

## Taking a Dramatic Approach to Mission

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1997

“We are a people of the Gospel story. We have such a treasure in this earthen vessel—the High and Holy Spirit in this lowly body. . . Lord, let the treasure out, let the spirit fly, let the ointment flow. Let us go and tell everybody everywhere and baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” (*Go Ye Therefore*, written by StorySource)

Everybody is a story waiting to be told; and God has given us the greatest story of all, in the life of Jesus, and the greatest storybook of all, the Bible. Every day we tell stories, sharing our day’s experiences, passing on our values and history. We are a people of story, and have a need to “go and tell everyone.”

No one in missions argues that we should not go and tell the gospel. After all, that is the foundation of missions. The question becomes how? What strategies should be used? Too often we use tried-and-true American methods overseas—such as training videos using great trainers such as Billy Graham or Willow Creek Church. While such training videos may work well in certain situations in America, it does not necessarily follow that these videos are also great cross cultural training tools. Each culture needs to be approached differently and appropriately, within that culture’s world view and modes of communication. (Steffen, p. 12)

Perhaps we should take objection to those who want to preach rather than tell, or use linear logical thinking only. The need is not only to share the gospel, but to train others to do so effectively. One effective strategy is the use of storytelling, or drama, and the arts.

“Why take the artistic way to prove so much?  
Because, it is the glory and good of Art,  
That Art remains the one way possible  
Of speaking truth, to mouths like mine at least.” *Browning*

### I. WHY USE THE ARTS?

The arts communicate in ways that mere speaking cannot. It speaks to the heart where words can’t. It engages our need for expression and creativity. Art compels attention because it tells something of truth.

“The purpose of the fine arts is to help us to see, to feel, and to appreciate the world in which we live. They are concerned, not with prosaic facts, but with the poetic joy of discovering beauty wherever it may be found.” (Cynthia Pearl Maus, *Christ and the Fine Arts*)

“Art is not about things as they are, but about things as they matter...art

creates an imaginary world into which we enter. We do not encounter ideas but a world of human experience. The meanings that art communicates are meanings that take hold of us both consciously and unconsciously as we enter into the imagined world of the work.”

Through the arts we also gain a heightened awareness of life. The purpose of most art is to show some recognizable human experience—to observe life and then present it to the rest of the world for their consideration and contemplation. The arts make us more aware of life and its experiences and help us to live it more thoroughly.

### *Storytelling is a universal form of communication*

People everywhere love a good story: stories of the life experience of others, stories about the day, or stories to communicate a point. We pass on our personal and family history through the telling and retelling of stories. (Steffen, p. 120)

With the proliferation of TV and movies, drama has become one of the most common means of communicating ideas. The average viewer probably watches 2-4 hours of television a night, and movies are one of the most popular forms of entertainment. With the increase in television and film viewing comes a decreasing attention span. The average TV image lasts less than 3 seconds, and an average story bite is generally around 7-10 minutes. As a result of this kind of image training, we have become a very visual society, with very short attention spans, and we need to address our target audiences accordingly. This does not rule out teaching the audience through the lecture form, but it would be a long process for them to come to fully appreciate it.

### *More than half of the world's population prefer the concrete mode of learning*

Illiterates and semi-literates probably outnumber literates (Barrett, 1997). Non-literates “tend to express themselves more through concrete forms (stories and symbols) than abstract concepts (propositional thinking and philosophy).” While it is good to encourage literacy and abstract thinking, why must this be the first step in reaching a people? Should we not rather communicate in a style that best suits their thought processes?

The lecture format is no longer at the center of American popular culture, and has never been the center of most other cultures. It is also proven that lecture is one of the least effective forms of communication. We retain much more what we see than of what we hear (and even more of what we hear and see). Communication takes place through verbal and nonverbal signals. Systematizing communication according to twelve signal systems helps us better analyze how communication is taking place. (For a full explanation of the signal

systems see *Creating Understanding*.) When several signal systems are used together, a greater amount of information can be communicated, and the impact of the message is increased dramatically. “Using several signal systems in combination is similar to adding more pipes to a water system. A larger number of pipes carries more water. Similarly, each added signal system increases the information load carried.” (Smith, p. 161) This is where drama comes in. It is first of all a story — and we are “hard-wired” to remember stories— and it combines several signal systems to get across a complex message.

- ***The verbal signal system:*** A script is spoken, a story is told. Hearing the words of the characters, as well as the variety given by different voices, reinforces everything else observed in the play.

