Storytelling in Bangkok: Biblical Storytelling for Leadership Development in the Slums

Submitted as partial fulfillment

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### Abstract befor the index.

### To be developed1. Introduction

Although Christianity has been present in Thailand for centuries, there has never been a time when the gospel has spread widely or the Thai people have taken leadership of the church in their country. Missionaries have come and gone, shared their words and efforts, sought social justice and victory in spiritual warfare, but the battle continues to rage for the hearts and minds of Thai communities, especially in the slums of Bangkok. The church may be present there, but it is unknown, misunderstood, and without much influence in the city.

The church must learn how to share the gospel with Thais more effectively, in ways that could lead to movements of new churches. One of these ways is through storytelling: communicating the Bible orally in stories that have been “crafted” into simple, understandable language. By investigating the practice of storytelling in the light of the cultural context of Bangkok, this research will highlight some storytelling practices that equip disciples and empower Thai leaders in the church.

***Why Crafted Stories?***

Throughout history, stories have been the tools that people use to relate to one another, to pass on worldview and to teach morality. God revealed himself through stories. The Bible is replete with stories that communicate truth about God’s character, His intentions for the world, the nature of mankind, and salvation through Jesus.

While some methods of discipleship and church planting clash with Thai culture and fail to produce fruit, this study will explore sharing stories from the Bible as a practice that enables Christians to reach reluctant listeners and exposes people to the word of God in a way that is comfortable, natural, and helps open their hearts to the Gospel.

However, even storytelling can run into barriers, especially in the slums. In order for storytelling to be most effective, storytellers must understand how to work around these barriers and adapt their method of teaching and telling stories, “crafting” them using understandable language, and putting them into cultural contexts.

The storytelling process is very different from sharing stories straight from the Bible or from preaching an expositional sermon because crafted stories work around hard-to-understand language in order to present both the ideas and the stories themselves in their fullness, remaining true to the Gospel message. Crafted stories are short, easy to remember, and reproducible, and stories are selected and organized into sets that engage relevant cultural issues.

### 1.2 Research Questions: Overcoming Barriers to Church Leadership

This study lies within the field of church growth. An experimental study in the application of biblical storytelling, this research will seek to answer the question, “What storytelling approaches overcome the cultural barriers to the formation of indigenous church leadership in the slums of Bangkok?” Cultural analysis, current literature on storytelling and church planting, as well as case studies in storytelling will shape a theory of how factors of contextualization and leadership contribute to the development of a storytelling method that responds to certain barriers that have impeded the spread of the gospel in Thailand.

The current state of the church in Bangkok does not demonstrate use of many methods of evangelism and discipleship that adequately prepare and equip Thais on a *broad* level to take spiritual leadership of the local church. My thesis is that current practices of storytelling have the potential to be effective methods of developing such discipleship and leadership among Thai believers that, with development over a few years, could lead to church growth in the slums.

The idea of local leadership as the key to church growth in Thai slums is a theory developed in reports by H. Michelle Kao (2012), Christy Johnson (2012), and Michael Visser (1992), while at the same time, Kao and Johnson acknowledge that previous attempts to establish local Thai leaders have repeatedly failed for various reasons, including 1) established local leaders falling into sin, 2) unhealthy dependence on a mentor- or patron-pastor, or 3) other life issues drawing even good leaders away from the community. While not all of these problems are the fault of the training the leaders receive, they do identify three problems with current models of leadership development in Thai slum churches:

1. A lack of biblical accountability between peers
2. Hierarchical structures that create obstacles to Thais leading
3. Developing too few leaders (leaving the group in the lurch when plans change)

Leadership in Thai slum communities therefore requires the broad-scale development of believers who can lead, including empowering all Thai believers to be able to *understand* and *share* the gospel with others in their communities (including living out the fruits of faith), something Jesus called “making disciples.”

The two issues of understanding scripture and being capable of communicating the gospel are what shape the major categories of this research on discipleship through storytelling:

* How do we teach stories and storytelling so that this method can be a *reproducible* tool?
* What stories are most *relevant* to the issues in a poor Thai person’s life? What themes and metaphors in the Bible appeal to their understanding of the world?
* How do we communicate these stories in the vernacular so that the language and context are *understandable* and convey the original intent of the message of the gospel?

Corresponding to those three needs that storytelling be reproducible, culturally understandable, and relevant, there are three elements of the storytelling process that the research will examine: the methods of implementing storytelling, the process of crafting stories in simple language, and the contextualization of stories the life of the poor in Bangkok.

1. *Method*: Although stories are very helpful in sharing the gospel, in order to empower leaders, the goal in teaching storytelling is to teach not only the stories, but also how to guide a discussion about them in order to help these truths come to life. Many foreign missionaries implement storytelling as evangelism or bible education, but fail to teach it in a way that prepares and disciples Thai believers to take leadership of the church.
2. *Crafting*: Part of the best practices that lead to empowerment, especially in the slums, means using simple language in crafting the stories. Currently the several Thai versions of the Bible are all poorly translated, with unusual and complex language that most Thais would not understand without previous knowledge of the Bible and which are completely inaccessible to those in the slums who have received little education. “Best practices” must necessarily take these translation issues into account.
3. *Contextualization*: Another significant element of what constitutes best practices in Thailand is the contextualization of storytelling—that is, telling stories along the themes and realities of the life of the poor in Bangkok. What “story sets” will be best received by Thais? Their Buddhist religion already evokes a sense of spirituality in their day-to-day lives; which stories of the Bible respond to what they already believe?

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Issue | Barriers to Church Leadership | Approaches |
| Reproducibility | Thais don’t like to read/studyHigh expectations/requirements of leadersLittle accountability because of hierarchical social structuresPatron-client relationships make transition of authority messyLack of confidence and insecurity because they stand out in Buddhist and because they feel unequipped. | Oral stories are easy to memorize and re-tellLearning how to lead bible storytelling through experience and practice in group contextLeader has a small role, promotes group participationAccountability among peer group participants |
| Relevance | Thais believe Christianity is a religion for WesternersCommon approaches to evangelism don’t fit in a Thai understanding of the world | Selecting and developing “story sets” of bible stories relevant to concerns and issues in Thai lifeConversational approach engages listeners’ questions; they make connections to life through personal discovery |
| Understandability | Poor translation of the BibleReading levels in the slum are not advanced enough to understand the BibleUnfamiliarity with context of scripture makes metaphors and symbols difficult to understand and interpret | “Crafted” stories to use easy-to-understand language, explain culturally/contextually confusing elementsOral, conversational approach to studying scripture works at each individual’s level of understanding |
|  |  |  |

Therefore, leadership style and contextualization will shape the discussion about implementing storytelling in the slums.

### 1.3 Literature Review

Existing research on fruitful discipleship, the cultural and historical context of Bangkok, as well as current storytelling practices all contribute to the conversation about storytelling as an effective method of discipleship and evangelism. It is necessary to analyze storytelling in the context of recent and historical trends of church planting in Bangkok in order to set the stage for understanding how storytelling can help to fill in the gaps of Thai receptivity to the gospel and local leadership of the church.

**Current Reports on Effective Discipleship in Thailand**

By looking at some of the evangelism practices that have been both successful and unsuccessful in Bangkok, some principles and best practices begin to stand out. The key principles of church planting relate to the nature of discipleship: it must empower lay leadership, connect the Bible to everyday life, and be communicated in a way that is understandable to the urban slum community.

One of the first principles, articulated by Michael Visser (2008) is that leadership must be decentralized, Thai, and oriented towards forming groups of believers that might saturate the community rather than a single church that stands apart from it. Visser reports this as the expressed desire of Thai believers who see that the patron-client relationship with western pastors has been unsuccessful in producing growing churches.

While Visser articulates this principle regarding Thai culture specifically, other authors including Western pastors and missionaries (Hunter & Chan 2007, Malphurs 2005, and Hull 2010), as well as international missions scholars (Smith 2011, Lian 2010, and Ott 2011) also affirm grassroots leadership as a major element of church expansion in Asia and elsewhere. In China this takes shape in the growth of unregistered house churches. Alan Hunter and Kim-Kwong Chan point to direction from lay leaders (in the absence of adequate numbers of ordained clergy) as the force behind the growth of these “autonomous church communities” (2007, p 81). Some analysts and writers such as Xi Lian choose to describe this phenomenon within Chinese church growth in terms of “grassroots” or “indigenous lay leadership” because hierarchy is not strictly absent, but the focus is on leadership by Christians who are not ordained, professional pastors.

Alan Johnson (2000) also affirms that along with decentralized leadership, empowerment, relationship, and a message of transformation are the keys to church expansion in Thailand. Reaching people in a deeply personal way is more effective than sharing the theological concepts of the gospel. Johnson shares that he witnessed some of the most effective experiences of sharing the gospel when people shared directly from their own lives how God had worked in them, as well as what God demonstrates in scripture about his power to transform others. Thai people desire personal transformation rather than impersonal truths, and unless understanding leads to fruit, the theology is useless. Far better than sermons or “the four spiritual laws,” stories use characters, actions, and drama to exemplify how truth actually changes our lives. Church planting must therefore incorporate these goals of empowered local leadership and personal transformation and discipleship tools must also take these goals into account.

Once lay people are empowered, church growth actually begins. But as Taylor (1997) points out, patron-client relationships, which naturally result from the hierarchical social structure in Thailand, are a difficult barrier to move past. Western missions have a history of these detrimental relationships where the foreign pastor has a distinctly authoritative role to the Thai congregation. Therefore transformational grassroots leadership that is local and broad is very slow to take root and most churches fail to develop their church members as active lay disciples.

Biblical discipleship is one of the primary elements of church planting movements, and by qualities of effective church planting movements can shed light on how what methods of storytelling can be used for discipleship and leadership development. From David Garrison (2003) to Craig Ott (2011) and beyond, there are many different books and studies on church planting as apostolic movements, meaning churches where leadership and discipleship are both indigenous and reproducible, creating many “apostles” rather than relying on a hierarchy of pastors, once again pointing to the need for a body of equipped lay leaders. Ott explains the concept of an apostolic movement as one that develops leaders in groups, from which each disciple from the group going on to disciple others as well.

Accountability is a key element of this kind of church planting, as well as adherence to the authority of scripture and prayer as Steve Smith and Ying Kai emphasize in their book *Training for Trainers* (2011). Once again, they emphasize small groups of individuals who also lead small groups, focusing on training and spiritual formation at all levels. Accountability—holding one another to the tasks of living like Christ and sharing the Gospel with others—forms through the format of developing leaders in peer groups rather than one-on-one,

**Storytelling in Teaching Culture and Moral Truth**

Within communities, people communicate core values, cultural heritage, and metaphysical truths through storytelling, whether religious stories, stories from personal experiences, or parables and fables. Storytelling has received a lot of attention in the past half-century due to the influence of postmodernism on church planting and evangelism. Tom Steffen (2005, p 18) says, “It has long been recognized that tribal and peasant peoples rely heavily on stories to socialize succeeding generations. Having no libraries to store knowledge, every member of society becomes a walking library.”

At the academic level, intellectuals like Ryken (1984) defend the value of viewing scripture as narrative; at the practical level, missionaries and researchers like Dinkins (2006) and Steffen (2005) advocate for storytelling through their reports on unreached people groups’ responsiveness to this method. Reports of the effectiveness of storytelling in church-planting have increased in the past few decades (see Dinkins 1996, Steffen 2005, Stringer 2010, and Smith 2011) and some have published research on *how* to use stories for evangelism to empower new and old believers to share the gospel more fluently and in a reproducible way. Steve Smith’s bestseller *T4T: A Discipleship Re-revolution* also promoted storytelling as a reproducible, empowering method of discipleship and released a guide called *ST4T* (Storytelling Training for Trainers).

Some of the research (International Orality Network, Steffen) also discusses the application of storytelling to oral cultures—both writing and non-writing cultures who prefer conversation, speaking, and listening to reading and writing. Some storytelling advocates also address how stories are effective with long-time believers as a tool for discipleship and digesting scripture.

Dinkins’ *Simply the Story Handbook* (2006) argues that an oral, literary style is more consistent with most people’s learning styles and is still capable—if not *more* capable—of making the meaning of scripture accessible to those who have never heard it. This is especially applicable to Thailand because Thai people do not like to read. Moreover, conversational Thai is very different from written Thai, to the point that conversational Thai might be considered a “heart language” while formal written Thai is less impactful. This begins to address the importance of contextualization of storytelling—especially in the slums—as a process unique to each culture and community.

**Storytelling and Cultural Context**

Long before Hudson Taylor took on the garb and appearance of a local man when he sought to share the Gospel in China, Christians have recognized the need to understand and appreciate the local culture in order to properly respond to it. Yet historically, Thais have not responded to the message of Christ because there is such a strong identity of Buddhism in Thailand. Cohen (1991) says that the efforts that have resulted in the most converts in Thailand have been directed towards tribal groups and groups further from the center of Bangkok where the influence of Buddhism is not quite so strong.

Yet the Buddhism of Thailand is unique, influenced strongly by animism and folk beliefs, especially among the poor. Idolatry, seeking to appease vengeful spirits, doing good to receive good, and a sense of fatalism are major strongholds in Thai belief. However, these are overshadowed by the very basic idea that to be a Thai is to be a Buddhist. Cohen and Keyes (1993) both talk about the power of Buddhism as cultural identity and how that has impacted the success of missionary efforts. Whether or not Thais strongly hold to the tenants of Buddhism, they would be hard-pressed to give up the label.

Storytelling has the potential to engage such issues when storytellers use stories from the bible that are relevant to the local culture and have been crafted into the local language. The process of telling and discussing stories provides an opportunity to interact with deeply instilled beliefs by provoking conversation and using the Bible as a standard of truth. By selecting stories that particularly speak to issues in Thai culture, storytelling also has the power to confront the idea that the Bible is only meaningful for Westerners and irrelevant to Thai life.

In summary, the current research in these four studies—discipleship, church planting, storytelling, and cultural context—are all guidelines for how to engage slum communities through storytelling by equipping local leaders to be able to communicate the Bible in a way that is understandable in the context of Thai culture. Much of the research on storytelling is *promoting* it as a method for evangelism (such as Steffen and the International Orality Network). While there is a significant body of literature in support of storytelling as a tool for church planting, it is a broad approach and can be applied in different ways and different structures of leadership. Narrative preaching, one-on-one storytelling, chronological storytelling, and many other methods all follow the basic concept of communicating scripture in story format.

