

The Place of Orality in Church Planting

By Jerry Wiles



In many cases, when the subject of Orality comes up, it's often necessary to define and explain exactly what is meant. The definition of the term orality does not express the magnitude of the Orality Domain or Movement. While the word, orality means a reliance on spoken or non-written communication, there are many other aspects and facets to the Orality Movement.

Properly understood and applied, the concepts, principles and practices of orality can apply to almost every phase or aspect of church planting, growth and multiplication. Many of these issues will be addressed in this article.

It would be valuable to consider what we mean by church and what we mean by planting. There is a growing trend with many now to focus more on disciple making, rather than church planting, although in many cases we're talking about the same thing. However, in the biblical context and understanding, we have the universal, the regional and the local expressions of church, or communities of followers of Jesus.

The Power of Small, Simple, and Reproducible

When we think of rapidly reproducing church planting and disciple making movements, Ed Stetzer has said, we should focus on "small, simple reproducible systems and structures," rather than buildings, institutions or organizations. A few years ago, I heard Ed say, "We should resist the grandiose, for the reproducible."¹ In reality, orality methods and strategies make it possible to go to any place and to any people group, with just what is in our heads and hearts. Sow the seed of God's Word,

gather followers into groups or cells, and see them reproduce. It can be done without any text-based or technological resources, but with totally oral methods.

When we recognize that a true church can be a small, simple cell group or assembly of believers, it opens up many new possibilities for planting churches. Furthermore, when addressing the idea of establishing congregations or communities of followers of Jesus everywhere and among all people groups, the methods and strategies of orality become vital. We know that the majority of the unreached people groups around the world are bible-less and/or in oral cultures.

While Bible translation and literacy programs are important, in reality people can enter a relationship with the Lord and become reproducing followers of Jesus, even before they have the printed text of Scripture or learn to read. That may seem radical to some in our post-reformation, modern Western culture. However, we have many examples today, as well as throughout history and in the Early Church. Our experience has also shown us that Orality Training can enhance and accelerate Bible translation and literacy programs.

The Importance of Understanding the Receptor Culture

Orality-based methods and strategies open up all kinds of possibilities for Kingdom advancing efforts, communicating the gospel and making disciples, and doing so according to the preferred methods of the receptor culture. In our Orality Training with Living Water International we emphasize that it's not enough to proclaim the gospel, people need to hear it, understand it, be able to respond to it, remember it and pass it on. We want to make sure it's biblical, cross-cultural, reproducible and transferable to the ends of the earth.

With appropriate training in orality methods, followers of Jesus are able to go to any place or people group and communicate the gospel, make disciples and plant churches, requiring no written material or technology. Our best models, of course, are Jesus, His first apostles and the Early Church. As important as the written text has been throughout history, most people have come to faith in Christ by some kind of spoken or oral method. Based on our collective experience over the past 40 years, some of us would advocate that orality-based methods of communication and training can greatly accelerate the church planting and disciple making movements. In fact, we have several thousand years of history with the orality understanding. It's the most effective ways and means that people have learned, communicated and processed information from the beginning of time.

Another encouraging development in the Orality Movement is the increased interest and growing amount of resources becoming available in the academic community. In their excellent book, *The Lost World of Scripture* authors John Walton and Brent Sandy point out that "A growing focus over the past few decades has been orality in the Gospels. It could be considered a revolution in scholarship." They also write, "So the message of Jesus and his strategy to communicate that message were entirely oral."²

The importance of Accuracy and Sustainability

Maintaining accuracy and sustainability are important concerns and are addressed by working in concert with all means available. Most orality practitioners, trainers and scholars would also promote the use of text-based and technological resources. However, it's the concepts of orality that can be the vanguard, the cutting edge of planting churches. It's actually the way the gospel spread throughout the entire populated world in the first century, before radio,

television, the printing press and other modern methods were invented.

Not only is understanding the power of orality in planting new churches important, but also maintaining growth and reproducibility. Orality Training has been an effective tool for enhancing relationships and community within congregations. In many places it has brought local fellowships and churches together for partnering and collaborating for outreach and impact on a regional level.

No doubt unity in the body of Christ is one of the most basic elements in sustained and continued growth of the Kingdom. Our experiences in Living Water International have demonstrated how Orality Training and practices have brought pastors and leaders together for united action and community transformation.

The Power of Stories and Questions

Asking questions, sharing stories and building relationships may seem like simple steps, but they can have powerful impact. We've heard many testimonies of how Orality Training experiences have created opportunities for removing barriers and building relationships and community across ethnic, tribal, denominational and racial differences.

In relation to planting new churches, and even launching movements of networks of churches and faith communities, orality can play a vital role. For example, prayer walking (which is more than prayer, and more than walking) can be a catalyst for church planting movements. It can be as simple as connecting with people, sharing the gospel, and seeing people come to Christ, then gathering them for group discussions. Then with appropriate follow up, reproducing disciple making cell groups can develop, all with Oral methods, requiring no literature or technology.

