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The making of an evangelist

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In these days of fast air travel and on other modes of transport, there is a distinct possibility that Christians who wish to evangelise, will be given opportunity to speak in other parts of the world.

When this happens, it becomes essential to find out all you can about water, food, customs, visa limitations, language barriers, restrictions by governments (e.g. Malaysia) on the spreading of Christianity. It is good to find out this information from missionaries or mission societies who have worked in the area to be visited.

It is essential to find out what you can regarding water and ways to prevent illness because of drinking water in some overseas nations. In some places, it is essential to drink only boiled water, and to clean your teeth with only boiled water on a brush. This precaution is very necessary to avoid serious illness.

In some areas food can be a health hazard. Salads can be a health hazard because of human fertiliser used by some countries (that is, faeces). In other cases, the cooking of food is not sufficient to kill bacteria.

It is because of the above difficulties that many European and English speaking people try to get into a good class hotel to stay, to avoid these dangers.

A visiting preacher to a country needs to get some information from somebody as to what customs, which we take for granted, can cause offence to some people in these overseas countries. In some countries, to pat a young boy on the head is considered to be an irreligious action, as the head is considered sacred, and so it is quite a dangerous thing to do.

Another country considers the way a man sits on a platform and crosses or places his legs is obscene.

In yet another country, one never hands anything, especially food or a gift with the left hand. It is not done as the left hand is used for all dirty jobs.

If you are ambidextrous, this causes problems because it is so easy to stretch out either the left or right hands. This writer falls into this category, and so found it necessary to sit on his left hand at times.

These suggestions are not meant to scare you, but are an essential part of knowledge for travelling to some overseas countries.

In some mission fields of the world, missionaries are finding difficulty in getting visas renewed. This is because of political decisions, and usually not because of any fault of the missionary. There are areas, however, where evangelists can get in on a 'visitor's visa' for a few weeks, as long as they have been invited by a local church to hold
special meetings. There may be some restrictions as to the kind of meetings which can be held.

Visiting evangelists have found that they have been able to reach a number of people for Christ, even though the time has been somewhat limited. These visits can be a strength to the missionaries and missionary churches, and helped them to feel less alone in their overseas task. The fellowship with a visiting evangelist, and sometimes a team with him, can mean so much.

In second part of this chapter will deal with 'speaking through an interpreter'. However, literature in the language of the nation visited can be a way of spreading the good news. Your hosts for the visit should be able to tell you what kind of literature would be suitable and permissible as far as the government is concerned. This knowledge helps avoid causing any difficulties for the resident missionary and church area he or she works in.

In some overseas countries, especially in Asia, have a national religion. In Malaysia, the Malay people are officially Moslem, and there is very little opportunity to evangelise the Malays. There are other nations in the country who are a field for evangelism. Chinese, Indians, Eurasians, and some English or Europeans. If restrictions set by governments, because of an official religion are disobeyed, action can be taken to close down the mission, and punish those who disobeyed the religion. Care has to be taken to see that overseas visitors do not hurt the people who have to live with damaged caused.

Speaking through an interpreter

These hints are given because there is very little material around that I know of to help those who are not familiar with the way to work with an interpreter.

There are two rather humorous happenings I heard of, which I understand are quite authentic stories. Both happened with preachers who were 'first time' or inexperienced in working with interpreters. Because they apparently did not understand some basic rules, they both lost their interpreter somewhere during the message. The evangelists continued preaching but the interpreters switched over and gave their own messages. At the appeal for decision for Christ, God was pleased to bless the 'split sermon' of one of the preachers. What happened with the other, I didn't hear about it.

There are two or three methods of working with an interpreter which I have had to use:

1. Working with deaf and dumb people, with a sign language interpreter.

2. Working with an interpreter standing alongside the preacher - both with microphones.

3. Working with an interpreters - four or five at a time, while they are seated in booths.
After many years of working with interpreters, covering a period of something like 35 years, I would like to pass on some of the pitfalls to avoid in these areas.

Under point one above, whilst working in a blind, deaf and dumb Sunday School, I found it worked out best to have an expert in the sign language. However, this chapter mainly covers points two and three.

Under point two, I have had the experience of working in Russian, Indian, Sri Lankan, Indonesian, Chinese (Cantonese), Vietnamese, and possibly some others.