However, this study is focused on a context where church growth depends on the development of lay leaders, In such a context storytellers must determine an appropriate approach to storytelling according to cultural context and methods of teaching and leading story groups.

### 1.4 A Biblical and Theological Framework

Within this need to understand local spirituality and the goal of establishing effective discipleship and evangelism methods, this research is crafted based on a belief in the truth of scripture and its authority in the life of believers. The theological foundations of discipleship and evangelism, God’s love for the poor, and God’s self-revelation through scripture are essential to the framework for this study.

**Discipleship and Evangelism**

Central in an evangelical reading of the scriptures is Jesus’ command to all believers to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything [Jesus] commanded.” (Matt. 28:19-20) It is the responsibility of all Christians not only to *proclaim* the message of the gospel (evangelism), but also to teach and act out the gospel in ways that display the fruit of God’s work in their lives (discipleship).

However, while Jesus gave his disciples authority in the world to proclaim his truth (John 17:15-18), it remains the work of the Holy Spirit to convict hearts and draw people into belief (Ps. 127:1; John 6:44; I Cor. 3:6-7). Disciplers and storytellers must acknowledge that “effectiveness” in church planting is ultimately the work of God.

Even so, the examples of Peter, Paul, and the apostles shows that Christians also have great responsibility to communicate the gospel in ways that respond to the issues and concerns of the local culture, as well as removing cultural barriers that prevent the local community from coming to know Christ (Acts 17; Titus 1:12; I Cor. 9). The Holy Spirit is ultimately the one who produces fruit, but preachers of the gospel must do whatever is in their power to avoid anything that hinders other from hearing it.

**God’s Love for the Poor**

God desires all people to believe in the gospel, but he demonstrates a particular concern for the poor. In the law of the Jews in the Old Testament, God establishes many safeguards for the wellbeing of the poor (Ex. 22:20-26; Lev. 19:9-10), God says that he hears the cry of the poor and through the prophets, God declares that true worship is to seek justice for the poor. He proclaims judgment on those who fail to care for the needy (Job 34:20-28; Is. 58:5-7).

This message is carried into the New Testament and the example and teaching of Jesus. When Jesus announces himself as Messiah (Luke 4:16-21), he quotes the prophet Isaiah in saying, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor”. His ministry demonstrates his concern for the needy as he heals and provides for “the least of these” (Matt. 25:34-40). He commands his disciples and anyone who follows him to seek their wellbeing.

**God’s Self-Revelation**

While Christians have the responsibility to proclaim the gospel especially among the poor, just as the Holy Spirit is the one who produces the fruit of the gospel, he is also responsible to produce the fruit of understanding in believers. Jesus is the way through which God reveals himself to human beings (Col. 1:15; John 14:6-11) and the scriptures are sufficient to communicate true practice (II Tim. 3:16). With Jesus as the example (John 13:15) and the gift of the Holy Spirit working in the hearts and minds of believers (John 16:4-11), every believer has the power to understand God’s self-revelation through his Word.

According to this scriptural understanding, God empowers all believers—including the poor—to bear the message of his word and proclaim it to and make disciples of all nations. Therefore the message of the gospel is one that empowers the weak to be leaders through the power of the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 1:27; II Cor. 12:9-11). However, we also rely on the group collectively to interpret scripture together, to challenge and engage one another in understanding what the scripture means. In both crafting and discussing stories, small groups work together in submission to the Holy Spirit in order to avoid falling into false doctrines.

### 1.5 Population and Sites

Currently there appear to be few churches practicing storytelling in slum communities in Bangkok and whatever grassroots movements that are implementing storytelling remain under the radar. As the goal of this research was to identify methods of storytelling that overcome barriers of local leadership emergence in slum churches, the research participants came from poor communities in order to more fully develop the image of what will be effective among the poor.

The methods of storytelling to develop church leaders that this research identifies are developed in cooperation with the Santisuk house church network in Bangkok. As this study is primarily exploratory in nature, the theories of methodology will lay a foundation for more conclusive results after implementation over the course of three to five years.

Two other church communities and a seminar group including members of the Santisuk churches compose the case studies that provide examples of storytelling approaches according to leadership and contextualization methods.

**Thai Deaf Community**

One group of research participants is a church of Deaf Thai people. As a marginalized group in Bangkok, they have many characteristics that make their community similar to slum communities. Though the socio-economic backgrounds of most of the community members in this group are varied, their disability makes them a very homogeneous group.

Most Deaf Thai people have little education, though the presence of a few who have been educated establish a distinct hierarchy within Deaf communities. This is similar to the nature of the church in the slums, where inequities among believers leave some individuals rather distant from engaging or sharing in the Word while others dominate, establishing a disempowering dynamic within the church group.

However, this church has also exhibited that overcoming this disempowerment is a priority for their community. The mission working with this church implemented storytelling as the central method of ministry, but they did so because church members collectively decided that that was the route they wanted to take as a church. Therefore this church community also demonstrates the biblical empowerment and lay leadership that is part of fruitful discipleship.

The international mission organization that works with this group has preferred to remain anonymous, so all participants from this group will be referred to using aliases.

**Jaisaman Church**

A storytelling seminar group at the Jaisaman church composes the second research community. This group is also diverse, representing several different churches around the Bangkok area. Most of the participants come from more middle-class backgrounds and most of them had been believers for a while already. Even so, their experience with storytelling sets up a “control” group: whatever method works with them could be modified to be effective in the slums; likewise, if a method of storytelling is not effective with this group of literate, bible-educated Thais, it will certainly not work among poor Buddhist Thais.

**Santisuk Community Church**

The final research group is the target group: they represent the slum demographic for whom the research is seeking effective practices. The Santisuk Church is a network of house churches from different poor neighborhoods in the Bangkapi area in northeast Bangkok and the congregation is significantly undereducated and marginalized.

In one of the communities, Samaki Pattana Chumchon, the house church has gone through many different iterations in past years. Christians have lived in the community for several years, but the group of believers has continued to fluctuate around the same number of people. Some have left, a few have joined, some have come from other existing churches, and yet little more can be said of the church than that it remains. The style of the church has morphed several times, from a pastoral style to a church of cell groups to a community of house churches. But it has not produced disciples who can lead the work of the church in Bangkok.

### 1.6 Research Methods and Data Collection

 With the goal of sharing power and control of the research process with community members and those who would be most impacted by the research, the method of data collection for this research is primarily to listen to the experiences of Thais who have participated in storytelling and to probe for their reflections in light of biblical goals for the church. The data for this research will be collected with the goal of empowering the local community, guided by the participatory action research method of conducting development studies, shaped by designs outlined by Slimbach in *Real World Research* (2007) and Maxwell in *Qualitative Research Design* (2012).

However, while this process is influenced by the participatory action approach, it is distinctly different from that method in that it also recognizes goals that derive from the theological framework. These goals of discipling Thai leaders and teaching the truth of the gospel come from an outside approach, using methods that have been tested and developed in churches in other cultures and nations, but with the goal of applying these innovative methods to Bangkok slums in a way that can be received according to their culture and understanding.

Participatory action research is an approach that empowers locals to be part of the research and the consequent action rather than leaving research in the control of academics and favoring the abstract and intellectual at the expense of real human experience and experimentation. Involving locals in every step of my project—shaping goals, understanding method, and future implementation—makes the difference in the significance of my research at the practical, community level.

The research process consists mostly in actual participation and observation of the storytelling process. In the participatory action method of social research, the researcher undertakes a study and invites local community members to participate. This study is implementing this process: as missionaries and leaders in the church in Thailand have implemented storytelling, the researcher became a participant in their activities and critically reports the findings. In order to better understand other methods of storytelling, the research will also include interviews with missionaries and leaders in the church in Thailand, comparing their methods and practices with eyewitness experiences.

**Research Guide and Partner Organization**

The international missions group that works in partnership with the Santisuk Church is Servant Partners, a missionary sending organization who focus on serving the urban poor. Suzy Triplett, an American working with Servant Partners, will serve as the research guide. Suzy is leading an initiative to develop and teach storytelling in the communities in the Bangkapi area and is in the process of developing story sets and teaching storytelling in to implement the method in the community house churches.

In addition to documenting Triplett’s experimental process as she “crafts” stories into colloquial language, the research will compare these experiences with the practices of other churches who implement storytelling. Comparing and contrasting the methods in practice will help to reveal how to best overcome the barriers that prevent storytelling from being effective as a discipleship method and contribute to the development of Santisuk Church’s use of storytelling.

**Data Collection**

Through partnership with Suzy Triplett the research will be conducted directly as the storytelling method is being tested and implemented. The research will combine interviews, documentation of the crafting processes of different storytellers, as well as field notes and observations from participating in storytelling groups.

Both the storytelling groups and the story-crafting process heavily involve Thai people—Christians and non-Christians—in the practice and provide an opportunity for Thais to share their opinions and evaluate the process. Interviews with group members from Jaisaman and Santisuk churches according to an interview guide (included in the appendices) will continue to address issues of relevance, understandability and reproducibility.

Although the majority of the data on storytelling will be conducted through the partnership with Suzy Triplett, interviews and experiences with the group from Jaisaman church and the house churches of the Deaf community will also contribute heavily to the research. Those church groups represent current practices while Suzy’s group represents an attempt to develop best practices among the poor.

Besides accounts of direct input from Thai participants, the process of crafting and telling stories also provides an opportunity for objective evaluation by the researcher. Listeners’ initial reaction to stories, active participation in the storytelling and discussion, as well as their intentions for future action in response to the story is information vital to the evaluation of how the process needs to be modified.

The interviews will also include perspectives from Western missionaries and story crafters who have introduced storytelling to their Thai communities. This critique from non-Thai outsiders is somewhat in conflict with the method of participatory action research, but derives from Biblical examples of the relationship of mature Christians and disciples who are younger in their faith.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis will be organized according to three criteria define in the research question section above:

1. The method of implementation and teaching that leads to a deep level of engagement with scripture and is reproducible
2. The nature of crafted stories to be understandable for the poor
3. The contextualization of storytelling through the use of stories that are most relevant to Thai life and experience.

As the goal is to identify best practices, the data analysis will compare the different methods, crafting, and contextualization of the different organizations while also taking into account the other previously published materials. However, because the goal is focused on the applying storytelling to the unique context of Bangkok slums, the data analysis will use published materials to set the stage and focus primarily on first-hand accounts, describing the experimental process and identifying what seems to be effective in order to develop a guide for other storytellers.

Because the churches involved in the study are very different and implement storytelling in different ways, much of the research with the Deaf churches and the Jaisaman church group will be exploratory in nature. The data gathered from those churches regarding their approaches to storytelling are interpreted according to a certain understanding of the culture of slums in Bangkok and the barriers it presents to the emergence of church leadership. Their experiences are included as a basis for comparing two different methods of using storytelling.

### 1.7 Ethical Considerations

As there is freedom of religion in Thailand, there is little risk to participants who assist in this research. However, it is also not the goal of this project to “convert” people, to be subversive, or even to engage in controversial issues. Rather, we want to invite people into discipleship by exposing them to the Word of God and to let the Holy Spirit do the work.

Because story *crafting* is such involved translation work and most of our story-crafting assistants are poor, we do provide some compensation for their time and help. While in many situations this might threaten to skew the research, we do not compel them to answer or participate in a particular way.

### 1.8 Research Outcomes

This research process includes participation in establishing a guide for churches in Bangkok that wish to implement storytelling as a discipleship method. The nature of this guide is partly externally driven — such as the development of story sets and crafted stories, as well as an overview of the methods of teaching and storytelling that are most effective—as well as subjective, setting an example of the framework, mentality, and posture in which storytellers enter a community in order to discover the distinctive character of each culture and how those qualities shape the storytelling process.

The materials compiled from churches implementing storytelling in their congregations are provided in the appendices as a resource for other churches and organizations who wish to implement storytelling in their communities.

On a broader scale, the report will also illustrate the approach that storytellers must take in entering a community and contextualizing storytelling to the distinct nature of the community’s culture and issues, as well as how those qualities shape the storytelling process. In this way, it can be a resource for non-Thai churches who wish to apply storytelling in their cultures and communities.

### 2. Community Relevance: Bangkok’s Poor – A Cultural Context

In shaping storytelling to fit the world of Bangkok’s urban poor, we must first look at the major elements of their life and culture. There are many unique factors in Bangkok’s history and culture that make it a particularly challenging cultural group to penetrate with the gospel.

Since cultural analysis is always complex, this research identifies four cultural elements as indicators around which to build this analysis. These are Thai values that are strongly present in the life of the urban poor of Bangkok, perhaps even more strongly than in the life of the middle class. Since the poor are plagued with greater challenges to even maintain the status quo of their meager lives, they look to religion, piety, and merit-making as a way out. These cultural elements are especially influential in the life of the poor because when these ideas are followed to their end, they contribute to the further marginalization of those who have nothing.

### 2.1 Buddhist Religiosity

Many religions—including animism, Brahmanism, Hinduism, among others—have influenced Thai spirituality through the centuries. Buddhism is the predominant religion and a central element of Thai life. Buddhism has been the official religion of Thailand since the seventeenth century when the monarchy recognized that it would be in their best interest to patronize the popular belief system. Over ninety percent of the population is Buddhist, with the remaining ten percent composed mostly of Muslims who live in the south of Thailand near Malaysia. This means that in Bangkok, almost all Thais identify as Buddhist. In fact, tied into a strong sense of nationalistic pride, there is the sense that *to be Thai is to be Buddhist.* For centuries, as all of the surrounding countries in southeast Asia were colonized by European empires and flooded with foreign missionaries, Thailand managed to retain its independence and its Buddhist culture. For Thai people, to love the country is to love the king and the Buddha; to accept a foreign religion is to betray the mother country and the king.

