

The Emergence of Audio-Scriptures in Church and Mission

The vision for audio-Scriptures grows and finds its place in world wide evangelism. With this new development the Word of God becomes available so that all the peoples of the world can be reached.

by Viggo Søggaard

The stories are coming in from everywhere and at an increasing pace. The businessman alone in his car on the freeway is listening to the Bible on his car stereo. Crowds gather around a simple cassette player in a village in India. A housewife listens to Scripture selections in Thailand. The translators who have spent years translating the New Testament are finding that people prefer to listen to it on cassette as they have difficulties in reading. Stories like these are coming in from all corners of the world. At a gathering of some 120 adult church members in a village in Ghana, they were asked how many had read the New Testament. Six responded in the affirmative. They then spent 25 minutes listening to four chapters of John's Gospel. It reminded me of Nehemiah reading the Scriptures to the people: "...they were moved to tears and asking what to do" (Neh 8:9).

It was during my early years as a missionary in Thailand that I became aware of the need to provide the Word in audio form, as few people were reading it. Most Christians came from a Buddhist background without any awareness of the Bible message. At the "Voice of Peace," we started work on programming in 1965-66, and at that time spool tapes, or tape cartridges, were used which could be repeated on a continuous basis. Audio-cassette players became available in 1968-69 and there was an immediate acceptance. Within months cassettes were in use all over the country. The primary content was basic Bible teaching. We also discovered that when good programs were available, people would find ways to get tape players.

In other parts of the world there were

similar developments, Dr. Harvey Hoekstra used tape cartridges in Ethiopia during the late sixties. His primary concern was that the New Testament he had translated could not be read by the people. Other Bible translators were also putting their texts on tape. It was obvious that those concerned about getting God's Word to non-literates were in the forefront of this development.

A Slow but Steady Acceptance

The development of the audio-cassette gave us a fantastic tool for bringing the Scriptures to all people. One would expect that Bible people and mission executives would jump for joy and scramble to be on the front line with audio-Scriptures, but unfortunately, to a large extent, it had to be developed against the wind. Change is difficult, especially when budgetary considerations are involved.

One of the first calls for Scriptures in audio form was given to the United Bible Societies (UBS) at their global meeting in 1972 by people such as Dr. Ted Hope. Consequently, a few attempts at producing audio-Scriptures in Bangladesh and other countries were made. In 1975-76 a special experiment was conducted in Thailand with a programmed format. The results were extremely interesting and proved that it is possible to present Scripture text in a relevant format, enabling the material to be easily understood and applied by the listeners.

At the next global meeting of UBS, which took place in 1980, renewed emphasis was given to the development of audio-Scriptures, but enthusiastic acceptance came from only just a few people. A primary promoter was Dr.

Chan Choi, regional secretary in the Asia Pacific region for the Bible Societies. Even so, the issue was left practically unnoticed, and this in spite of the theme, "God's Word Open for All." A few experimental projects were conducted, and in 1985 the first edition of the Audio-Scriptures Handbook was published. The following global meeting, in 1988 (eight years later), finally gave almost the same importance to audio-Scriptures as that given to printed Scriptures. Now, seven years later, the budgets devoted to audio-Scriptures are still very small, but there is a growing and wide acceptance of the medium, and this will in due time result in the necessary budget allocations. New audio-Scripture products and programs are being developed. The diffusion of innovation, unfortunately, takes time.

The Growing Need

A few years ago a colleague of mine at Fuller Seminary related an incident at a church in the United States, a group fairly well known for its level of Bible knowledge. He had asked an adult Sunday School class to put a number of biblical names in chronological order. The results were nothing to be applauded. They did manage to get Adam first, but there was a discussion as to whether Paul came before David. The level of Bible knowledge in European churches is similarly dismal. Some have called it "biblical illiteracy." People do not know the Scriptures, and as little formal or consecutive teaching takes place, few have a full chronological story. They have bits and pieces of Bible stories, but not in any significant order. Even so, Christian history has a specific beginning and a definite

end, a history of God's redemptive plan for humankind needs to be seen historically.

A further complication is that literacy levels are not increasing in the world, and this is in spite of numerous literacy programs. For some countries literacy is below 20%, and if we speak of functional literacy, we find that some of the largest countries are way below 50%. It is safe to say that less than half of the world's population can be reached by printed Scriptures today. This alone illustrates a tremendous need for Scriptures in media other than print.

