

LESSONS FROM THE FLANNELGRAPH

How Bible studies can play a role in evangelism

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unday-school alumni have fond memories of flannelgraph stories of Jonah and the big fish or coloring in a picture of Jesus with bread and fish. It's easy to dismiss those stories as childish today, or at least conclude that they have little use in evangelism. As the American church engages with a postmodern culture, however, the flannelgraph might be closer to the right strategy than you think.

REACHING THIS GENERATION

In *Preaching in a Post-Literate Age*, author Michael Frost writes that the current generation in the United States learns by discussion, distrusts authority, values experiences rather than formal knowledge and tolerates many different points of view. Although young people are wary of speeches and textbooks, they pay attention to what their friends say on Facebook and YouTube. One ministry of Cru, called StoryRunners®, trains people to help their friends discover God simply by telling and discussing stories from God's Word.

For years, StoryRunners has worked primarily with unreached people groups, preparing and delivering Bible stories to people around the world who either cannot or prefer not to read (see "StoryRunners" on page 37). Now they are discovering untapped value right here in the U.S. Galen Miller, who serves with StoryRunners, cites U.S. government statistics that 83 percent of Americans prefer non-written forms of

entertainment and learning. "What do Hollywood stories do?" Galen asks. "They bypass the head and hit the heart. For good or bad, that happens in story." He explains that story can also help restore biblical values in church culture.

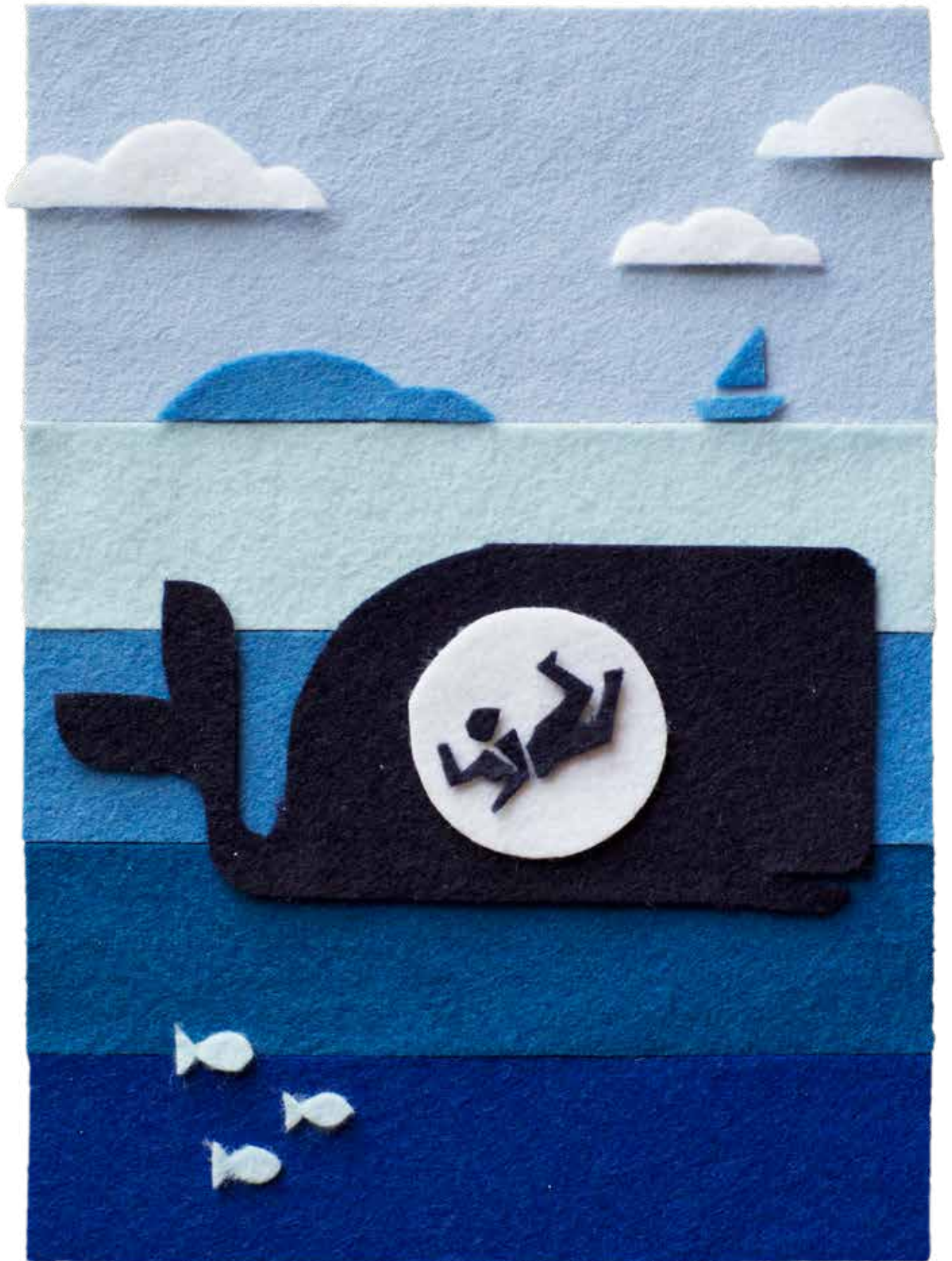
BIBLE STORY DISCIPLESHP

In oral-preference countries, StoryRunners staff members help people translate and accurately re-tell a chronological collection of Bible stories, called a "Story Bible," used in evangelism, discipleship and church planting. This same process is starting to take place in the U.S. as well. To run a Bible study in this way, simply tell a story from God's Word and then ask five simple questions:

