

**PRIORITY OF VERNACULAR LANGUAGE IN CHURCH PLANTING**

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**Introduction**

George Cowan observes, “Indigenous churches take root and grow when the Scriptures are translated into the language of the people and laymen can witness using vernacular Scriptures” (*Importance of Using the Vernacular in Church Planting*).

Patterson and Currah, like thousands of others, bear testimony to the greater effectiveness of church planting efforts through the preferred language of local populations. Patterson took years to become fluent in a rural Spanish dialect of Honduras and Currah in Baol Wolof of West Africa, before the gospel took root in an indigenous people. David Garrett affirms the authority of the Bible and the priority of the heart language of the people in church planting:

Even among non-literate people groups, the Bible has been the guiding source for doctrine, church polity and life itself. While Church Planting Movements have occurred among peoples without the Bible translated into their own language, the majority had the Bible either orally or in written form in their heart language. In every instance, Scripture provided the rudder for the church’s life, and its authority was unquestioned. (*Church Planting Movements, 34*)

**Vernacular language in training Christian workers**

Where workers have received training in language other than the local tongue, problems have been noted over the centuries. These concern the choice of trainees for Christian work, the ability of these workers to understand their training, and the respect that local people show to these workers. Giving priority to the vernacular avoids these problems.

	<b>IF YOU TRAIN USING AN OUTSIDE LANGUAGE</b>	<b>IF YOU MENTOR USING THE VERNACULAR</b>
Choice of church workers	Outside trainers choose trainees who are competent in the trainer’s preferred language.	Trainers choose workers who demonstrate faithful service regardless of national or official language ability.
Workers’ grasp of ideas and methods	Requires education based on a foreign worldview and ecclesiastical culture.	Ideas expressed in the vernacular fit better the local culture.
Respect given to church workers by the people	Only those demonstrating fluency in the national language enjoy respect, even if misunderstood.	Vernacular-speaking workers gain respect by their maturity, character, and spirituality, as Scripture requires.

Those who must train Christian workers by using an outside language should ensure that the vernacular language remains the priority. We recommend the following actions:

- Train workers who speak both languages fluently, having lived in the local culture.
- Talk with these workers often about how to express ideas in the local tongue, and about what local customs apply to church planting. Be a learner as well as a trainer.

- Employ training materials written in the local language. You may have to teach your workers to read that language, if they were educated in an outside language.
- Insist that apprentices witness and teach using the vernacular that local people prefer.
- Make efforts to gain, at least, a rudimentary knowledge of the language, until you can carry on a simple conversation and ask the right questions about expressing ideas.

### **Vernacular language in planting new churches**

The apostle Paul explained to the Corinthians that, in church meetings, he would rather speak five words in plain language than a thousand in an unknown tongue, so that others would be edified (Acts 14:10-13). Tribal pastors often preach in a trade language that they consider to be the proper worship tongue, even though only the men who have travelled extensively understand it well and their wives not at all. Such happens frequently with Spanish in Latin America, French in West Africa, and Hindi or English in India. Garrett explains that even in such cases,

The heart language of the people emerges in their prayers, songs, sermon illustrations and applications. Worship in the common heart language keeps it accessible and within reach of all members of the community and allows everyone to participate in a new church's formation. Missionaries who identify and embrace the heart language of the people they are trying to reach are well positioned to stimulate a Church Planting Movement. (37)

Some mission agencies require tribal workers to learn trade languages in order to 'get around.' The workers, having spent a year doing so, will not endure another year learning a third language, and so they fail to bond with the people they serve. Christians often adopt traditional or colonial, church traditions that they learn through an outside language. Terms like church, pastor, evangelist, preach, elder, deacon and many others, as used in Western and mission-founded churches, can evoke non-biblical ideas that stifle church reproduction and body life. We recommend taking the following actions:

- Gain enough ability to speak and think in the vernacular language, that you and your local co-workers can find expressions that accurately convey biblical ideas.
- Use a vernacular translation of the Bible, even if it is incomplete. If the translators used a lot of outside, traditional vocabulary, then explain those words and phrases in the local language, assigning biblical meanings.
- Encourage a lot of discussion, sharing and dialogue in the vernacular language as a normal part of church life. Avoid teaching workers to "preach" monologues.
- Encourage and support production of affordable materials in the vernacular, especially materials that local folks can afford to purchase and share with others.
- Translators in pioneer fields should work closely with church planters, to make sure that their translation of Scripture makes sense to them and is actually used.

### **Resources**

*Reproducible Pastoral Training*, to multiply churches, O'Connor:

<<http://missionbooks.org/wcl/customer/product.php?productid=533&cat=1&page=1>>

Mentoring tools and sites, visit <<http://www.MentorAndMultiply.com>>.

*Train & Multiply*<sup>®</sup>, Pastoral training, church planting. Info: [GalenCurrah@TrainAndMultiply.com](mailto:GalenCurrah@TrainAndMultiply.com).

Obtain *T&M*<sup>®</sup>: [www.TrainAndMultiply.com](http://www.TrainAndMultiply.com)

Free training materials for new leaders & missionaries, <<http://www.Paul-Timothy.net>>

Download "*Come, Let Us Disciple the Nations*" (CD-ROM), visit <<http://www.Paul-Timothy.net>>.

Order *Church Multiplication Guide* from a bookshop or via <<http://www.WCLbooks.com>>.

To subscribe or to download earlier *MentorNet* messages, visit <<http://www.MentorNet.ws>>.

Training materials that combine pastoral training with church planting: <<http://www.Paul-Timothy.net>>.