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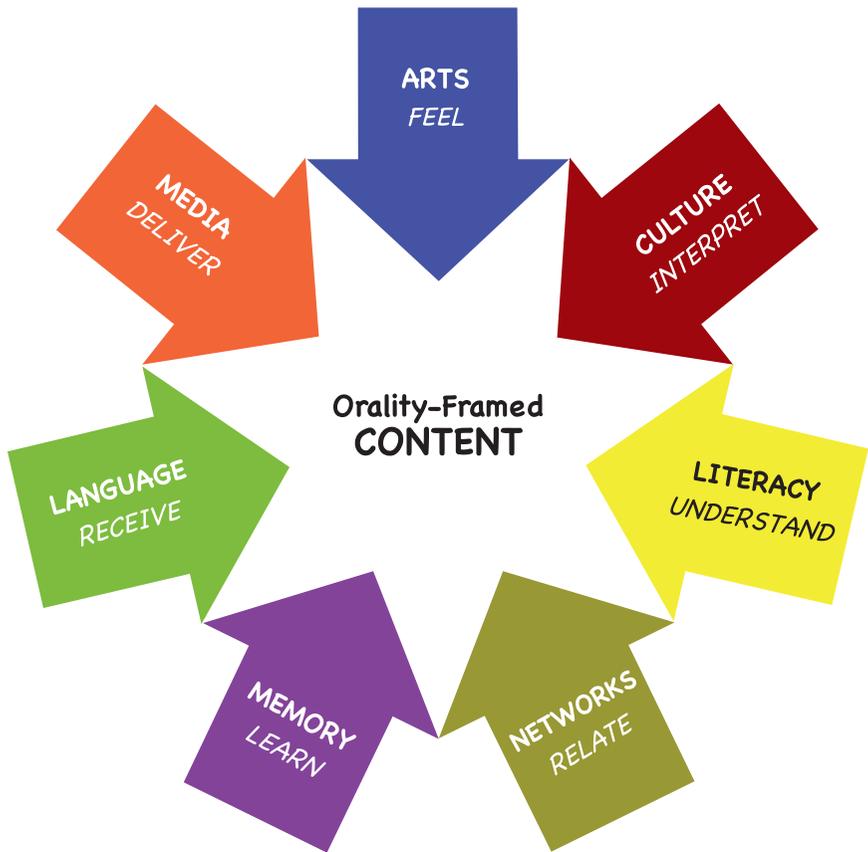
Orality Journal

The Word Became Fresh

Connecting Orality, Language and Culture

Gravelle • Wafler • Kwa • Arnett • Handley • Freeman

The Seven Disciplines of Orality



Courtesy of Dr. Chuck Madinger who leads Global Impact Mission and serves on the International Orality Network's Leadership Team facilitating the Research Task Force.



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INTERNATIONAL ORALITY NETWORK

Orality Journal

The Word Became Fresh

Volume 6, Number 1, 2017

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Cover Photo

Lausanne Movement, used with permission

*During an evening worship service in Jakarta, hundreds of participants at the Lausanne Young Leaders Gathering (YLG2016) brought forward rocks, each with a significant word that God had given the person. Piled together, the rocks created an altar, depicting the integrated power of both the literate **and** non-literate symbols within Christian worship.*

Additional Photos

Stan Wafler, used with permission

Kiem-Kiok Kwa, used with permission

"In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!”

Isaiah 6:1-3 (ESV)

"And they sang a new song, saying,
'Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood
you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth.'"

Revelation 5:9-10 (ESV)

Orality Journal

The Word Became Fresh

Orality Journal is the journal of the International Orality Network. It is published online semi-annually and aims to provide a platform for scholarly discourse on the issues of orality, discoveries of innovations in orality, and praxis of effectiveness across multiple domains in society. This online journal is international and interdisciplinary, serving the interests of the orality movement through research articles, documentation, book reviews, and academic news. Occasionally, print editions will be provisioned. Submission of items that could contribute to the furtherance of the orality movement is welcomed.

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CONTENTS

Co-Editors' Note: Making Connections—Orality, Language, and Culture..... 7
Samuel E. Chiang and William Coppedge

“What Do You Mean?” Why Communication Breakdowns Happen..... 13
Gilles Gravelle

By contrasting two different communication models (process and semiotic), Gravelle analyzes how experience and environment influence the communication process.

