

RURAL MISSION SOLUTIONS

Centre for Rural Mission
4 Clarence Street, Market Harborough, LE16 7NE
E-mail: sunrise@ruralmissions.org.uk
www.ruralmissionsolutions.org.uk
01858-414930

The Power of Story Telling

This paper is only a rudimentary introduction to the art of story telling. Story telling is experiencing a revival of interest throughout the western world at this time. Almost everybody has story telling skills and most people of all ages enjoy stories. Of course some people seem to have greater talent than others when it comes to composing stories and to telling stories. However, a good storyteller lurks in almost every person and, with a little help and practise, the storyteller will come to life.

This revival of story telling provides an opportunity for Christians to communicate truth.

For the Christian there is a great tradition of story telling. The stories in the Hebrew Scriptures were originally passed from one to another by word of mouth. Children learned about God on the knees of their parents. Jesus used story telling as a key part of his ministry. Down through the ages story telling has continued to be a major aspect of preaching and teaching. Sadly, relatively recently story telling has been neglected and in many churches it is only used in children's work - and often done poorly.

SOURCES OF STORIES

Stories can be gleaned from many sources. The Bible itself is full of wonderful stories. Some of these are factual, some are parables, some are allegories, some are romantic, some are adventure, and some are mystery.

There are many other stories around, and new ones being made up daily.

Some relatively new Christian books have been written in response to the new opportunities. Some of them re-tell traditional Bible stories but in new ways. Some of them are clever stories that communicate biblical or theological truth. While some are aimed at children, many are for all ages. A list of some of the titles available is provided at the end of this paper.

Perhaps the greatest treasure store of stories lies buried between your ears, waiting to be resurrected by a spark of imagination.

STORY TELLING TOOLS

Perhaps there are many tools - I want to mention just three.

1. Imagination

Everyone has imagination. In some people it is more developed than in others. Have you never found that when you read a story you can imagine that you are actually hearing the voice of the speaker, or you can just picture the scene? If you watch some people

when they are reading silently you can see their facial expressions adapting to the story into which they are entering.

Radio stories and plays also fire up the imagination.

Children learn to use their creative imaginations from a very early age. They play imaginary games, talk to imaginary friends, and tell lies!

Try shutting your eyes when you are hearing a story and see what pictures your mind produces for you.

It is only a short step to using your creative imagination for making up or developing stories.

When you plan to tell a story be sure to spend time in preparation imagining yourself in the story. You could try to imagine how you might *feel* if you were various characters in the story.

2. Voice

Not all voices are the same. Some seem ideal for story telling. But even if you think your voice is not very ideal do not despair - with a little training and practise you will be amazed at how useful a tool it can become. Of course it helps to know the different ways in which you can use your voice in story telling.

There are three elements that go to make up our speech. First there are our vocal chords that make the basic sound, then there is the mouth, lips and tongue that fashion the sound, but there is also the flow of air through the vocal cords. Breathing is a vital aspect of any verbal communication. For the main part, breathing comes naturally so that we phrase the words properly, but watch out for bad breathing and get some tips from a good speaker or singer who can explain phrasing to you.

You can do marvellous things in story telling with your voice. Your voice is a paintbrush with which you are going to paint a picture for others to see.

Try experimenting with varying the **volume** - just a little - or a lot. What impact does it have? Don't forget that you can get quieter as well as louder.

Try using **silence** or pauses. What does that do in a story? Yes, it adds dramatic affect and can suddenly draw in or heighten the attention of your listeners.

Speed is another interesting element. As we speak faster it creates a sense of excitement. As we speak slower we pull the mind of the listener in to us.

Pitch is important too. Often as we speak faster we speak higher, and we speak slower we speak lower. Varying the pitch is important to keep interest.

Attack is about emphasis or the stress we place on the beginning of words. Try saying (without any emphasis), "the ball bounced back buzzing past my ear". Now repeat it with attack and see the ball bouncing as you say it.

Accents or dialects can be very helpful but if you are not very good at them it might be better to leave well alone.

Remember to speak clearly and project your voice (not the same as shouting) so that all the words are audible and properly enunciated.

With all these things PRACTISE TELLING STORIES WITH VOCAL TECHNIQUES ALOUD. Use the bathroom or a remote part of a garden or field if necessary!

3. Your body

Story telling is a visual as well as an audible exercise. Actions should be kept to a minimum but do be prepared to act.

Facial expressions are very important. Smiling, frowning, grinning, and winking can all help to make a story go well. You will see that when you use facial expressions it affects your voice.

Posture is also important. Leaning forward grabs attention. Never slump when you are telling a story unless it is part of your acting!

Set your face at an appropriate comparative height to your listeners' eye line.

By all means move around a little. You can create an imaginary listener in a dialogue. One person might be smaller and so when he/she speaks needs to look up, while a taller person might look down. One person might be on the right and another on the left. Just a little movement can help to paint the scene for your listeners.

Most people use their hands (gesticulate) when they talk. You try describing a spiral staircase without using your hands! Some hand movement is natural but be careful not to overdo it.

SOME HELPFUL TIPS

While you can always read stories this is not the same as story telling. Story telling always focuses on either short stories or short episodes of a longer story. If your story source is written down then read it through ALOUD several times. Reading it aloud will do several things for you. It will help to fix it in your memory. It will help you to hear what it sounds like when told. It will help you to identify key passages or phrases.

Once you have read it aloud a few times, make some outline notes as a memory aid and try telling your story. Again do so aloud. Make any adjustments and run through the procedure again.

Practise your stories by telling them aloud regularly. You will find this not only helps your performance but it will also help to fix the key points in your mind and automatically polish out the unnecessary parts. The story will improve through the process.

Listen to professional storytellers and spot their techniques. Try some of them out for yourself.

See if there is a kind of story that works better for you.

Eye contact between the storyteller and listener is vital.

Watch the body language of your listeners. If they have slumped and their attention is wandering it may be time to introduce a change (e.g. silence, drama, change of speed, etc.) Or your story might be too long and needs winding up.

Look out for good stories. If you make one up yourself, practise it on some friends and let them help to polish it.

Look up other good storytellers and share your experiences and resources.

RESOURCES

"Tales to Tell" compiled by David Campbell and published by St. Andrew Press. Designed for adults to read to children.

"Speaking of God" and "Imagining God" are both by Trevor Denis and published by SPCK. Trevor has a unique skill and style and appeal to a particular audience.

"Splashes of Godlight" is edited by Terence Copley and others, and is published by the Bible Society. The stories come from Jewish and Christian traditions.

The Northumbria Community (Open Book Project) is at the forefront of Christian story telling. You can contact them at Hetton Hall, Chatton, Alnwick, Northumberland, NE66 5SD Telephone 01289-388477. Email thetellingplace@bigfoot.com

Barry Osborne
Centre for Rural Mission
4 Clarence Street
Market Harborough
LE16 7NE
01858-414930