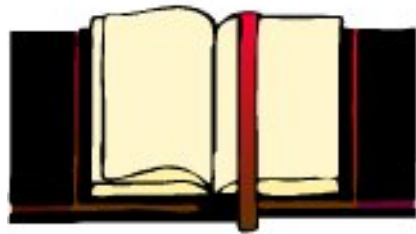


LET THE BIBLE LIVE



**REPORT OF THE
NORTH YORKSHIRE DALES
BIBLICAL LITERACY PROJECT**

INTRODUCTION

The world's best-selling book is in danger of becoming the least read! Yet in it God wants to communicate with the people he created and loves.

(Whitney Kuniholm)

The Bible is America's favourite unopened text.

(David Nienhuis)

In the beginning was the Word

(John 1 : 1)

“Who fought the battle of Jericho?” asked the quiz show host. The contestant shuffled her feet, looked to heaven and then replied “Paul?” A snapshot into the state of biblical literacy in this country! Anecdotal evidence, general impressions and academic research all tell the same story – that levels of biblical literacy, not only in society at large but even within the Church, are not good. For many this is a deep cause for concern.

When watching an incident like this on television, how do you react? Do you simply shrug your shoulders and think “C’est la vie”. Do you “tut, tut” and blame the teachers, the government, the new atheists or the Church itself. Or, with a sense of urgency and hope, do you ask “Can the church, can I, do anything about this?” - in the belief that biblical literacy matters.

Well, three years ago, three groups of people decided they could do something to promote biblical literacy. They were the Darlington Methodist District of the Methodist Church, the North Yorkshire Dales Methodist Circuit, and CODEC, a research institute based at St. John’s College in Durham. Working in partnership, they set up a unique project with the catchy title The North Yorkshire Dales Biblical Literacy Project (NYDBLP)!

The following report contains the project’s story as well as wider reflections on biblical literacy in general. In Part One it charts the origins of the project; it shares something of the research from which it grew and to which it has contributed; it reflects on the importance of the Bible for church and society and it asks about the nature of biblical literacy, attempting to understand what is meant by the term. Part Two concentrates on rehearsing and reflecting on what the project has actually done, in church, in community and through the social media. The final part examines the impact of the project and how elements of it have been more widely shared, concluding with some thoughts about the way forward.

This report is prayerfully and humbly offered in the hope, not just that the story is of interest in itself, but that it will stimulate further research, reflection and work in the wider church. If further Biblical Literacy Projects, of varying kinds, were to emerge in response, the author would be happy indeed!

(All Biblical quotes are taken from the New Revised Standard Version)

PART ONE

GENESIS : THE STORY OF ORIGINS

The Project Begins

A living word, unread, remains a dead word. (Lynda Day)

The fight for biblical literacy in our churches will involve the taking of thousands of small steps on a long journey. But first we need to get on the road. (George Guthrie)

And God said, "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3)

How it all began.

The project had its origins in a flash of inspiration! And this happened in a no less exotic context than a meeting of the Methodist Church Connexional Stationing Committee! The recipient of the initial vision was the Chair of the Darlington Methodist District.

A number of observations and insights came together as the basis and stimulus for setting up the project. Among these were:

- a recognition of the crucial role of the Bible in nurturing spirituality and discipleship, church growth and mission;
- an awareness of the lack of biblical literacy, not only in our communities, but even within the Church. This awareness was partly grounded in the results of the National Biblical Literacy Survey conducted by CODEC in 2008 (cf. Appendix 1);
- previous experience of models of mission which were locally based, yet whose outcomes were more widely shared. This was felt to be a good model for enriching the Church's life, thought and action;
- a realisation of the lack of a rural emphasis in many projects and programmes initiated by the Church;
- the challenge of using social media in the cause of biblical literacy.

Thus the idea was born of initiating a unique and pioneering project to promote biblical literacy, a project that was to be District-wide, yet grounded in a particular rural circuit and that involved an exploration of the use of social media. This vision was then shared with the leadership teams of the Darlington Methodist District and the North Yorkshire Dales Methodist Circuit, as well as the Director of CODEC. Their enthusiasm and support led to the wider dissemination of the idea, as well as the drafting of an outline proposal. After proper and rigorous discussion in the requisite church courts, it was finally agreed to set up the North Yorkshire Dales Biblical Literacy Project for a three-year period, beginning in the autumn of 2010. Although initiated by the Methodist Church, the philosophy from the

beginning was that the project should be open and ecumenical.

Structure, Management and Funding

In terms of the nuts and bolts of the project, it was decided to appoint a part-time facilitator who would lead and direct the project. The Revd David Wood, a Methodist presbyter living in Bedale, North Yorkshire, was duly chosen to work seventeen and a half hours a week in this role.

The project was to be managed by a small, ecumenical management committee, chaired by the Darlington District Chair and comprising two representatives from the District (the District Training Officer and a superintendent minister), two from the North Yorkshire Dales Circuit (the circuit superintendent and a circuit steward), the Director of CODEC and two representatives from other denominations. In the end the United Reformed Church happily appointed a representative, the Anglican Church were unable to send one.

Once the project was under way, a local circuit support group was also formed, comprising six people of various backgrounds from different parts of the circuit, all of whom were keen to promote biblical literacy. Part of the reason for the formation of this group was to provide the facilitator with local knowledge and expertise. But it was also designed to help the circuit “own” the project and see it as a shared venture, not just something done on their behalf by a paid employee!