While spirituality is central to every Thai person’s life, that spirituality is lived out as *Buddhist piety* and the religious motions of living as a good Buddhist. People go to the temples daily to make offerings, ask for blessings from the monks and receive teaching, all of which make merit to count against their wrongdoing. The teachings of Buddhism are still communicated in Sanskrit and Pali, ancient Indian languages that few Thais—and even few monks—actually understand. Similar to Roman Catholic services conducted in Latin, the meaning of the monks’ chanting is lost on most hearers, thus putting priority on the tangible, physical actions of Buddhist religiosity, from the amulets that every person wears to the care people put into tending the spirit houses to the merit-making motivations that drive so many people’s actions.

But even as religion and spirituality are so central to life, they are more reactive than proactive. Religious “practice” where the motions take precedent over meaning—rather resembling the religion of the Pharisees in Jesus’ time—leaves a vast *spiritual vacuum* where hope is relegated to the satisfaction of temporal desires. There is no “further up and further in” within this religion, no pursuit or even hope of spiritual fulfillment. The suggestion of reincarnation after death does not even promise a world any better than this one.

Similarly, religion acts to cover up one’s mistakes, to make up for what a person didn’t do. As Thais—and especially the poor—seek to alleviate the pain and struggle of their lives, the pursuit of happiness in the present physical world thus manifests itself as materialism covered up by merit-making activities: indulgence that is glossed over by piety. When one Thai woman in my community was confronted with her alcoholism (which is prohibited in Buddhism) she said, “Don’t worry, I’ll make merit at the temple tomorrow.”

In the culture of *merit and karma*, *material gain is equal to moral gain*. Everyone works for what they get, and everyone gets what they deserve, whether in this life or the next. Therefore, wealth is a reflection of who a person is, of their goodness, of their merit: to have something is to be worthy of it. This contributes to a sense of fatalism among the poor, and also leads people to focus more on image than substance: to look good is to be good. “Saving face” is more important than honesty and appearances are more important than reality.

### 2.2 Fear and Power and the Spirit World

Thai Buddhism is a reactionary religion, one that seeks to serve this world and ward off the evil that would interfere with one’s attempts to realize the life they seek for themselves. Not unlike the monarchy’s attempt to secure power by patronizing Buddhism when it became popular in the 17th century, adherents in Bangkok similarly use it to secure their own power against the spirit world. The incorporation of superstition, Hinduism, and a pantheon of animistic spirits into Buddhist tradition creates a religion that covers all divine bases in order to protect the pious from all kinds of spirits and evils.

Although animism and folk belief in spirits are not part of traditional Buddhism, among Thais and especially among the poor of Bangkok who feel particularly vulnerable to the spirit world, Buddhist piety is essentially a defensive spirituality, driven by *fear of the spirits* and the havoc they might wreak on a person’s life. Spirituality is not fulfilling, but frightening. People engage in rituals to commit themselves to servitude of a particular spirit, or offer gifts to a spirit house in order to seek protection from a spirit instead of invoking the spirit’s wrath. In this way, all spirituality is devoted to preserving one’s stability, well-being, and safety against karma and the spirit world.

### 2.3 Hierarchy

The hierarchical nature of society in Thailand is present in every relationship as people refer to one another according to age or rank in every social context. Whether they come from birth order or education level, hierarchies are strictly observed. They exist in all levels of Thai life; even in the business world people call each other “*phi*” or “*nong*”[[1]](#footnote-1) There is a vast and distinct separation between the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated; not just a separation, but a status distinction and different expectations.

In his paper on patron-client relationships in Thailand, Stephen Taylor says, “Most Thais are keenly aware of their position of seniority to some (and the obligations they have towards them) and their position of inferiority to others (again with its own set of obligations).” Taylor says a leader “should be feared. The leader must command respect. His manner, behavior, dress (and even his car!) should all reflect his position of authority. It is the boss who should take initiative and come up with new ideas. It is his job to know what his juniors think rather than the junior’s job to initiate saying it.” (1997, p XX)

### 2.4 Status and Values in Thai Society

Many of the ideologies that result from Thai Buddhism, including fatalism and resignation to one’s circumstances, seeking material comfort in the present life, fear of the spirit world, and a vacant, unsatisfying spirituality, lead people to focus only on life in the present with all of its temporary concerns and desires. Economically, Thailand stands out in Southeast Asia: unlike many of the surrounding Communist countries, Thailand—especially in the Bangkok area—has kept up with modern development well and holding on to economic progress is a concern of the rich and poor alike. This has led the culture to value a materially bountiful lifestyle, and one’s ability to participate in the consumer culture determines one’s sense of inclusion in society. This pursuit of inclusion in the greater materialistic society in turn contributes to the spiritual stagnancy that shapes cultural and religious life.

As I have observed, this inclusion or exclusion is particularly strongly felt for the Thai urban poor. They live in such close proximity to the wealth and glitz of the city while it remains ever out of reach. Billboards, advertising, and media show young men and women what it is to be “*thansamay*”[[2]](#footnote-2) or “modern,” and to achieve that status and find acceptance in the greater culture is worth many compromises. However, fatalism and karma remind the poor that they will never escape the slums, so they grasp at whatever they can get.

My landlady in the slum exemplifies the discrepancy between hopes for a “*thansamay*” life and the risks the poor are willing to take to obtain it. She worked in the tourist center of the city, not far from the red-light district, and often spoke of how she wanted a *farang* (white) boyfriend. She ultimately decided to have plastic surgery on her nose shortly thereafter found a white boyfriend, but soon lost a large amount of money when she had to have the nose procedure undone after it became infected and split with her boyfriend.

Even education is oriented towards the cultural values of fitting into established societal norms. Schools encourage uniformity among children starting at the preschool level. As I have observed, Thais are more inclined to think of education is beneficial mostly as it assists one in “making it” in society, while education for the sake of personal development or creativity are lower on the list of priorities.

Closely related to this perspective of education, as many Thai neighbors have told me, Thai people don’t like to read. While Thailand boasts a ninety-four percent literacy rate,[[3]](#footnote-3) it is helpful to consider them an “oral” culture because of Thais’ preference for conversation and audio/visual media over the written word. Further, while most of Thailand is literate in common Thai language, there is also a special vocabulary which one uses in reference to the king or deities—referred to in this research as “high” or “royal” language—and even though many Thais (particularly the poor) don’t know this vocabulary very fluently, the Thai translation of the Bible predominately uses this language in reference to God and to Christ.

### 2.5 The Church in Thai Culture

Fatalism, materialism, hierarchical culture, and a passive practice of religion set a very challenging stage on which to plant churches and make disciples of Jesus. At the same time, these characteristics of Thai culture begin to point to the need to address *method, contextualization*, and *crafting* in storytelling.

*Method*

While top-down cell church models of church-planting have been effective in nearby countries like Singapore, the reason why this method seems less effective in Bangkok is due to the stark difference in their receptivity to Western ideas: where South Korea and Singapore have responded more favorably to Protestantism, top-down teaching and preaching of Christian values is more widely accepted. Meanwhile, despite the hierarchical society in Thailand where top-down preaching would seem to be an appropriate model to implement, because Thais derive values from their community, they have historically resisted outside influencers. As Christianity remains so foreign to Thais and seems to them only relevant to Western cultures, establishing Christian leadership at the community level is necessary for the church to grow.[[4]](#footnote-4) There is a place for cell groups in Thai churches, but with the development of cell groups churches also needs to develop leaders from the community and scale down the role of the Western missionaries.

Among Thais, there exists both a sense of longing for inclusion in a group at the same time as they live in established hierarchies of demographic, experience, and intellect. Traditional models of church fit well into a hierarchical culture: a few educated individuals teach the masses and do so with an unquestioned authority. However, this sets the stage for a few serious problems and challenges. Many foreign missionaries have started churches in Thailand with the intent to transfer leadership to a Thai pastor who has been groomed to take over. Often the transfer of leadership does not “take” because the local leader develops a sense of dependency on the “patron” missionary pastor, or the local leader stumbles into sin because of the weight of responsibility and the lack of peer accountability.

Viv Grigg also talks about challenges to rising leaders in terms of growth seasons he defines as 1) security, 2) commitment, 3) quality, and 4) gifts and calling. Storytelling can help move Thai believers through all four of these seasons because, when implemented with the right leadership methods and using contextualized stories, storytelling establishes the group culture where believers can feel secure, develop a sense of commitment to the others in the group at the same time as they receive the study and theology with which to step into their gifts and calling.

Michael Visser (2008) addresses these problems as part of a “minority complex”, where Thai Christians’ fear of rejection by the Thai majority, self-satisfaction in their own spiritual achievement, and dependence on Western missionaries become major psychological barriers that prevent Thai people from becoming effective leaders in the church. While the challenge of this relational development is not the “fault” of Thai believers, Western missionaries have the responsibility to discover a group relationship process and culture that better shapes new leaders. These problems highlight the need for a method of discipleship that establishes relationship and acceptance, empowerment, and accountability in peer groups.

*Cultural context*

For a culture so oriented towards community and uniformity, it is particularly poisonous that in a Thai person’s mind, Christianity is a religion that belongs to Westerners. Their understanding of Christianity is that it does not relate to their lives. For example, the typical evangelism spiel—“we are sinners who are separated from God and Jesus came to take the punishment for our sin”—is oriented towards an entirely different understanding of the world: many Thai people don’t even know to whom foreigners are referring when they speak of God, they believe that no one can take anyone else’s punishment for wrongdoing, and they are focused on this life instead of “heaven”.

On the contrary, Jesus’ teachings directly address many of the serious issues in the life of the Thai urban poor, but it is vitally important that disciplers identify those issues and develop storytelling in response to them in order to teach how scripture has meaning for more than just the Western world. William Yount, author of *Called to Reach* (2007), introduces a concept coined by child psychologist Jean Piaget called “optimal discrepancy”:

*Optimal* means ‘best, most effective.’ *Discrepancy* means ‘difference’ and refers to the difference between what learners know and what we are teaching. Put another way, we present ideas different enough to evoke curiosity about them but not so different as to provoke rejection of them.

Visser addresses this problem as well, pointing out that Thai Buddhists “don’t go through the trouble of making a rational comparison between Buddhism and Christianity. Christianity is not seen as a viable alternative to the life they are currently living.” In order to engage Thai belief on a deep level, it is necessary to use storytelling to address their life concerns, highlighting both the relevance of the gospel to their lives as well as challenge them with its uniqueness.

*Understandability*

Ultimately, the necessary foundation for both contextualization and method of storytelling rests on whether or not the Word of God is understandable to Thais in the slum. Understandability depends on clear translation and explanation of terms as well as clear communication of the context in which the stories of the Bible take place. Currently the available Thai versions of the Bible are poorly translated, not only confusing because of certain word choices, but sometimes entirely incorrect in the meaning they convey.

Understanding of the culture and context in which the Bible was written is also necessary. While many of the teachings of Paul and of Jesus are didactic, communicated in more universal terms, most of the Bible is written in metaphor, parable, and richly steeped in the context of Jewish history. Leland Ryken goes so far as to discuss the Bible as “imaginative writing”, not to diminish its significance or deny that it is God-breathed, but to put it into the proper context in which to analyze and understand it. He says:

“The new attitude toward the Bible involves a growing awareness that literature expresses truth in its own way, different from ordinary propositional discourse. In other words, when the Bible employs a literary method, it asks to be approached as literature and not as something else…the literary approach builds at every turn on what biblical scholars have done to recover the original, intended meaning of the biblical text. In fact, the literary approach…is a logical extension of what is commonly known as the grammatico-historical method of biblical interpretation. Both approaches insist that we must begin with the literal meaning of the words of the Bible as determined by the historical setting in which the authors wrote.”

The complex and nuanced elements of Thai life and culture in the slums continue to act as barriers to the gospel. Those who develop approaches to church planting, discipleship, and leadership development must recognize and respond to these complexities and nuances as they implement even methods that demonstrate evidence of success in other countries and contexts. The crafting of stories is a process by which storytellers select the language and stories that communicate the meaning of the Bible messages in a way that is understandable in the context of the local community. In order to effectively craft stories, the crafter must understand both the points of connection as well as the potential barriers and challenges to understanding. With an effective understanding of culture, however, storytellers and crafters can adapt the methods of storytelling to be both understandable and compelling, as we will see in the accounts of how storytelling has been implemented in Bangkok.

### 3. Research Data

### 3.1 Interpreting Storytelling Experiences

Currently, a few different churches, missions teams and organizations are using storytelling in Bangkok, and each group implements storytelling in a different way. Method, story selection, and the crafting process are varied and as organizations introduce storytelling to churches in the slums, it is helpful to analyze the differences in order to develop storytelling to be most effective among the urban poor.

The case studies presented here identify two major approaches to implementing storytelling. The first approach is “Leadership-Heavy, Crafting-Light,” focusing on preparing a leader to guide the storytelling discussion while using little to no crafting. The second approach is “Crafting-Heavy, Leadership-Light,” in which the group uses a story that has been crafted from scripture, allowing the leader of the discussion to be more “hands-off”, letting the group participants take a larger role in dissecting the story.

This research will look at experiences with three different groups: a storytelling seminar at the Jaisaman Church of Bangkok; a group of house churches in the Deaf community; and a team that is currently focused on crafting stories for slum communities. The three different research groups spent at least ten hours using the two different approaches to storytelling. In the analysis, the groups will be evaluated according to three different criteria within the categories of leadership modeling and cultural understanding:

1. Participants ability to reproduce the storytelling and discussion – reflective of the goal to empower lay leaders
2. The quality of discussion – how participants understood the story’s meaning for their lives, and indicative of participants’ understanding of cultural and linguistic elements of the story and its contextualized application
3. Language usage and how participants were able to understand the facts of the story

The purpose of this analysis is to examine the different groups and identify aspects of their storytelling implementation that respond to the qualities and challenges of the urban poor community as described in the previous chapter. What works for a middle class church or a church where believers are more accustomed to the traditional style of bible teaching might not necessarily respond to the everyday realities and thought processes of the urban poor and vice versa. The goal is to focus on applying storytelling in a way that targets the unique challenges of church planting in the slums of Bangkok.

### 3.2 Jaisaman Storytelling Seminar

The Jaisaman church group is the most different from the test group of slum churches because, as a middle-class church, most of the participants were well educated and familiar with “high” language, and since many of them were seasoned Christians, they also had at least some background in Bible learning. Therefore, in comparing their experience to that of the slum churches, we analyze it both as a special case as well as interpreting it through the understanding of slum culture as described in chapter two. From this case study, the research will make recommendations on how the Santisuk house churches can learn from these approaches.

