

[Review] *Building Bridges to Oral Cultures: Journeys among the Least-Reached*, by K. Carla Bowman



C. P. TROUTMAN

C. P. Troutman and his family have served in cross-cultural ministry in East Asia since 2013. Most recently they lived in Ulaanbaatar, where he taught and did relational student ministry at Mongolia International University, taught cross-cultural ministry at Mongolia Trinity Bible College, and worked with worship leaders to develop contextual worship in fusion genres. He is currently working on his PhD in World Arts at Dallas International University.



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Building Bridges to Oral Cultures, by Carla Bowman, is an autobiographical account of the ministry of Carla and her husband, Jim. In a career that began in the 1980s and spanned more than three decades, the Bowmans helped pioneer the use of orality in mission work. Many of the ministries we take for granted today were initiated in large part by their lives and work, such as using orality to learn and engage with scripture, story-based approaches to evangelism, and the use of drama in teaching and communication with a community. Like their work, most of the stories here are focused on work with indigenous groups, clearly demonstrating their passion for working with overlooked, unreached, and oppressed people groups. Their own description of their ministry sums it up best: “we had been entrusted with a dream to see the Word presented as a creative reflection of the beauty of the Lord in every culture” (130). This book is for those who want to know their story and learn from their methods.

The text is structured in four parts, mostly organized chronologically, each marking a transition in the scope of their ministry. It begins with their early days of short-term summer ministry with indigenous people groups in Mexico, which served as a foundation for a “five-year plan” that launched their later work. Section 2 marks their transition into full-time ministry in Mexico, which sees them broadening their ministry beyond initial contacts to interact with a wide variety of groups and organizations. Taken together, these sections show the Bowmans’ own development of thought from vague impressions to a clearer strategy. The next two sections explore their development of a comprehensive approach to reaching and discipling oral learners, creating their *Bridges* orality training curriculum and working to implement it globally. This started with testing and refining it in Asia (Section 3) and then publishing it as an illustrated video curriculum, used throughout the world (Section 4). These last two sections often shift the focus of the narrative onto the many local leaders they helped empower.

Each chapter shares a similar structure: after an excerpt from one of Carla’s journal entries there is a main narrative portion, followed by a bullet-point summary of “What We Learned.” The journal entries contain the most aesthetic and emotive language in the book, focusing on Carla’s



inner thoughts and prayers. (I had the sense that they must have been edited after-the-fact, as they seem far too well-composed—but that hardly detracts from their purpose.) The narrative portions read like a particularly interesting missionary newsletter; they are quite “bare-bones,” presumably to keep the book to its manageable 250 pages. These passages are easy to follow, but they could have benefited from more of a story form, as the sparse structure occasionally becomes tiresome.

The final “lessons learned” summaries, however, strike me as the most useful and innovative aspects of the text, and slightly unusual among missionary memoirs. While it does distract slightly by taking us out of the narrative flow, it’s more than worth the trade-off, as it helps to solidify the key points of the text, forming its own sub-narrative of the logical growth and development of their thinking.

In addition to gaining an understanding of the major principles of orality mission work, I suspect that every reader will take away several different personal lessons. As an instructor of cross-cultural ministry classes, I appreciate the Bowmans’ emphasis on contemporary missiological concepts, all presented without jargon; verbiage like *critical contextualization*, *capacity building*, *empowering local leadership*, *social justice*, and *minority language use* is largely absent from the text. But what I most admire is how they’ve modeled the need for humble, vulnerable honesty. Rather than hiding their missteps, the Bowmans recognize that mistakes are where the best learning happens. They wrestle with the ambiguity of well-intentioned mission efforts, yielding many insights in the process¹ while always avoiding harsh criticism or polemics. In fact, the strictest evaluations are reserved for Carla’s own favorite ministries, such as when she realized that though her literacy workshops might be giving the attendees new skills, they would never effectively communicate to their hearts the way oral forms did.

Creativity, experimentation, and refinement are the hallmarks of the Bowmans’ approach, conveying one of the most important lessons of this book: never stop learning and growing. Occasionally some of the lessons and observations of the text feel dated, but every time I questioned whether their insights are still applicable in those cultures, I had to wonder if they might not also be becoming applicable once again within my own late-modern cultural sphere in the US. This thought process often happens in the space of a single page. On page 67, for instance, I wondered if the resistance the Tzeltal people showed toward literacy could possibly have persisted until now, given the fact that most of the young people are now bilingual in Tzeltal and Spanish. Just a bit further down the page, however, when she mentions her concern for “those who learned better through song, storytelling, Biblical poetry recitation, memorization, and drama,” I had to chuckle and say, “those are the kids I teach every week.”

At several points in my reading I found myself stopping to reflect and journal about my own life and ministry. If nothing else, the example of patient refinement convicted me about my own rush to see progress in my ethnoarts work; it’s beneficial to see that the most useful and

¹ For example, that the Jesus film may seem a foolproof means of evangelism, but a film cannot just “show what happened,” because it relies on a visual syntax that varies by culture (see chapter 8, under the section “The Jesus Movie Effect” for a fuller description of this).

transformative aspects of our experience require a lot of time and many mistakes. These efforts are not fruitless or wasted time—just the opposite: they are pure gold. The many descriptions of oral approaches to scripture and discipleship also made me want to use more of these approaches in my own engagement with scripture, perhaps using music to memorize passages of text. In discussing these larger lessons, however, I don't want to mitigate the usefulness of the many, many individual practical observations and insights they convey. One example that comes to mind is a relatively short passage that discusses the importance of having storytellers ask their audience questions after finishing a story, because giving answers for ourselves is necessary to effectively solidify the meaning in our minds. Such insights are bound to spare orality practitioners many a headache.

Considering the accessible level of terminology, careful introductions to missiological concepts, and emphasis on narrative over concepts and models, it seems clear that this book is meant for beginning missionaries, curious popular audiences, and intro-level mission students. For academic use, I would say that *Building Bridges to Oral Cultures* is ideal for introductory courses for workers in fields such as orality and translation. But it could also prove very beneficial for a general course in mission practice, and it would even be a good candidate for personnel training programs. Anyone wanting to expand the imagination of supporters, practitioners, or students about what mission can look like will undoubtedly find this text useful. However, if you are looking for a high level of hard data or a concise how-to manual for orality practitioners, this is probably not going to fit your needs. The emphasis here is on expanding our thinking and gaining insight into the need for adaptability in our mission practice. Finally, and perhaps most obviously, for anyone interested in understanding the history of the orality mission movement that is now flourishing all over the world, this volume provides key pieces of information about that story.