

7Song: When Music Preaches the Gospel

Imagine the powerful message of the gospel communicated through seven songs that tell the full story of creation, the fall and redemption. Imagine a musical narrative that crosses cultural boundaries without losing the heart of the message. Imagine a symphonic presentation that could allow millions of lost souls around the world to experience the love of Christ.

Laura Cooke and her team at Let There Be Hope have imagined all of these things—and with their new project, 7Song, they're turning those imaginations into gospel realities. Tapping into the universal language of music, 7Song could mark a revolutionary shift in the way the 21st-century church approaches evangelism and missions, which has long been marked by tracts and Bible translations that fall on illiterate eyes.

Indeed, nearly 17 percent of the world population can't read, according to a 2010 UNESCO study. If effective communication is based on two parties that speak the same language, then the church needs to find a way to speak the language of oral cultures to fulfill the Great Commission. As Romans 10:17 says, "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."

7Song presents the gospel, the greatest story ever told, in an engaging way to oral learners and illiterate people worldwide. In the process, the team at Let There Be Hope has harnessed the artistic power of music as an evangelistic instrument. As Laura says, "A lot of the closed countries we go to will let us sing anything we want, but won't let us preach. ... It's easier to get people to come to a concert than it is to get them to come to a service."

Discovering a Gospel Disconnect

The 7Song concept has been swirling in Laura's spirit for years—and it all started during her missionary travels.

"Six years ago, I was in Paraguay leading a worship concert, and a bunch of people who spoke Spanish—but not English—showed up," says Laura, who started leading worship internationally 11 years ago. *"I thought, 'There's got to be more that we can do than just show up and sing songs.'* Music has such a big pull and draws a crowd. What if there's a way we could share the gospel without necessarily needing to speak it?"

The vast majority of the 775 million adults UNESCO identified as functionally illiterate—again, nearly 17 percent of the world's population—live in key areas for international missions work: South and West Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab states. Africa, in particular, has illiteracy rates between 27 percent and 40 percent, depending on the study consulted. Cultures in these areas are largely oral, with narratives told verbally to one another.

Thomas Bracciale, music director for Let There Be Hope and co-writer of 7Song, says this reality creates a vast disconnect between Western culture and the cultures missionaries are trying to reach.

"Most of the world are oral learners," Bracciale says. "That's the way religion, history, art and tradition have always been passed down. Generation to generation, it's through hearing and speaking. We in the Western world teach in the way we learn, and it comes naturally to us—but Laura realized there's a disconnect there."

Missionary and author Stephen Kuert, who also serves on 7Song's board of directors, has witnessed this disconnect firsthand: "When I lived in Burundi, we always tried to get evangelistic literature to distribute, but when 60 percent of the country hasn't been taught how to read or go to school, it's worthless," he says. "Even when you have the Scriptures

or simplify it just to the Gospel of John or a tract, it doesn't mean much to them."

Researchers have also called out this historic disconnect. In a 1991 article, Dr. James Slack observed that oral communicators remembered only 29 percent of a message when the knowledge was communicated through logic, outlined arguments or printed materials. But when the message was told as an oral story, subjects remembered over 75 percent of the information.

Phil Cooke, a Hollywood producer and founder of Cooke Pictures (no relation to Laura), says Jesus tailored His messages to an oral culture. He points to Mark 4:33-34: "With many such parables, He spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it. Without a parable, He did not speak to them."

In a 2004 article in the *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, Rick Brown explained what this means for evangelists: "Messages are more likely to be enjoyed and remembered if they are presented in narrative forms, such as stories. ... Since oral communicators depend on memory rather than reference books, important texts such as translations of Scripture or stories from the Bible should be phrased in a way that makes the text easy to say, listen to, recite and memorize."

Laura came across these and similar proof points and felt compelled to give oral learners the gospel in a way that matches how they learn. She evaluated her own strengths as a worship leader and reached a simple, life-changing conclusion: "I do music. Let me see if we can put the Bible into music."

Embracing the Challenge

Of course, it all starts with Creation. Bracciale remembers his first meeting with Laura to create 7Song. The two had met at Oral Roberts University (ORU) while Bracciale was a student and Laura was worship director at the school, and she asked him point blank: "Has someone already done this?" No one had,

and they soon discovered why: It's not easy. In fact, they wondered at one point if they could pull it off.

The first challenge—transforming the gospel into a series of songs—is ambitious. When compounded with the second challenge—making songs that could be easily translated and arranged for a variety of instruments—the task was daunting enough to make the composers feel like pulling out their hair. Bracciale, who makes his living as a professional Nashville songwriter, still calls 7Song “undoubtedly the biggest work I’ve ever been a part of.”