Orality as a Means to Engaging Culture and Language..... 29
Stan Wafler

Written from grassroots experience, Wafler describes how orality can transform the language and culture learning experience.

Proclaiming the Gospel through the Use of Church Banners: A Case Study from Singapore..... 39
Kiem-Kiok Kwa

Kwa offers an oral perspective on how churches in Singapore engage culture through church banners.

Discipleship in the Face of Orality..... 49
Randy Arnett

Has orality been effectively applied to discipleship? Arnett offers a critical analysis of typical shortcomings as well as practical steps forward.

Developing Leaders... From The Trail..... 59

Joseph W. Handley, Jr.

In this lab, the wilderness provides a multisensory environment, creating liminal experiences wherein people's hearts are transformed.

**Orality and Honor/Shame Interaction in Sub-Saharan Africa:
Implications for Discipleship..... 63**

Sandra Freeman

Freeman provides experienced reflections on the interconnectivity of honor and shame with orality culture.

Co-Editors' Note

Samuel E. Chiang and William Coppedge

Connecting Orality, Language, and Culture

In August 2016, Samuel and I had the privilege of attending the Lausanne Young Leaders Gathering (YLG2016) in Jakarta, Indonesia. The Lausanne Movement is an international network committed to seeing the whole gospel taken to the whole world.

For this particular event, the Lausanne leadership brought together one thousand younger leaders from all over the world for one purpose: connection. The tagline for Lausanne, “*connecting ideas and influencers for global mission,*” captures the spirit of our time together as representatives from over 140 nations worshipped, dialogued, learned, and prayed together for each other, our families, our communities, our nations, and our world.

While such a missional event is worthy of consideration in its own right, upon reflection, the YLG2016 event was predominately and intentionally an oral communication experience. With the theme for this edition of the Orality Journal as language and culture, it seemed pertinent to offer an oral evaluation of such a multicultural and multilingual communication phenomenon.

Oral Communication Analysis of YLG

Upon arriving at the conference site, a sense of the oral came through enormous, brightly-colored banners that were dotted around the campus. The banners included a label (Create, Repent, Love, etc.), but what caught my eye was not the literate symbols, but the images of a green tree, a blue tower, a red cross, or a yellow flame.

There was a color and an image to go with each of the seven days of the conference; the depiction of these color-image combinations on conference brochures and name tags reinforced an oral-oriented message. It became evident that the YLG2016 leadership team was not relying on print to begin impressing upon us the themes they believed God had for all of us.

A second way that orality featured predominately in *YLG2016* was in the conference theme: *United in the Great Story*. By welcoming story onto center stage, an intentional space was created for the liminal possibilities that so often accompany narrative. This reminded all of us that what unites the Body of Christ, among other things, is a *story* of epic proportions. It is inviting each of us into our appointed roles in a divinely-authored drama.

Some within the orality movement today criticize storytelling, saying that it is not the primary means or purpose of orality. Yet clarification is needed here. An argument can be made that story is inherent in all oral communication. For example, many proverbs are but the synopsis of a larger story; similarly, song often invites us into a narrative, whether of love, loss, or worship. Drama is narrative-based, and dance is often the physical embodiment of a cultural narrative. These examples are more than story; however, story often plays an essential role in their development. Story, therefore, is the life-blood of orality.

The confusion seems to come when story is equated with oral storytelling. While story is a macro category, oral storytelling is itself a specific genre of oral communication, along with other genres like proverbs, ballads, and dance. Thus, equating orality to oral storytelling is drastically incomplete.

However, to dismiss *story* from orality is to dismiss the very power of orality. To reiterate again, story (or perhaps we should use *narrative*) is a macro category, while oral storytelling is a micro category, a particular application of oral communication principles. Such clarification allows us to appreciate the "oral-ness" of the *YLG2016* theme as well as several other story components throughout the conference without feeling like we are inappropriately elevating only one particular genre.

For example, story manifested itself in multiple ways. This was no more clearly seen than in the drama and dance team. Each day, their brilliant display of reader's theater provided an entry point into the biblical themes for the day. At first analysis, it would seem like reading scripted lines in a theatrical performance might be the antithesis of orality; yet, a wise friend observed that the text provides a point of reference—both for the dramatists and the audience.

