
Literacy for Life: a Tool for the Church?¹

By Pat Herbert
© FOBAI 2009

Community literacy has been implemented in the GILLBT (Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy and Bible Translation) language projects since the 1970s, and approximately 500,000 students have participated in that program. It was thought that once the value of literacy took hold, the communities would take responsibility for their own literacy development and that this would include financial responsibility. However, though there has been progress in this, the dream has not been fully realized. What is more, the church, as part of each community, has not shown much interest.

We suddenly realized that pastors were not using the translated Scriptures in their churches. Why? Many could not read them properly and did not want to be embarrassed in their stumbling and stuttering. Some were from a different language community and could not speak the local language, and, whereas they could have asked a local person to read, they often did not do so. Perhaps, we thought, we had not tried enough to bring in the churches and so we arranged at least two meetings in Tamale town, in northern Ghana, inviting as many church elders and pastors as possible and aiming at presenting the literacy program and its benefits. There were a good number at the first meeting, but little interest after our various presentations, and nobody contacted us. The next meeting there were fewer people and the same lack of interest.

One day, the GILLBT Director, Justin Frempong, called some of us to his office and said that a certain number of southern churches were asking for literacy with biblical content in the primers. We tossed the idea around and realized that we would have to redo all our primers for the 30-plus languages we were involved with as we did not have biblical content in them. What a job! Also, if later, we wanted secular funding for the primers for the current literacy program, we would have to get rid of the biblical references. We had had to be very sure that our current literacy primers did not have Christian content otherwise government development agencies would not have funded them.

Thus we came up with the idea of using the literacy primers as they were, and a separate book called a Scripture Guide would accompany them.

¹ This article is a revision of: Herbert, Pat. 2006. "Literacy for Life." *Scripture in Use Today* 13:24-30.

The Scripture Guide

Each lesson in the Scripture Guide has a key word and picture that matches those in the literacy primer of a particular language such that lesson 1 in the Scripture Guide has the same key word and picture as lesson 1 in the primer. All the lessons follow the same pattern. If, for example, the key word is *water* in the literacy primer, then the Scripture reference in the Scripture Guide can be John 13: 1–10 with a short overview of the meaning written after it, followed by three questions asking about the passage, and after that a memory verse.

An Example of a Scripture Guide Lesson

Water

Read: John 13:1–10

Comment

In New Testament times, the Jewish people had servants to do menial tasks. To wash people's feet was the job of the lowest servant of all. So, it was all the more an amazing occurrence that Jesus did this service for his disciples. He said that he had set them an example. His followers were to be servants to others. In Matthew 20:28, it says that Jesus came, not to be served but to give his life as a ransom for many.

Questions:

1. What did Jesus do when he got up from his meal with the disciples?
2. Why did Peter not want Jesus to wash his feet?
3. How should followers of Jesus follow his example?

Memory Verse: 1 Peter 4:10

Comment: Each one should use whatever gift he or she has received from God to serve others.



It was necessary at first only to print one Scripture Guide for each class as only the teacher could read it. However, each student had to have a literacy primer. Later, more Scripture Guides were printed so that the students could buy them and read them when they were literate.

Lesson Content

Each lesson starts teaching the students to read and write from a lesson in the mother-tongue literacy primers. Then, the Scripture Guide is used by the teacher when he or she links the theme to the literacy primer lesson which has just been taught. A passage of Scripture is read and an overview is given by the teacher or the pastor. Three questions on the Scripture passage are given and lively discussion is generated; after this a memory verse is learned. A review lesson is given every five or six lessons with a review of all the memory verses.

Training

One of the problems in LFL is to find someone in the local churches who can teach the literacy primers. If the local GILLBT literacy project cannot spare a teacher, then it is necessary to train one from the local church and he/she can be trained as part of the teacher training of the local GILLBT literacy project, otherwise there may have to be separate teacher training courses. We usually held training anyway for in way to use the primers alongside the Scripture Guides. If the pastors can read their own language, they can be trained to teach the primers and the Scripture Guides, otherwise they can learn to read and write in the church class.

Church-based

The objective was to make this literacy initiative different from the usual GILLBT literacy program. So, it was decided that it should be church-based and that the classes would be in the churches and from the church congregations. They would be responsible for running the project and for the financial back-up after an initial input by GILLBT funding for printing.

