

Bible Translation and Small Languages in the Pacific: Ten Years Later

by *Karl J. Franklin*

According to SIL International in Papua New Guinea (PNG),¹ there are about 850 distinct languages in that country alone, as well as a multitude of dialects in many of the languages.² In addition, there are 200 languages on the Indonesian side of the island of New Guinea, as well as hundreds of languages in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu with the majority of them being very small. The most complete record of the languages can be found in Ethnologue, a catalogue of the world's languages, where each separate language is given a three-letter identifying code.³

We, therefore, have a reasonable record upon which to base our observations about the status of small languages in the Pacific. Note, as background, that most of the world's authorities on the linguistic viability of a language say that one with only 10,000 speakers is in the "endangered" category. Since the average size of a language in PNG does not approach 5,000, I have concluded that a group with 500 speakers or less is indeed endangered.⁴

My conclusion, then, is much the same as it was almost 10 years ago: For the most part, full Bible translation efforts are impractical for small language groups, particularly as an initial project, and therefore Bible stories should be the default starting strategy.

Do the Math

I started thinking about the problem in 1999, the year that the executive director of SIL International proposed a bold goal that was adopted by delegates at an international conference, namely, that every language "that needs one" (the necessary and essential caveat) would have a translation program started by 2025.

In November 2000, I wrote a paper called "Reaching small languages in northern Papua New Guinea," and a month later I expanded the paper as "Proposing an alternative strategy for small languages groups in the Pacific." I provided data showing that 27% (236) of the languages in PNG had fewer

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than 500 speakers, 20% of those spoken in the Solomon Islands were in the same category, and over half of those spoken in Vanuatu were similar. I did not address the question of translation or Bible storytelling for the languages on the Australian continent because so many languages there had less than 100 speakers or were nearly extinct. I did note that in the year 2000, of the 255 historically documented languages on the Australian continent, only 12 were still spoken by more than 1000 people.⁵

In my most recent examination of the Ethnologue (November, 2010), I note that the number of speakers for small languages has declined in every population category and that the overall number of small languages has declined by 54. This may be the result of some languages moving into the category of “above 500 speakers,” but it is more likely that the populations in each small-language category have simply decreased.

In 2000, the Provinces in PNG (20 at the time) that had the greatest number of small languages were Madang (86), East Sepik (35), Sandaun (30), Morobe (21), Western (14), and Milne Bay (11). The remaining Provinces each had less than 10 small languages. However, the survey and population figures for many of the languages are at least 25 years old for these Provinces. The following table outlines comparative figures from three Ethnologue editions (Figure 1).

A Different Strategy

A new or different strategy does not mean that others are wrong or misguided. But, as indicated and according to my research, little translation work has been done in very small languages (even with “cluster projects,” which I shall mention later) and, given the way personnel are available and assigned to programs, there is not likely to be much more translation work done among very

small languages. On the one hand, this might argue for the assignment of more personnel to PNG and the Pacific; on the other hand, it may call for some alternative approach to how people are trained and deployed. In the ten years since I have become interested and involved in the project a number of Bible storytelling programs and strategies have been in use, but none of them are of the nature outlined here.⁶

An important aspect of my suggested strategy requires an initial agreement with leaders in the particular language group (or some recognized segment thereof) so that the program is understood from the onset as deliberately restricted to Bible storytelling. As such, it will require a different kind of training than the traditional translation training that expatriates are familiar with.

In some cases, experienced storytelling consultants have been training nationals to re-tell certain stories from the Old and New Testaments.⁷ Depending upon the interest of the people, the policies of the mission organizations, the emphasis of the church(s), the projected viability of the language, as well as the availability of trained national speakers, a “fuller” program may develop. Such long term goals, however, depend upon the decisions of leaders in the language group and trained personnel.

However, a Bible storytelling program would differ from most “traditional” translation ones in a number of

respects. First of all, the retold stories would not be based exclusively upon the canonical text (the Greek or Hebrew), but instead upon an approved derivative source text that is well known by the vernacular speakers, such as a church or trade language. For example, in PNG the base text for many of the languages would be the Tok Pisin translation or some equally understandable English translation (such as the Contemporary English Version). Secondly, the retold stories would not need to be chronological, but could be synoptic, or thematic and without verse numbering—these are stories, not texts. Thirdly, they could be in audio or visual format, rather than printed, although some combination of the output mode would be possible. Finally, but as a major point, retold stories should fit the cultural style of oration and discourse that is present in traditional stories in these societies. This point can be easily glossed over because it insists that Bible story trainers be familiar with the vernacular cultures and the structure of their languages.