While the Orality Movement is perceived by some as just story telling or communication methods for non-readers, it is much more. Worldview, cultural value systems, sociology, psychology, theology, anthropology, and oral traditions are just a few of the many disciplines and facets to the overall orality domain.

In many cases it goes without saying, but needs to be continually emphasized, that the work of the Holy Spirit is foundational to all effective and sustained mission advancement. The tools, techniques, methods and strategies, apart from the work of the Spirit, will not produce lasting fruit.

Rethinking Church and Disciple Making

Perhaps it seems too good to be true, or even too simplistic, but one of the keys to orality in

planting churches is rethinking, and sometimes unlearning and relearning several essential factors. Following are a few important questions: How much and what do people need to know in order to enter a relationship with the living God? How much and what do they need to know in order to become reproducing disciple makers? How much and what do they need to know to become church planters, pastors or missionaries?

All of these questions are important. The answers should not be based on 2,000 years of Church history, modern Western, post-reformation or contemporary thinking, but rather on the essence of what we learn from Scripture and the Early Church.

Another way of thinking about the place of orality in planting churches would be to consider planting the seed of the Word of God in people's hearts. Telling stories and asking questions is something everyone can do, and when we tell the true stories from the Word of God, the Holy Spirit can touch hearts and change lives. It's the power of the Good News (story), the Word of God that has power to transform lives and communities. In our Orality Training, we emphasize that you don't have to be a great storyteller, because we have great stories to tell.

Communicating Effectively

Curtis Sergeant, veteran missionary, church planter and trainer, says,

Our world has become a progressively more orality-oriented place over the past few generations. New technologies have impacted the way people prefer to receive communications. Between those we used to call "primary oral learners" and "secondary oral learners" virtually everyone is now included. It is important to remember that for Kingdom purposes, there are two essential aspects we need to consider in our communications. The first is understandability and the second is ease or effectiveness of transfer. Our expertise and awareness in using orality-oriented communications is vital in regard to both aspects, but perhaps even more critical for the latter.³

Curtis has also said, "Between primary and secondary orality, pretty much 100% of the world population is covered. In a sense, the discussion then shifts from whether or not we should use "orality aware" approaches or not, to whether we are communicating effectively or not."⁴

The multiple concepts of orality provide a wide variety of ways and means of Great Commission activities, such as evangelism, disciple making, relief and development, community health/development, work with refugee and immigrant communities, and many others. orality-based methods can be applied in the numerous streams of the church and mission world, i.e. organic, simple and house church movements, but also groups that meet under trees, in shopping malls, coffee shops, as well as other expressions, such as discovery groups, and morale groups in restricted countries or regions.

The Power of Groups and Communities

Once we begin to think outside of our modern Western (Post-Reformation) models and traditions, it opens up increasing numbers of possibilities. It's not about buildings, programs and institutions, but groups and communities of followers of Jesus that reproduce and spread. Orality methods and strategies, of course, make that possible, even necessary in some cases. There are some denominations that only recognize a real church when they own property and have a building, which can greatly restrict the possibilities of reproducing disciple making and church planting movements.

Contextualization is a vital topic in the world of orality Missiology. Scott Moreau has said, "Areas that we can anticipate will be of ongoing concern to evangelicals in contextualization include the development of even more organic models and comprehensive approaches—especially methods based on orality."⁵

Another important topic in relation to reproducing church planting movements is the area of discipleship vs. disciple making. It's not within the scope of this article, but there is a distinction between the modern American concept of discipleship, and a biblical understanding of disciple making. I recently read an article by a prominent church leader who was making the case that daily Bible reading and verse by verse expository preaching are necessary for what he referred to as discipleship. As valuable as they (Bible reading and expository preaching) are in their appropriate contexts and for certain segments of the population of the world, they are certainly limited in terms of global mission strategies of reproducing disciple making and church planting efforts.

Not Either/Or, but Both/And, and "By All Means"

A prominent American pastor, radio Bible teacher and author recently made the statement that "It takes the whole Bible to make a whole

Christian.” Of course, he was emphasizing the value and importance of reading through the entire Bible, which is a very good discipline for those who have the entire Bible in their language and can read it with comprehension. Sadly, that would exclude a large percentage of the language and people groups of the world.

I spent many years working with an international ministry that produces Bible reading guides with devotional commentary so I am a firm believer and whole-heartedly support those efforts, having read through the Bible myself more than fifty times. However, it is that kind of thinking that greatly limits us when seeking to reach and disciple Bible-less people groups and oral learners.

As a longtime proponent of orality, I would not suggest that Oral methods and strategies are our only tools for ministry and missions. However, orality is opening the hearts and minds of many who gain a whole new perspective on outreach, disciple making and church planting, church growth and multiplication, as well as many other applications.

