

MentorNet #09
**Using Stories and Skits to Train Leaders and
 to Communicate God's Word**

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Pastor Joe ambled into the seminar room and sat with a sigh. “These will be three boring days! Listening to a foreigner mumble about his abstract ideas and irrelevant methods! Oh well, the food is good. I’ll get some business done between sessions.”

The foreign speaker, however, immediately asked for three volunteers. To Joe he said quietly, “Sir, will you role-play the part of Mr. Trainer? Simply listen to your trainee — this other volunteer here — report what his church is doing.” To another he said, “You, Mr. Moneybags, will interrupt and offer this trainee a scholarship to study in a distant city. Joe, you argue that you are already training him the way Jesus and Paul trained leaders, and he is starting a new, growing church as a result. Mr. Moneybags, you keep insisting with arrogance that yours is the only way to get education, and ask the audience if they agree with you.” Thus started three days of intense interaction, at the end of which Joe told his friends, “I never learned so much in such a short time, and we students did most of the talking!”

Since pastors and mentors seek to train others through real human relationships, rather than artificial classroom lectures, they often find that student learning is enhanced by stories, especially when acted out. Fortunately, good stories are easy to find — the Bible has scores of them — and acting is natural, since we all do some of that every day.

Part of becoming a competent mentor and workshop trainer is to incorporate stories and skits into training sessions, both to enhance learning and to teach how to mentor others using this same, simple, easily-transferred method. Besides, stories and skits are fun in every culture in the world. In fact, our Bible has come to us largely in the form of stories, historical accounts of God’s dealing with us, not primarily as a theology book.

Stories can be...

- read (good),
- related by memory (better),
- related by other helpers (better yet),
- acted out in a short role-play (best),
- role-played briefly by different helpers (best by far!).

We first list benefits of stories, then some do’s and don’ts.

Benefits of Using Stories to Train Leaders and Communicate the Word of God

Folk recall stories more easily when the time comes to apply the teaching—if the stories were done right.

Stories and role-plays stick in our memories better, because they offer more sensory stimuli. They find a home not only in our brain's abstract memory banks, but also wherever we store visual and audio images. For example, workers arriving in a different culture seldom do what they have heard in lectures or read. They do what they have done before or have seen modeled. In workshops of more than a day, we often form the group into a temporary training church that does everything a church should do. They role-play fieldwork that they cannot do for real because of time limitations.

Stories and role-plays are easy to pass on—if done right.

Oral societies need the Word of God in story form. Most people movements to Christ throughout history have taken place among illiterate peoples. They repeat the stories and the gospel flows from friend to friend and family to family. Stories also flow this way in literate societies, if we teach them in a way that is reproducible. Using high technology is not reproducible. Nor is highly analytical reasoning. Simple stories with apt applications, however, are.

Stories touch the heart—if done right.

Stories motivate and apply the truths of God's Word better than abstract analysis. This is why our Lord used so many. The whole Bible is either history (in story format) or teaching that grows out of the stories that relate historical events.

Stories enable more people to participate actively in the teaching—if done right.

Avoid letting people be passive 'hearers only.' Both adults and children enjoy role-play and telling a Bible story. Wise teachers do not always tell the Bible stories themselves, but ask others to tell them or act them out. Put the chairs in a semi-circle or horseshoe for stronger interaction.

Role-plays disarm people who resist doing new and needed activities—if done right.

Traditionally-minded people often want things to be perfect in a mother church before starting daughter churches. (The wasted time discourages everyone.) They fear that it will cost too much. They set up man-made rules for evangelizing, baptizing, organizing, naming leaders and other church activities, which only hinder. In those circumstance, you, as a trainer, can have the group role-play starting a church. Appoint characters to enter the scene when you see that the time is right and to voice these objections. Let them argue outlandishly and humorously for the most detrimental traditions. It is better not to tell them exactly what to say. We sometimes name such characters Mr. Legalist, Dr. Academician, The Rev. Highchurch, Mr. Throwmoney. We name others as pagan idol worshippers and money seekers, etc. This works better if the role-players do not memorize their lines, just the ideas. Ask the group to respond to them.

Do's and Don'ts of Using Stories

DO include adults. Did you think that stories are mainly for children? Adults also learn, retain and apply truths better when we convey them with stories. When children or teen-agers act out a Bible story, ask at least one adult also to participate, to bring seriousness and respect to it. Especially include fathers.

DO NOT present a 'production.' For teaching Bible truths and helping people make plans and commitments, we find it much more effective if role-players do not memorize lines, but simply act out the ideas, keeping the focus on the point being made. Avoid costumes and any but the simplest props. Trained actors can seldom adjust to this. They want to perform, which draws attention and admiration away from what we want to portray. (The same thing happens with worship music. When it is very beautiful few people sing. They listen and enjoy it passively, which is the opposite of what God requires in His Word.)

DO keep it brief. Normally two or three minutes for each point are enough. For example, you might name some as church planters and others as their contacts in a pagan society. Then tell them to plant a church. They usually start by conversing casually with these contacts to build a relationship, which takes time that we cannot spare. When you see that they have begun this, say, for example, "Good! You're building the relationship. Now, a day has passed and you've done it. What has to happen next?" Ask the group to suggest things. Above all, keep it moving. Inexperienced teachers often let role-plays drag on, which weakens their value as a teaching tool.

DO NOT avoid role-plays because you think you are not creative. Let those you ask to help do the creative stuff. Creative leaders can rob participants of the opportunity to feel free to portray a truth in their own way, by structuring it too much for them. Simply let those who tell the story or act it out do it their own way. You will have some happy surprises.

DO teach highly doctrinal books such as Romans, Galatians and Hebrews with stories. The apostle Paul assumed that his readers knew the stories. The book of Romans is boring and obscure if we do not include in our teaching the stories upon which its doctrines are based. It is a crime to teach such books without relating the historical events that gave rise to the doctrines. We rob people of joyful understanding of the doctrines' foundations. Christianity is unique among religions in that all of its doctrines are derived from historical events. These include creation, Adam's fall, the flood, God's promises to Abraham and his faith, the slavery in Egypt and their escape, the law given at Sinai, the establishment, division and fall of the kingdom, the exile and restoration. The New Testament adds the birth, baptism, miracles, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and many more.

DO give preference to Bible stories. The Holy Spirit normally uses the historical events of Scripture to convince and illuminate our minds more readily than fiction. Also, the spiritual impact of most Bible stories makes them easy to relate or act out. For example, to teach original sin, first ask someone to role-play Adam. "Speak what Adam says in Genesis 3, and act out briefly what you think he did." Name others as Eve, the serpent, the Voice of God, and a Narrator who reads what is not dialogue. Do not rehearse it too much or it will become stiff. Do not expect perfection. The errors give opportunity to laugh and lead to effective discussion afterwards by the group. You can do this for dozens of Bible stories to convey vital doctrines and duties. Discuss the stories afterwards and ask what God wants us to do in response. Confess our sin? Pray with stronger faith? Show our love for needy people in a more practical way? ...