

HOW TO WORK WITH AN INTERPRETER

A RESOURCE FROM NEXT GENERATION ALLIANCE



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There are many opportunities for the evangelists of the Next Generation Alliance to travel to foreign nations to preach the Gospel. When an evangelist preaches overseas, it is often necessary to use an interpreter. In this article you'll find tips to help you be effective at communicating with an interpreter.

SIT DOWN WITH YOUR INTERPRETER BEFORE MINISTERING AND TELL HIM ABOUT YOUR SERMON.

Explain any difficult concepts or unusual words you are going to use.

Ask your interpreter to find the scriptures you plan to use and read them. It is helpful if your interpreter puts a marker in his Bible for the Scriptures you will quote. This saves time during the preaching of the sermon.

If you have notes, let your interpreter look at the notes.

Explain how you want your interpreter to work with you:

- Do you want him to mimic your actions?
- How do you want him to handle the healing testimonies? For example, ask him to whisper in your ear what the person is saying, instead of saying it in English on the microphone.

Pray with the interpreter before the service. He should be covered with the same anointing that is on you. The best interpreters are ministers in their own right who are used to flowing in the Holy Spirit.

USE SHORT SENTENCES AND PAUSE BETWEEN EACH SENTENCE.

Often inexperienced preachers make the mistake of forgetting their interpreter. They may speak for thirty seconds or longer before suddenly remembering their interpreter. Do not preach a whole paragraph. By the time you finish the paragraph, your interpreter may have forgotten what the beginning of the paragraph was about. Preach one sentence or thought at a time.

SPEAK IN COMPLETE IDEAS; NOT BITS OF SENTENCES.

Because sentence structure is turned around in some languages, you have to convey the whole thought, so the interpreter knows where you are going. For example, in Spanish, they say “The man big and handsome...” instead of “The big, handsome man....” If you only say the first few words, the interpreter will not be able to get the sense of the sentence across to the audience.

USE THE TIME THE INTERPRETER IS SPEAKING TO THINK OF YOUR NEXT SENTENCE.

You can be aware of what the interpreter is saying without fully listening to them.

GIVE THE INTERPRETER TIME TO TRANSLATE.

Don't cut them off before they have finished. Some concepts have no linguistic equivalent in other languages. Your interpreter may need to paint word pictures of the concepts you use. This process may take longer than your original sentence.

When you use an interpreter, your time is cut in half. If you have one hour to preach, prepare a thirty-minute sermon because the other half of the time will be used by the interpreter.

DON'T ALLOW A BAD INTERPRETER TO KILL A SERVICE.

If an interpreter is not doing a good job, don't hesitate to find a new interpreter. But do it gently. Explain to the audience, “I'm sorry but this interpreter and I are not used to working together. He's doing great but I want to try another interpreter.” Ideally this situation should not come up because it is embarrassing

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for the interpreter. Try to test the interpreter before putting him up on stage in front of a bunch of people.

SPEAK SLOWLY AND DISTINCTLY WITH GOOD PRONUNCIATION.

Sometimes the acoustics of the venue can be horrible, and it is hard for the interpreter to hear what you are saying if you are facing away from him and the stage monitors are not working right. If this happens, face towards the interpreter as you speak each sentence. By watching your lips, it will be easier for him to understand what you are saying.

DON'T USE PUNS, IDIOMS, COLLOQUIALISMS, OR SLANG.

In Mexico, I heard a minister preach on the joy of the Lord. The point of his message was that the letters of the word J-O-Y stand for Jesus, Others, & You. However, the point of the message was lost because in Spanish, the word for joy is “gozo” which does not translate to “Cristo, Otros, & Usted.”

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Pastor Ted Estes was preaching in Russia when he started his sermon by announcing, “God is a fixin’ to move.” The interpreter froze because he did not know what “a fixin’” meant. After an awkward silence, an American voice called from the balcony, “God is preparing to move.” There are many phrases like “The bottom line...” or “from the inside out” which do not translate into other languages.