This first research group was composed of six individuals randomly selected from a seminar group of more than fifty participants. After listening to a lecture-style introduction to storytelling, they spent ten to twelve hours under the supervision of a trained Thai storytelling teacher who travels with an American missionary to teach stories to Thai churches. The seminar was hosted at the Jaisaman church through Simply the Story, an international organization committed to teaching the Bible through oral storytelling. Larry Dinkins, a missionary who has lived in Chiang-Mai for over thirty years and produced materials for Simply the Story, led the five-day seminar.

The first two days of the seminar were set aside to teach those who want to be teachers of the storytelling method. Those students—accompanied by their mentors—led the storytelling and discussion small groups in the following three days of storytelling. Wednesday through Friday were devoted to teaching storytelling to church members, walking through the telling-and-discussing process.

Dinkins presented a very basic introduction to storytelling. To a group of more than thirty individuals, he explained that we emulate Jesus’ example of sharing the gospel by using stories. The best way to understand how storytelling works is to experience it, so Dinkins told a story once for everyone to hear, divided everyone up into pairs to have the opportunity to tell it as well, and then led the group in discussing the story.

The seminar style of storytelling is one way to introduce the concept and acquaint people with the experience of using stories. Although some storytelling bible study groups might tell a story over a dozen times in the process of discussing it, in the first few sessions people only listened to the story told one or two times since a seminar must deal with the natural challenge of time constraints. Even so, because of Thai culture’s orientation towards orality, after hearing it once, most people appeared able to repeat the story with varying degrees of accuracy.

Dinkins led the discussion process according to more of a teacher-class dynamic, even much like a sermon in formal church. Dinkins walked through the story, identifying key characters and actions and asking many questions of the group. Many of the questions were the type of question that has one obvious answer, which the group would all answer in unison, such as: “When the paralyzed man came to Jesus, was he strong or weak?” and the crowd answered, “Weak.”

The participants were all believers from different churches and were able to respond to questions about the Bible rather quickly without needing to search for an answer. While extensive Bible knowledge is not required to be able to answer such questions, the crowd also demonstrated a familiarity with Bible lingo and “high” words. The first story was taken straight from the Thai translation of the Bible, which includes words borrowed from English, such as “Pharisee[[5]](#footnote-5)”, and high words such as “ka pra ong,[[6]](#footnote-6)” which is a way to refer to one’s self in relation to God, and “ridt[[7]](#footnote-7),” the high word for “power”.

As a Thai-speaker for barely a year and a half, the word “ridt” was foreign to me. Another participant explained, “You don’t have ‘ridt’, you just have ‘amnaat[[8]](#footnote-8)’ (the common word for “power”). Only God or the king or a powerful spirit would have ‘ridt.’” Although there is a distinct difference between the two words, people who have less education might not be familiar with ”ridt”. The fact that this word and other “high” or “royal” language did not seem to impede understanding and they used the same language fluently indicated that most of the seminar participants were familiar with this vocabulary. Within the research group, all participants indicated that they were capable of reading the bible and said they felt confident that they understood most of what they read.

Although the participants were grouped into units of six for discussion, the storytelling continued in a format more akin to traditional model of pastor-and-congregation. After telling the story once, the leader invited a volunteer to come up to tell the story in front of the group of fifty individuals. When people were reluctant to come up, he offered to tell the story once more. After listening a second time, most people were able to tell the story with some help from the others in their small group The fact that everyone was more or less able to retell the story demonstrates the effectiveness of learning facts orally in a culture that is so oriented towards orality. The flow, the action sequence and steps of the whole when they fit together in story form made it easy to remember.

The leader used many questions with obvious answers (Jesus went where? Jesus talked with whom?) in order to reestablish the facts of the story. He also asked many leading questions, guiding the audience towards a certain answer in order to lead the discussion in a particular direction. For example, in one of the stories where Jesus heals a man with crippled legs and the Pharisee thinks to himself, “Who is this man that he can forgive sins?”, the leader said to the group, “The bible says this man didn’t ask this question out loud, so who heard him say it in his heart?” to which the group responded “Jesus.”

After the large group broke into groups of four to six people, each group was assigned a story to memorize and share. If crafting is a major focus of the storytelling group, the group might receive a version of the story that is not copied directly from the Thai translation of the Bible but has been translated and developed in the structure of a story and shared either in printed or digital audio format. The Jaisaman seminar instead used un-crafted stories taken directly from the bible, so each group was given a passage that they would look up and memorize. Each person would take turns reading the story to the person next to her once or twice, then the other person would tell the story. This system went around the group circle until everyone had a chance to tell the story and everyone had heard and read the story multiple times.

Experiences with storytelling revolve around two basic elements of engagement: personal understanding and the way the leader handles the group conversation. The test group at the Jaisaman seminar represents an example of a highly managed group where the storyteller or leader is guiding the discussion rather strictly. Leading the research group was a mentor and mentee, with the mentee acting as storyteller and discussion leader while the mentor advised, corrected, or otherwise directed the mentee. The group members were two Thai women and a Thai man who were all seasoned Christians, as well as a second Thai man who indicated that he was only a recent convert. However, the mentor-leader quickly dismissed the recent believer from the group, instructing everyone that he would just watch while others participated.

After each person in the research group had read and recited the story, the mentee-leader began to open up discussion according to three questions assigned to direct the conversation:

1. What was said?
2. What was done?
3. What choices were made? (and what were the consequences?)

As the mentee-leader guided the discussion, the mentor-leader quickly stepped in, interrupting continually to give suggestions and corrections to the mentee. The mentor was seeking a very particular order of questions from the mentee. For example, the mentee might ask, “What did the disciples do in this story?” and the mentor would respond, “No, no, you must first ask what *Jesus* did in the story.” The mentor was a very hands-on instructor, interrupting and guiding the mentee, “Don’t say that, say this. Don’t ask that, ask this.” He would also correct other participants as they attempted to answer questions and cut off incorrect responses.

Even though the mentor’s goal was to train the mentee and to teach the participants, his continual interruption had the unfortunate consequence of smothering conversation. Telling listeners how they should or should not answer a question seemed to discourage them from participating at all and the “discussion” became more of a lesson than a conversation.

One of the challenges of gathering information from Thai folks is their ingrained sense of respect for authorities and their reluctance to criticize openly or directly address negative issues. Especially in a seminar where people have just met one another, Thai people are not going to critique someone who is leading the group. However, in response to the mentor-leader’s over-involvement, the conversation seemed to shut down and the mentee-leader did not seem very confident to lead, increasingly deferring to the mentor. The members of the discussion group also communicated the effect of the leader’s influence as they grew reluctant to talk, they stopped engaging, and they demonstrated in their body language a sense of intimidation by shrinking back and remaining silent.

In the introduction to the seminar, Larry Dinkins encouraged everyone that telling stories is something they can do with anyone they meet, whether it is a taxi driver, someone they sit next to on an airplane, or a family member. However, as I asked people in the research group how they planned to use storytelling in their lives, most people responded that they would use it to teach Sunday school for children.

The Jaisaman church experience is an example of storytelling in its most basic form: where the goal is simply to get people on a path of telling Bible stories and seeking to glean spiritual truth from them. While this is good, there is even more potency in storytelling when these very basic methods are expounded upon and applied to the community in ways that challenge and affirm participants according to cultural understanding.

### 3.3 House Churches in the Deaf Community

For the past three years, there has been a team of missionaries working with the Deaf community in Bangkok, sharing the gospel and planting churches through storytelling. They have planted three churches with approximately thirty total baptized believers. Throughout the past three years, the churches have been using storytelling as their weekly bible study. The circumstances of the Deaf in Bangkok closely resemble those of the urban poor, even though the Deaf community encompasses Thais of all socioeconomic backgrounds. Most Deaf Thai people have little education because neither their parents nor their schools know how to deal with their disability. Not enough teachers in Thai schools have any concept of sign language, so most Deaf children are “language-deprived” during the language development phase of their lives (3-5 years old). In America, one of highest-ranking nations regarding quality of education for Deaf people, most Deaf people graduate high school with a third grade reading level while the King James Bible ranks at approximately an 8th grade reading level. This means that in Thailand—where there are far fewer opportunities for quality education for the Deaf—Deaf people have even less access to the gospel.

The discrepancy between written or spoken Thai and signed Thai is vast and makes translation difficult without an understanding of Thai Deaf culture. Unique sentence structure and grammar, use of facial expressions and body language, as well as the changes in sign language from generation to generation make it challenging and complicated for most people to cross between written or spoken Thai and signed Thai, increasing the gap between the Deaf community and the mainstream culture.

Further, because few Thais are able to communicate with Deaf people, the Deaf end up as a marginalized group, seeking out tight-knit communities since they have little sense of community elsewhere, not even among their own families sometimes. However, Deaf culture is also extremely hierarchical. Those who can read will lord it over those who cannot, even though those who can’t read are often the most adept signers, opposed to readers who have received their education from hearing people.

Using stories to communicate the gospel with Deaf Thai people fits naturally into their way of life. Much like the less educated poor of Bangkok, they are an “oral” culture (referring to their preference for non-reading rather than to their “speaking”). Adults will sit around for three to four hours, four nights a week, sharing stories from their lives, stories that happened to somebody else, and stories they saw on the news. Storytelling is not only entertainment but also a way they convey information. Deaf schools even have storytelling competitions. Thus, telling bible stories works so well with Deaf people because rather than depending on the written word, it suits Deaf culture and is easier for them to learn.

### 3.3.1 Method

In each of the three house churches, church is conducted and a Thai person leads the storytelling on his own without a western missionary present at the event. While the missionary team meets with the house church leaders weekly, providing mentorship, accountability and support for the group leaders and facilitators, they are not part of the activities of the house churches on a week-to-week basis. The house churches are led exclusively by Thai believers who have learned the method of how to conduct a bible study using stories.

However, the method of how to lead and conduct a bible study using stories is as important as the stories themselves for the development of the church body. Accountability, a safe learning environment, and the opportunity to engage with the stories for personal discovery are characteristic of the method they use.

Leadership of the storytelling session is divided into two different roles, the storyteller and the discussion moderator. The two of them come to the discussion having prepared together to lead. The purpose of having this dual leadership is to develop a sense of equality as believers approach the scriptures: each person has the responsibility to interpret for herself, but also has gifts and insights to share with the group. Likewise, participants may have different giftings, but everyone has equal opportunity to share their questions and perspectives.

The storytelling process is also oriented towards offering “equal access” to the story and the leaders. The storyteller tells the story first, then for a few times of retelling the story, no single participant tells the whole story by herself. Each person tells pieces of the story and if someone can’t remember, the storyteller tells the whole story over again. So before the moderator even gets to the first question, everyone has heard the story three or four times. The goal is to achieve understanding and memory of the basic facts. Everyone in the group should understand the whole story. Understanding *concepts* like “grace” or “salvation” comes later. First they must understand *what actually happened*.

Throughout this process, the group members all repeated the story over and over until by the time they had finished discussing the first question, everyone had heard the story at least ten times and had it memorized. This happens for each of five dialog topics, which the discussion moderator leads:

1. Facts: What happened? Who? When? Where?
2. Focus: What do you notice, see, or learn about God?
3. Feel: What does this story makes you fee? What bothers you? What questions pop into your head? What touched or confused you?
4. Find: What have you identified in this story that God says is wrong? What have you identified in this story that God says is right?
5. Follow: What will you do from now on to obey what you learned from this story? How will you live differently?

In the first question, as participants respond, the discussion moderator prods and asks follow-up questions, seeking specificity and understanding of all the facts. With each follow-up question or comment, the storyteller invites the group or individual to re-tell the story. However, the moderator is *only* allowed to ask questions, not to feed answers but to teach the group to discover the facts for themselves. If an important fact is missed, the group stops to retell the story and find it.

The second question—What did God/Jesus/the Holy Spirit do?—is sometimes not so straightforward or clear, but group participants are once again encouraged to answer very thoroughly instead of giving vague and broad answers. If someone responds to this question with an answer like, “Jesus loved people”, the moderator encourages him to point out specific actions and details that led the participant to that answer.

The third question—How did this make you feel?—can sometimes take a few *hours* to answer! Question three is a “free-for-all,” in which participants can respond in any way they wish, but the moderator continues to ask questions, guiding the conversation back to scripture every time. While each person has the opportunity to speak without being criticized, the goal is to compare all responses with what the story says. Likewise, group members might disagree or think differently from one another, but they are encouraged and affirmed as individuals.

At this point, participants might also refer to stories from other parts of scripture, but they must be able to tell the whole story to the whole group. This also prevents people with more education or Bible knowledge from commandeering the conversation.

(Signing the motions of opening a book and literally pulling something out of it, and then flinging it away): If I open the Bible and I’m “taking a verse,” I’m taking it out of context. So we have to be really careful not to quote just verses because it can be wildly taken out of context. And especially for people who don’t read well, if they read one verse out of context they may not understand that that one word might have multiple meanings when they only know one meaning…so that’s why we take a whole story. Because if you’re going to fling out a verse, you have to tell the entire story and tell it perfectly, and by perfectly I mean not leaving out any details.

On one occasion when a group of both believers and non-believers were discussing the creation story, everyone expressed different opinions, from ideas about aliens to a story about a seed on the back of a turtle. The moderator explained, “You can say whatever you want. You can say, ‘I totally disagree with Jesus, I think he was wrong, he was a bad man.’ And then we’ll say, ‘Okay, let’s examine what the story says.’ No one can say, ‘Well, you’re wrong.’ We want it to be a safe place to express what you think and what you feel,” but the group ultimately compares every opinion and expression with the Word of God.

While this question, “How does this make you feel?” might strike some Bible teachers as risky, potentially putting too much emphasis on subjective feelings rather than objective Biblical truth, if time is short such as in a one-on-one conversation with a non-Christian, a discussion moderator explained that if she has time for only one question, *this* is the question she will use to engage listeners. Because Thai culture is so strongly a feeling culture, the listener’s connection to the story in an emotional way is a route to further, deeper engagement with scripture, as long as the storytellers return to what the scripture literally says.