The retold stories should, of course, represent the approved source texts as clearly and accurately as possible. In this respect, they would be similar to the genre of popular translations such as *Philips Modern English*, F. F. Bruce’s *Letters of Paul*, or *The Living Bible*. In terms of idiomatic style, they might be more like *The Message*. Eugene H. Peterson explains why he felt an

Figure 1. Ethnologue Numbers for Small Languages

Category of Speakers	Ethnologue 14 (2000)	Ethnologue 15 (2005)	Ethnologue 16 (2009)
01-50	13	21	22
51-100	32	24	25
101-200	61	42	36
201-300	47	38	42
301-400	56	43	36
401-500	41	31	35
Total Number of languages	250	209	196

informal idiomatic translation in the “street language” was needed:

The version of the New Testament in a contemporary idiom keeps the language of the Message current and fresh and understandable in the same language in which we do our shopping, talk with our friends, worry about world affairs, and teach our children their table manners. The goal is not to render a word-for-word conversion of Greek into English, but rather to convert the tone, the rhythm, the events, and the ideas, into the way we actually think and speak (Peterson 1995, 10).

We have added that the stories should be in the same cultural style and persuasive discourse as one would use to tell any good story (Maguire 1998, Sawyer 1942). Of course the goal of retelling Bible stories in the vernacular is the same as for any modern idiomatic translation, namely, clarity and understanding, as Peterson has forcibly reminded us. Similarly, Taylor, in his introduction to the Living Bible, recounts that his purpose was “to say as exactly as possible what the writers of the Scriptures meant, and to say it simply, expanding where necessary for a clear understanding of the modern reader.”

If a synoptic retelling was chosen, stories could parallel something like Christianson’s continuous narrative harmonizing of the four Gospels and Acts. However, the style would be different because our goal is retold stories, not paraphrases of a full translation.

The “Language Cluster” Strategy

A strategy that is now widely promoted in SIL International and other Bible translation agencies (such as The Seed Company and Pioneer Bible Translators)⁸ is the so-called “cluster” tactic. This approach is a conceptual one, where speakers from a number of languages agree to work collectively on Bible translation projects. They may have certain social and linguistic com-

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monalities based on their interaction and therefore provide a “natural” unit for a cluster. The project may focus on a particular book of the Bible or have “just in time” training. Trainers examine aspects of the phonology (orthography solutions), grammar, and culture, but their main emphasis is on the exegesis of the Scriptures. A consultant, usually trained in the biblical languages, assists with such exegetical and, to some (often minor) extent, linguistic or anthropological problems. Projects of this sort are going on in a number of locations on various continents. However, decisions about translation clusters need to address issues such as

- What are the features used to consistently determine the constituent members of a cluster? For example, are the languages represented in the cluster formally related and, if so, upon what features are their degrees of likeness determined?
- What background information (cultural, grammatical, etc.) is available on the languages and how it is disseminated to the translators in the cluster?
- What are the competencies of the translators and consultants in the cluster? How are they evaluated and by whom?
- How do consultants determine the degree of relationships between various linguistic and cultural aspects of the languages? If the languages are documented, how will the consultants pass on information to the translators?
- What are the specific goals and outcomes of the cluster project? Who determines them?
- How are the cluster projects financed and who keeps the records?

- What infrastructure (technical, transportation, communication, etc.) is necessary to sustain the cluster project?

Cluster projects would be appropriate for Bible storytelling as well, although the constraints may prove to be less rigorous.

Some Objections to Bible Storytelling as a Primary Strategy

There are a number of potential and real problems with my proposal:

Choosing Size as a Criterion

While it is true that the size of a particular group, such as the figure of 500 as a cut-off point, is in some sense arbitrary, additional sociolinguistic research is fundamental and crucial for decisions about translation viability. And of course “small” does not always mean that a language is “dying.” Bilingualism or multilingualism has or will take place in the small groups, and there often seems to be no approved strategy that takes into account such circumstances, except in the traditional manner.⁹

Choosing Time as a Criterion

The very notion of trying to enter each language group in a certain length of time may not be appealing to many people. What is the hurry? As one translator told me (I hope with tongue in cheek), “If the people change their language in 25 years, it will simplify our task by not having to deal with those languages.” On a more positive note, another person said, “If people are dying without access to the Scriptures in their own tongue, then why not adapt this strategy for all languages.” In addition, as sociolinguists have noted, many languages may disappear, but the people don’t. They merely shift to using another language.