The problem is further enlarged today with the decline in reading among those who can read. Fewer are reading books, as video and television viewing is replacing the time that used to be given to reading. Time spent in a car is replacing time on the train. Reading was possible on the train. Youth are playing video-games rather than reading books and magazines.

At a recent script-writing workshop in rural Bangladesh, we came across the reference to Joel and David in Acts Chapter 2. What did it mean? They did not have an Old Testament. It is obvious that significant events and people from the Old Testament must be understood if much of the New Testament is to make sense to people with no Christian background. We need at least an essential version of the Old Testament if we are to be effective in mission and world evangelization.

The Living Word

In the Western world, the Word of God has become almost synonymous with a printed book. However, in the Bible, the Word is primarily a reference to life, the "Living Word." There are also a number of references to the spoken word, but very few mentions of the written word. It was the Living Word that became a human being and lived among us.

In the New Testament we find the

Christians primarily communicating through speech. There were no written records of the life and ministry of Jesus, so the stories were told and retold. Some have estimated that only 5% of the members of the New Testament Church were literate. Later the stories were written down and the spoken Word became a book, a medium that in itself is objective and separated from a living being. From something spoken aloud in a group where there was personal interaction, it became an objective text one could read and deliberate upon alone, without reference to the group. Many hundreds of years later when Gutenberg invented the printing press, the Bible began to be mass produced. Now everybody can own one and have it on the shelf.

This does not mean that we do not need printed Scriptures, but the question to the Church and to its leaders does remain. What do we do? Can we be satisfied with our members having the Word in a book, or do we want to have it memorized in their minds and hearts? The challenge today, therefore, is to communicate the Word effectively through sound and images. The audio-cassette provides this possibility.

The Cassette Medium

The possibility became reality with the invention of magnetic recording tape. Now hours of speech could be recorded and reproduced at ease. The advent of the audio-cassette improved practical use even more, and up to this time the audio-cassette is unsurpassed as a medium for audio-Scriptures. There are no tapes to thread, no records to turn, and no sensitive needles to replace. Much of the equipment is portable, and simplicity of operation, low cost, and availability make it extremely versatile.

The medium was used to communicate the Gospel to soldiers who took part in "Desert Storm," where 100,000 copies of a "Maranatha! Music"

produced cassette were distributed. It was also the ideal teaching tool for decentralized development projects in India, Tanzania and other places. Cassettes have been used for teaching Bible to rural churches in numerous places, and they have enlarged the ministry of many evangelists.

We have had to deal with a print-orientation when it comes to audio-Scriptures. The Audio-Video Database developed by the United Bible Societies has presently about 1,100 entries for audio-Scriptures. Looking at the database, we find that by and large the cassettes consist of a direct recording of written text, the print translation being transferred directly to tape without adaptation. The whole issue of text is problematic. A good audio-Scripture program will need a new translation made for the medium.

Visions, Plans and Production

An early pioneer was Dr. Harvey Hoekstra. His primary concern was to see the New Testament he had translated into Anuak made available to the people. His relentless efforts on behalf of those who cannot read have resulted in numerous products. In Africa he worked through Portable Recording Ministries, and in Asia he established studios under the name of "World Cassette Outreach." His latest effort is "Audio Scriptures International," (ASI) which was started in 1989. They now list audio-Scripture material in more than 250 languages. A primary interest has been the complete New Testament, but they also have Scripture selections for specific uses.

Dr. Hoekstra's influence on key decision makers in the Bible Societies has been significant, especially in the early years. During the last few years, ASI has sent more than 7000 cassettes into Russia, and 5000 cassettes in five Indian languages were distributed at a recent conference. A Christian taxi driver in Indonesia received 500 cassettes

for use with his passengers. ASI and related organizations have focused on non-European languages, and their burning vision is to provide the Word of God to those who have not had the opportunity to learn to read. A special concern is therefore expressed for the tribal peoples and the poor of the world. Consequently, they have utilized fairly simple recordings so that those who need audio-Scriptures most will not continue to be deprived of this material due to expensive recording techniques.