Bringing everyone back to the scriptures is the responsibility of the moderator, but that is the extent of their role in this approach to storytelling. During question three, the storyteller and the moderator remain outside of the conversation, always asking questions and never giving answers. If the moderator is continually interfering, it communicates a sense that she is the expert, the person with all the right answers, effectively leading others to stop engaging. Meanwhile, the storyteller continually brings the conversation back to scripture, asking, “What does scripture say?” in order to prevent the whole conversation from going off on a tangent. While these roles carry great responsibility in the group dynamic and it takes experience to learn how to moderate well, it is a method that all listeners might learn through participation in storytelling groups. Not everyone will be equally skilled as a storyteller or moderator, but all group members are offered the opportunity to practice.

While this conversation setup exists to promote equality and break down false hierarchies, it also safeguards against straying too far from scripture. People in the group might have different education levels, but the group members learn and come to conclusions together. This means that members act to check and balance one another, preventing against formulations of wild doctrines while at the same time the conversation remains in the hands of the group as a whole and everyone has a sense of ownership and investment in the story.

As the group enters into the fourth question where they identify what the story teaches to be right and wrong, another volunteer tells the story once more. The purpose of such repetition is to give everyone the opportunity to learn the story and practice telling it to the group so they can develop a sense of confidence that comes with the experience of telling it on their own.

In question five, the story turns to action in order to produce fruit in the group members’ lives. The moderator asks, “What in the story do you follow or not follow? What do you obey or not obey?” Once again, the moderator encourages participants to respond according to specific elements of the story. For example, when the group studied the story of when Jesus fed the five thousand, a possible example of how to “follow” this story might be, “Don’t doubt Jesus,” or “trust that Jesus will provide.”

After the group points out actions that they need to follow, they need to make a decision about a specific action that they will take during the week in response to the story. By establishing a measurable goal, something which, at the end of the week they can look back and say they have done or not done, they create the opportunity for growth and accountability as a peer group. A goal might be to share the story with a certain number of people, or to repeat the story to oneself in the midst of worry or anxiety. When the church studied the story of the Last Supper and read Jesus’ command, “Do this in remembrance of me,” they went out to the convenience store, purchased a small loaf of bread and some juice, and began to share in Communion every week. A participant’s response to this question is up to her, but it must be an *action* so that the next week before the group starts the next story, the whole group asks one another “Did you do what you said you would do?”

The accountability aspect is indeed unusual in Thailand. Thai people are extremely non-confrontational, so correcting each other and holding one another to account is not natural for them. However, the Deaf churches have implemented this mutual accountability as an element of their church group culture throughout the past three years. Most of the accountability process regards sharing the weekly bible story with other people. Participants begin with small tasks, but those tasks double up if they fail to follow through. When the group first began this accountability they all struggled with it and the Western missionaries confronted them about it. But because the church members had learned about Biblical confrontation, they understood that it was a necessary part of accountability.

The Thai leadership even made it clear that follow-through on commitments is expected of all members, and there are consequences if people repeatedly fail to follow through. When one church member repeatedly failed to do what she said she would, the members of her storytelling group told her to take the time set aside for church to do what she committed but failed to do in previous weeks. Even though the girl “lost face,” she fulfilled her commitments. The group still had encourage her afterwards, reminding her that they loved her as a sister in Christ, but in holding her to commitments in the spirit of accountability, they demonstrated that the life of a believer must display the fruit of what they learn from the Bible.

The clash of cultures is a challenge that the church had to overcome, but they also recognized that the culture of the church ultimately lays the highest call on their lives. The church derived their understanding of accountability through studying a story set about accountability and confrontation. They came to understand that they don’t behave a certain way merely in response to the patron or authority in their life, but because it is what the Bible says to do. Instead of conforming to prevailing Thai culture or even succumbing to Western influences and adopting the traits of a Western Christian, the church members recognized that the Bible is the authority that tells them how to live.

### 3.3.2 Crafting/Context

The Western missionaries who craft most of the stories (putting them into Thai sign language and story format) translated the story series on accountability and confrontation in response to the challenges and issues in the lives of their house church members. In this same way, stories are prepared in “sets” in order to address biblical concerns that exist in real life. These stories useful similarly to a topical sermon series, providing layers of insight to a particular issue from multiple relevant scriptures. Like Piaget’s idea of “optimal discrepancy,” storytellers must teach stories in a way that demonstrates how the gospel speaks to real-life situations.

In response to a friend who, when questioned, admitted that he did not understand *why* he is supposed to bow to the idols, one story-crafter told this friend story of the fiery furnace and Shadrach, Meeschach and Abednigo. Story crafters select stories and story sets based on conversations and observations on the lives of Thai friends. If a friend tells a story about an encounter with a spirit, that could create an occasion to tell a bible story. One story crafter said, “When I see something happening [in a friend’s life], I think in stories. ‘What bible story would I tell to match that situation?’” Especially since their church community is so cautious about “flinging out” verses (or, taking them out of context), there is a strong emphasis on having equipping Christians with stories that might be relevant to any given situation or encounter.

Just like the church takes care to continually return to scripture as they teach and learn stories as a bible study, the process of crafting is a complex process focused on communicating the scriptures in a way that is both understandable and true to the original text. Even a “quick translation”, which is less thorough and requires less editing of the crafted story, is a very deliberate, careful process. First, since signing is visual rather than verbal, after reading the passage the crafter draws a picture according to what she remembers of the story. After drawing the picture, the story crafter identifies places, looking through the passage to identify all of the places mentioned, then people, things, animals, time, numbers, and finally action. The story crafter reads the passage again for each different category of elements.

The story-crafting process follows Deaf language in how it sets up the scene. Setting or location is the first element, including objects such as mountains, trees, or rocks. After the scene is set, the characters come in and perform the action. The crafting process for communication in sign language is even more complex than crafting into Thai because of the uniqueness of sign language and the importance of putting it into a structure and chronology that makes sense in Thai sign language.

The long translations of passages—as the crafting team prepares them for DVDs and official story sets—take months to complete. The “quick translation” is only the first step of the long translation, and for all translations, the story crafters always check the story with many different people. Those “checkers” will offer corrections, saying, “No, you can’t say that. Say it like this.” They interact with the storyteller, giving advice on communication in Thai sign language while the storyteller makes sure to hold true to the scripture, not adding anything that isn’t present in the Bible nor taking elements away.

After the stories are crafted, the crafter teaches the story to the Thai storyteller and moderator of the house church group who then teach the story to the church. After three years of having Thai leaders teach and moderate the storytelling sessions, the story crafters are now teaching the quick translation process to some of the local leaders.

The challenge of any translation process is to focus on what the passage is trying to communicate rather than imprinting one’s own belief or opinion on the passage. The story crafter might incorporate insight from commentaries and different translations of the Bible, draw pictures, and sometimes incorporate different emotions or reactions through body language as they tell the story. When the crafting team does long translations, they will check the completed story with usually twenty or more people. They check the story with both Christians and non-Christians, people who are very familiar with scripture and people who are new to faith in order to ensure that with whatever audience, no matter what level of understanding they previously had of scripture, the crafted story is capable of communicating the message so that the recipient can access its meaning.

### 3.4 Story Crafting and the Santisuk House Churches

The house church network in the Bangkapi, Samaki, and Photong communities goes back a couple of decades and has gone through many different iterations and changes. The patron-client structure of church leadership led to some of the problems that Visser addressed, including “self-satisfaction because of what they are or what they have achieved,” dependence on foreign missionaries, and, among some, a sense of isolation from the community. While the church’s teaching has continually challenged church members to step into leadership roles in the house church, to disciple others, and to share the gospel with neighbors, in retrospect, church members have expressed a sense of being pushed into leadership without either being fully prepared or even wanting to lead.

The structure of the church has changed over time, from formal large-group church with a pastor preaching, to cell groups, to house churches in the respective communities. Formal preaching from one member of the missionary staff or Thai church leadership still happens on one Sunday of every month, and in other months, the house churches are free to choose their method of study. The Samaki church has used a certain bible study guide for a few years, but because the guide was written in Singapore and translated into Thai, the lessons are often difficult to read and understand, even for the most literate among the house church.

The Photong house church at one time employed storytelling as a method of bible study, as introduced by Suzy Triplett. One church member said that he learned more about the Bible through those storytelling experiences than through any other study. They worked through five parables: the lost sheep, the unjust judge, the good shepherd, the Pharisee and the tax collector, and the lost son. Together, these five stories outline the basic elements of the gospel regarding God, mankind, sin, Jesus and salvation, and man’s response to God.

### 3.4.1 Storytelling Seminar for Bangkapi Area Churches

Recently, Triplett hosted a seminar to teach the same five stories to members of the house church network. Since the churches are small, the seminar hosted only eight people—a manageable number, where (as in the structure of the Deaf church community) everyone has “equal access” to the storyteller and equal opportunity to participate and practice leading. The seminar took place over two days, providing time for people to see an example (modeling) of the storytelling and discussion process, learn the story at home, and take turns leading the group the next day. Suzy demonstrated the storytelling, asked questions about observations and what group members learned from the story, then guided a discussion about how to teach this method.

One revealing comment came from one of the attendees who is a member of the church and has been a Christian for more than twenty years. This woman, from a poor family and with little education, has participated in discipleship classes and has even been entrusted to disciple others; yet after discussion of one of the stories Suzy crafted in contextualized language, the woman said, “So you mean *bhut manut*[[9]](#footnote-9) (Son of Man) is referring to Jesus? I always thought it meant all human beings.” Although she had read the Thai Bible, heard sermons and participated in bible studies for years, not until she heard stories crafted for this seminar did she finally understand this basic fact that enlightens so much of what Jesus said and taught. This is why crafting stories is so important: that by stripping away all of the confusing language in order to communicate the stories of Jesus, everyone—especially the urban poor—can come to a fuller understanding of the gospel.

The seminar group was demographically diverse and feedback was different for each category of individuals. One woman from the house church said, “I’ve thought about telling stories before, but I never thought about teaching them so they could be reproduced. It was helpful to think about it in that way and to focus on memorizing the stories.” A woman from a middle‐class church said, “I’m understanding more about ministry in the slum because of the different ways we tell stories. Now I understand how the slum is different from other communities. When I go into the slum [to do ministry], I don’t know how to talk to the people there, I’m not confident in knowing how to talk to them. Knowing these stories helped me have confidence to know how to talk with them.”

### 3.4.2 Crafting

Just as the participants at the storytelling seminar recognized the importance of what language a storyteller uses, Triplett currently focuses on the process of crafting stories: putting passages of scripture into language that non-reading people in the slum can understand and memorize. There are two sides to the crafting process: 1) choosing and using words in a way that make sense to someone with little education, and 2) holding on to the meaning of the passage as it is presented in scripture.

Because of the importance of putting both language and meaning into cultural context, Triplett always works with at least two Thai slum residents in the crafting process. Like the story crafters in the Deaf church, Triplett identifies stories according to conversations and stories from Thai neighbors and then interacts with local community members to develop the story.

Triplett’s role as story crafter is to ask questions in order to obtain the most accurate language. Before meeting with the crafting assistant, Triplett will read through the Thai version of the Bible, identify important words or ideas, and read through the same passage in English in order to have a better idea of the accurate translation. During the crafting session—usually lasting two hours—the participant will read or listen to the scripture passage in Thai and Triplett will begin to ask questions about words. Many words regarding theological and spiritual terms have multiple meanings in the context of Thai Buddhism, so a translator or storyteller has to be careful of communicating the correct meaning of these words. Triplett might ask, “When you use that word ‘*thep teywadaa*’[[10]](#footnote-10) in this way, does it mean a good or bad or neutral spirit? Could it mean a human or embodied spirit or does it only mean non-physical spirits?” “What does this term for righteousness mean? What do you think when you hear it?” Other terms like “Pharisee” and “tax collector” don’t have a meaning that Thais understand without more background and definition. The Thai bible uses the same word that the English Bible does, but for a listener or reader who has no previous understanding of the Bible, it would be the same as an English listener who hears the term “nak bouat”[[11]](#footnote-11) (priest) In one story-crafting session, Triplett explained the Jewish cultural understanding of a tax collector as the neighborhood swindler who manipulated people and was generally hated. What Thai word describes that kind of person succinctly and clearly? The crafting assistant suggested that the Jewish tax collector was rather like the loan sharks who live in most slum communities, so Triplett used the colloquial phrase for “loan shark” in place of “tax collector” in the story.

As they slowly work through the language of the story, Triplett also leads the story-crafting assistant through questions about the passage in order to establish understanding of the full story. Triplett’s focus on crafting looks not only at clear language, but also accuracy in the message that the whole story communicates. One significant example of how this is necessary is in the poor translation of the parable of the good shepherd in the tenth chapter of John where Jesus says, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” The phrase “abundant life” is translated in the Thai bible as, “cheewit khrap boribun[[12]](#footnote-12)” which literally means “perfect life.” When Triplett was crafting this story, she asked the crafting assistants, “What do you think when you hear this? What kind of life is this?” Each person in the group, after having looked at three translations, responded that it means “perfect life.” So Triplett probed further: “When you say ‘perfect life’ what do you mean? Would you ever have a fight with your spouse? [No.] Would your children ever disobey you? [No.] Could you ever lose your job? [No.] Would you be poor? [No, you have plenty of money.] Would you have problems at work? [No.] Would you get a ticket on your motorcycle? [No.] “*Cheewit khrap boribun*” is a perfect life. That is what the *Thai* bible says Jesus promises to those who believe in him.”

In response to this challenging translation issue, Triplett read to the crafting assistants Jesus’ promise in John 16:33 that “in this world you will have trouble, but I have overcome the world.” She asked participants if the two concepts of “cheewit khrap boribun” and a life with both trouble and a deep sense of peace are consistent with each other. When they responded that they were not consistent, the crafting process became an opportunity to discuss what “abundant life” really means.

Once again, Triplett looked up the passage in the Greek to compare it with other scriptures and establish what it really means. She then asked the participants, “what word in Thai would you choose?” They responded with “suk jai”[[13]](#footnote-13). The term comes from the word “khwam suk”[[14]](#footnote-14) which means “happiness”. At first Triplett thought that was the wrong word because Jesus doesn’t promise happiness; but the group of assistants explained that “suk jai” is an inner happiness. Even though you might have problems in your life on the outside, to be “suk jai” is to be inwardly content, to have peace and confidence that things will be okay.

