

9-23-2021

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### Recommended Citation

Sellers, K. (2021). Storytelling the Gospel in Hungary: Zooming in on an Ancient Mode of Communication. *Great Commission Research Journal*, 13(2), 77-84. Retrieved from <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/gcrj/vol13/iss2/7>

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# **Storytelling the Gospel in Hungary: Zooming in on an Ancient Mode of Communication**

*Keith Sellers*

With the daily reminders of our mortality, during the pandemic my wife and I became energized to communicate the good news of Christ through dramatic storytelling. Michael Green (2004) tells us that the early Christians gave witness by using pericopes or short narratives from the life of Christ. The Medieval Church used mystery and miracle plays to reach and teach once illiterate European peoples. To enhance their presentations of Bible stories to Africans, Livingstone and other 19th century missionaries appropriated the 17th century Jesuit use of the "Magic Lantern," a device which included a fueled flame and mounted glass slides for projecting images (Simpson, 1997). Of course, storytelling is not just for children, the illiterate, or indigenous peoples! More than twenty years ago I dressed up as Pharaoh to help a Northern Virginia Baptist pastor talk about the Exodus story in an adult Bible class. This pastor planted a seed which years later bore fruit in another continent.

We serve in the Golgota 11 Church, a small, young church in the eleventh district of Budapest, as well as in summer day camp ministries held in a variety of venues across the Hungarian countryside. Reworking ancient storytelling with technology for the current crisis proved effective when we were limited to web-based meetings. The church suspended live services and met online from the third week of March 2020 until June 2020. As the pandemic waned during the summer months, we served in person at Christian day camps in small Hungarian towns. From summer until the end of October 2020, churches met in person, but when the third

wave of the coronavirus hit hard, almost all churches closed their doors from November 2020 until late May 2021. When the world slowed down, we were able to rediscover and retool the ancient mode of storytelling the gospel both in summer day camps and with online children's meetings. Although we have contact with about 30 children in our church community, only three to ten kids met regularly for our online children's church meetings.

One of our ministries in Hungary involves communicating the gospel to unchurched kids from first to eighth grades at summer day camps, which are conducted much like a Vacation Bible School in the States. In the summer of 2020, we worked in five weeks of day camps in different towns across the Hungarian countryside in partnership with the Hungarian director of the Way of Hope Foundation in Hungary (<http://www.wayofhope.co.uk>). The Way of Hope Foundation seeks to evangelize families and youth as well as provide forms of social relief and educational opportunities like English or German language study camps. They usually serve disadvantaged communities in Hungary and Southwest Ukraine. Depending on the venue, the camp week saw anywhere from twenty-five to seventy-five kids. Two additional weeks of day camps were canceled due to the host school or town not wanting to risk the spread of the virus. The Hungarian government allowed smaller towns the choice of tightening or loosening restrictions depending on the weekly virus cases reported. Each day and every week we wondered whether any of us would fall victim to the virus and the entire week or remaining camps would be canceled. Thankfully every camp remained coronavirus-free.

As we pondered how to best present the gospel to young listeners, we concluded that we needed to do something that captures their attention. Unchurched kids certainly do not want to sit through an analytical lecture about the evidence for the Christian faith. Neither do I! Back in 2019 my wife first suggested the idea of using dramatic storytelling to engage kids at summer camps. My dressing up as a Bible character and having the character retell his encounter with Jesus is much more engaging than my typical lecture. Our rediscovered use of dramatic storytelling is certainly not original, but it proved especially handy during the pandemic year. We first used dramatic storytelling in the summer of 2019 with unchurched kids, and in 2020 we improved it for camp use. Also, whenever the government ordered restrictions on public gatherings, we used this approach online for our usual church kids. The government allowed churches which own their own buildings to meet during the pandemic, but churches like ours that rent their halls were not allowed to meet. Due to the severity of the third wave in Hungary, most churches closed their doors

even if they owned their properties. Our church, Golgota 11, is affiliated with the Calvary Chapel movement in Hungary and is located in the eleventh district of Budapest. The church launched from the downtown mother church about nine years ago and fluctuates in total attendance from twenty to eighty. Just before the third wave of the pandemic hit in November, the church called a new pastor in late August of 2020.

To meet the need of constructively occupying children on summer break while their parents are at work, Hungarian churches and other ministries have for many years held day camp ministries available to the general public. Christian day camps attempt to meet a niche market such as helping youth improve second language proficiency or learning skills in a specific sport. Because we serve in Christian day camps to promote English language learning, we also seek to present the gospel in an effective way. The host, usually a church and sometimes a local mayor, informs parents of the inherently religious background of the camp program. Everyone knows ahead of time that the purposes are both academic and spiritual.

