

**TUTORIAL**  
**8.14**

# What is literacy? Is it important?

This tutorial introduces literacy - an aspect of church development and growth that should be carefully considered. We will look at what literacy is, how it is viewed in the world today, and why it is an important part of the picture for a church.

## What is literacy?

The English word *literate*, originally, and for most of its history, meant 'to be familiar with literature', 'well educated', or 'learned'. Only since the late nineteenth century has it also come to refer to the ability to read and write text. Today when most of us think of 'literacy', it is simply the ability a person has to read and write.

Here is a definition of literacy that is helpful because it gives a comprehensive view:

*Literacy is the ability to read and write and use written information and to write appropriately in a range of contexts. It also involves the integration of speaking, listening, viewing and critical thinking with reading and writing, and includes the cultural knowledge which enables a speaker, writer or reader to recognise and use language appropriate to different social situations<sup>1</sup>.*

So, although literacy is fundamentally about reading and writing skills, it also means much more for the individuals or communities concerned. Literacy brings with it an ability to have access to, and to use, information about the wider world. It gives people and communities the ability to evaluate influences or pressures on them, and to make wise decisions about them or even to resist them if they decide to. It also gives them a real voice and opportunities to influence and to benefit from the wider world.

## The literacy picture in the world today

Most of us come from highly literate societies, where there is a huge amount of 'environmental text'; such as street signs, food packaging, restaurant menus,

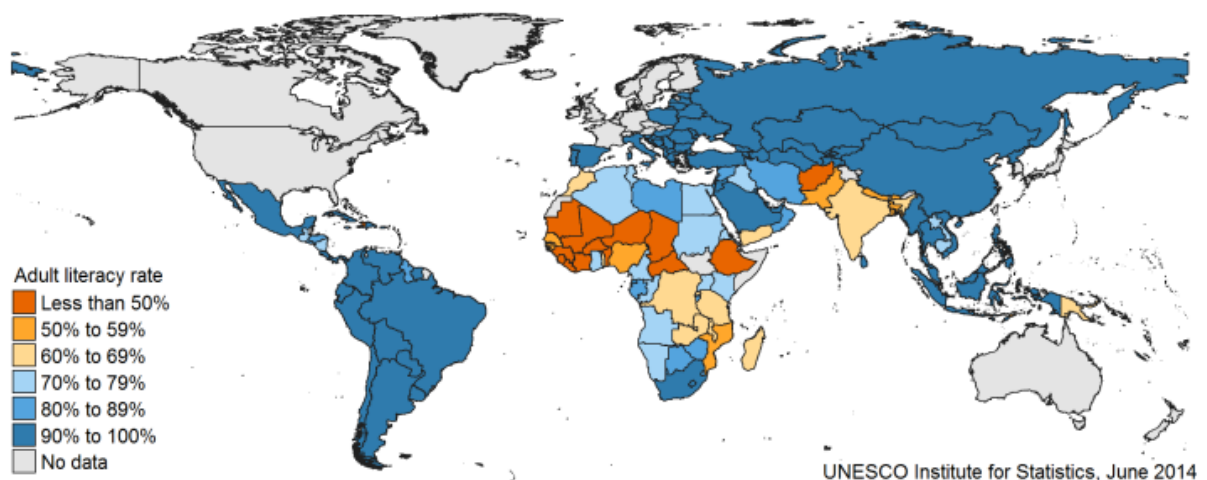
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<sup>1</sup> A definition of literacy agreed to by Australian and New Zealand State and Federal ministers in 1997.

instructions, notices - and where we are surrounded from childhood by an almost overwhelming amount of written materials, both print and digital. This can make it difficult for us to understand some of the issues surrounding literacy in societies that are not so rich in literate resources.

Literacy is not only the ability to read and write, but it also involves an individual's capacity to put their reading and writing skills to work: in shaping the course of their own life or the lives of their family and community. In the cultures most of us come from, putting literacy skills to work seems like a very natural consequence of everyday life - we have so much immediately available and easily accessible to read - and it is necessary to engage with written materials on a daily basis. In other, much less literate societies, there is little or no 'environmental text' and there are few written materials in the classrooms or at home. This makes the illiteracy cycle difficult to break, and it takes a determined and multi-faceted effort - motivating people to learn, providing post-literacy reading materials, making an effort to include adults and children - to see a community eventually come to embrace, enjoy and benefit from their literacy skills. Even though literacy programs require a lot of effort, they are often very much desired and supported by the community itself.