This was not spontaneous ad-lib entertainment; instead, it was a performance that sought to uphold the value of the written biblical text even as the actors and actresses embodied the message. It was an integration of the strengths of oral and printed methodologies.

The conference program highlighted story in another creative way by prioritizing each participant's own *life map*, or personal journey. Each participant presented his or her life map to a small "connect group" of five or six people. After quietly listening for a few moments, the group's members would then share what they had heard God say in response to each personal story. This creation of a platform for story, the listening to God speak on behalf of another, and the sharing in a small community became not only the most meaningful experience for many, but also epitomized a holy oral communication event between both human persons and a personal God.

One other way that orality appeared, albeit it in a secondary oral fashion, was through the *YLG2016* Connector app. The *YLG2016* leadership team encouraged participants to utilize the app as a platform for engaging in vigorous discussion regarding things that were happening. Remarkably, the Connector app transformed the typical monologue plenary sessions into dialogue experiences, with participants sharing their responses and feelings with each other in real time. Print was present as many texted back and forth during these sessions, and yet the atmosphere maintained a high value-association on oral communication.

Language and Culture

To fully appreciate this oral communication analysis, we must realize the role of language and culture in attempting such a gathering from so many different nations. The *YLG2016* team made translation available in six major languages, including: French, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, Korean, and Russian.¹ In addition, the worship team sought to incorporate other languages like Indonesian and Kiswahili so people had as many avenues as possible to praise Jesus in a familiar tongue. Furthermore, whether in different clothing styles, the proud national flags that were often displayed, the skin tone varieties, or the volume level of different groups' conversations, diverse cultural elements permeated the interactions.

But why raise the money and time (over three years to prepare for *YLG2016*) to bring together so many leaders from different language groups, representing so many cultural contexts? Particularly in today's age, why not hold a webinar or a virtual conference, whereby people can still hear and even see each other in real time? Surprisingly, part of the answer is found in orality.

The reason Lausanne wanted to bring everyone into a shared physical space was so that oral communication—personal conversation—could happen face to face. Those personal connections can happen virtually, but the trademark of orality is its face-to-face humanness.

Virtual relationships, at times, lend themselves to minimize cultural and even language differences. Technology allows for sites like Google Translator to overcome language obstacles. Likewise, social media, by definition, requires selection: what will be shared with others and what will not. Yet oral face-to-face conversation does not allow for easy avoidance of cultural and linguistic differences. We celebrate how technology has helped us overcome many of those challenges, and yet we suggest that it is precisely the unique language and culture differences that make orality beautiful.

For me, this was no more clearly experienced than when the worship team led all of us in the song *Holy, Holy, Holy*, for we sang it not in one language, but in multiple languages, all at the same time. I was reminded of Revelation 5.9-10:

And they (the saints) sang a new song, saying, "You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for you were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood, out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth."

Gathered with over one thousand saints from over 140 countries, we spent the days face to face, learning to listen to each other's stories and heart cries. Gathered around the throne of God, we turned our faces not to each other, but to the face that alone is worthy of our worship. In that anthem of praise, we brought our differences before the throne of God as offerings,

gifts of thanksgiving; for somehow in the divine mystery, we sensed that in the bringing together of all of our unique cultures and languages, therein could the truest reflection of the image of God be understood.

It is our hope that as you read this edition's articles, representing cultures as diverse as Singapore and Botswana, they might inspire and encourage you as you seek to recognize afresh the beauty of oral communication, even amidst the uniqueness and challenges of all our different languages and cultures.

Holy, Holy, Holy...

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Samuel E. Chiang'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'S' and 'C'.

Samuel E. Chiang
Arlington, USA

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'William Coppedge'. The signature is cursive and elegant, with a large initial 'W' and 'C'.

William Coppedge
St. Andrews, Scotland

¹For a helpful video capturing the role of languages at YLG2016, see Supporting Languages at YLG2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQrlF5ubGuM>

Proclaiming the Gospel through Church Banners: A Case Study from Singapore

Kiem-Kiok Kwa

Kiem-Kiok Kwa has been teaching intercultural studies at East Asia School of Theology in Singapore since 2009. Since much of her time is spent in public—communicating, teaching, and preaching—she enjoys reading detective novels and listening to classical music to recharge herself.