Choosing Something Other Than the Canonical Text as the Base Text

Some translators and linguists may have trouble with the notion of retelling Bible stories, instead of providing a translation or paraphrase of the biblical text. They most often cite the cause and concerns of accuracy, implying or stating that stories soon become hearsay. Remember, however, that the tellers or re-tellers are getting their stories initially from a Bible text and the stories can always be checked against that text.

Which Set of Bible Stories?

The decision about the particular set of Bible stories used may also be a problem. The essential component of the strategy given here allows the trained vernacular speaker to retell the Bible story in a clear and natural way and to choose which stories they want to retell. But retelling Bible stories does include many of the same concerns that idiomatic translations do, only in a different manner. This difference is because the trained native speaker compiles the “translation” in a story format. It follows that the native speaker (not the translator) is the best judge of what stories to choose.

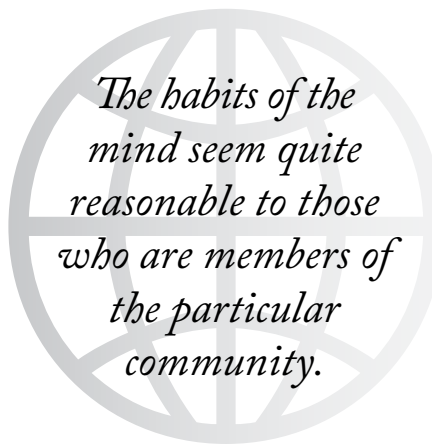
Choosing an Already Existing Exegesis of the Stories

Other concerns may be about exegesis because this strategy assumes that an acceptable and satisfactory exegesis of the passages for the stories exists. Will it lower the quality of the story, as some claim, by retelling the Bible stories rather than translating them directly from the Greek, Hebrew, (or some national language) text? If the stories are retold naturally and accurately (a task that preachers and expositors perform at every Bible study or church service), why should this be a problem? Historically, it has often taken years for an expatriate translator to properly exegete and translate the Bible. The strategy proposed here bypasses this long-term commitment or requirement for exegesis because it assumes an adequate and reliable underlying text. It also gives ethnic groups the Bible stories in a

language they not only understand easily but, in some cases, can also read. It, therefore, complements the concomitant goals of literacy and Scripture use.

The Problem of Checking and Assuring Quality Control

To highlight further a concern about accuracy, note that a verse-by-verse translation of Scripture requires considerable exegetical preparation, meticulous attention to every detail, back translations for the consultant to read, and other procedures. However, retold Bible stories would not require the same linguistic or exegetical detail of checking. Although they would be checked for the accuracy, naturalness and overall discourse cohesion, just as



in any translation project, the checking procedure would not require a literal adherence to the proposition-by-proposition content of the original text.¹⁰

The Problem of Adequate and Appropriate Training

In our strategy of retelling Bible stories, coordinators or facilitators need to train native speakers who are culturally recognized storytellers. Although the native speaker should retell the Bible story with naturalness and clarity, we emphasize that these are not scientifically defined terms. In retelling a story there is a certain art form that emerges because the teller uses the vocabulary and style that is most effective for the particular audience. Translation efforts

assume a generic audience; storytelling assumes particular audiences.

The Problem of Knowing One's Own Language

Most English speakers know little formally about their own language, although they know a great deal intuitively. Vernacular speakers need to learn to use their own languages—a goal that is similar in literacy programs where national writers are trained to write in their languages. The goal is necessary because many translators do not have a facility for writing their own language well or for expressing themselves clearly. By adopting this alternative strategy for small language groups, nationals can be trained in a different way. This approach should significantly reduce the necessary time to provide Bible stories for a group, as compared to the time now spent in a typical translation program.

Of course accepting a retelling approach in communicating the Bible's message is only possible as an entity adopts it as a legitimate project. By doing so, they provide some assurance that the task can be completed within a time frame that excludes a moribund state of the language.