Dr. Hoekstra relates a recent experience. He had given a "Portrait of Jesus" cassette in an Arabic language to a man from Lebanon who operates a service station. He said he'd listened to it and also was going to have his son listen to it. One week later, when Hoekstra met him, in conversation he suggested to the man to listen to the tape frequently. Hoekstra said "I've listened to mine forty or fifty times and I am always blessed when I do so." The man then leaned toward me and said with unusual seriousness in a soft voice, "I've listened to mine twenty times already." Hoekstra says, "Needless to say, I went on my way rejoicing!"

Scripture for the Blind

The concern for the blind and visually impaired has been evident in various Christian ministries. Blind people would be the obvious group to receive Scriptures on audio-cassette, so various missions organized for the purpose of reaching and assisting the blind have been on the forefront of Gospel cassette production. One of these is "Bible Alliance, Inc." in Bradenton, Florida, which began supplying audio-Scripture cassettes to the blind in 1983. Bible Alliance, a ministry founded by Anthony T. Rossi, is supplying cassette

albums free of charge, and they focus on three groups: (1) ministries to blind and physically handicapped, (2) prison and rehabilitation ministries, and (3) missionary organizations.

The work of Bible Alliance has grown constantly. Their materials are now distributed in 161 countries of the world, and each month about 3000

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orders are processed. The organization has recorded the New Testament in 40 languages, and more are being added. The facilities at Bradenton include a studio as well as modern equipment for mass production and duplication of cassettes.

Program Format

Program format is a real challenge for audio-Scriptures. As noted earlier, most have taken the easy route and just recorded the written text. By doing so, they have actually left out many features of the written text such as chapter numbers and headings, paragraphs and verses, maps for references, word studies, and comments. Some Bibles have introductions to books and sections, and many include pictures—all aimed at helping the reader understand the printed text. When such a Bible is put on

cassette, the audio equivalence of these features should be included. All necessary helps must be there. This means that the producer of an audio-Scripture program should develop formats through which maps and geographic concepts can be communicated aurally, together with proper introductions and explanations, so that the text will be readily understood and applied by the listener. There seems to be a need for a "guide" (narrator) that will provide the necessary introductions and explanations.

A multi-track recording may make the text more interesting to listen to, but apart from being more costly it also has the danger of taking the attention away from the text itself. In many parts of the world, it would seem more appropriate to use a storytelling format. This does not require changes to the text, but it must be recited in a storytelling fashion according to their own style.

Music is an important ingredient in any audio program, and much of the Scriptures can be put to music. The Psalms are obvious, but so are many other parts of the Bible. If people can sing the text, it will be much easier to remember. In Bangladesh, 14 texts were selected on Easter to give a complete story. These were then given to a group of Bengali composers, and a cassette tape was produced with 14 songs that communicated the Easter Story from the Scriptures in Bengali tunes.

In Pakistan, a series of Scripture cassettes have been produced with stories from the Old Testament for children. Each cassette comes with a coloring book so that children can follow along and color pictures related to the story. It works well for memorization, and the tapes give hints as to application. It was discovered that on an average at least

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10 people listen to each cassette, so a distribution of 3000 tapes effectively communicates Scriptures to at least 30,000 people.

Need orientation is very important for audio-Scriptures and with that follows careful research of the intended audience. When the apostle Paul spoke in a synagogue, he could freely quote from the Old Testament, but when he taught the Gentiles in Athens he had to begin with the concept of God. Similarly, our audio-Scriptures need to be prepared for specific audiences and associated materials need to be made so that the audience can understand.

Distribution Channels

The first thought for many is to distribute audio-Scriptures the same way as printed Scriptures, but new approaches need to be developed. One problem is that those who most need audio-Scriptures are often the poorest, and they normally do not read. For instance, they do not come into bookstores, so we need new systems of distribution: renting or loan systems, etc. Often an effective way is to distribute through church-based loan-systems. There are also reports of distribution at truck-stops and other places where motorists buy their supplies.

We found in Thailand that if the user does not actually own the cassette, but loans it for a shorter period of time, the cassette will be listened to many more times. The user knows that the cassette must be returned and will therefore listen as many times as possible, learning the text by heart.

The Indonesian Bible Society has produced two interesting cassettes. One is for non-Christian househelpers working in Christian families as drivers, cooks, cleaners, and baby-sitters. The tape was produced to be distributed by the families themselves to their servants. This in turn required associated plans for follow-up, training in counseling for the Christian families concerned, and

more material. For women on the opposite end of the social scale, they produced a tape with Scripture material for career women.