Soon after the Pokemon Go game was launched in Singapore in July 2016, a local church put up a banner facing the outside with the in-game map and the words “Pokeballs, potions or revives we do not have. Instead, we have the Living Christ, who died for your sins and mine. Come and experience Him! This is a GRACE-stop” with the name of the church and service times below.

Some weeks later, another church put up a banner with the same in-game map with the words “This stop is where you recover your spiritual HP (sic.). The Lord is my strength and my defense; He has become my salvation Psalm 118:14.” In Singapore, banners are a wayside pulpit¹ as churches connect with current issues and engage a secular society.

Banners are common outside churches and other religious buildings in Singapore. These are usually placed on the fence of the

church, facing the outside, with the intention of catching the attention of passers-by.

Churches located along busy roads or thoroughfares, or near public bus stops, would take advantage of that location and strategically place banners where there can be a maximum exposure. Usually, banners are informational, telling about programs or special events coming up. Thus, for example, many churches who run the “Alpha” program, which invites people to know more about Christianity, have a banner with the words “Got Questions?” and a bespectacled young man looking quizzically into the middle distance. Its very plainness encourages questions about anything, a trait of the program which creates space for anyone to ask anything about the Christianity.

Singapore is a multi-religious society and other religious groups also put up informational

banners on their fences. It is quite clear to whom the information is targeted—a banner outside a mosque in Arabic is for Muslims as they are the ones who can read and understand Arabic. The Tamil language church located at my workplace will often advertise special services or events in banners in that language, reaching out to the Tamil-speaking people who frequent the area.

While there are four official languages in Singapore—English, Mandarin Chinese, Malay, and Tamil—English is the *lingua franca*. Banners in English can therefore be read and understood by many people. Christianity in Singapore is largely English-speaking anyway, so church banners are often in English.

While informational banners are common across the different religious groups in Singapore, in this article we will explore proclamation banners. These are banners which proclaim a message, either by making a statement, raising an issue, or asking a question. Such banners are intentionally addressed to the general public outside the church and are a form of proclamation of Christian truth in the public space. Today, everyone has an opinion and wants to make a statement, and social media like Facebook and

Instagram are platforms for such engagement. While messages can be put there, whether or not people see it depends upon whether it appears on their newsfeed and whether or not people are even on social media. However, banners in public spaces are there for all who pass by to see.

Thus, there is still a place today to engage in physical spaces such as church walls. If the banner has a familiar symbol or picture, such as the in-game map of Pokemon Go, or the horse in the year of the horse, it catches attention. Therefore, the purpose of the banner is fulfilled. By simply using familiar images and pithy and witty statements and puns, these proclamations are fresh presentations of the Christian message.

Employing the common language and cultural symbols that are understood by many and coupled with meaningful artistic design, these banners catch people's attention. As we shall explain in this article, appropriate and meaningful banners are best accomplished by cultural insiders who appreciate the context and can therefore make prescient proclamations. When a church makes regular and consistent proclamation banners, the public will begin to associate the church with such proclamations, therefore adding to the witness of the church.

While often incorporating print, these proclamation banners must be understood as reflecting and in dialogue with several of the descriptive disciplines related to orality. It is therefore worth keeping what Charles Madinger calls, “orality framed content” in mind—namely, culture, language, literacy, networks, memory, and the arts.² Whether intentionally or not, the principles of orality are impacting the types of proclamations that churches are making today.

One Local Church Example

Orchard Road Presbyterian Church has capitalized on its location where there is plenty of vehicular and pedestrian traffic, and regularly puts up proclamation banners. In February 2014, during the Chinese New Year season and in the Chinese almanac year of the horse, they put up the banner

below (www.orpc.sg/happenings/banners?page=2).



This message pulls together the Chinese preoccupation with luck, the New Year message, and firmly points to God, who is not capricious.

On another occasion, when many Singaporeans were avidly following the Korean drama *Descendants of the Sun*, a gripping love story between a doctor and a soldier, the church put up a sign entitled “Descendants of the Son.”



More recently was a photograph of the church circa nineteenth century with the words “For the last 160 years, we have been saying only one thing: God loves you.” Unlike previous proclamation banners they had put up, this one has a straightforward gospel message, while capitalizing on their long history in the country.