The chart below shows world literacy rates (orange areas have the lowest literacy levels):



The UNESCO Institute for Statistics, International Literacy Data 2014 says:

*The global adult literacy rate, for the population 15 years and older, is 80% for women and 89% for men.*

*Despite these gains, 781 million adults still could not read or write – two-thirds of them (496 million) were women. In more than a dozen countries, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, fewer than half of all adults had basic literacy skills. Even though the size of the global illiterate population is shrinking, the female proportion has remained virtually steady at 63% to 64%.*

## How are literacy programs viewed?

Later we will see how the literacy level in a community is a major factor affecting the healthy growth and development of a local church. Experience shows that effective and long-lived church planting efforts include literacy programs as a part of their initial strategy of community involvement and the ongoing life and outreach of the church. Almost universally, governments and local communities view literacy projects in a very positive way - literacy and other educational work is greatly appreciated. It can help to provide a platform for positive community relationships for a local church.

## Why is literacy important for a church?

Anyone who has been involved in a literacy project will know that implementing, sustaining and passing it on to local teachers and administrators is a long-term undertaking. But even so, what an immense privilege and joy it is to see a newly literate person quietly sitting and reading their Creator's Word, and knowing that they are now able to benefit from the miracle of 'hearing' His voice - speaking directly to them - through that Word. A lot of people today do not have that privilege, either because they don't have a Bible translation in their language, or because they are unable to read, or both.

Thinking about individual believers learning to read God's Word in their own language is probably a compelling enough reason for us to want to be involved in making the Word accessible as part of a church planting effort, but we will probably be even more convinced when we look at the whole picture of what literacy brings to the life and function of a local church. Literacy is only one thread in the whole fabric of a church planting effort.

A group of team leaders in an area of the world where literacy levels are very low in the general population, wrote: *'We want to encourage our church planting teams to see the purpose of literacy to be much more than just teaching people how to read. It is the way that individuals can keep their souls fed with truth. If the church is to be strong, literacy must be strong. Literacy must be recognized in its importance as a tool God will use.'*

If we are involved in church planting work we should ask:

- Are the believers able to access the Bible in a form that clearly and faithfully communicates God's revelation to them?
- Are they increasingly able to make use of God's Word as He intends for His children and His Church?

Reading and writing prepares believers to participate in the life of the Church by allowing them to:

- Help with Bible lesson and curriculum development initially and into the future.
- Interact with believers from other local churches in a greater variety of ways.
- Teach Bible studies and write praise and worship songs.
- Teach literacy classes and be a part of developing and teaching material specifically for children.
- Have the opportunity to read God's Word for themselves and to grow spiritually through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.
- Have direct access to God's Word, not just rely on a few 'interpreters of truth'.
- Take part in outreach activities including education programs and teaching programs.

Having the tools of reading and writing, and written materials available, helps in these ways also:

- The authority of the Word of God is established through the idea of the unchanging written Word.
- It is God's Word, not man's teaching - the truth of the Bible and Bible teaching is given more authority and is verified by the written Word, rather than authority being based on human teachers or leaders.
- If everyone has access to God's Word, not just a few 'educated' leaders or teachers, it fosters unity, as everyone has more opportunity to be involved in the life of the Church, and it also fosters maturity because leaders and believers together are relying on guidance from the Lord and can support one another.
- Taught faithfully by local teachers who are able to refer to the written Scripture, God's Word is better contextualized for the Church – they know the deep issues in the community and have the relationships, understanding and empathy to help the believers to apply truth.
- The deep worldview changes that are made are based on the believers' own understanding of Scripture, and God's work directly in and through His Word in that culture, not on outside pressure to change. This protects against syncretism developing in the church, when it is God's Word itself that is changing people's minds and hearts.
- It helps in the discipleship process – when each believer is reading and growing spiritually, and each teacher or leader is equipped with the whole Word of God.

Literacy is vital to each of the key growth and development areas of a church.