A New Paradigm

Howard Margolis (1993) wrote that habits of the mind can block out what later come to be almost irresistible solutions. This is because certain ways of talking about things, for example, views on translation and paraphrase, bind together (or separate) certain educational and intellectual communities. The habits of the mind seem quite reasonable to those who are members of the particular community. Traditional translators and consultants represent such a community and an old paradigm.

How might we determine what constitutes a translator's or consultant's habit of the mind? Let us assume that one habit is to consider a translated text as essential. We can contrast this

by examining some alternative view, as in Pikean terms by noting the essential components that demonstrate differences. Comparing retold Bible stories with translating the canonical text can be helpful and instructive. We note, for example, that exegesis controls the translation task, and naturalness controls the retelling. The default paradigm is that the translator (and consultant) must adhere closely to the original text. Such a habit can be a barrier to an alternative way of thinking about retelling stories. Another barrier may be our terminology. We call something a translation when it is judged as accurately representing the canonical text but it is a paraphrase if it moves somewhat further from the source text towards a freer form of expression. It is therefore generally rejected as a “true translation.” By employing Bible storytelling, the gridlock over what is acceptable in translation theory and practice may possibly be broken.¹¹

In a traditional paradigm, Bible stories are often considered something less than what a mature Christian would want or enjoy. One of my critics said that “Bible stories are for children,” implying that Bible stories are baby food and that only the full translated text is adult food. But, as C. S. Lewis said:

... a children’s story which is enjoyed only by children is a bad children’s story. The good ones last. A waltz which you can only like when you are waltzing is a bad waltz (Lewis 1982:59).

Adopting the strategy proposed here attempts to award retold Bible stories with a status that enhances them beyond what is “merely for children.”

As Philip Sampson (2000, 157) recounts, “Narratives are not just gripping accounts. They may also have profound cultural power. . . . The biblical narrative has deeply marked the development of Western societies.” Storytelling is one of the most important and widely accepted method of communicating in any culture. In fact storytelling societies abound

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(there are hundreds of sites that can be found on the Internet) in many cultures around the world. In addition, stories are the fabric through which moral and religious meanings flourish (Murphy 2000, Coles 1989, Rodari 1996). Any person who has spent time living in another culture has learned the importance of the people’s stories. People love to hear stories and people who can read love to read them. They are Scripture-in-use at its most practical level.

However, to think differently about the Bible translation task for small languages, in any radical sense, requires a paradigm shift. The shift proposed here does not provide full canonical translations, but encourages trained nationals to retell selected Bible stories naturally in their own languages. The strategy focuses upon finding good storytellers in the culture, acquainting them with Bible stories, training them, and then allowing them to retell them in their own languages. The paradigm does not require a written translation for the output because it acknowledges that 70% or more of the people in an oral society never learn to read.

For a new paradigm to be adopted, administrators will need to re-assess the linguistic viability of small language groups, then assist the language groups in making some difficult decisions. They will have to decide, “Do we have the time and capacity to warrant (not deserve) the efforts of a full translation project?” Given the limited resources available, particularly in terms of trainers and consultants, Bible retelling projects need to be seriously considered as a strategy. The approach can become part of cluster language programs in some instances.

However, if storytelling is simply conceived as one of a number of possible

strategies and the default strategy is always a partial or “full” translation project for every language, then retelling Bible stories will not be given a serious hearing. Rather, as I have emphasized repeatedly, retelling Bible stories must be seen as a legitimate strategy in its own right. And because I have had small and often endangered languages in mind, linguistic salvage would be an accompanying strategy. This aspect would require further study to define what can realistically be recorded within the “retelling” strategy.

Elson (1977) wrote the following: “Perhaps by the turn of the century, SIL will have wound down much of its field programs and members will be involved in teaching, practical training and consultant work, both at home and abroad.” Elson’s predictions would support a new paradigm for small languages, but the way things are progressing it will not be in the century he had in mind.

Conclusion

I have not carried the matter of the new paradigm as far as it can go, but I have raised some important questions and issues. To sum up, this proposed paradigm was initially proposed for very small language groups. It did not and does not assume a church with a historical structure of pastors, commentators, nor a fixed denominational exegesis of certain passages. However, in cases where the predominant national language is also the language of the source text, the preaching and teaching emphasis is already based upon retelling the message, so “interpreters” already exist. They may intuitively know how to best retell the story.