Some Thai believers didn’t think “suk jai” was a strong enough term for the goodness of the life that Jesus promises, but Triplett offered to them that they were welcome to recommend a better translation. Otherwise, by using the term “suk jai,” the story does not communicate something that Jesus does not really say, and it also becomes a question for conversation during the storytelling and discussion process: what is ‘suk jai’? To use the word ‘khrap boribun’ (perfect) in the story and fail to explain it, people are led astray. If someone believed in Jesus because they thought their worldly troubles would go away, when that inevitably *fails* to happen, they fall away. Triplett said, “They need to know up front that ‘cheewit khrap boribun’ is not what Jesus promises.”

There is often some controversy in the crafting or translation process because these issues of language are so closely tied to theology. For example, in the Santisuk storytelling group, the new concept of context and making something understandable for the audience noticeably struck a chord during discussion. The group talked a lot about using “high” or “royal” language and when such language is appropriate. Some people said we should cut out all of the high words while others said not to because they convey a sense of respect towards God. The conclusion they came to is that however one speaks, the storyteller must use language that is easily understood by common people. The same woman who commented on gaining confidence in slum ministry said, “If I was working with college students, I might keep some of the high words. But after this experience, I think I would use different language with people in the slum than I would with people in other contexts.”

Just as she said, crafting, translation, and language usage are especially necessary when working with the poor. Education in Thailand does not teach students to think critically or conduct thorough analysis, so when it comes to complicated or foreign concepts or where there are errors in the Thai translation of the Bible, story-crafting brings clarity to those ideas and truths.

### 3.4.3 Conclusion

While Triplett’s house church no longer meets because, as often happens in urban poor communities, many of the members have moved on to different places, all of the church participants reflected favorably on their experiences with storytelling. At one point during the house church’s existence, the members were given the option to continue studying the Bible through stories or to move on to a different study using a book. One church member said, “I prefer stories. I can’t remember the other things you teach about, but when you use the stories, I remember those.”

Not only the church members but also the crafting assistants reflect on their experiences and recognize how much it affected them. Triplett did story-crafting with one newly formed house church in which most people were very new in their faith. One man, Noi, helped to check the crafted parables, confirming or correcting the translated stories. He had been a Christian for many years before his experience with storytelling, but he said, “That is when the Bible really entered my heart.” His wife Nok identified her experience with storytelling as the point when she truly became a Christian: “That is when I began to seek God.”

### 4. Analysis

After looking at stories from three different demographics, differences in method of storytelling and discussion and in story crafting and contextualization begin to arise. All of these differences can be beneficial, but in light of the barriers within Thai culture to Christianity and the need to develop leaders on a broad scale in the slums, what storytelling approach can Christians use in order to share the gospel so that it is most understandable, reproducible, and relevant to the lives of the urban poor in Bangkok?

* According to language usage and translation, a crafted story becomes *understandable* in the slum community and culture and people are more able to remember, repeat, and discuss it with others.
* According to the method of storytelling and discussion, local believers are able to *reproduce* the process at the same time as they understand the scriptures more fully.
* According to story selection and contextualization, scripture becomes not only understandable but also understandably *relevant* to the realities and issues of life in the slums.

From these three case studies, two major approaches to storytelling appear, a method that requires strong leadership in the storytelling process with little crafting beforehand, and a method that emphasizes crafting in advance and requires less strict leadership in the storytelling and discussion.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | In Practice | Result |
| Leadership-Heavy, Crafting-Light | Requires more backstory and explanation, preparation and education by the leaderRequires more guiding from the leader during discussionDiscussion is more like a lesson according to storyteller’s leading | Group members defer to the more educated leaderLess freedom to ask questionsStory is not clear without much explanation |
| Crafting-Heavy, Leadership-Light | Discussion is guided by questions and observations of the groupRequires more advance preparation through story-craftingCrafted stories are clear and accessible to all listenersCreates a level playing ground for discussion | Openness to engagePersonal discovery in discussionShaped according to topics and concerns in Thai lifeLess interference from story leaders |
|  |  |  |

In order to establish which of these approaches—according to leadership and crafting—were most effective to break past these barriers of relevance, understandability, and reproducibility, the research looks at the direct response and comments from participants, the degree of involvement they demonstrated in engaging with the story, as well as their ultimate ability to reproduce the storytelling session and lead on their own. While church planters are only beginning to use storytelling in Bangkok and data from three different demographics and the two different methods of implementation are far from adequate to establish “best practices,” identifying how the themes and practices of these two methods correspond to the identified barriers and challenges in Thai culture we can begin to construct a guide to methods of implementing storytelling for others working in Bangkok slums.

Turning again to the identified barriers as the framework of analysis, we evaluate the two approaches according to reproducibility, relevance, and understanding.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Reproducibility | Relevance | Understanding |
| Leadership-heavy, Crafting-light | Training to lead discussions requires much one-on-one instructionEveryone can at least tell stories after learning and discussing | The whole bible is available as a resourceThe leader shapes the conversation connecting the story and everyday life | The leader explains, provides background and context after much preparatory study and bible education |
| Crafting-heavy, Leadership-light | The group is not dependent on a single trained leader to guide storytellingTeaching through modeling and participationAccountability for leaders established in peer groups help create stability | Crafted story sets target specific concerns in listeners’ livesParticipants make connections to their own life issues through personal discovery | Crafted stories use the most clear and appropriate language to tell storiesMeaning is more accessible for all listeners |
|  |  |  |  |

These comparisons reveal themes according to the categories of 1) crafting practices, and within the issue of leadership, 2) implementation and 3) group culture.

### 4.1 Crafting Practices

In order for the teachings of the Bible to develop disciples and be understandable to people who have no previous bible education, it must first be understandable in the language and mindset of the local community. William Yount recounts Jean Piaget’s work on “cognitive processes,” which are the ways that our minds “[seek] to arrange experiences in the world so that they make sense to us.” (2007, p 78) As many foreign ideas and influences have come through Thailand, Thais have adopted a mentality of cultural relativism, acknowledging that a belief might make sense for Westerners in their own Western culture, but have little relevance to Thai culture. It is therefore necessary to begin by allowing the Bible to make sense—on a basic language level as well as a deeper rational and heart level—in the context and language of Thai slum culture.

Using stories straight from the Bible such as the Jaisaman church did is a convenient, easy method that puts all of scripture at our disposal. There are also chronological lists of stories for use in storytelling groups or personal story memorization. However while all these have the merits of convenience and reproducibility, contextual elements of scripture unfamiliar in the local setting sometimes make crafting a necessity. In the context of the Jaisaman church, using stories straight from the Bible was possible because the participants were mostly people who had been Christians for a long time already, steeped in bible culture and familiar with who “God” refers to, terms like *ka pa ong*[[15]](#footnote-15), and concepts like “Son of Man”[[16]](#footnote-16).

In contrast, it is necessary to craft stories not only because of a lack of literacy within the community, but also because of the challenge of foreign and unique vocabulary in the Thai translation of the Bible. The oral nature of Thai culture and the poor translation of the Thai Bible make the slums of Bangkok one such context in which it is necessary to craft stories and working straight from the Bible is only effectively reproducible if the people are able to read and understand the scriptures.

Even within the Jaisaman storytelling group that used stories taken directly from the Bible, storytellers need to do “common sense crafting”. When the group read the story of Mary and Martha, Dinkins addressed the Thai translation of Jesus’ comments to Martha: the Thai translation has Jesus’ comments written as “Marta, Marta, eeuy”[[17]](#footnote-17) or “tow, Marta,” which does not have a direct translation, but communicates a sense of anger in Jesus’ address. Dinkins said that even in the Greek, there is no implication that Jesus expresses anger as he merely says Martha’s name twice. Dinkins said, “You can determine how to craft it, but hold on to common sense.”

Some of these elements and concerns in crafting seem small at first, but since believers study stories from scripture and shape their faith and actions off of those stories, understanding of the truth of those stories can make a big difference in their lives and context and language sometimes make the difference between whether a story is understandable or not. How scripture is understood goes on to impact reproducibility and understanding of scripture’s relevance to the listener’s life.

While the crafting process is necessary in the context of Thai slums, the crafting process does not need to be reproducible among all church members. Crafting involves nuance and details of language that most people would be unable to do without extensive bible study and biblical interpretation experience. Locals must definitely have a *role* in the crafting process, but crafting requires much more education and training. Only after three years of teaching through storytelling have members of the Deaf church emerged who, through experience, developed skill in leading storytelling conversations and have now asked to be trained in the crafting process.

While the story-crafting process removes confusing language, it has the considerable drawback of limiting the accessibility of stories from the Bible. The crafting process is long and complicated, requiring research and multiple local assistants. There are certainly benefits to working straight from the Bible and bypassing the long translation process, but for those in the slum, it is vital that language be clear and easy to communicate. But while the story-crafting process itself can be used as a Bible study, it still challenges the story-crafter to be intentional about which stories they choose to craft and how they prioritize them.

Stories about relevant issues engage listeners—including non-Christians—by demonstrating that scripture offers meaning to their unique life situations. “When told in sequence, these [selected and crafted] stories allow the listener to not only hear the Word of God but be able to understand the particular biblical truth which is being presented through that combination of stories. The goal is to present a redemptive panorama developed to best interact with each particular worldview and socio-cultural setting.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Selecting stories according to “optimal discrepancy” in order to draw the audience to a point of being able to engage with scripture means that appealing to personality and interests is not too shallow to be taken into consideration in the selection and crafting process.

Discipleship as Jesus demonstrated it is something that transforms lives, but if people do not understand scripture, comprehend its relevance to their lives, and share that with others in their peer groups and communities, they receive something less than the transformation that scripture brings. Using crafting stories in bible studies helps to break past the barrier created by a sense among Thais that Jesus and the Bible have no relevance to a non-Western culture. When scripture is communicated in the language and context of the slums, people are more likely to hear it and be able to respond on a deeper level.

### 4.2 Implementation

Even when a story is translated or crafted to be understandable for a certain people group, cultural hierarchies and understanding of piety or religiosity still might impede the message from connecting with listeners. The way in which a church or bible study implements storytelling has many different variables based on 1) learning environment and 2) the steps involved in the telling and discussion process. Within these two broad categories, teaching and learning concepts from educational theory shed light on how bible study through storytelling can take root in the listener’s head and heart in deeper ways than learning according to a sermon, lesson, or other didactic teaching.

### 4.2.1 Role of the Teacher

The learning environment in which a story is presented and discussed contributes greatly to how listeners receive and understand it. In a traditional hierarchical style of teaching, the teacher often takes for granted that participants understand and process the words they hear. Yount says, “The evidence of effective teaching is found in the learning which occurs… I can transmit facts, but do those facts have meaning for those I teach? Pastors explain, but do their congregations understand? Bible teachers teach the Bible, but does their teaching ever make it into their learners’ thinking, actions, or attitudes?” (2007, p 91) The audience receives something that is already broken down and analyzed without participating in that process.

Storytelling where the teacher guides the discussion too firmly can be a similar situation. We can understand how such teaching falls short by appealing once again to concepts developed by Jean Piaget. Piaget said that the stage of development at which we “live,” making decisions and growing as human beings, is what he called the “concrete operational” stage. “Concrete” refers to the real objects and physical events that we experience and logically think about on a personal level, while “operational” refers to abstract mental representations of those events and objects; so “concrete operational” thinking refers to one’s ability to connect abstract thinking with real life situations. When a learner connects these two realms, their new learning becomes more solidified in their minds and hearts.

While didactic teaching often removes the listener from this process of making connections, studying through crafted stories facilitates this kind of thinking because instead of forcing pre-drawn conclusions on the listener, crafted stories are prepared in advance to “[present] an experience [in an understandable way and] instead of telling us *about* that experience, it constantly appeals to our imagination (the image-making and image-perceiving capacity within us).” (Ryken, 1984, p 14) By merely presenting well-prepared stories, the storyteller and group discussion invites others to experience and understand the world in a new way. The leader’s job is to create a situation where listeners can receive that new experience and connect it to their life and actions.

Storytellers model the act of storytelling as they grow through studying the stories too. Listeners learn not only the lesson from the story, but also how to do storytelling and how to lead a conversation. At Triplett’s seminar, many participants indicated in their feedback that they wanted to see more modeling, to see the storytelling demonstrated by someone who was more adept at it. Even so, learning by experience is a powerful teacher and even though the group said they would have liked to see *more* modeling, everyone was able to tell stories on their own after seeing only one story modeled. One man joined the group late and didn’t even see Suzy’s original example, but after watching the others in the group was able to lead a discussion even though he used five simple, canned questions.

How a story is modeled also contributes to whether participants can reproduce the process. Storytelling as modeled in our small group at the Jaisaman seminar was confusing and involved so many specific and leading questions that listeners found it overwhelming. A method that requires so much preparation and understanding in advance in order to even facilitate the conversation intimidated participants from leading because it was too difficult to reproduce. In contrast, in groups where the storyteller and/or moderator use crafted stories and have a smaller role, participants are able to imitate the method, even in a simple way, with only few simple questions. As the line blurs between “leader” and “participant,” the possibility grows for more “participants” to step into leadership, too. Of the research group at the Jaisaman church, none of them express confidence to use storytelling in their everyday lives. Instead, when asked how they would use storytelling, most said, “I will use it to teach children.” Meanwhile, one woman who attended Triplett’s seminar, after having seen a few stories modeled, decided one Sunday to do storytelling instead of preparing a sermon. With only two questions (“What do you learn about God in this story?” and “What will you do about it?”), she led a group of twenty people through a thirty-minute discussion of a crafted bible story.

In some situations, modeling serves to demonstrate *how* storytelling is useful for adults. Some Thais are initially offended at the suggestion that they are an oral culture. They say, “But we can read; we’re not stupid,” and dismiss storytelling as a method of learning suited only to children. While teaching children is a fine use for storytelling, it is also a very powerful tool for deep and meaningful discipleship with adults. Instead of abandoning storytelling, or stroking the egos of those who protest, a good leader models storytelling and *shows* how it can be a method of bible study that is more engaging, more personal, and more suited to Thai learning style.