Under point three, in conferences and congresses in French, Spanish, German, Dutch, Japanese, Korean, and others.

In congresses and conferences, speaking through an interpreter is relatively easy because those interpreters in the booths have their own equipment and they are first-rate linguists.

Most of this chapter deals with the section two where from time to time the ability of the interpreters will vary, and therefore, much more care is needed.

Ú ☪ God blesses through interpreters✉

This is a fact. Many, many people have been won to Christ through the use of interpreters.

Another fact is that God uses all kinds of interpreters - brilliant, poor, confused, and in the cause of David Brainerd (the apostle to the Red Indians), it seems that the only interpreter he could find was a drunken Indian.

When you wish to get your message over using an interpreter, here are some steps that are useful.

* Expect God to bless the interpreted message.

* Spend time in prayer about it.

* Planning should take into consideration, the structure of sentences in the language. English may say 'The boy ran up the road', but in the Greek and Cantonese Chinese languages, that sentence would not necessarily be in that order. It could be something like 'the road ran up the boy' depending on endings and emphases.

In other words, some languages need a whole sentence given by the speaker in order to be translated more accurately. In other languages, sentences may be broken up because of the length of words and/or sentences.

* Give your interpreter a rough outline of what you are going to say and have a half-hour or so talk with him about it. Mark out Scripture to be quoted with chapter and verse, so that he can mark them out in his own Bible.
* It is usually a good thing to avoid poetry because what rhymes in one language usually does not in another. At best, you can only give a summary of what the poem says. Usually best to avoid it.

In planning the length of your sermon, please remember that a 30 minute message, may have to be reduced to 15 minutes in order to give the interpreter approximately 15 minutes to translate it. This time factor will depend on the ability of the interpreter. Some interpreters are so good that they speak as fast as the speaker, with the same intonations and gestures. These are exceptionally though.

Avoid also colloquialisms, slang and terms not familiar to the audience. Be guided by your interpreter.

The story is told about an Australian and French man travelling in a train together. The French man was looking out the window when the Australian saw another train approaching. 'Look out', he cried. The French man put his head further out and just avoided a terrible accident. He was very angry and said to the Australia, 'You people are crazy, you say 'Look out, when you mean look in'. As has been pointed out before in this book, some statements familiar in one country do not give offence, in another country can border on the crude or obscene.

Slang expressions such as 'how does that grab you?' meaning 'what does that mean to you?', can be taken on the literal meaning of the words with rather strange results. People learning English from another language usually are taught strict English, and unless used to the speech of an English-speaking country, they tend to give a very literal meaning to words.

So simple, straight-forward meaning of words gives the interpreter a better opportunity of translating more accurately.

Unless people are familiar with sport and politics of your country, terms like baseball diamond, cricket pitch, rugby league football and members of the Legislative Assembly, will probably mean little or nothing to the interpreter or audience.

As a general rule, speak plainly and a little slower, unless you have a very accomplished interpreter. One interpreter I had told me to talk at my usual speed because she could manage to interpret quite adequately.

In some languages, the length of sentences and words have no bearing on the words being interpreted. For example, once I said something short like 'Yes it is', but the interpreter went on, and on, and on, and on. Then in the same situation I used a rather long sentence, but the interpreter said something very short. I actually wondered whether he misunderstood me, until I got the hang of the language.

Don't let this chapter scare you off. Trust God who has said in Proverbs 3:5-6, 'Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not to thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him and He will direct they paths'. He promised it and He will do what He has said.

If you are making an appeal, how to do this will depend on who has been leading the service. I have found there are a couple of ways of doing this.
1. Make the appeal yourself, speaking slowly and having previously discussed it with your interpreter.

2. On other occasions, I have made a brief appeal, but I had a Pastor with a great evangelistic heart leading the service, and I let me expand my appeal with great results.

In both types of appeals, God has been at work with people coming in decision to the Lord.

Always remember this - God is master linguist who, by the Holy Spirit, is able to overcome the poverty of our experience or knowledge, and is very concerned to see people come back to Him in repentance and faith. You can depend on God to make up whatever is lacking, provided we have done what we could to be the best we can be for Him.

God bless you! May you go ahead and reap a harvest of souls for the sake of the blessed Lord Jesus Christ.