A retelling of a Bible story has some of the technical aspects as a Bible

translation project because the meaning of the source text must still be clearly understood and conveyed. However, it is not as technical in the sense of claiming a detailed analysis of the target language (although present translations often also reflect limited linguistic analysis). The trained national translators, in either case, judge decisions about style.

Although there are technical decisions to be made in Bible storytelling, just as in a “normal” translation programs, the emphasis is upon common language and naturalness. It is not about back translations and exegetical checking. As Newmark says

for the vast majority of texts, you have to ensure: (a) that your translation makes sense; (b) that it reads naturally, that it is written in ordinary language, the common grammar, idioms and words that meet that kind of situation (1988, 24).

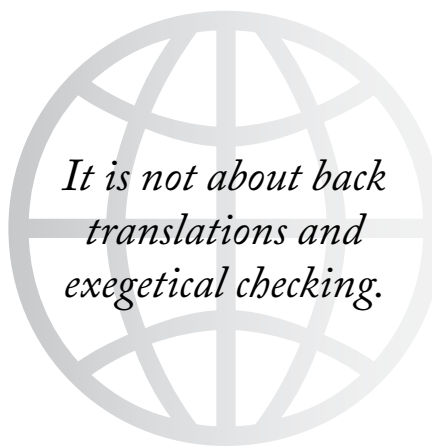
There is a mixture in the goals between retelling the message on the one hand and a literal translation of a text on the other. For example, the use and translation of idioms, rearrangement of the text, interpretation of obscure text, making clear implied information, and so on, takes place in the “normal” translation task by means of introductions, cross-references, pictures, section headings, indexes, maps, footnotes, and so on. However, telling stories have fewer constraints because it includes the introduction of background information, foreshadowing the conclusion, flashbacks, and so on, to provide a free flow of the story without adhering as closely to the source text forms. The story checkers spend their time ensuring that the source text is retold naturally, not literally. Only a native speaker can judge a story’s naturalness, so insertions and interpretations are always directed toward the audiences’ understanding.

The checking procedures would therefore change, first of all, in degree. At present, in most situations, a translation consultant examines an

episode by embarking upon a word-by-word, phrase by phrase, and sentence by sentence checking of the vernacular text for exegetical accuracy. In retold story form, spot checks of known difficult key ideas would be adequate.

As already indicated, retelling stories would allow, for example, the synoptic narratives to be harmonized to eliminate redundancies, even recasting or restructuring information along certain lines, e. g., chronology, topic, author.

The present and continuing arguments about how much freedom the translator can take by inserting implied information would be a moot point



in this paradigm. The problem would not be in focus because the insertion of implied information is considered a natural and necessary part of the storytelling task.

To briefly summarize—the Bible translation task is at first, etic; the storytelling task is emic. This is because outsiders control the former, insiders the latter.¹²

Ten years after I first wrote about Bible storytelling there is a plethora of agencies involved in the activity, using various strategies and techniques.¹³ None of them, however, exist solely to meet the needs of endangered language communities. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ See <http://www.sil.org/pacific/png/index.asp> for details of the languages, including a list of publications online, a bibliography (by author, language, series, province, and subject), as well as maps for each province. According to their website, SIL in PNG is now (2010) working in about 200 different languages, having already carried out research in almost 400 languages. The research varies from full grammars and dictionaries to abbreviated descriptions of parts of particular languages, but almost always the phonology.

² The practical problem of distinguishing languages vs. dialects is an on-going discussion but SIL considers the feature of intelligibility as its main criterion. For example, the classification of language or dialect is summed up in *Ethnologue* (2005, 8) by noting inherent intelligibility and common ethnolinguistic identity.

³ The code is called ISO 639-3 and defines all known human languages with a three-letter identifier. Its website (<http://www.sil.org/iso639-3/default.asp>) processes requests, applications, or changes in order to register all language codes.

