

New focus on oral scripture: God speaks Pilaga - Thursday, October 16, 2008

FORMOSA, Argentina (Mennonite



Estefania Sosa
Photographer: Bolivian
Bible Society

 [PHOTO\(S\) AVAILABLE](#)

Mission Network) - Santiago Cabrera listens for God's voice every morning, a voice that speaks to him in Pilagá.

Some young Pilagá professional people believe that a degree from a school is essential to Christian faith, said Cabrera, who first learned about Jesus 64 years ago.

"It's not true. When the young teacher says to me, 'Old man, you don't know anything,' I just hold my tongue and listen in silence. He may know something, but I know God," Cabrera said.

[Byrdalene and Willis Horst](#), serving with Mennonite Mission Network, have walked alongside indigenous Christians in the Argentine Chaco since 1971. Instead of planting Mennonite churches, they have offered Bible-centered ministries that affirm an authentically indigenous expression of faith.

Like Cabrera, they have also learned to listen.

This listening posture prevents them from becoming mired in outdated mission strategies. They have joined the biblical linguists who, pushed by the electronic generation and a new understanding of traditional societies, are re-thinking the time-honored

practice of focusing largely on printed Bibles.

"The emerging mandate is to translate the message of the Jesus way into media other than the written word," said Willis Horst. "Orality is still a strong factor in many traditional cultures. Even among populations where literacy has become vital, less dependence on the written word is a trend in the popular electronic environment."

In 1997, the Horsts and two Pilagá Christians attended a [United Bible Societies'](#) workshop where they learned to prepare biblical texts for dramatized reading. The two indigenous people returned to their community, Pozo del Tigre, excited about recording scripture in their language."

Five years later, the first cassette was distributed, featuring the stories of Jonah and Paul's shipwreck (the final two chapters of Acts) and original songs inspired by the Jonah narrative.

Since then, four more recordings have been completed with stories, poetry and songs from the biblical books of Judges, Ruth, Lamentations and Psalms. Photos of church leaders and their families illustrate accompanying booklets of the texts.

Though Lamentations probably wouldn't rate a place among the top five essential Bible portions in the United States, it describes the reality of the indigenous people of Argentine Chaco.

"This is our cry: hunger, cruelty, suffering, humiliation. Our people cry and go looking for food. They trade whatever they have for scraps to stay alive, and call out to God, 'Look how they humiliate us.' " said Zulema Sosa, Pilagá lab technician in the Pozo

del Tigre hospital, quoting from Lamentations 1: 11.

Translators were working with Lamentations in 2006 while government authorities conducted an intensive investigation into the 1947 massacre of several hundred Pilagá people by the federal government's National Guard.

Representatives of 16 indigenous communities met with lawyers while the mass graves near Las Lomitas were excavated.

"When the first bones were exhumed, many of those present cried out in long-suppressed grief," Byrdalene Horst said. "Fear of the military had locked them in silent lament for 60 years."

Before leaving the site, Yancoudi Pedro Yánzi, a Pilagá pastor and teacher, led the crowd in a prayer that included forgiveness for those who killed their loved ones, as many onlookers had relatives who had been murdered.

The Pilagá people describe how the audio-scriptures empower them by giving them a deeper understanding of their faith and by validating their culture.

Ignacio Silva, a preacher and grade school teacher said, "In order to be a people, every culture needs to value its own language and customs. We are a forgotten people, so it is especially important to spread enthusiasm for our language. The memories of our elderly people are our books."

Patricio Fernández earns his living by hunting and farming.

"When I was invited to be a reader, it was as though I just woke up. I always want to learn more about this faith I

have," Fernández said.

Beyond an increasing awareness of the importance of oral communication in both tradition and electronic societies, Willis Horst named three additional reasons for the recent emphasis on an oral presentation of the Bible.

- It follows the same trajectory by which the word of God became a sacred book.

"Jesus carried out his ministry mostly through oral media," Horst said. "He entrusted God's message to the oral processes available to the uneducated and common people of his day."

- An oral presentation frees translation from a rigid literalism by maximizing the principle of the dynamic equivalent that helps make the biblical message more understandable in new contexts.
- Third, it makes hearers more aware that every expression of the inspired message in human languages has passed through human filters, Horst said.

"Exploring those filters helps discover new meanings in the texts more clearly than if we only focus on the exact words of the Bible, which may cause us to miss some of what God intends to communicate with us," Horst said.

Horst likens the oral scriptures to preaching.

"Sermons have always relied on dynamic story-telling skills which include current details to bring the message to life. Terms, such as contextualization, have been used to refer to the process of making the gospel understandable inter-culturally. The new realization is that the

message is not dependent on the written text alone," Horst said.

In January 2009, the Horsts will retire from their assignment that includes listening, teaching, literature distribution, a quarterly newsletter, visiting and prayer.

Lynda Hollinger-Janzen
[PHOTO\(S\) AVAILABLE](#)