This church has been putting up proclamation banners for several years now. They have shown that they are engaged with the world, and that there is a Christian response for all of life. More than just inviting people to come to church and join their activities, they are putting a message outside the church.

In public places, these messages are seeds which are sown widely and broadly, causing everyone to consider what is being said. This too is an act of Christian witness which should be applauded and encouraged. Over time, those who frequent the area may look forward to these messages. Since Christians are as likely to read these banners as non-Christians, they too may be inspired in their faith.

Engaging Publicly

In recent decades, Christians have become more aware of the public

dimensions of their faith. As Bishop Lesslie Newbigin declared in the early 1990s,

We are called, I think, to bring our faith into the public arena, to publish it, to put it at risk in the encounter with other faiths and ideologies in open debate and argument, and in the risky business of discovering what Christian obedience means in radically new circumstances and in radically different human cultures. (1993, 59-60).

Bringing the Christian faith into the public realm has now led theologians and missiologists to explore what it means for Christians to be engaged in the common good, politics, and global society (see Volf 2011; Budziszewski 2006; Hainsworth and Paeth 2010).

Public theology, by definition, discusses public issues. These issues are not only national level issues such as the laws of the country, but also popular level things such as games. Jesus Christ is Lord of all of life.

As George Hunsberger explains, public theology is mission as it is “*theologizing about* public life and the implications of the reign of God regarding its character and

shape, or the church's *theologizing with and among* all those who share public life together and seek to find the common good” (2005, 317, emphasis his). Such theologizing about public life and then proclaiming a message to others is an act of mission of the Church.

The various elements in this endeavor include:

- Discussing issues which affect the public life of the community
- Theologizing or putting Christian theological reflection on the issue
- Proclaiming those ideas in public (the public here would be the ‘general’ public, not the specific Christian audience; hence, the message needs to be meaningful to them)

These three are closely intertwined and related—as matters or issues arise, Christians reflect on them and then share their thoughts with others. When those thoughts are to be proclaimed in the public realm, special attention is given to what is said and how it is said so that the message is meaningful, thought-provoking, or encouraging to others.

By putting up banners, the church shows that it is engaging

in society, especially with trends and popular culture. These can be meaningful statements to make so that Christians and the church break down perceptions that Christians are aloof or other worldly. Furthermore, Christians show that there is a Christian response, or a Christian way of looking at a current issue.

There are many matters that one can proclaim about, so choosing the topic requires some wisdom; ideally, it should be a subject that is commonly understood, easily identifiable, and which lends itself to a uniquely Christian comment or point of view. Such a proclamation involves what Hunsberger calls a “courageous particularity” in engaging culture (2005, 323). Proclaiming the gospel involves some risks. For example, the issue may turn out to be a 15-minute wonder; however, if that were to be the case, then the banner could be taken down.

The public proclamation of the gospel must be in language and forms that can be understood easily and clearly by members of the public. As mentioned above, these banners are in English and so accessible to many residents in Singapore. The banners must also be clear—that is, we must ask,

What is the message that the church is giving or statement that is being made? Furthermore, there can be a diversity of opinions, and while the church may wish to make a distinct Christian statement, they need to give room for different expressions and views.

In the past, Singapore Christian engagement on national issues has been primarily done through presenting papers to the government. For example, Parliament would issue a White Paper or open a forthcoming Bill for discussion and invite the public to give their views. This has been done on such issues as abortion; the Women's Charter which deals with, among other matters, the grounds for divorce; and the Maintenance of Religious Harmony: matters of high public interest and matters of conscience.

The views given by the public may be taken into consideration before the final Act is drafted, although Parliament is not obliged to do so. In 2005, the Singapore government engaged the general public in a discussion on whether or not to have casinos in the city-state. Christian individuals and organizations like the National Council of Churches took part

in this discussion, presenting Christian views on the issues.

In these situations, while Singapore Christians do engage, it is mainly the elite—intellectuals and church leaders who speak up, and speak for, the Christian community. On some issues, like abortion, one needs to have specialized medical or legal knowledge to be able to engage meaningfully with the content. Furthermore, since one is dealing with the government, one needs to present cogent arguments in language that the secular authorities can understand and appreciate, and present arguments for and on behalf of the common good.

Proclamation banners, on the other hand, are made by local churches and by believers in that parish as they consider the issues that they face and seek to live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. These are public in the sense of being done by the common people. Churches are merely trying to engage in life, and all that life is. This is commendable and should be encouraged.