Here are some examples of some idioms that do not translate into other languages:

- The lights are on but nobody is home. (Means someone is stupid).
- When pigs fly (Means something is impossible).
- To pig out (To overeat).
- Bring home the bacon (To make money).
- Get down to brass tacks (To get started).
- Everything but the kitchen sink (Everything has been included).
- Put a sock in it (To tell someone to be quiet).
- To drink like a fish (To drink heavily).
- Finger licking good (To taste really good).
- It is a dog eat dog world (Means that people are mean and only look out for themselves).
- Bet your bottom dollar (To invest everything you have).
- To put in your two cents (To give your opinion even if it is not that valuable).
- To work for peanuts (To work for low wages).
- Learn the ropes (To learn how to do something).
- Run a tight ship (Have a disciplined organization).
- Go overboard (Be overenthusiastic).
- A rule of thumb (A basic principle).

Often interpreters only have a basic understanding of English. They do not understand all the idioms that English-speaking Americans use. Instead of using a figure of speech, just tell the people what you mean by using ordinary words.

STOP USING “CHRISTIANESE” VOCABULARY.

Christianese: Vocabulary that only someone who has been in the Church for twenty years can understand.

Often our vocabulary can be misunderstood unintentionally. For example, in Papua New Guinea the indigenous people thought the Christian word for God was “Hallelujah” because the Christians said that word so often. Most likely, no one in a non-Christian community knows what “maranatha” means, or what a synagogue is, or what the Urim and the Thummim are. No one is going to understand a reference to “the former and the latter house,” or “the valley of dry bones,” or “the Rose of Sharon.” I heard one crusade preacher mention in passing how “the veil was ripped in two.” This means nothing to a non-Christian audience. Before you can understand this reference, you need a teaching on the tabernacle, the temple, the Holy of Holies, and the meaning of the temple furnishings. Casually mentioning this Christian cliché conveys nothing to a non-Christian listener. It is useless to talk about “the blood of Jesus” or “the lamb of God” unless the concept of offering an animal sacrifice to atone for sin is carefully explained. What does it mean to an unchurched person if you say, “Blow the Shofar, it is the year of Jubilee”?

When I preach to people who have never heard the Gospel, I explain even basic terms. When I hold up a Bible, I do not call it a “Bible.” Instead, I announce I am reading from “God’s Book.” When I mention Adam and Eve, I explain they were the first man and the first woman created by God. When I talk about sin, I explain, “Sin is when we break God’s commands. God says, “Do not lie,” so when we lie we are sinning. God says, “Do not steal” so if we steal, we are sinning.” If I mention being “born again” I explain there is a natural birth and a spiritual birth.

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BE SENSITIVE TO CULTURAL DIFFERENCES.

Many stories could be shared about misunderstandings between cultures. A pastor in Pakistan who had translated for many different foreign preachers shared this church growth technique with me, “The best way to convert the poor Muslim families in Pakistan is to buy a plot of land where they can be buried when they die. Land is very expensive, and the government gives free land to the Muslims for their burial grounds, but the Christian church must purchase land. No one who converts to Christianity can afford to die.” This is a problem that few westerners would consider, but what he said next is a great example of cultural misunderstanding.

The Pakistani pastor continued, “Preachers from America always talk about this problem, but they never do anything to help. They always ask the question when they are preaching, ‘Where will you go when you die?’ but they never help to buy any burial land.” The pastor had translated for dozens of preachers and every time they said, “Where will you go when you die?” meaning “Will you spend eternity in heaven or hell?” he translated it as “Where will you be buried when you die?”

“One time in Nicaragua a preacher started out with a joke and instead of translating the joke the interpreter just said, ‘He’s telling a joke. I don’t really understand it. When he is finished, everyone laugh.’ When everyone laughed, the preacher was happy he had such an impact and started on another joke. The interpreter told the people, ‘Oh no, he’s telling another one. Don’t laugh at this one so much.’”

In Tanzania, there is a story about an old man who is helping a cow give birth to a calf. The birth is difficult, and a young boy suggests to the old man that he turn the shoulders of the calf to help it come out properly. The man follows the suggestion and then, deeply shamed that he had to take the advice of someone younger, the old man goes home and commits suicide. In the West, this story would not be understood, but in Tanzania this story reveals a deep truth about their culture. Elders are highly respected, and the young are never to offer advice or try to teach an older man because the older man would be deeply shamed by not knowing something the younger man knows. This attitude makes it difficult for a young missionary to preach the Gospel because simply by trying to teach about God, he is offending their culture. The missionary must understand the culture he is working with and learn to respect the good within that culture.

