

Planting a church ... by the book

Howie Ellis, May 2004

I can hear my old English teacher now, 'Howie Ellis teaching literacy? Blind leading the blind surely!'



Joking aside, how has literacy become such a huge part of our ministry? We signed up to be church planters, didn't we? Absolutely! And what better church-planting tool could there be in one of the world's most illiterate countries, than the gift of the '4 Rs': Reading, Writing, Arithmetic and err . . . Relationships (Isn't that two 'Rs', an 'A' and a 'W'? Maybe my old teacher was right). Here's what I mean.

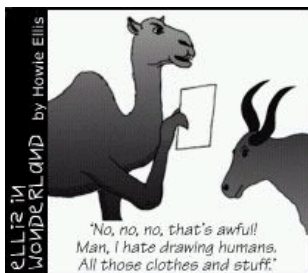
I hate saying goodbye. On this occasion it was to a group of Muslim [Fulani](#) I've worked with over the past two years. As we sat chatting, one of the men took a minute piece of chalk and began writing on the cart he was sitting on. 'Is this right?' he asked after a while. He had written yaKuBu, my Fulani name.

Those few awkward, mixed-case letters were hugely significant. Two years ago this man was totally illiterate, but now he could hear a name and know how to write it. Another shared excitedly how he had visited a strange town and been able to find something by reading the signs.

One reason I was dreading saying goodbye to this group was that I wouldn't be able to continue paying the young Christian man who had been teaching them. So, did they want the classes to continue even when I couldn't fund the teacher for them? Oh yes! They would do whatever it took to ensure he could still come.

Thanks to the trust we have earned through the literacy class, we've been asked to show the Jesus film twice in this village. There are no believers here yet, but through the relationships we have made, there is an opening to share our faith with them. Seeds are planted, thought processes started, questions mulled over. Maybe next week one of them will believe, or maybe in 20 years' time. The timing is not in our hands; but the seeds are.

Reading, writing and wonky camels



Have you ever tried drawing a camel? If so, you have my sympathy. They bend in all the wrong places! But you can't tell too many stories in the Fulani language, Fulfulde, before you come across a camel or two, and because there were hardly any books in the right dialect of Fulfulde, we started to make our own. Simple stories with pictures — including wonky camels!

In the last 2 years, with help from colleagues from Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), these books have been developed into part of a literacy programme in Fulfulde. We are trying to produce something that can be used to teach literacy and train teachers. This is a vital tool in planting the church among the Fulani, especially the nomadic Wodaabe. Even if they can't have regular contact with other believers due to their nomadic lifestyle, they can read the Bible for themselves.

It also means the next generation of Wodaabe Christians will have access to Bible schools and discipleship materials. We have seen the benefits of this. One Wodaabe man who went to Bible school in Benin has returned to lead an indigenous Wodaabe church. His maturity and understanding of his faith are, without doubt, increased due to the fact that he can read and write.



The potential impact of literate Wodaabe Christians is huge. Our Wodaabe friends regularly travel to Nigeria, Benin and Cameroon, and throughout Niger. They could easily become, and have become in some cases, itinerant evangelists covering a vast area. If these men and women could read God's Word for themselves and use it to answer questions and counter criticisms, their impact could be extraordinary.

0 comments

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Urgent Prayer Need

Bingham Academy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, urgently needs a [French teacher](#) to join their staff team in August.

Pray that God will provide the right person to meet this need.