Are Local Arts the Key to Reaching the Basque People?

After repeatedly failing to communicate the gospel to the Basque people, God showed me that the arts offer a key to open hearts. The arts are a crucial form of gospel communication that move people's emotions in a way that only sharing information does not. This makes it a powerful discipleship and evangelism tool.

Felipe's* piece was chosen to be part of our arts competition, but he did not know it. When he finally got the news, the art exhibition was already opened to the public. He rushed to the art gallery with his work of art, and we graciously made room for it.

Then I introduced Felipe to a Christian painter who was part of the competition. They had a nice conversation that eventually led to both artists sharing about the messages they wanted to communicate with their paintings.

With a dropped jaw, I observed the Christian artist sharing the whole message of the gospel in a natural, organic and non-threatening way. The message I repeatedly failed to communicate many times before using the methods I learned in my home country was now being delivered and listened to without any resistance. That was when I realized that local arts could be the key to reaching the heart of the Basque people with the gospel.

San Sebastian, Spain – The San Ignacio de Loyola Church is visible at the end of a street. San Sebastian, also known as Donostia, is in the Basque Autonomous Community in Spain.

PHOTO BY FOTOKON, ADOBE STOCK.

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WHO ARE THE BASQUE PEOPLE?

The Basque people are an ancient people in Europe who stand out because of their unique language and culture. They settled in the region thousands of years ago, before the Romans arrived in the area.[1] They called their territory *Euskal Herria* – the land of the Basques. This region comprises four provinces in Spain (Navarra, Guipúzcoa, Vizcaya, and Alava) and three in France (Lapurdi, Behe-Nafarroa, and Soule).

The Basque language, also called *Euskara*, is a linguistic isolate with unknown origins. It has such a high importance to the culture that the Basques identify themselves as *Euskaldunes* – "the ones who own the Euskara." Moreover, "the Basque language is revealed as the inescapable benchmark and element for Basqueness … ."[2]

Since 2009, I have been living among them as a missionary. My hope is to see the seed of the gospel bear fruit in this unique people group, but this has proven to be very challenging. I am not the first one to attempt this. An evangelical presence in the Basque Country has existed since before the Reformation.

In the 16th century, thanks to Juana de Albret queen of Navarre, Protestantism was about to become the dominant religion of the Basques.[3] However, after many centuries of persecution, Protestants were almost banished from the region.

Over the years, the evangelical presence grew stronger until the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and the post-war period when another persecution forced evangelicals and Protestants to flee for their lives. In 1945, congregations were allowed to meet again, and since then, Protestant churches in the Basque Country and Spain have been growing.[4]

A study by the Centre for Sociological Research (CIS in Spanish) shows that the number of Spaniards who identify as Protestants (around 1% of the population) has increased tenfold since the early 2000s. While it is true that this increase has not stopped, it has slowed down and much remains to be done.[5] According to *Operation World*, less than 100 evangelical churches exist in the four provinces in Spain where Basques live and all of them are Spanish-speaking.[6]

STRUGGLING TO PREACH THE GOSPEL IN BASQUE COUNTRY

A few years ago, a pastor who was visiting us asked us this question: "If Jesus came today for the Basque church, would the neighborhood notice its absence?" Probably not. The few evangelical churches in the area are not influential enough to make a difference in the community. Like the rest of the Spanish population, most Basques consider evangelical churches to be a sect, a foreign institution, and something to be feared or at least suspected. As a result, sharing the good news with them becomes a challenging task.

This reality contrasts sharply with my experience in Venezuela where people are more open to the gospel. Coming as a missionary with this mindset, I thought that the same things I did in Venezuela would work here among the Basques. This was a big mistake that led to a lot of frustration when I saw that my efforts to share the love of God with the people around me were futile. What was I doing wrong? Why were people so determined to reject the gospel? What could I do differently?

Learning about critical contextualization in my missionary studies, I knew that I needed to study the culture and the local language to effectively communicate the truth of the Bible. As a newcomer, it made total sense to me. However, local believers, who were supposed to already know the language and the culture, were also struggling with the ministry of proclamation. The message they delivered was not being heard and local churches were hardly experiencing growth. What could be done to change this reality?

USING LOCAL ARTS FOR PROCLAMATION

Words are not enough to communicate ideas or emotions completely. Getting a message across as clearly as possible requires more than only information. Likewise, Christians committed to the fulfilment of the Great Commission need to realize that preaching the good news goes beyond sharing information. The gospel needs to be understood and embraced. It is the work of the cross-cultural evangelizer to enable this understanding by any possible means to overcome the many barriers that have led people to see this message as alien or irrelevant.

Arts play a crucial role in gospel communication. They more powerfully and directly connect with people's emotions than information alone. Native forms of art communicate in profound and transformative ways, ultimately forming the resources and materials through which people engage, communicate, and encounter the God of the Bible.[7] They can also bring about change in cultures because of their unique ability to motivate people to action, inspire feelings of solidarity, and provide a socially acceptable space for disagreement.[8]

Such features make the use of art a vital part of any ministry endeavor. In the words of Michelle Petersen: "When people receive the word of God in languages and forms most meaningful to them, they are more likely to understand the content, resonate with it, and integrate the message with the rest of their lives. Scripture experienced

Scripture-infused songs performed in local styles, facilitate the transmission of the gospel among non-believers and the spiritual formation of those who are already part of the church.

in multiple ways is likely to influence people´s lives more significantly. *The word that gives life rightly lives in all parts of our lives as it is sung, danced, dramatized, drawn, and told in stories and poems, as well as being studied and read*"[9] (emphasis added).