The practice of modeling storytelling avoids the problematic patron-client relationship that results from traditional church-planting models for a few reasons. First, because everyone is learning and participating together, they are establishing a support system composed of their own peers so they are less dependent on a single guide or leader. In this kind of group learning, the teacher can maintain a sense of space between herself and the group members even as they are actively involved in one another’s lives as a church family. Second, because everyone is participating in the storytelling discussion from the get-go, there is no long transition of authority. All group members are instilled with a sense of their value to the group and develop a sense of empowerment to step into active leadership and involvement. Third, because storytelling is something that people *experience* rather than merely listen to or observe, group members gain an understanding of how the process works and even develop an enthusiasm to lead on their own.

### 4.2.2. Personal Discovery

As leaders tell stories and facilitate discussion, group participants are invited to discover what scripture means for them personally. Jesus taught through questions in order to provoke this kind of discovery in his listeners. As Yount says, “He did not have to ask questions, for he ‘knew what they were thinking; (Luke 5:22) and ‘knew what was in a man’ (John 2:25). But he asked anyway, if for no other reason than to reveal to others what they were thinking. In the act of formulating and expressing an answer to a teacher’s question, learners search their schema and organize their thinking.” (2007, p 89) Every person has a certain way in which they “organize” the world and their experiences in order to understand it, and every person must *re*-organize the world for herself. No leader can compel such a thought process, but merely ask the questions that might make way for it, and when the listener engages these questions, they come to a more fully-felt meaning for themselves.

The way that the discussion was modeled in the small group at the Jaisaman church demonstrated how so many direct questions can keep the group so focused on “getting the right answer” that they leave little room for the unique ways the Holy Spirit might be working in someone’s life. When a leader limits the questions that can be asked, requires people to give specific answers, or otherwise controls the discussion too strongly, the leader confines the story and discussion to the their own will instead of letting participants freely engage with the bible. This example reinforces the sense of hierarchy within the group and can hold people back from taking ownership of the meaning of scripture because they are either dependent on the leader to explain the story or because they feel too intimidated to participate or both. Crafted stories offer the explanation up-front, making room for more freedom in the discussion.

By being open to imperfect questions and answers, the group benefits from the insight of participants who might see something in the story that the leader does not. “In processing a thought-provoking question, learners must consider what they know, decide what is relevant to the question, and then frame an answer… Answers to such questions are windows into the minds of learners, allowing us to see what they already understand. Thought-provoking questions can certainly be answered incorrectly, but such incorrect answers are also important because they reveal where learners go wrong in their thinking.” (Yount, 2007, p 94) Instead of the leader cutting people off to prevent the conversation from going into an unintended direction, giving participants freedom to ask questions and express their own questions and curiosities creates a context in that invites the Holy Spirit to be present and active.

According to Piaget, “teaching…means crafting situations where learners make discoveries.” (Yount, 2007, p 97) Besides putting stories into common language and making room for listeners to make connections for themselves, it also means simply drawing them into the stories, engaging their thoughts and imaginations. For communities like the Deaf house church group, this means appealing to their senses in addition to their rational faculties. When Triplett leads in storytelling, she uses props, drawings, acting, and any physical objects that help the group to become more fully immersed in the story. When the leader helps the group members to become involved and engaged, they have greater opportunity make those connections and organize new schema of how they understand the world. Rather than

### 4.2.3 Group Culture

The leader sets the tone of conversation in order for listeners to make discoveries about scripture that affect them on a deeply personal level, but the learning environment also contributes to how a story impacts listeners. When the storyteller guides the discussion process without controlling or censoring participants, it helps to develop a sense of safety within the group that encourages participants to engage more freely at the same time as the example of the leader and accountability within the group as a whole can spur participants on beyond mere hearing to response and action.

Stories offer opportunities for listeners to experience and engage with abstract terms by putting them into real situations where participants “get involved” with the characters at the same time as they analyze and seek to understand the larger themes the story conveys. A sense of safety comes not only from being able to speak in terms of the characters of a story, but also through the dynamics established in the group. In the Deaf church community, the group seeks to create an equal playing field where everyone’s opinions and comments are welcome and respected. Because everyone can understand the crafted story as it is communicated in simple language, no one is at a disadvantage because of their previous education or understanding and everyone is encouraged to participate. Likewise, when they tell the story in the group, no one is allowed to monopolize the conversation or even—for the first few rounds of re-telling—to tell the story on their own. This means that everyone has the opportunity to contribute, instilling confidence in participants at the same time as their comments are continually compared with what the scriptures say.

In any culture, time, or demographic, most people are, as Yount describes it, “egocentric” in their thinking. “That is, they think that things *really are* the way *they see them*…Social interaction—thinking, discussing, sharing with others—exposes learners to the ideas and opinions of others. One-way communication, teacher to student (or pastor to congregation) needs to be supplemented with…activities which encourage learner-to-learner interaction.” (2007, p 94) For some participants, learning in a group is humbling while for others it is encouraging. For all participants, learning in a group where there is freedom to ask questions and offer opinions facilitates the possibility of receiving the Word more deeply.

Finally, the group culture also establishes expectations of action that comes from hearing. The leader models how to do storytelling and through the development of an accepting group culture, participants challenge one another to implement what they learn and holding one another to account. The fruit of hearing is doing, and while the church has processed through the Word in a way that they can discover its meaning for their lives and their personal challenges, participants must also implement the lessons of scripture in the way the live their lives.

As listeners come to understand the concepts of scripture, the group culture established through participatory understanding scripture sets the stage for participants to apply concepts to reality. “Formal thinking is not all positive. Without a concrete foundation [action], abstract thinking can lead to idealistic solutions which never touch reality… Formal thinkers can create images of reality in their minds and find themselves hypocritically *thinking one way* and *living another*.” (Yount, 2007, p 87) Just as learners re-organize their conceptual understanding of the world through personal discovery in the storytelling group, that must also be brought back from abstract thinking into reality. The question, “What will you do as a result of this?” is how groups help to prevent hypocrisy from developing in the lives of disciples, bringing the new knowledge and understanding back from the abstract to their real lives and actions. This leads Christians to not only study the bible to know in their heads what it says, but also to understand how God desires them to live; challenging listeners to think about how to apply scripture to their lives is the natural next step after hearing and discussing Bible stories.

Merely asking, “what will you do?” is not enough, as Paul’s letters to the various young churches in the New Testament demonstrate; he tells them, “remember what I taught you,” and expects them to follow through on what they learned. But this sense of accountability within a group becomes achievable through the use of crafted stories that everyone can understand and discussion that allows for freedom to dig deep and apply the learned concepts to their lives. ”[Jesus] connected the…rational world of his learners with the…rational world of the kingdom by means of parables.” (Yount, 2007, p 85) The dramatic confrontation in the Deaf house church in which they required a group member to follow through on her commitments before she came to Bible study again is an example of the kind of accountability that is possible in the context of a church culture founded on mutuality and freedom to engage in the storytelling process.

The culture of a group helps to combat the “minority complex” of Thai Christians that Visser described. Accountability and the challenge to let the scriptures direct one’s life establishes a sense of intimacy and inclusion in the group at the same time as it helps people to confront the temptation to complacency and self-satisfaction in their “spiritual achievement.” While patron-client leadership relationships are fragile and many leaders in the Santisuk church community have deflated once the “patron” figure was removed, peer accountability is more stable because it is not so dependent on hierarchy. Further, the inclusiveness of the group and the use of understandable bible stories that relate to everyday life instills a sense of confidence in participants than can even be a motivator to reach outside of the group and invite others in as well, spurring people on to share the gospel with others and reproduce storytelling in their own lives.

### 5. Conclusion

Storytelling has been a means of communicating values and culture since the beginning of history, but as Christians implement storytelling as a method of developing lay leadership in the church, it is important to evaluate and discern which approaches to use to tell and discuss stories as well as to put them into the context of a new culture. Using crafted bible stories that are understandable and relevant to the lives of the local community paves the way for discussion where listeners can freely engage with the scriptures and discover its meaning for their lives.

Careful understanding of cultural themes is the starting point for this analysis and practice, and in the slums of Thailand there are many factors that seem to fight against the possibility of success in making reproducing disciples in this country. However, in the communities that use storytelling for discipleship, the outlook is promising that, as storytelling groups engage listeners in the process of understanding and ????, storytelling can be a very powerful process for developing and spiritually forming disciples who receive, understand, and put the gospel to work in their lives.

Instead of seeking to develop leaders who can dissect and apply scripture *for* the people they lead, the method of using crafted stories allows for developing leaders to grow along *with* participants as they freely ask questions, raise concerns, and engage deeply with the story. This kind of storytelling and discussion works beyond hierarchical barriers, establishing a sense of inclusion and mutuality between members of groups of peers. In this kind of environment, people are free to make personal discoveries about the Bible that have real implications on their lives while they are challenged to continually compare those discoveries with truth as it is presented in scripture. Storytelling using crafted stories is also a reproducible process, empowering participants to become leaders who, as they continue to grow into leadership through storytelling experiences can take the helm of directing church growth in the slums of Thailand.

Ultimately, methods of storytelling as discipleship are meaningful as it has the power to produce fruit in disciples’ lives. Though the evidence is still not plentiful, it is clear and compelling. Some storytelling participants testify the power of storytelling to speak to people in ways that teacher-to-learner studies cannot. One storytelling participant said, “What I noticed is that stories open people's hearts.  When I teach from a booklet, people get lots of information, but it sometimes doesn't get to their heart." Other expressed a sense of feeling not only empowered but equipped to share and teach from the gospel. In both of these ways—people opening up to receive the gospel and people feeling prepared and eager to go and preach the gospel—there promise that the message of the gospel could finally break past the boundaries of reproducibility, relevance, and understanding of the gospel in Thailand. As missionaries, churches, discipleship groups, and evangelism teams begin to adopt these methods, storytelling could change the game for church planting in the slums of Bangkok.

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You have added in Christy, and Michelle and Grigg.

### Appendix II – Materials on Crafted Story Sets

**A.** Story set of five stories that together present all basic elements of the gospel, crafted by Suzy Triplett for Santisuk Community Church. Used with permission. © 2013 Suzy Triplett

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Man | God | What does this story teach about: |
| * Is lost
* Is sinful

Thinks he is good (self-righteous) | * Loves man
* Seeks after man
* Seeks after sinners
* Brings sinners to repentance

Rejoices over our repentance | Lost SheepLuke 15:1-7 |
|  | * God is righteous
* God is a judge
* Listens to prayers
* Worthy of our reverence
 | Unjust JudgeLuke 18:1-8 |
| Know the voice of their shepherd | * Has given his son to die for his sheep
 | Good ShepherdJohn 10:7-18 |
| Self righteousness is sin* Is good in his own eyes
* Good deeds will save
* Is not acceptable to God
 | * Considers the humble righteous
* Is not impressed with our goodness
* Exalts the humble
* Humbles the proud

Forgives those who humbly repent | Pharisee & Tax CollectorLuke 18:9-14 |
| * Is sinful

Sin:* is against God
* Is rejecting God
* Is Unrighteous living
 | * Like a Father
* compassionate
* Unconditionally loves his sons
* Eagerly Forgives those who repent
* Restores those who repent (into right relationship)
* Rejoices in our repentance
 | Lost SonLuke 15:11-24 |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Man’s Response | Jesus/Salvation |  |
| Repent |  | Lost SheepLuke 15:1-7 |
| * Pray
* Persevere
* Fear God

Have Faith |  | Unjust JudgeLuke 18:1-8 |
| Choose Jesus | * Is the way of salvation
* Is the only way to salvation
* Salvation is abundant life
* Is the good shepherd
* Cares for his own
* Protects
* Provides
* Willingly dies for his own
* Is raised back to life
* Has authority over his life
 | Good ShepherdJohn 10:7-18 |
| * Humility
* Confession of sin

Cry out for mercy/forgiveness |  | Pharisee & Tax CollectorLuke 18:9-14 |
| HumilityRepentance:* Is acknowledging wrong/sin
* Turning away from wrong
* Turning to God for forgiveness

Receiving forgiveness (not earning it) | * Salvation is new life
* Salvation is restored relationship
 | Lost SonLuke 15:11-24 |

**B.** Five-Point dialogue used in Deaf church community. Used with permission.

FIVE POINT - DIALOGUE

*After every story is a period of dialogue. We do not use 5 QUESTIONS but we reserve five periods of dialogue. Each of the periods of dialogue have a specific goal:*

1. FACTS – GOAL: To review and nail down essential facts
2. FOCUS – GOAL: To know and understand the character of GOD
3. FEEL – GOAL: To teach and admonish one another
4. FIND – GOAL: To identify what is righteous (right living)
5. FOLLOW – GOAL: To apply the truths of the story

ONE

Story Teller: Tells the Bible Story

DIALOGUE: FACTS

GOAL: Review Facts

What happened? Who? What? When? Where?

A number of questions and techniques can be used to have the person or group re-tell the story, You want to make sure that the facts of the story are understood. When you ask what happened always lead the person or group to re-tell the story chronologically. You can ask, “What happened next?” “Where did that happen?” “How many were there?” “Who met the man?” “What did she do?” Storyteller: Tells the COMPLETE story.

GROUP TIP: Be sure you do not allow one person to re-tell the story. As one person begins to re-tell the story then stop them and let another continue then stop them and let another continue. Provide everyone a chance to rebuild the story. When a fact is missed then stop and let the group fill in the gaps.

IMPORTANT: If an important fact is missed then be sure to stop and retell the story so the missed FACT is seen and absorbed within the context of the story.

You should never FEED or GIVE the facts. The individual or group needs to discover the facts from the story itself. Sometimes the group will want to start talking about how the story made them feel. Affirm, smile and then ask them to hold that thought so we can talk about it fully.

TWO

Ask the individual or group to watch the story again and focus specifically on what they notice about GOD (or Jesus / or Holy Spirit).

Story Teller: Tells the Bible Story AGAIN

DIALOGUE: FOCUS

GOAL: Know God, Jesus

What do you notice/see/learn about GOD – JESUS – HOLY SPIRIT?