To overcome the first challenge, Laura and Bracciale spent a lot of time seeking God's will.

“It's certainly a challenge, but we realized we have to come into this with prayer and humility every day,” Bracciale says. “We can't think about this lightheartedly; we need to do this intentionally. We need to be somewhat heavy-hearted. The gospel is going to go out into the world, and we have to represent the gospel.”

After much prayer, the pair felt led to pull lyrics directly from the Bible. Every line of all seven songs has a matching chapter and verse. This system ensured no personal biases could enter the finished product.

“It's funny, we co-wrote 7Song, but we really didn't write 7Song,” Bracciale says. “We wrote the music and melody, but the words come from Scripture itself. We wanted to ensure that our personal beliefs, background or denominational beliefs were, not even in a subconscious way, present. We wanted to make sure it's Scripture from the first line to the last line.”

This approach killed two birds with one stone. With Scripture offering the lyrics, translators could simply replace English verses with the matching verses in the target language.

“Our goal is to have 7Song translated in every language there is,” Laura explains. “We wanted to make it easier for people to translate. They can pull in verses and avoid translation issues and cultural nuances.”

The pair wrote full orchestration to accompany the songs, taking inspiration from film scores. This allows the music to be used in anything from acoustic sets—such as the digital EP they recorded last year—to elaborate, culturally specific concerts.

“We’ve created a base orchestration, and then each region that records over it adds their own culturally appropriate instruments,” Laura says. “When we work with African countries, they use a lot of drums. When we work in the Middle East, there’s a lot of string instruments. They use well-known instruments. We’ve done seven so far and we haven’t had to change the music yet.”

Though Laura sings the English version, she says she has no plans to sing on the international versions—“No one wants to hear that.” Instead, the international translations use native singers already on the ground as the vocalists. Many of them are worship leaders working with other ministries, but some are simply singers who are fascinated by the project.

Bearing Eternal Fruit

7Song has been provoking powerful reactions among listeners, even in the United States. Bracciale recounted a story from a concert they held in the Chicago area. After the service, the Let There Be Hope team set up a small booth where they greeted people, prayed for them and answered questions about 7Song. One woman stopped by the booth and told them an inspiring salvation story.

The woman had come to Christ years ago—through the influence of a doctor from ORU—but fell away from the faith and called herself an atheist. When she woke up that morning, she felt

“compelled” to come to church for the first time in years. When she walked in the doors, the band was performing 7Song. She was reminded of her long-dormant love for Christ and described how the music set the stage for a “coming home.”

As the band replied with awe, the woman concluded, “What are the odds that I was saved by ORU people and now, after I’ve fallen away from the Lord, ORU alumni brought me back to Him?”

Thomas says those kinds of stories are common. In Phnom Penh, Cambodia, for example, a Buddhist monk requested a copy of the CD in order to help him better learn English. Since then, he’s been playing the CD for the monastery, ministering to the entire community of monks. In Southeast Asia, a pastor emailed a digital copy of 7Song to 25 underground house churches. Members of those churches share it with their friends and family. One year later, and those music files have reached around 1 million people in the area.

Laura cites several reasons the 7Song project has been successful. Technology, for example, has been one of the key factors in their marketing strategy: “Technology is amazing at getting the music out there. One upload and suddenly our songs are available in hundreds of countries. ... We ask people to burn it and give it away. Our copyright is the right to copy.”

7Song is effectively tapping into the power of music to reach an oral culture. “When you make it music or song, you speak in the language of the people’s hearts, especially if it’s translated in your local dialect,” Kuert says. “You put all that together, and the potential for 7Song to be one of the most effective tools to reach our generation can’t be overstated.”

Or as Laura more succinctly put it, “People are really drawn to music. When we say we have music for them, no one’s turned us down yet.”

Yet the team acknowledges that the most important factor

underlying 7Song's success has been the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Bracciale says he has seen the Spirit ministering powerfully to people through 7Song.

"It's an inspiring thing to be a part of," he says. "I am extremely humbled to have any connection to this at all. I know without a shadow of a doubt, 7Song is the most important project I have been or ever will be involved with in my life. It's so inspiring to hear stories of 7Song being spread throughout the Middle East and Southeast Asia and Africa. And to think we wrote that on a very old piano in Laura's loft."

Redeeming Heaven's Sound

The success of 7Song demonstrates the oft-untapped potential of art to change hearts and win souls. "I think art as ministry is wholly underutilized in a lot of our Western churches," Laura says. "I think it is easy for ministries to downplay the use of art."