Here is another example from a pastor from Pakistan. In his culture it is acceptable to drop in unannounced

and to visit for as long as one wants whereas in American culture, one only comes when invited and then only stays for a predetermined amount of time. In the Pakistani culture, a visitor expects to have everything provided for during his visit. This pastor visited America in order to raise money for his work in Pakistan but when he arrived at a mission’s meeting in Tulsa, Oklahoma, no one there really cared to talk to him, let alone support him, even though they all supposedly cared deeply about reaching unreached people in places like Pakistan. The confusion on his face was obvious as he struggled to navigate through a strange American culture.

When it was time for him to leave he was asked, “How do you plan to travel to your next destination?” He replied, “Can you help me book a plane ticket?” Then he also expected the man to pay for the ticket. It was awkward when it was obvious that the pastor had no money to pay for his ticket. He assumed Americans had an infinite amount of resources (by his standards perhaps they do) and he was greatly confused why people in the West were not willing to give out of their abundance to his needs. The Pakistani pastor went home probably thinking that Christians in America were greedy, self-absorbed, inward-focused, and uncaring even though all the Americans he met were acting in normal caring ways by the standards of their own culture. Whether a missionary goes to the other side of the world, or someone from there comes here, an understanding about the differences between worldviews is vital.

BE CAUTIOUS ABOUT TELLING JOKES.

Some cultures find jokes extremely offensive. Many jokes rely on plays on words and cultural concepts that do not translate well to another language. If you must tell a joke, go over it with your interpreter in advance and ask if it makes sense in the culture you are visiting.

Once a preacher said, “I had butterflies

in my stomach on the airplane because Jesus said, 'Lo [Low], I am with you always...' and the plane was high up in the air." The interpreter was completely confused.

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In Pakistan I was invited to preach at a conference of ministers. Right before I stepped onto the platform, a committee of pastors pulled me aside and sternly warned me not to say that Jesus is a dog. I did not know why they felt that was so important, but I agreed. After I finished preaching I asked why they felt they needed to warn me about this particular thing so strongly.

One pastor told me, "Last year an American preacher told a joke that greatly offended people. This was the joke: Once there was a thief who broke into a house. As he was taking the silverware out of the kitchen drawer he heard a voice say, "Jesus is watching you, Jesus is watching you." It scared him until he noticed a birdcage in the corner of the room. It was a parrot that was saying, "Jesus is watching you." As the thief was climbing out the window a huge doberman pincher jumped up and grabbed him by the rear. The dog held him until the owners arrived and called the police. As he was walked out in handcuffs, he cried, "I should have listened to that bird that told me that Jesus is watching." The owner of the house said, "That's right. The dog's name is Jesus."

This is a joke I have heard a dozen preachers in the United States tell at the beginning of their sermons. It always

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gets a little laugh, but it is not that funny. However, this slightly funny joke from America caused enormous offense in Pakistan. In this Islamic nation, to call someone a dog is a great insult. To imply that Jesus, the Son of God, is a dog or that a dog could have the name of the Son of God is a horrible insult. The preacher who told this joke was removed from the platform and not allowed to speak in any churches in all of Pakistan. His entire mission trip was wasted because of a stupid joke he tried to tell to break the ice.

BE CAREFUL USING ILLUSTRATIONS FROM AN AFFLUENT WESTERN CULTURE.

One of my friends was preaching in India and he shared a story about how his car ran out of gas. At first he did not know what to do but then he remembered he had a hidden \$100 bill in his wallet, and he was able to fill up his tank. The point of his story was that God will help you in times of trouble. But the people in the room heard something much differently than what he was trying to communicate. The richest pastor in the room only had a bicycle. None of them had ever owned a car, nor did they have much hope of ever getting a car. In their villages, the average wage was \$1 per day so the fact that he had forgotten about a \$100 bill is the equivalent of forgetting where you hid a third of a year's wages. The simple point this person was trying to communicate was overshadowed by the story of his immense wealth, at least in the ears of his listeners in that village.

Daniel King, D.Min. started preaching as an evangelist at the age of six. His parents became missionaries to Mexico when he was ten and throughout his teen years he did children's evangelism. He met his wife in the middle of Africa on a mission trip. Today, Daniel is a missionary evangelist who has visited seventy nations in his quest for souls. He has led over 2,000,000 people in a salvation prayer and he is happily married with two children.

Daniel will give you three of his e-books as a gift if you visit his ministry website: www.kingministries.com. You can check out his books on Amazon [here](#).



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