Engaging Theologically

Christian proclamation must be theologically informed both by scripture and Christian tradition. Merely printing verses from

scripture would be meaningless to the general public, who are of another or no religion. We have seen how these church banners used Bible verses and puns (Descendants of the Sun – Descendants of the Son) to make a point about the Christ who came to serve. These proclamations, made in the public realm, need to strike that fine balance between being Christian and yet not being too preachy.

The banner that said that the church did not have “poké balls but had Jesus Christ,” while stating a theological truth, makes too large a conceptual jump from the game to Jesus Christ. There could have been some other reference (e.g., to throwing balls to ‘catch’ something more worthwhile than Pokemons, say peace of mind or joy, which can be found in the church, or in Christ).

A statement made to the public must be in language and form that is accessible by the public. In the multicultural and multi-religious context of Singapore, such a statement must be meaningful to the general public. Proclamation banners are different from conducting an evangelistic message in church, where people are expecting to hear a message about Christianity.

A proclamation banner by a church is more akin to a person posting a status update on Facebook, and so can be truth statements; but such statements can also be questions, be reflective, and even be humorous. The banners can also use meaningful and appropriate symbols and pictures as these catch the eye more easily than mere words. Some people may stop to read, but others may just be passing by on the bus, so the message must be easily read and understood.

Furthermore, the message on the banner should not just be for observers to step into church, but to point them to Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life.

Missional Significance of Proclamation Banners

Asian Christians are challenged to engage creatively in their context—both in the gospel message that is proclaimed and in the medium and means of bringing that message. In some Asian countries, Christians cannot preach the gospel openly; China and Vietnam are atheistic communist countries and the state only recognizes state-sanctioned religious groups. Malaysia has a Muslim majority which seeks greater Islamization of their country.

In these contexts, Christian engagement in the public sphere is restricted or even prohibited. But that does not mean the church in those contexts cannot make a gentle or subtle proclamation of the gospel through banners. As done by Christians who know their context well, such messages can be meaningful and sensitive. They can make such proclamations prudently.

In Singapore, as elsewhere, Christians are seeking ways to tell others the good news of Jesus Christ. However, non-Christians may have heard the message and have not responded positively to it. Others may have closed themselves to messages about being sinners, or are simply fatigued hearing about Jesus. While not intrusive, the banners are simply there and can catch one's eye. A pithy statement can cause one to pause. In these ways, these banners are missional.

Since Singapore is a multi-religious society, Singaporeans are generally courteous towards people of different faiths and will seek to maintain religious harmony. Therefore, this practice of Singapore churches could be adapted and adopted by Christians in other societies so that they too can intentionally and sensitively

proclaim the gospel using this medium in their contexts.

While Christians in Singapore have religious freedom, church and state are firmly separate. In an op-ed piece published in the national newspaper, Mohammad Alami Musa, a Muslim and the Head of Studies in Inter-religious Relations in Plural Societies Programme of a local university, said that religious groups in Singapore played a part in enhancing Singapore's secularism (2016, A26). He explicated that this is done by the state applying a "principle of being equidistant in accommodating the special needs and interests of the various religious groups, as well as in giving some space to religion in the public square without causing disharmony."

While the church recognizes this, and will do its part to maintain religious harmony, the Christian faith is not private and Christians should find ways of reaching out to others with the gospel message. It is in this context that Christians in Singapore engage in the public square. Church banners become another way of simply putting the good news out there, while simultaneously interacting with the issues of the day.

Conclusion

Christians all over the world continue to face the challenge of presenting the word of God in meaningful and relevant ways in order that as Paul put it, “by all possible means to save some” (1 Cor. 9:22). The current renewed interest in orality has opened doors for more creative evangelism and discipleship using art, music, drama, and storytelling.

This exploration of proclamation banners has highlighted several of the key disciplines for considering oral-framed messages. For example, churches have used banners to engage popular **cultural** topics; have employed familiar **language**; have recognized the need for symbols and images that can be easily understood (**literacy**); and have sought to package these banners in artistic manners that are attention-grabbing as well as aesthetically pleasing. They are bold proclamations in a

common, indeed, low-tech **medium** (Madinger 2010, 201-213).