- ***The audio system:*** Music is often used to heighten, or interpret a moment (as in the use of violins at romantic part of a movie). Tone of voice in delivering a line helps reveal mood or underlying meaning. Other sounds also carry a meaning that contributes to the effect of a scene.

- ***The optical system:*** Lighting and color also create moods, interpret scenes and make subtle points; for example, blue light may signal mystery, whereas red light suggests the wilder side of life. Light and color in appropriate places adds to the overall picture and flavor and makes a scene more memorable.

- ***The tactile and kinesic systems:*** Body language, movement and touch are a strong foundation of dramatic communication, and are more observable than some of the above-mentioned systems. In ordinary speech we use body language to express ourselves— adding emphasis, striking a blow in anger, hugging someone in love. Emotions are shown more in kinesics (movement) than in mere words, and using kinesics to its fullest advantage in a drama communicates emotion even more strongly to the audience. Furthermore, seeing an action take place kinesically as well as hearing the words increases the retention level of the audience to that particular event and makes it more meaningful and memorable.

- ***The spatial system:*** Like the kinesic system, the use of space creates subtle messages and visualizes undercurrents of feeling. In Western culture a great distance indicates coldness, whereas extreme closeness is interpreted as aggressiveness. Space can also be used to show power. Paying attention to the use of space helps give further clarification to the message you are trying to portray.

- ***The artifactual and pictorial systems:*** In the theatre these systems are called properties, scenery and costumes. Each of these items consciously and unconsciously communicates a message about a character (e.g., the dress of a prostitute as opposed to the dress of a businesswoman). They can even display some of the character’s values by looking at which objects are given prominence by the characters, or what kind of scenery

and pictures are used.

- *The olfactory system:* Smell is not something commonly used in Western drama, but is common in Hindu religious plays through the use of incense. Taste, on the other hand, has been tied quite well to drama in the U.S. through the proliferation of dinner/dessert theatre. While the food may not be on stage, it is nonetheless associated with the play in the audience's mind, as they connect good food with the message of the drama.

Combining these stimuli reinforces the message and increases retention. The audience remembers the drama and reflects longer on the message.

### *Stories connect with our imagination and emotions*

The arts give us perspective, beauty, and engage us in interpretation. Through the use of metaphors, symbols and images, art attempts to put meaning in a tangible form. Its goal is to get the audience to use their imaginations to recreate the experience of the speaker/painter/poet and carries them along to the conclusion. Our emotions become involved as we enter the world of the characters and relate to their situation. Our minds are engaged in interpreting what the work means to us, so there is no passive observance of art, but a putting of ourselves into the situation and responding to it.

We, as human beings, need to express ourselves. We have many feelings and experiences that we want to let out, to tell, but lack the ability of clear expression. The arts help give order and form to that need for expression. We turn our pain into art so we can bear it; our joys into art so we can prolong them.

In summary, then, the arts give expression to the feelings, experiences, and beliefs of the human race and of ourselves. They express experiences and values that are important to us and intensify our involvement with life.

### *Every major religion uses stories to socialize its young, convert potential followers, and indoctrinate members.*

Stories are a nonthreatening way of challenging basic beliefs and behavior. We not only get new information through the arts, but also rediscover things we may have forgotten. Portraying things in a new way gives a fresh look at the familiar. We are caused to look at the subject in a different way, thus coming to a new and better understanding. In this way, the arts are a mirror in which we see ourselves. They capture universal and enduring human experience by beginning with something real—what can be seen, touched, tasted, heard, smelled—and adding an interpretive element to the experience.

The human element of the actors places the truth to be learned within the context of real life, not in the realm of the abstract. It shows real people in real situations, resolving issues, and providing a model for others to follow.

### *Approximately 75% of the Bible is narrative*

75% of the Bible is in narrative form (history, recounting of people and events), with approximately 15% as poetry (songs, lamentations and proverbs that express a variety of deep inner emotion). This leaves only 10% as thought-organized text (the logical, linear writing of Paul). If God communicated the majority of his message to the world through stories, why do Christian workers spend the majority of time and teaching in the Scripture's smallest literary style? (Steffen, p. 124)

### *Stories create instant evangelists*

"People find it very easy to repeat a good story. Whether the story centers around juicy gossip or the gospel of Jesus Christ, something within each of us wants to hear and tell such stories. Suppressing a good story is like trying to resist a jar full of one's favorite cookies. Sooner or later, the temptation becomes too strong. The cookie gets eaten; the story gets told." (Steffen, p. 124) We have all passed on a good joke, story or news item that we've heard. The gospel of Jesus Christ is also, after all, the "good news," or "good story." Viewing it in the light of a story makes it easier for anyone to retell.