- What did you like about this story?
- What was difficult to understand?
- What does this story teach you about people?
- What does it teach you about God?
- What applies to your life?

Galen reports that a group of pastors who have gone through StoryRunners training have begun to incorporate it into their small group Bible studies and Sunday-morning sermons. One pastor in Florida said his congregation's response to this new style was a complete flip from their usual reaction. The typically less involved 80 percent engaged with his three-minute narrative-centered sermons in this less literary format. The 20 percent who are typically the most involved in church needed time to get used to the different style.

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BIBLE STORY EVANGELISM

In the U.S., evangelistic tools like the Four Spiritual Laws booklet have been a common means of delivering the message of salvation, but the effectiveness of this method in today's culture is challenged by D.A. Carson in his book *The Gagging of God*. "To those who know nothing about the Bible's plot-line . . . how will they hear you?" Carson continues, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life: Is this the god of Shirley MacLaine? Of course he/she/it loves me: I'm lovable aren't I? And this wonderful life: Will I be wealthy?"

Many Americans today grow up without ever hearing the old Sunday-school lessons. To understand the gospel, Carson believes, people today must first hear the story of the Bible. Galen Miller puts it another way: "They will be better able to experience a story, like they would listen to a co-worker tell about his weekend."

JAKE'S STORY

Nancy Wilson, another staff member with StoryRunners, modeled this idea during a conversation she had with a

neighbor. Knowing Nancy loves God, Jake spoke with her on his break from work. "I need help, and I want to talk to you," she remembers him saying. He opened up about his struggles with addiction.

Instead of focusing on Jake's addiction, Nancy told him a story about Jesus and the demon-possessed man from Mark 5:1-20, a man imprisoned within his own body, who needed Jesus to free him. Then Nancy told Jake, "The reason I love this story is that Jesus delivered me from an addiction." She told her own story of being rescued from an eating disorder and alcohol. Jake prayed and received Jesus.

Nancy has created a unique introduction to the StoryRunners international training and adapted it into what she calls Story-Wave, a seminar for reaching postmodern cultures. She says that the strength of this method is that people can see themselves in the story. For example, after hearing the parable of the soils from Matthew 13:1-23, a man named John Ntandale asked, "Which soil am I?" Recognizing himself in the seed that fell among thorns, but wanting to be the good soil, John repented and placed his faith in Christ. He understood the gospel clearly



through the stories he heard. Within two months, John led 10 people to Christ using the stories he'd learned.

Nancy presents StoryWave seminars in the United States and around the world and, twice a year, StoryRunners hosts an Orlando training week for international workers. (Visit www.nancy.wilson.org to host one in your church, community or on campus.) However, you can get started right away simply by reading Scripture with a mind for how it can be retold in three- to five-minute stories. Many sample story suggestions are available to listen to and learn at www.storyrunners.com. Try to visualize each scene taking place, and practice retelling it. The more you tell a story, the better it gets. Use your own words, as if describing something you have seen and heard, so it doesn't sound memorized or written as a script.

Knowing these stories can help you apply them naturally. You may find yourself in lively conversations with people who have never shown much interest in the Bible before, but maybe leave the flannelgraph at home. ■

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STORYRUNNERS™

Many of the unreached people groups in the world live with no written language at all.

To reach these people, StoryRunners missionaries teach local people to memorize a story Bible (a chronological collection of three- to five-minute Bible stories) and share it person-to-person or in small groups.

Oral cultures use their story Bibles just like written Bibles. They pray, worship, meditate, teach and make life decisions based on these Scriptures. Because of this, StoryRunners teams are very careful to remain accurate when creating story Bibles. Though they keep the stories simple (avoiding religious terms and focusing only on the events that are central to the story and audience), they make certain not to add facts that aren't mentioned in the Scriptures.

There are many ways you can join with StoryRunners. Visit the "serve" tab on www.storyrunners.com to find out more, including finding opportunities to take short- or long-term mission trips to

African countries like Nigeria, Guinea and Benin. For ideas on reaching postmoderns, scan this QR code or visit www.cru.org/postmodern. ■



ACTION POINT

This week, as you talk with people, especially non-Christians, think about what stories from the Bible might relate to their life situations.