigenous students do not do well when given standard multiple choice tests. In our program, the students help guide the training by selecting the style in which they choose to be tested. Most of our students who come from residual orality backgrounds prefer to be tested through informal assessments like oral presentations. Since there are no limitations to informal assessments, these could include interviews, oral presentations, dramas, poems or other artistic modalities of expression.

The concept of “cooperative learning” for discreet informal evaluations is also effective. After explaining a new theological concept, students are directed to gather in small groups to discuss the new idea and explain it to one another. Listening to the interaction that follows gives the teacher a sense of how the new concept is being understood. This accomplishes two things, first, in the community of their small groups the students work together to achieve understanding and consensus; second, this allows the teacher an opportunity to make a deep and rich evaluation of how the students might contextualize and use the new information they’ve been given.

Much documentation supports the idea that primary oral pastors will begin to change their way of thinking with the introduction of literacy. R. Douglas Fields, blog writer, for Scientific American, states that brain imaging done by neurologists confirms that learning to read restructures the brain.^[6] Since change becomes inevitable in literate and semiliterate students, they should still be encouraged to express content knowledge through written assessments.

The biggest challenge lies with students that are from primary oral backgrounds. These students should be permitted to be trained through the memorization of Bible stories. "The communication of stories in this way has come to be referred to as "chronological Bible storying." It is a proclamation of God's word in a culturally relevant way that oral learners can understand and respond to."^[7] One the biggest promoters of this style of discipleship is a ministry called "Gospel Recording Network (GRN)." They have Bible material recorded in over 6000 languages.^[8] The resources provided by GRN are a great starting point. However, since these materials are mostly designed for evangelism, pastoral students need to be encouraged to take this a step further and learn stories from each book of the Bible. Even though deep Biblical knowledge can be attained through Chronological Bible Storying, it is not a system of training that is recognized in Latin America for credentialing purposes. Until this changes, missionary educators are in the best position to help mentor these pastoral candidates through literacy-based institutes. Even though this would take years, the joy of seeing a fully credentialed pastor working among his own people contextualizing the Gospel message is well worth the effort.



Any good teacher or student knows that learning does not just happen in the classroom. Students need good materials in their homes to continue to be lifelong learners. Libraries, bookstores and the internet become harder to access when in remote areas. Many good audio tools have been made available for the use of oral tradition communities. If the

pastoral student comes from an indigenous group that has the Bible translated in their language, then it is imperative that they have access to an audio device that will along them to hear the word of God. There are several good audio players that have been designed for rugged remote areas. One of the most popular is the "proclaimer" which is distributed by a ministry called "Faith Comes by Hearing."^[9] GRN also distributes a device known as the "Saber."^[10] Although devices like the Proclaimer are excellent for listening to the Bible, they are locked

systems and not useful for distribution of audio training materials. The other weakness of these devices is that they are hard to obtain unless you know a missionary with access to the United States. If these audio players cannot be obtained, pastoral students with access to the internet have the option to download a Bible to a micro SD card and play it on their mobile phone. The use of mobile phones may also be the most practical way to distribute audio Bibles and training materials. As a help to the pastoral students I work with, recordings are made of all our written material to mp3 format. Students always have the option of having the materials on a micro SD card for their phone or on Bluetooth speaker that has a port for a memory stick. CD's are provided for those who wish to listen by using a CD player.

While continuing the study this subject, I have become convinced of two things. Literacy must be encouraged while respecting the needs of Oral learners. Also, indigenous pastoral students are truly powerful servants in God's kingdom. They have the unique ability to win and disciple the lost in unreached areas in their native languages. They deserve to have access to the necessary training and mentorship that will help them become excellent local pastors. Some of my best students struggle to read, however, when I see them ministering in their native language under the anointing of the Holy Spirit, it is clear they are fulfilling their call to be pastors. How wonderful to think that these indigenous servants will then become the next providers of great contextual theological training for other indigenous pastors and missionaries.



^[1] Godzwa, Dave. "Rethinking the Task of Teaching" ACLAME (2010)
<http://www.aclame.net/201001godzwa.htm>

^[2] <http://www.servicioad.net/Archivos/PlanB%C3%A1sico2016i.pdf> p. 14

^[3]

<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/education-building-blocks/literacy/resources/statistics>

^[4] Avery Willis – Convener, Steve Evans – Co-Convener – Mark Snowden – Facilitator. *“Making Disciples of Oral Learners.”* Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization And International Orality Network. 2005

^[5] Lovejoy, Grant (Ed.). (2005). Making disciples of oral learners: Lausanne Occasional Paper 54. Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization. http://www.lausanne.org/docs/2004forum/LOP54_IG25.pdf

^[6] R.Douglas Fields, “Genius across Cultures and the ‘Google Brain,’” *Scientific American Guest Blog*, August 20, 2011, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/genius-across-cultures-and-the-google-brain/>

^[7] Avery Willis – Convener, Steve Evans – Co-Convener – Mark Snowden – Facilitator. *“Making Disciples of Oral Learners.”* Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization And International Orality Network. 2005

^[8] <http://globalrecordings.net/en/about>

^[9] <https://www.faithcomesbyhearing.com/news/blog-post/proclaiming-good-news>

^[10] <http://globalrecordings.net/en/saber>