## Planting a seed...

*“The gospel is to be planted as a seed that will sprout within and be nourished by the rain and nutrients in the cultural soil of the receiving peoples. What sprouts from true gospel seed may look quite different above ground from the way it looked in the sending society, but beneath the ground, at the worldview level, the roots are to be the same and the life comes from the same source.”*  
Charles H. Kraft

*“Now the parable is this: The seed is the Word of God...”* Luke 8:11

*“For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”* Hebrews 4:12

The fundamental reason to place a high value on literacy in church planting or development work is because it is the power of His Word that changes lives... *‘that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.’*  
1Corinthians 2:5

God’s Word has the power to change lives, so we should give ‘free reign’ to that power, by allowing a person or local body of believers to engage with it in its written form as well. God then has the opportunity to speak directly to people through His word as they read it for themselves. The ‘seed’ should be planted in such a way that it has the best possible chance to grow into a healthy, functioning, fruitful, mature church that will stand on its own and be able to fulfill the ongoing role that God has for it in a community. Literacy is an important part of that process of growth.



### DISCUSSION POINTS

*What is literacy? Why is it important?*

1. Have you thought much about literacy before? If not, do you think this might skew your view of the issues surrounding literacy in a less literate society? If you have thought about it before, how much do you empathize with those who are illiterate and can you imagine what it is like for them in today’s world?
2. Do you think that every person should have the right to learn to read and write if they choose to do so, or do you

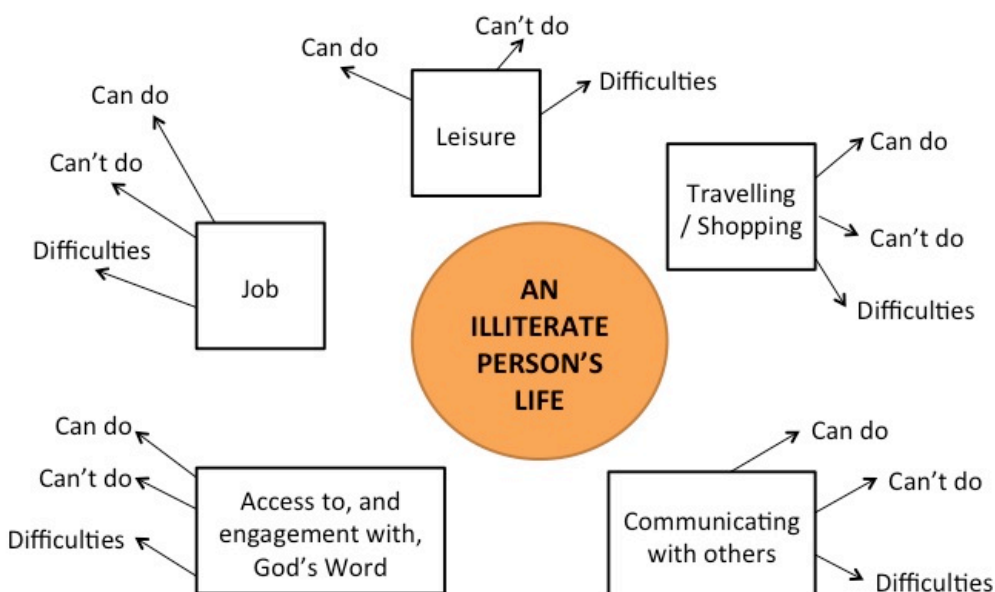
feel that there are some 'non-literate' cultures that should be left that way? Explain.



## ACTIVITIES

*What is literacy? Why is it important?*

1. During one normal day in your life, make a journal of every time you use your literacy skills, either to read or to write. Note also *how* you used your literacy skills, e.g., reading subtitles or news headlines on TV, reading a street sign, writing a note to a friend on Facebook, reading a book, sending a text message, etc. (Hopefully you'll be surprised by how much you have to note down.)
2. Look at the diagram below, and try to imagine, for each of the areas in an illiterate person's life, all the things such a person can do, but also all the things that are denied to them or that they might have difficulties with in each area. Take no more than twenty minutes to think about it and write down the things you think of.



3. Do some online research about current literacy initiatives, the view of literacy by Governments, and the organizations that are involved in literacy work. (One example of a video to watch is; *Literacy as Freedom - UN Literacy Decade 2003-2012*).