⁴ According to Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Endangered_language#cite_note-K2007-0), an endangered language is one that is at risk of falling out of use and upon losing all its native speakers, becomes a dead language. Krauss (1992) estimated that there are about 6000 languages in active use and defined languages as “endangered” if children will probably not be speaking them in 100 years (approximately 60-80% of languages fall into this category). Languages are “moribund” if children are not speaking them now. The Linguistic Society of America (LSA) established a Committee on Endangered Languages and Hale and others published key articles (1992) that addressed the problem. Following Hale’s death, a Professorship was established in his name “to document endangered languages and work with communities toward their preservation” (<http://www.lsadc.org/info/inst-past-profs.cfm>, accessed February 14, 2011). There are various agencies that support efforts to preserve endangered languages and to gather linguistic materials. See, for example <http://www.sil.org/sociolx/ndg-lg-home.html> and <http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/enduring-voices/> (both accessed February 14, 2011).

⁵ I formally presented a version of my paper at the International Language Assessment Conference IV in Chiang

Mai, Thailand, Sept. 5-12, 2001, although the basic idea was first presented to the SIL International Vice Presidents/Area Directors meetings in Dallas, April 28, 2000. I appreciated comments received from participants in those meetings, as well as from a number of SIL linguistics and translation consultants over the years. However, I should add that most of the early comments were objections or reservations to the idea of substituting Bible stories for translations—regardless of the population size of the language group.

⁶ I have not carefully examined the policies of other agencies that are involved in Bible translation in PNG and the Pacific, such as New Tribes Mission (NTM), although I have talked with some of the leaders. NTM does work with very small groups and does Bible translation, even in cases where the Scriptures are available in closely related dialects. .

⁷ For example, The Seed Company is also now involved in Bible storytelling and training in PNG. Jim and Janet Stahl, storytelling consultants for TSC have held several workshops at Alotau, in the Milne Bay Province.

⁸ See <http://www.theseedcompany.org/project/vital-ig-cluster> (accessed February 14, 2011) for a description of the “VITAL cluster of Papua New Guinea.” The claim is that “This project represents a strategy to accelerate Scripture translation for 15 languages. The VITAL program (Vernacular Initiative for Translation and Literacy) successfully and efficiently trains PNG translators in Milne Bay Province. VITAL conducts workshops for teams of translators from many languages, not only to leverage the help of consultants and trainers between translation teams, but also to promote healthy teamwork among translators of related languages.” On the roots of the Pioneer Bible Translators (PBT), see http://www.pioneerbible.org/cms/tiki-view_blog.php?blogId=2 (accessed February 14, 2011).

⁹ Entities of most translation organizations do have, of course, certain policies on whether or not to translate for a particular group (but not necessarily on documenting the language and culture). For example, Lewis and Stalder (2009, unpublished) have written a paper providing a conceptual framework in which they discuss the concept of clustering and the administrative decisions that are associated with it. Although they do not give specific directions on working with the size of groups that I am discussing, their study is very helpful.

¹⁰ For some specific suggestions on examining and checking stories, see Chapter 8 of my online book called *Loosen your tongue: An introduction to storytelling*: <http://www.gial.edu/specpubs/loosen-your-tongue.pdf>.

¹¹ Note, however, that we have Bible storytelling organizations that apply strict constraints to what is an acceptable Bible story. They are very “literal” in their approach, while other agencies allow more “freedom,” such as interjecting or substituting cultural analogies, conflating stories that have similar important points, and so on.

¹² These two terms were coined originally by the linguist Kenneth L. Pike to convey two perspectives: the insider, who is naturally familiar and acculturated in the language and culture (the emic view), and the outsider, who studies a language from an outside cultural and scientific perspective (the etic view).

¹³ New Tribes Mission (NTM), see <http://www.ntm.org> is sometimes considered the originator of Bible storying as a mission strategy. Their set of 48 lessons studying the Bible chronologically is called “Firm Foundations” and can be purchased from their website. The Southern Baptists mission (IMB) uses the “Chronological Bible Storying” method (see http://www.oraltystrategies.org/strategy_detail.cfm?StrategyID=1, this and those that follow, accessed February 14, 2011). Note also the OneStory Partnership, with four “managing partners”—Campus Crusade for Christ, Trans World Radio, Wycliffe USA, and Youth With a Mission (see <http://www.onestory.org/Partners/PartnersDefault.aspx>). Some other agencies that either endorse or practice Bible storytelling methods are, for example: Scriptures in Use (<http://www.siutraining.org/>); Chronological Bible Storying (http://www.oraltystrategies.org/strategy_detail.cfm?StrategyID=1); Network of Biblical Storytellers, Int’l (<http://www.nbsint.org/>); and the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship (<http://www.nobs.org/>).

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