Thus, we begin to recognize how proclamation banners are more oral in their communication style than perhaps previously understood. They interpret culture as churches reflect how the Christian message is brought to bear on matters of everyday life.

While a banner may not be the main reason for a person to come to faith or be renewed in faith, such oral proclamations are part of the whole picture of Christian witness in the public square in Singapore.

Some years ago, during the Christmas season, a church in Singapore had a long banner of three men on camels on one side with a star on the far side. In between were the words “Wise men still seek Jesus.” May this be the posture of all who are Christ-followers and the inclination of all those who are seeking.³

¹The term “wayside pulpit” generally refers to signs outside churches which have a message. In 2007, in the United Kingdom, there was actually a competition for the best or worst of these wayside pulpits, with prize money of £500 sponsored by a church property insurance company.

²See Madinger’s Seven Disciplines of Orality diagram at the front of this edition of the Journal.

³Thanks to Lai Pak Wah, Ng Zhiwen, Saw Seang Pin, and Tang Huey Ming for sharing photographs, ideas, and suggestions for this article.

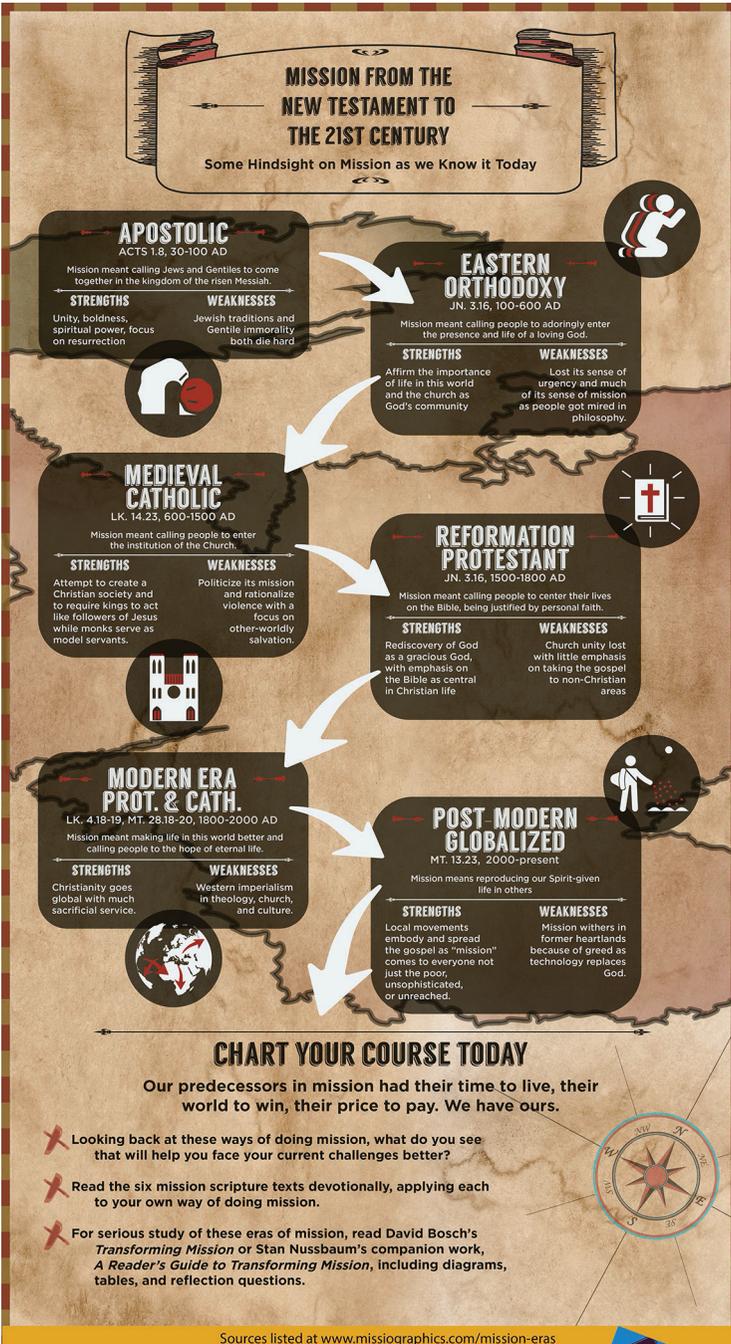
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