Faith Comes by Hearing

A very effective and interesting Scripture use program has been developed by Hosanna. At their facilities in Albuquerque, New Mexico, they are producing around 12 million Scripture cassettes a year. The big contribution of Hosanna has been the development of a new distribution program for Scripture cassettes to churches, called "Faith Comes By Hearing." They were concerned about the very low level of Bible reading by Christians in American churches. The focus of Hosanna has therefore been primarily church members in the United States, but during the last few years extensive advances have been taken internationally. The primary partner for Hosanna outside the United States has been the United Bible Societies.

Hosanna, founded by Jerry Jackson, recorded their first Bible on cassette in 1973, and they have now recorded the complete New Testament in 66 languages, with more to be added.

The first project outside the United States took place in 1985, and during these last 10 years the global vision, relentless drive and enthusiasm of the international director, Morgan Jackson, has helped establish Faith Comes By Hearing programs in some 35 countries around the world.

Faith Comes By Hearing programs work like this: A pastor is called by the representative and asked if he or she wants the congregation to listen to the Bible on cassette. Usually there is a very high response. The pastor has to preach a sermon that focuses on the topic, and a certain number of members must sign up for the program. Each one pledges to listen to at least one cassette a week for three months. During that time they will have gone through the

entire New Testament. The complete Bible can be covered in a year at the rate of one cassette per week.

A special program has been developed for churches in poorer countries. Hosanna will provide a set of cassettes to each church free of charge. In turn, they promise to gather people to listen at least once a week. One of the primary persons spearheading this approach has been Dr. Mae Alice Reggy of the UBS Regional office in Nairobi. She has arranged programs in several African countries with great success.

Partnerships

As we know from printed Scriptures, a variety of skills are needed, including translation, production, and marketing. For audio there are associated skills of research, script-writing, voicing, music, and design. With print, cooperation was needed between the translators, printers, and booksellers. In the audio context translators, producers, studios, and distributors must work together.

One type of partnership has been described above where Bible Societies and Hosanna have cooperated in the setting up of Faith Comes By Hearing programs in various countries. Significant cooperation has also been seen between PRM (Portable Recording Ministries), related organizations and Bible Societies. On a local level, there have been good partnerships between churches, studios and Bible Societies in several countries, but we need to expand such partnership if the need is to be met. Bringing the skills and resources together will ensure strong and effective ministries.

The Challenge for the Future

The future challenge rests on the task given by Christ—to bring His Word to all people. For centuries we have focused on the affluent and western groups that had the privilege of learning

to read. Today we have the possibilities of making the Scriptures available to all, irrespective of their social, cultural or economic background. If this is to happen, then the vision that has characterized the early pioneers in this area will need to continually catch new fire in the hearts of Christian leaders. It is possible today to make God's Word available to all.

1. The first challenge is for church leaders to give practical support for this advance, and that means providing priority budgets, even if that would require decreases in other programs aimed at the literates.

2. We should not continue to just record the printed text made for literate people without adequate adaptations. It is of great urgency that new formats and recording techniques be developed so that the audio-media will not remain subordinated to principles designed for print-media.

3. We need to develop appropriate distribution channels. audio-Scripture cassettes cannot and should not be sold in the same way as books. Creative distribution systems are needed. Associated with this area is a need for financing systems, as many of those who need audio-Scriptures are poor. If we just focus on those who can pay, we will continue to cater to the literate peoples of the world.

4. A real need and challenge is the development of other recordings apart from the New Testament. Most of the organizations mentioned in this article focus on recording the New Testament, with some parts of the Old Testament. In many parts of the world, there is no awareness of the OT, and it is really only possible to fully understand the NT if at least a selection of main OT events and its people are understood. Bible agencies distribute many times more portions and selections

than complete NT and OT. We need to develop audio-Scriptures that are prepared for special groups, and special needs, tailor-made for the audiences we are trying to reach with the Gospel

In His ministry, Jesus selected appropriate texts and applied them. I fully realize that this will take time, energy, and funds, but should not those who do not read—many of whom are the unreached peoples of the world—at least for once have a certain priority and get true access to the Word of God? So may it be!

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