Contrary to what some may think, dramatic storytelling takes a lot more forethought and preparation than the typical lecture or sermon. The preparation involves not just lots of Bible study and prayer, but also reading history, gathering materials and costumes, preparing presentation slides for visual support, communicating with the hosting church or school, and continuous practice and revision of the script. Just before the pandemic intensified in the spring of 2020, I was spending winter back in Virginia visiting supporters in the Mid-Atlantic region. In early February I ordered some additional costumes and accessories, all made in China, shipped to the US, and then transported in my luggage to Budapest on March 2nd. While globalization may one day pose an ominous apocalyptic threat, it has never been so good for us in ministry! Hats off to Chinese manufacturing and Mr. Bezos for enhancing our efforts at evangelizing and teaching youth in Hungary! Those skilled in dressmaking could certainly have designed more authentic costumes, but the Amazon option was my lot as a missionary on the cheap and in a hurry to fly back to Europe. A recent addition to my wardrobe included a centurion costume as well as a selection of beards, a bald cap, a realistic-looking plastic chain, and other accessories to dress up as various key Bible characters (See Figure 1). From a wooden pole and metallic wood stain obtained at a German hardware chain store here in Budapest, I fashioned a satisfactory Roman javelin.



At some camps, I dressed up like the young Simon Peter who tells about one of his recent encounters with Jesus, whether on Lake Galilee or in the Garden of Gethsemane. His dialogue directly addresses the audience by conveying his incredulity of a miracle, his honest doubt, and his gradual process of coming to faith in the new rabbi from Nazareth. A fishing net and some rubbery plastic fish make for

good props to throw at the audience to gain their immediate attention. At two other camps, I dressed up as various New Testament centurions, who told how they came to faith in Christ (Luke 7:1-10, Matt. 27:54, Acts 10:1-7). Pre-teen and adolescent young men, even the ones known for bad behavior, were especially attentive when the ancient soldier talked about his encounter with Jesus. Prior to the appearance of Peter or the centurion on stage, a youth or adult read the related gospel pericope in their heart language, and then the Bible character appeared speaking in English with a translator. The storyteller addressed the audience as if they were part of his ancient world. He assumed that they were traveling in an ancient caravan, which appeared to stop at Capernaum's Roman tax station or on the outskirts of Jerusalem during one of the Jewish festivals. The script integrated important details about the historical and geographical setting to enhance the listener's personal engagement with the biblical text and context. When playing Peter, I might point to an image of a first-century fishing boat if the venue has a projector. Peter described his fishing boat as a modern young man would enthusiastically speak about his new car. After the brief skit, I changed clothes and returned as myself to further explain the gospel story and its application to our lives in the present. In the middle of the week, I give my own testimony of how I came to faith as a young teen.

Of course, it would have been better to use two or three different people and more characters to enhance the depth of a scene, but as Jesus said, "the laborers are few," so we work with what we have. My only helpers were the translator, sometimes a young adult who read the related Scripture passage, and my wife who helped me dress up in the costume.

Before the summer began, I had to brush up on New Testament history, geography, and Roman centurions to knowledgeably portray the characters. Personal study on the New Testament centurions and Roman-era soldiers was enriching and helped me grasp the ancient quest for

honor. Such background work is necessary in a European country which prides itself on historical parks and festivals held near ruins of Roman settlements (Scarbantia in modern Sopron, Aquincum in Budapest, and Sopianae in Pécs).



At the end of each week of camp, sometimes as early as on the third day, I asked the audience to consider making a decision to follow Christ. Almost every week at least one youth decided to follow Jesus. On the third day of a camp held in a public school, at least ten young people decided to follow Christ on hearing just three lessons about Peter's life. What is fascinating is that the use of dramatic storytelling does not require expert thespian ability nor Hollywood-style theatrical effects, but simply a storyteller who knows the story. At each day camp venue, I flexibly customized the props, lighting, and use of image projection. If image projection was not possible, I just compelled the audience to imagine the scene. Because we often served in economically depressed areas, a simple set posed no problems. Telling the story in an accurate, compelling way as well as boldly asking the audience to apply the story to their own lives are the most important tasks. Sometimes I took too much artistic liberty by not accurately portraying the biblical text, so I corrected myself in later presentations. Storytellers must continuously evaluate their performance to improve and communicate more effectively.