### *Jesus taught theology through stories*

Jesus chose to reveal theology through parabolic stories, knowing their double-edged ability to entertain, arouse curiosity, and to teach. After all, people listen to stories where they won't listen to plain talk. "When a Bible teacher exegetes theology from a story, he or she is exchanging teaching mediums, not message content. The question becomes, Which medium best communicates the message? Not, Which medium possesses theology?...Stories do not just illustrate theology ... they *are* theology. If Jesus relied on parabolic stories to communicate his message, does this not imply theology lies resident in the stories?" (Steffen, p. 117)

Knowing the power the arts have, it is then our responsibility to use them as much as possible to proclaim God's truths. Truth presented in artistic form will be remembered and acted upon far longer than other mediums.

## II. DRAMA TO MOTIVATE FOR MISSIONS

In our work with ACT, we use drama extensively to motivate people to consider their own involvement in missions. We present dramatic stories of the lives of missionaries and include material that will challenge the audience as to the need of the unreached.

We naturally look at the world through one perspective, based on our own experiences and culture. The arts help us to be aware of, and experience vicariously, the outlooks and experiences of people different from us. They enlarge our range of experiences and thus increase our understanding. ACT productions focus on enlarging the audience's experience of the missionary life by presenting the stories of various missionaries of the past. The audience enters into the world of the play, living the experiences with the missionary character, and emerge with a better understanding and empathy of the challenges faced and overcome.

## III. DRAMA IN EVANGELISM AND MISSIONS

Drama is being used extensively in churches in the United States as a part of "seeker services," and in various places as an outreach event. The desire to use drama also exists in other countries, and can be used very effectively. Care should be taken, however, not to merely import dramas that work well in the United States into other countries. Studies should be made of the resident, indigenous drama/art styles, and then use those styles to carry the message. One example of this is the use of film in India to evangelize. Currently, a project is underway to film the story of Sembulingam, also known as the "Indian Robin Hood." He is a well-known figure in India. Less well-known is the fact that missionary Amy Carmichael led him to the Lord. The proposed film would be a high adventure drama of Sembulingam's life, which would include the story of his conversion. The producers want to release the film in regular commercial theatres, and dub it into at least five of the Indian languages, as well as English. Knowing that Sembulingam's adventurous life will bring people to view the film, they want to use it as a means of sharing the gospel message in an appropriate form. The film format has been chosen over television because of the relatively few TV sets owned in India (50 million sets for 800 million people). Most people just go to the movies.

It is also interesting to note that the film is being produced by Indian Christians. The producer was a Hindu before becoming a Christian 14 years ago. As a result, he understands what messages are being given by certain films, and knows what will speak to a Hindu mind and heart. He observed several showings of the "Jesus" film in the villages of India and noted that even though everyone raised their hands to receive Jesus as Savior, their real meaning was to receive him as one of their many gods. The people also do not see

how they can accept Jesus, who has only been around for 2000 years, as the supreme and only God, when the temples to their gods have been around for a much longer time. Showing, from the Indian perspective, a film of the life and conversion of a well-known Indian bandit, and how he overcame these objections for himself, is an effective way to go.

There is also increasing use of drama for development and self-help. One report states that teams would live in a village for a period of time collecting data, with the help of the community, on the perceived problems in the community. "These problems formed the basis for working out together the scenarios of dramatic sketches, role-playing, songs and dances. As much as possible, the extension workers tried to build on the traditional performative skills in the community." (White, p. 15)

UNICEF sponsored a travelling drama troupe in Burkina Faso. The troupe toured to outlying villages presenting a 30-minute play on various health problems. When they were done they invited the audience to come on stage and answer questions about the problem presented—causes, prevention techniques, etc. Then volunteers were sought to recreate the roles. The reporter writes, "These exchanges lasted nearly an hour with many amusing role recreations. Traditional attitudes were dealt with, and humor was applied to several difficult situations. The message was clearly understood and readily accepted." (Morrison, p.6) Studying how these groups operate, using indigenous styles of performance, local talent and community participation, can help us gain a better understanding of how to use the dramatic arts to present the gospel message.

Many benefits have been demonstrated for taking a dramatic approach to missions. Seriously consider the advantages, and begin to incorporate the arts into your outreach and teaching strategies.

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