GILLBT Scripture Use, Literacy for Life, and the GILLBT Literacy Program

A comparison of the two programs:

Church-based 'Literacy for Life' program	Community-based GILLBT Literacy program	
Church-based	Community-based	different
Christian funding	Govt. & Christian funding	different
Strongly motivates pastors	Pastors not strongly motivated	different
Uses Scripture Guides	No Scripture used	different
All volunteer zonal supervisors	Some paid & some volunteer supervisors	different

Church-based 'Literacy for Life' program	Community-based GILLBT Literacy program	
Voluntary supervisor	Allowance for coordinator + 2 supervisors	different
Church ownership	Community ownership	different
Pastors committee	Community committee	different
Church classrooms & some schools	Schools and other community rooms	mixed
Objective: to read mother-tongue (MT) New Testament (NT)	Objective: read MT & English, and be involved in development. Also be able to read the MT Scriptures	different
Scripture-In-Use activities	Development activities	different
Post-primer: MT NT, MT Bible studies	Post-primer: folk tales, functional materials, English bridge	same
Uses Gudschinsky primers	Uses Gudschinsky primers	same
Students buy subsidized primers	Students buy subsidized primers	same
Church buys subsidised Scripture Guides (after GILLBT funding of printing)		different

These two programs do not seem to run parallel. They seem to run in two circles, one within the other where they touch at a certain point. That point is sensitive in that it involves external government funding for the literacy primers used by both programs.

The impact of Literacy for Life so far

At a recent LFL seminar we did a survey to find out something of the impact of LFL since it had started classes after initial research, trial Scripture Guides and printing in 2004. We discovered that in the 17 language group areas where LFL had church classes, there were 313 active classes that were spread over approximately 160 churches, but that there was also within these areas a potential outreach to 1,065 churches.

Number of active classes	313	Increasing
Number of students	3,130	
When the classes meet	Usually in the evenings Sometimes on Sunday mornings	According to local conditions
Number of times meeting per week	Once a week and in some cases twice a week	
Where meetings held	Usually in the church. Sometimes in the school.	
Male/female make-up of classes	Overwhelmingly men and women attended mixed classes, but there was one class of women only.	
Predominant age group in classes	Most classes had people between the ages of 21 and 45 years of age.	
Religious make-up of classes	Classes are predominantly Christian, but there are a few that are mixed: Christian, Muslim and African traditional religion backgrounds in one class	A means of outreach to others and Christian discipleship within the church
Use of Scripture Guides	Apart from the initial literacy lessons, some pastors use the guides for sermon material and Sunday school lessons.	Spiritual development

The local GILLBT Scripture Use coordinator who introduced LFL to the Deg churches (in the Brong-Ahafo region of Ghana) praised the Deg Scripture Guide and said that it was used in the church classes but also as a devotional guide in the home. A change for the better has been seen in the lives of many people, and some who were not Christians have been converted. One elderly lady came to faith through LFL. She attended an LFL class before the church service when the key word was “man.” The teacher read from Romans 5:19–21. The woman asked him to explain, and he started with Adam and went on to show how through disobedience, sin and death had entered the world, but through another man’s obedience, deliverance had come. Then the teacher read from John 3:16. The woman said that as God had done her a favor, she

would give herself to him. Now the woman's testimony of God's love to her has become the talk of the town.

A Tool for the Church?

Every church wants to expand and bring more people into the kingdom of God. If the local people are mostly Dagombas living in Dagbon, and the pastor is Ashanti and conducts every service in Twi, he will have a hard time attracting the Dagombas. They will see Christianity as alien. There has to be preaching in Dagbani or at least interpretation, Dagbani prayers, Dagbani Christian songs and the reading of the Dagbani Scriptures so that the Dagombas will feel comfortable in this environment. Therefore, to encourage the congregation to read and write Dagbani is essential. The church can utilize the LFL program to this end.

The pastor can use LFL as an evangelistic and discipleship tool in that the classes will have a Christian message implicit in the lessons themselves. Also after the students have become literate in the mother tongue, they will be able to use the Scripture Guides for private devotions.

The pastor will find that not only can his congregation read the Scriptures in their own language, but they will show a greater depth of understanding God's Word and show growth in their Christian lives. The memory verses are greatly appreciated and can come to the mind in the middle of stressful situations so that they are a real help to the individual believer.

There is no doubt that LFL can be integrated into the Faith Comes By Hearing program so that those who have heard the Scriptures and want to learn to read, can join the LFL classes.

Most definitely, LFL is a tool that the church can utilize to great advantage.

Pat Herbert works in Ghana with GILLBT (Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy and Bible Translation) as a consultant in both translation and Scripture Use.