The ultimate goal is to see a vibrant community of Jesus followers from every people group able to use their own artistic resources to express their faith, hope and love for others in their community in a way that is not strange for them. This is the goal of every missionary endeavor including the ones that are taking place here in Basque Country.

BASQUE ARTS FOR PROCLAMATION

For the Basque people, art forms and traditions are an expression of who they are, what they value, and what they hope for. It is also a way to showcase their *Basqueness* to the world. Our Creator God wants to see many *Euskaldunes* in the "… great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb … wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands" (Revelation 7:9).

Basque art and folklore are the ideal means to let this people group know about the love of God for them and his plans for a better future. By doing so, we are not only dressing the gospel in local garments to make it understandable to the Basque people but also demonstrating our love and respect for who they are.

Here are some of the ways I have used Basque art for proclamation:

Basque Music

The Greek philosopher Plato says that "the patterns in music and all the arts are the keys to learning." In this sense, music is a great ally in evangelism and discipleship as we look toward fulfilling the Great Commission (Mathew 28:19–20).

Scripture-infused songs performed in local styles, facilitate the transmission of the gospel among non-believers and the spiritual formation of those who are already part of the church. In 2013, after hosting the first ever songwriting workshop for local churches, thirteen worship songs were created for Basque believers. Some of them were used for street outreach with a very positive response from the audience. Out of all the songs, nine of them were recorded and made available for local churches to use on YouTube.[10]

Bertsolaritza

This oral folk tradition has experienced an incredible revitalization in recent years, becoming what might be the most powerful oral improvised tradition in Europe. It is a Basque rhetorical form of art consisting of singing extemporaneously composed songs in Euskara. Each performer is called "bertsolari," and they follow strict rules concerning meter, rhyme, and melody.

Due to its remarkable influence on Basque society, a *bertsolaritza* performance is likely to occur in any season of the year. From first communions to weddings through openings, tributes, sporting events, or funerals, any social gathering is a good occasion.

Bertsolaris sing about anything that could be relevant to society. They give their personal interpretation of the current social, political, cultural, and local affairs becoming figures of reference on social opinion for the Basque-speaking community. They are also "agents of emotions" since their real goal is to stir the audience's feelings, using all the linguistic features at hand.

In this sense, *"bertsolaritza* serves as a vehicle for lamenting the ills of the common person, a platform for raising one's voice in objection to the status quo. It often aims at exposing injustice in the hope that social maladies can be addressed and remedied … . [T]his remarkable oral poetry is simply doing what oral poetry always does: it works on behalf of society, on behalf of ethnic and community values, as an adaptive mechanism for negotiating the world."[11]

Due to its features, this unique Basque form of art is perfectly suitable for proclamation purposes. It has been used as content for Evangelistic tracts, books, and a performance.[12] There is still much to be done in this area due to the lack of Christian performers. However, its potential to make the Bible and its message relevant to the Basque society is great.

This painting, called *LIFEDROP* by Fiona Fung, was part of an art exhibition that provided opportunities for Christian artists to share the gospel.

OIL IN CANVAS, 61X50 BY FIONA FUNG. PHOTO BY JUAN ARVELO MONTERO.

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Visual arts

In 2016, because our city (San Sebastian) was a European Capital of Culture, we created an original art competition that we called "Welcome Donostia."[13] Forty artists, most of them non-believers, presented their works of art on the theme "Welcome."

It was during this competition that I first saw the seamless, effortless, non-threatening presentation of the gospel that I referenced in my introduction. The competition also showed many other effective ways that art could communicate new ideas and be a key to gospel proclamation in the Basque Country and across Europe.[14]

Performing Arts

A group of talented performers used their God-given artistic skills to share the gospel in the streets of the Basque Country. People were captivated by what they were doing. At the end of the presentation, I approached a lady in the audience and initiated a conversation with her about what she just saw.

When I mentioned God, she let me know that she did not want to do anything with him since she didn't believe in God. However, she stayed for the whole performance because of her love for the art. I did not need to keep talking to her since our goal after the performance was already achieved – she heard the whole message of the gospel of Jesus Christ without any resistance.

AN APPEALING GOSPEL

A banana tastes better if you peel it before eating it. Likewise, for the good news to be appealing, it needs to be clothed in local garments. If you are trying to spread the gospel in a culture different than your own, give native arts a chance. Make use of the expressive resources already available in the host culture to communicate the truth of the Bible in a culturally relevant manner.

By doing so, people will be more receptive to this new message, and they will feel loved and validated as we foreigners acknowledge the value and beauty of their local art forms. Using local forms of art for outreach and ministry among the Basques made a difference in our endeavors. It created a safe space for the community to interact with the local church and its artists. When used for these purposes, art becomes God's secret weapon for the end times. ■

PHOTO BY JUAN ARVELO MONTERO.

Spain – A group of street artists performs in a public square in a city in Basque Country.

** pseudonym*

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12. See an example on YouTube, https://youtu.be/rz_j2rk2_lE.
13. Donostia is the name used for the old part of San Sebastian.
14. This video shows a visual summary of the event, https://youtu.be/PzjUANpYFmE.

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