Old Testament stories will contain mostly information about GOD/HOLY SPIRIT. New Testament stories will also contain mostly information about JESUS. The purpose is to dialogue about what is seen/noticed/learned about GOD or JESUS. Allow the group to dissect as much as they want conversations and interactions between characters and GOD. You can ask what did GOD do? What did he say?

IMPORTANT: As you draw, lead the group to identify the character of GOD. For example (Rich Young Ruler Story) the Deaf person might say, “Jesus told the young man to sell everything and give to poor.” Then you could ask what does that show you about Jesus’ heart/character? Individuals that grew up in the church or are already familiar with the story might seek to give an answer common to communication about Jesus. For example they might say, “Jesus loves everybody.” If you see a comment is not something observed in the story but just added, then take an authority position and ask the group to stick to the story. You can say, “In what story did you observe that?” The might answer. You say, “That is interesting. Maybe we can study that story later.” Then take the attention of the group back to the story.

TIP: I will end by recapping what everyone said. I will say from the story you John noted that Jesus could read the man’s mind / omniscient. And you Sally – you noticed that Jesus felt mercy. And you Mark noticed that Jesus spoke with authority … etc. After a while the group will do this themselves.

THREE

Story Teller: Tells the Bible Story AGAIN

DIAlOGUE: FEEL

GOAL: Teach each other

In many places and with many groups this part of the dialogue can last several hours. It is an opportunity for the individual or group to interact with the story personally. The leader should fade into the background and become one of the group. There should be shared dialogue. Each individual needs to be given protection and opportunity to share, to teach, to question, to ponder, to express doubts, to encourage. I will begin this section by asking the individual or group “What bothers you, what questions pop in your head, what did you like that happened what touched you, or what confused you? How did the story make you feel?” I make mental notes I later record. If someone says this story help me see that Jesus is GOD then that is very important to me to remember. It tells me about their worldview and that I can use this story later with someone who does not believe Jesus is God.

Groups and individuals that feel safe to be honest and raw with their thoughts will be the ones that most benefit. The Holy Spirit is powerful and I am always moved how He works and speaks to and through the group. For example a person might say, “I have a hard time accepting that God did that.” I do not feel the need to change their thoughts or doubts. I know and trust the Holy Spirit will do that. I will ask what others think.

Many will agree but given the support and time to grapple with a question this same group will find an answer. Allow the group time (unlimited time) to deal with the various aspects of a story. This is when they can ask each other questions.

Many have accused this method as excluding “teaching of the scripture”. The truth is that this method provides the widest opportunity for teaching. Instead of one central leader being the teacher, the group becomes active participants in their learning and is empowered to teach what the Holy Spirit is revealing to them. I have seen an eight year old speaks profound truth to the adults. I have seen a new believer speak truth to a long time

Christian. What if during this course of dialogue some erroneous thought or wrong teaching is stated. When one of the group says something that is felt to be very wrong or heretical or false the first step is to see if the group given time to hash it out will come to agree on truth. This is usually what happens. IF NOT? Then I let story clarify story. I will tell another story that will bring clarity. WHEN? Sometimes later and sometimes in that moment.

Four

By now the group has seen the story at least three times. Ask someone in the group to tell the Bible Story. Protect the person. Allow them to tell the entire story (mistakes and all) without being interrupted. You want the group to see you will keep them “safe” while they are trying. After they FINISH telling the story then you can allow the group to fill the group then ask the person if they want to try again. Be sure to affirm the person.

DIALOGUE: FIND

GOAL: understand what is right/wrong

Ask the group to tell you what they have identified in the story that is wrong and what is right. Avoid using the word “sin” and ”holy”. Use everyday terms. A father will tell his child, “Wrong!” Within their Deaf Community they have opinions about what is right and what is wrong. But GOD’s view of right and wrong are not the same as ours. So this time of dialogue is to identify not what we think is right and wrong but what do we see from GOD view what is right or wrong. What any groups like to do is have someone tell the story again. As soon as they see something that they think is RIGHT or WRONG they will pretend to hold a remote control and dramatize hitting pause! Then they will discuss whether what they observed is right or wrong. Then they continue with the story. It is amazing but in almost every story one will discover what is right to do or what is wrong to do.

TIP: If the story clearly shows something that is WRONG. You can ask “What is the opposite? If that is wrong then what is right?” Before concluding this section of the dialogue review with the group if everyone caught what was said about what is wrong and right and if there is a consensus. If there is not, give the dissenting person an opportunity to express their thoughts. It is during time the group identifies what GOD requires us to do. What is right to do? The longer you work with your group the more skilled they will become at seeing what is *descriptive* and what is *prescriptive*. They will (through the Holy Spirit) begin to see when something is described and something is clearly prescribed. For example, in the story prior the Pentecost when the disciples picked a new apostle (12th), they drew lots. Is this descriptive or prescriptive? One group after a long discourse felt it was not prescriptive but descriptive – not a matter of right or wrong but what happened.

Five

By now the group has seen the story at least four times. Ask someone else in the group to tell the bible story. Protect the person. Allow them to tell the entire story (mistakes and all) without being interrupted. You want the group to see you will keep them “safe” while they are trying. After they FINISH telling the story then you can allow the group to fill the group then ask the person if they want to try again. This is when I allow the story to be told several times. If possible I like for every person to stand up and tell the story.

DIALOGUE: FOLLOW

GOAL: Obedience

This is not a group discussion with repeated exchange but a dialogue where each person contributes an answer. They share what they will do (from now on) to obey this story.

What will you change?

How will you act different?

What will you fix?

What will you do?

This is not an optional response. I make clear that we have something to learn from every story. We do not want to be Pharisees – full of knowledge – but we want to let the Holy Spirit to speak to us and show us what we can do, how we can change, what we can improve. Every person must answer.

**C.** Story sets developed for use in house churches in the Deaf community. Used with permission.

Story Sets:

“555” Set – Basic church

1. All go to heaven? [Matthew 7:1-23]
2. Two Houses
	1. Luke 6:46-49
	2. Matthew 7:24-27
3. Feeding the 5000
	1. Matthew 14:13-21
	2. Mark 6:30-44
	3. Luke 9:10-17
	4. John 6:1-15
4. Good Shepherd [John 10:11-15]
5. Sisters and Lazarus [John 11:17-45a]
6. Rooms [John 13:33-14:7]
7. The Vine [John 15:1-9]
8. 3000 Baptized [Acts 2:1-5; 2:22-24; 2:33; 2:36-41]
9. The Body [1 Corinthians 12:12-27]
10. Temptation
	1. Matthew 4:1-11
	2. Mark 1:12, 13
	3. Luke 4:1-13
11. Early Church [Acts 2:42-47]
12. Bread and Wine
	1. Luke 22:14-16
	2. Matthew 26:26-29
	3. Luke 22:17-20
	4. John 14:12-26
13. Prayer
	1. Luke 11;1-4
	2. Matthew 6:9-13
14. Commission [Matthew 28:16-20]
15. Horn [Ezekiel 33:1-9]
16. Salt and Light [Matthew 5:13-16]
17. 10 Virgins [Matthew 25:1-13]
18. Parable of the talents [Matthew 25:14-30]
19. “222” [2 Timothy 2:1-7]

“Uplift/Oppress” Set:

* Uplift
1. Love [1 Cor 13:1-13] (13:3-7,13)
2. Forgiveness (Joseph) [Gen 45:1-15]
3. Strengthen (Moses’ Friends) [Exodus 17:8-1^]
4. Goodness [Galatians 6:1-10]
5. Serve (Good Samaritan) [Luke 10:25-37]
* Oppress
1. Harmful Words (Boat and Rudder) [James 3:1-12]
2. Unforgivness (Unmerciful Servant) [Matthew 18:21-35]
3. Lying (Ananias & Sapphira) [Acts 5:1-11]
4. Gossip (Mary and Martha) [Luke 10:38-42]
5. Wrongful Judgment (Log In My Eye) [Matthew 7:1-5]
* Other Considerations
1. Slander (Stephen) [Acts 6:8-17; 60] (6:8-17)
2. Strife (Hagar and Ishmael) [Gen 16:1-16]
3. Favoritism [James 2:1-9)

Creation Set

1. Creation in 7 Days [Gen 1:1 – 2:4a]
2. Garden of Eden [Gen 2:8-14]
3. Creation of Man [Gen 2:4-7]
4. Rules and Responsibilities [Gen 2:15-20]
5. Creation of Woman/Marriage [Gen 2:21 – 25]

Genesis:

1. Fall of man [Gen 3:1-24]
2. Cain & Able [Gen 4]
3. Enoch [Gen 5:21-24]
4. Tower of Babel [Gen 11:1-9]

Abram/Abraham:

1. Call of Abram [Gen 12:1-9]
2. Abram & Lot Separate [Gen 13:2-18]
3. God’s Promise [Gen 15:1-6:13-16]
4. Hagar & Ishmael [16:1-10:15-16]
5. Abraham’s Covenant [Gen 17]
6. Birth of Isaac [Gen 21:1-7]
7. Hagar & Ishmael Sent Away [Gen 21:8-21]
8. Abraham Tested [Gen 22: 1-19]
9. Sarah Dies (?)
10. Abraham Dies [Gen 25:5-11]

Joseph Set:

 Intro: Jacob had 12 sons (give names) [Gen 35: 23-26]

1. Joseph’s Dream [37:1-11]
2. Joseph Sold by his Brothers [37: 12- 35 or 36]
3. Joseph and Potiphar’s Wife [39: 1-23]
4. The Cupbearer and the Baker [40:1-23 or 41:1a]
5. Pharaoh’s Dream [41: 1-49]
6. Brothers go to Egypt [41: 53- 42:38]
7. Second Journey [43:1-34]
8. Silver cup [44:1-34]
9. Joseph is known [45:1-28]
10. Living in Egypt [46:1-7; 26-47:11]
	1. Father dies (summary)
11. Brothers Reassured [50:15-22 or26]

God’s Power Over Idols

1. Elijah and Mt. Carmel [I Kings 18:18-39]
2. Fiery Furnace [Daniel]
3. Dagon and the Ark [I Samuel 5:1-5]

Cult Set

1. The Wolf In Sheep’s Clothing [Matthew 7:15-20]
2. Vine and the Branches [John 15: 1-9]
3. Secrets of the Kingdom [Matthew 13:10]
4. The weeds parable [Matthew 13:24-29]
5. 5.Weeds Explained [Matthew 13:44-46]

Deaf Set

1. Jesus Heals the Deaf Man [Mark 7:31]
2. Moses and the Burning Bush [Exodus 4]
3. Levitcus 19:14?
4. Isaiah 29?

Lost and Found Set [Luke 15]

1. Prodigal Son
2. Lost Coin
3. Lost Sheep

Legalism

1. Circumcision [Acts 1-11; 19-21]
2. Brother Stumbling [Romans 14: 13-18]
3. Pharisees Question Cleanliness [Matthew 15:1-9 or 11 and Mark 7:1-19]
4. Paul and Peter [Galatians 2:11-21]
5. Freedom in Christ [Galatians 5:1-6]

Jesus Birth Set:

1. Angel Appears to Mary [Matt 1:18, Luke 1-26-56]
2. Angel Appears to Joseph [Matt 1:19-25]
3. Jesus Birth and the Shepherds [Luke 2:1-7, 2:8-20]
4. Jesus Dedicated (Simeon and Anna) [Matt 1:25b, Luke 2:21-28]
5. Magi Worship and Joseph/Mary/Jesus Flee [Matt 2:1-28]

Jesus’ Divinity:

1. Power Over Sin (Paralytic) [Matthew 9:1-2, Mark 2:1-5, Luke 5:17-20, Matthew 9:3-8, Mark 2:6-12, Luke 5:21-26]
2. Power Over Nature (Storm): [Matthew 8:23-27, Mark 4:35-41, Luke 8:26-39]
3. Power Over Evil (Gerasene Demoniac) [Matthew 8:28-34, Mark 5:1-20, Luke 8:26-39]
4. Power Over Death/Sickness (Woman Bleeding) [Matthew 9-26, Mark 5:21-43, Luke 8:40-56]
5. Power Over Mind (Centurion Soldier) [Matthew 8:5-13, Mark 5:21-43, Luke 7:1-10]

Change when you meet Jesus:

1. Zacchaeus
2. Nicodemus
3. 10 men with leprosy, one comes back

Cost of Discipleship Set:

1. Cost of Following [Matthew 8:18-22]
2. The Narrow and Wide Gate [Matthew 7:13-14] ?

Cooperation:

1. Nehemiah Builds the Wall [Nem 4]
2. New Testament Money [I Cor 8-9]
3. Galatians 1

Missions:

1. Great Commission
2. Ephesians 3:8
3. Holy Spirit and Missions [Acts 13:2-3]
4. Ethiopian Eunich [Acts 8:26-35]
5. Abram In Ur [Gen 12:1-3]

Spiritual Warfare:

1. The Spirit World [Isaiah 14:12-14]
2. Eve Deceived [Gen 3:16]
3. Punishment [Gen 3:14-24]
4. Job
5. Battle over Moses’ Body [Jude 1]
6. 3 Temptations [Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13]
7. Jesus and Peter
8. 70/72 Sent [Luke 10:1-12]

### Appendix III – Cell church principles relevant to storytelling groups



Booker, M., & Ireland, M. (2005). *Evangelism-which Way Now?: An Evaluation of Alpha, Emmaus, Cell Church and Other Contemporary Strategies for Evangelism*. Church House publishing. (p 148)

1. ผี่, นอง [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Thai word [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. www.unicef.org/infobycountry/Thailand\_statistics.html [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Despite this difference in leadership styles, the cell church and storytelling models do share many similarities regarding practice in studying scripture, as demonstrated in the figure in Appendix III [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ฟาริสี [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. ข้าพระองค์ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ฤทธ์ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. อำนาจ [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. บุตรมนุษย์ [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. เทพเทวดา (angels) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. นักบวช [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. ชีวิตครบบริบูรณ์ [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. สุขใจ [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. ความสุข [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. ข้าพระองค์ [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. บุตรมนุษย์, *bhut manut* [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Luke 10:41 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Retrieved from <http://www.onestory-media.org/> on July 25, 2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)