During the spring and fall months, my wife and I taught Sunday School in Hungarian from home via Zoom. Online attendance fluctuated from three to ten each Sunday. She typically asked someone to read a Bible passage online while I donned my costume in the garage. The dark, spider web filled garage with an ugly brown door provided a suitable backdrop on which to focus my iPad and utility light. When I portrayed Peter in prison, the ugly brown door fit the scene perfectly. At other times it fit the scene of nighttime or a dark room in a home. From another room, my wife integrated word games, live online interaction to review the story, and life application so that the children did not have merely a passive experience uncontextualized from their own lives. Sometimes we asked a couple of Hungarian college students to assist us online from their dormitory across town. They played word games and led the kids in action songs.

During one virtual Sunday School class, I dressed up as Peter in chains awaiting his death sentence in Rome. As an old man, he retold his encounters with Jesus when he was young, and how he often ended up in

prison for the cause of Christ. The dismal-looking garage door nicely resembles the wall of a prison. Being under quarantine for so many weeks,



sort of a modern house-arrest, helped the listeners and the presenters better feel the isolation that Peter must have experienced. Another time I dressed up with long hair as the young John, and another time as the centurion at the cross. On Sunday, December 6<sup>th</sup> (the day when St. Nicholas delivers presents and candy to well-

behaved children), my Deutsche Amazon-ordered St. Nicholas costume proved handy for posing as the beloved bishop of Myra. Nick told the kids about the original Christmas story and read from the Gospel of Luke. A donkey puppet and some olive oil helped us make a brief video to explain the meaning of Messiah, "the Anointed One."

On the Sunday just before Christmas, I dressed up as an old shepherd who reminisced about the night when angels appeared and how the Messiah was born in his small village. Sometimes I prerecorded the storytelling, especially since my memory of the Hungarian script is sometimes limited. Whether live or prerecorded, we taped pages of the script in large font to an old step ladder for an improvised teleprompter. Using Apple's free iMovie software on a six-year-old MacBook proved handy in editing my numerous mistakes and pauses to make the video flow better for attention-challenged kids. Watching humorous YouTube videos produced by other amateurs provided creative hints and ideas for our storyboards. The magic lantern has come a long way from Livingstone's day!

Storytelling holds several advantages for teaching the story of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. The pandemic prodded us to step back in time and diverge from the worn-out analytical gospel presentations of modernity. Because we have the advantages of both the ancient and the modern, we can hybridize storytelling with digital technology by using prerecorded video, slides, and live online presentation. By retelling short biblical narratives, the listener becomes automatically engaged. With storytelling, one does not have to defend each detail about the event because the storyteller gives his eyewitness account during which the listener tends to give the witness the benefit of the doubt. The skeptical heart is more easily disarmed and may even want to learn more. When playing the role of Peter or a shepherd, one does not have to portray

himself as an educated and erudite apologist. Additionally, the veracity of the account is verified by the love and Christlike character of those explaining the application that immediately follows the story. The children know us, trust us, and still have a general respect for Jesus even when they do not understand what he is about. My stuttering and forgetfulness added to the scene of a simple person telling his story. The power of the Spirit who illuminates the redemptive story in the minds of the listeners made up for any thespian deficiencies in the storyteller. I've never had an acting class nor starred in a high school drama, but I know that we have a story that must be told.



Of course, a time will come when we need to modify this approach and innovate once again. As the world stood still, we took a step back to use an old method. By stepping backward, we were able to make a few big leaps forward for the Kingdom of Christ. Our church kids enjoyed learning more about the Bible and did not seem the least bit bored. At the end of each summer camp week, I asked children and teens to consider becoming a Christ-follower. During the summer of 2020, at least twenty children raised their hands to indicate their decision to follow Christ. Because most people are reserved and very discrete about personal matters, we believe that the message likely affected more than the number of raised hands indicated.

## References

- Green, M. (2004) *Evangelism in the Early Church*, rev ed. Eerdmans Publishing.  
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## GOLGOTA 11 CHURCH BUDAPEST, HUNGARY

**Year founded:** 2012

**Denomination or Network:** Calvary Chapel

**Weekly Attendance:** 20s to 60s

**Location:** Urban, 4 miles south of the Parliament



## **About the Author**

Keith Sellers and his wife Beverly have served in Hungary with WorldVenture Mission since 2000. Keith holds a D. Min. in Growing and Multiplying Churches from Talbot School of Theology, La Mirada, CA. They tell about their ministry experiences on their website at [www.keithnbeverly.com](http://www.keithnbeverly.com).