She suspects the church may have diminished its role in the arts because of a misguided ambition to separate the secular from the sacred. A false dichotomy was created, and the creative arts were unfairly lumped in with the secular, unless the Christian message was explicit.

Kuert rejects that notion. He says worship, missions and art are inextricably linked together in God's ultimate plan: "Missions have to be directly connected with worship, and worship is one of the arts. How are we going to be effective in the 21st century as a church to engage in Christ? Missional purpose must incorporate the arts because missions and arts are married together so beautifully."

Beyond a missional context, Bracciale believes music has intrinsic spiritual power. "All throughout Scripture, we see countless references to music," he says. "We know there's music in heaven. ... I think the Lord is really smart. I think music is not just a mental thing or an emotional thing; music

is one of the things that can impact someone spiritually, emotionally and mentally. You can hear a song and you bop your head to it, or it reminds you of something. It can connect you to the Father. Music is, undoubtedly, the most powerful medium in the world.”

That power did not go unnoticed by the early church. In fact, centuries ago, the church used to be one of the biggest patrons of art. Stained-glass windows were constructed and entire orchestras conducted to convey the majesty of Christ. Phil believes the same artistic fervor needs to be embraced by this generation.

“For creative artists who are Christians, I think it’s absolutely important, necessary and critical that we explore our art platform to share the gospel,” Phil says. “In the very first verse of the Bible, God chose to introduce Himself as a creator. I have a Ph.D. in theology, and I understand there are many attributes of God, but I find it very fascinating that His first introduction in the Bible is as a creator. If we are made in the image of God, it is imperative that we express ourselves in forms of creating art. I think what we’re seeing now is a new generation that embraces the importance of sharing His story, the eternal story, through art.”

Laura hopes 7Song can be a positive step forward for the church: “The church needs to get back to utilizing creativity. That’s what I think the purpose of art is for: to tell stories.”

Expanding Its Reach

Though the groundbreaking is complete, the story of 7Song has only just begun. Laura’s mind is already brimming with ideas and initiatives for the near future. She hopes to partner with MegaVoice, a manufacturer of solar-powered audio Bibles, to minister more effectively to unreached people groups.

The ministry is also raising funds for additional

translations. Within two years, Let There Be Hope plans to record in Mandarin, Spanish, French, Arabic, Hindi and Russian—which, when combined with English, represent 30 percent of first-language speakers in the world. But that's not 7Song's final goal; it's just the starting point.

"The goal has always been spreading the gospel and reaching believers," Bracciale says. "It's a lot easier to not get in the way when you know what your vision is. I think that's where a lot of ministries and people can struggle. But since the beginning, we've known it's not about us. Anything we receive immediately goes back into 7Song. I don't get paid for this. We do this because we believe in the power of the gospel."

The team admits there is definite room for growth and improvement. For instance, Kuert believes 7Song needs a consistent follow-up mechanism for discipleship. "We don't really have a good grasp on follow-up, mostly because it's completely free and can be distributed to anyone," Kuert says. "We would have no way of following up on what the results would have been from people who listen to it, so that's something we're talking about: figuring out how to get more feedback, from both evangelistic and discipleship contexts."

But early victories and the Holy Spirit's favor have the team excited about the project's potential. "As we are coming into contact with different churches and ministries overseas, everyone we come into contact with has been very receptive and excited," Laura says.

She hopes 7Song can follow in the footsteps of the Jesus Film Project, which has been seen in every country and translated into hundreds of languages since the film's 1979 release. The project that put the gospel story in film is considered by many to be the greatest evangelistic success story of all time. Can putting the gospel into music produce similar fruit?

Phil says he has “no idea” whether the project will be successful long-term. “It’s a huge, daunting challenge,” he says. “I welcome everyone’s effort to try and express the gospel in an artistic medium. Sometimes it works; sometimes it doesn’t. But there’s no question that one of the most important ways to engage today’s culture is through art.”

Bracciale compares the project to a mustard seed, planted humbly in faith and growing beyond their wildest dreams. Wherever God takes the project next, Bracciale says he’s in it for the long haul.

“My biggest hope is that God keeps doing what He’s doing now and gets 7Song into the hands of people who need to know Him and to understand His message of hope ... ,” he says. “That’s the beauty of the gospel. It never stops being relevant. It never stops changing lives.”

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Laura Cooke shares the story behind Let There Be Hope, a ministry ready to share the gospel through seven songs at .