For more than a decade now, Living Water International has been on a significant learning journey and has experienced amazing impact through their Orality and Bible Storying Training programs. We receive many reports and testimonies of church growth and new church plants as a result of the orality training. It is a big challenge to measure and quantify impact, but when returning to areas where the training has taken place, the feedback is extremely encouraging.

The Challenge of Tracking, Measuring, and Reporting

Many of the places where we’ve conducted the training are in Oral Cultures where communication technology is not readily available or affordable. So, tracking and reporting, monitoring and evaluation are great challenges, but significant improvements are being made and more data will be available over time.

When we think of penetrating every segment of society, and planting biblically-based, culturally-relevant churches everywhere, we see that the business world is an important mission field. The newly formed orality in business network is connecting and collaborating with Business as Mission efforts. Howard Partridge, a successful businessman, participated in one of Living Water International’s Orality Training Workshops a few years ago. He immediately began using some of the methods in his businesses and small business

coaching. He creates what he calls POD (Power of Discovery) groups in an effort to promote relationships, community and improve corporate culture. He has authored several books and in *The Power of Community* he writes how the Orality Training is enhancing his effectiveness in his business activities.⁶

Some of us are thinking and praying that the Orality Movement could be a catalyst for church planting and disciple making movements within the business world. Simply getting individuals together to discuss important topics to those in the business world, the marketplace and everyday work world. For those with adequate training in orality-based methods, the conversations can turn to the life, teachings and Spirit of Jesus, recognizing that His ideas are relevant to every area of business and life. In fact, orality methods can enhance the effectiveness of small groups everywhere.

Importance of Orality in Difficult Places

A major area of interest for mission strategies and church planting should be the more limited or creative access countries or regions. This is where the concepts and principles of orality are hugely important. Appropriate orality training can equip people with knowledge and skills that can enable them to go to any place and/or people group on the planet. For several years with Living Water International our approach has been equipping pastors, missionaries, cross-cultural church planters and others, with just what’s in their heads and hearts, that can be reproduced in the heads and hearts of others. While there are numerous applications, our primary focus is on communicating the gospel and making disciples, resulting in communities of Jesus followers forming, reproducing and multiplying, not depending on text-based or technological resources.

I personally like to emphasize that our very best model as a communicator, trainer, disciple maker and church planter is the Lord Jesus Himself. Think about how He used stories, parables and questions, how He created relationships and community, and how it was reproduced by His followers for more than 1,500 years. Then the Church became more dependent on text-based methods and, for the most part, neglected the most effective ways and means that people have learned, communicated and processed information from the beginning of time.

I’m an advocate of using all means available, the tools of the age, and the tools of the ages. We are blessed in the modern world with amazing technological resources that didn’t exist just a

few decades ago. However, we want to also use all the tools that have been around for thousands of years, orality of course is foundational.

Rapid Reproduction

As laws and regulations in various parts of the world make it more difficult to share the gospel openly, the concepts of orality are even more important. Increasing persecution, regulations and anti-conversion legislation in various countries are also critical factors many are dealing with. Low profile, small groups, using Oral methods make it possible for rapidly reproducing disciple making and church planting movements to flourish under the radar screen of opposition forces.

If missionaries, evangelists, pastors and church planters are properly trained and equipped with orality-based methods and strategies, disciple making and church planting movements can begin and reproduce anywhere and under the

most difficult circumstances. Again, prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit are foundational and the highest priority. Small groups, household meetings and cell groups that can gather anywhere seems to be the best options for reproducibility.

For many years, as a follow up to our Orality Training, Living Water International has encouraged forming what we call 5-5-5 Support and Accountable Groups. They consist of five people, getting together once a week for five weeks, and reviewing the basic five-story set from the training and giving account of how they have been using the stories and methods. Following the five weeks, the groups can transition to what we call Reproducing Disciple Making Cell Groups. This method is one example of how a small, simple, reproducible model can be implemented anywhere.

Jerry Wiles serves as the North America Regional Director of the International Orality Network, and as President Emeritus of Living Water International. He became involved with Orality in the 1980's, has more than 35 years of experience in ministry and international mission work, and is recognized as one of the paradigm pioneers in the Orality Movement.

Notes

1. Ed Stetzer, Keynote address, Mission America Coalition, Leadership Consultation (Houston 2015).
2. John H. Walton and D. Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture* (InterVarsity Press, 2013).
3. Curtis Sergeant, Quote from email, (July 2018).
4. Ibid.
5. A. Scott Moreau , “Evangelical Models of Contextualization” in *Local Theology for the Global Church* (William Carey Library, 2010).
6. Howard Partridge, *The Power of Community* (McGraw-Hill Education, 2018).

This article was first published in EVANGELICAL MISSIONS QUARTERLY (EMQ) – volume 55 – issue 1