As for funding, the main funding was provided by the District and the Circuit. Although application was made to the Methodist Connexional Grants Committee, this approach was not successful, the Connexion having other priorities. The project also benefitted from the generosity of the Ripon and Lower Dales Circuit in which the facilitator was resident. CODEC also supported the project financially through payments for discrete pieces of work, not least the further training of the facilitator in the use of social media!

Aims and Objectives

Of greater interest perhaps are the aims and objectives that were formulated for the project. These emerged from initial conversations between the management committee and the facilitator and were kept under constant review as the project developed. They were seen to be in line with the goals and priorities of the three sponsoring bodies, as well as with those of the wider church. Overall, five major aims were identified.

Aim One : to research levels of biblical literacy in a typical rural circuit and communities.

It was felt to be important to include a research element in the project. This dimension was seen as furthering the work of the 2008 National Biblical Literacy Survey and as providing additional evidence in building up as complete a picture as possible of the state of biblical literacy in this country. It was seen as one of a number of mini-research projects on biblical literacy that would feed into the next national survey, scheduled for 2014. The rural context for the research was designed to cover a perceived gap in the 2008 survey. There were

initial feelings that levels of biblical literacy in rural areas might be slightly higher than the national average.

Aim Two : to encourage biblical literacy within the church at all levels

A major focus of the project was to help churches engage more with the Bible in all aspects of their life, individual and corporate. It was intended that it might encourage greater enthusiasm for the Bible, a deeper engagement with scripture and an understanding of the many approaches to reading scripture. It was also hoped that it might attract new people to the delights of Bible reading. This was seen as part of wider church programmes for nurturing individual discipleship and spirituality, as well as being in line with the Church's priorities for church growth and the whole Fresh Expressions movement. The project was seen as one way among many of fostering in Methodism the initiative of becoming "A Discipleship Movement Shaped for Mission".

Aim Three : to encourage biblical literacy in local communities

This aim was predicated on the belief that the Bible is God's gift to the world, not just to the Church - a good principle of the Protestant Reformation. The project was designed to help local communities rediscover the riches and relevance of the Bible. Time and effort were to be spent on "getting the Bible out there" and assessing the challenges and opportunities for doing this. This belonged to the Church's wider missionary and evangelistic goals, not least in terms of community outreach and involvement.

Aim Four : to explore the use of the social media in the work of promoting biblical literacy

Recognising that we live in a digital age, the project was concerned to see how the social media might be used in the work of communicating the Bible. This aim was very much in tune with the whole philosophy and work of CODEC (see the CODEC website www.durham.ac.uk/codec). It was especially interested in how possible such use was in a rural area, granted both the physical and psychological issues. Practically some parts of the North Yorkshire Dales Circuit have restricted access to mobile phone signal / broadband. Psychologically, the conservative nature of both church and rural area were thought to present a real challenge!

Aim Five : to share the results of the project with the wider Church

Finally, in line with the initial vision, this was held to be a locally based project whose outcomes might be shared for the enrichment of the wider Church. Indeed the aim was that this initiative might stimulate the growth of a network of such projects around the country and thus contribute to an ever-increasing spread of biblical literacy.

Specific Objectives

Under these five general aims, there were also a number of specific objectives, namely:

- a) to consider the particular opportunities and challenges of nurturing biblical literacy in a rural area, granted the scattered nature of rural communities and churches;

- b) to develop and work with teams of people within the church and community, especially to help in the encouragement and training of preachers, worship leaders, Bible study group leaders and other key players;
- c) to use already existing material and to create specially designed resources for use in biblical literacy, paying particular attention to adult education methods and different learning styles;
- d) to act as a bridge between the two worlds of academic biblical studies and the local church and community;
- e) to reflect theologically, with the help of others, on every aspect of the project.

The Context

Although operative in the whole of the Darlington District, from the first it was envisioned that the project be grounded in a real and typical Methodist circuit. This was to be a work of practical theology, albeit linked to the academic and research community. The context chosen was the North Yorkshire Dales Methodist Circuit (see www.nydalesmeth.org.uk).

Covering 375 square miles of rural North Yorkshire, this circuit had been newly formed just three months prior to the start of the project. It is an amalgam of two previous circuits, the Wensleydale Circuit and the Swaledale Circuit, stretching from the A66 at Ravensworth in the north to Coverdale in the south, from Scorton, to the east of Richmond, to Hawes /Gayle in the west. Incidentally the project has been one factor in helping to give the new circuit a sense of cohesion. In terms of the staff team, there are three presbyters and most recently a circuit administrator. In all there are 22 churches, geographically scattered, ranging from one large town church of over 150 members, to a majority of small village chapels with memberships varying from 40 to 4! Most congregations are made up of local dalesfolk and more-recently arrived “offcumdens”, often retirees. Apart from the town church and one other, the average age of the membership is well over 65.

Theologically the area tends to be conservative. When the project began there were 19 Bible study / fellowship groups meeting around the circuit, a good base from which to work. Fortuitously the project was also greatly helped by beginning just as the Church and therefore the Circuit were celebrating the 400th anniversary of the publication of the King James Bible. This proved to be an excellent way in both for conducting the research and for trialling certain initiatives.

The Three Peaks Challenge

The Yorkshire Dales are renowned, rightly, for many things, including the famous Three Peaks Challenge. This entails climbing Yorkshire’s three highest mountains – Ingleborough, Pennyghent and Whernside – in under twelve hours. This challenge has proved to be an excellent analogy for the Biblical Literacy Project, which itself can be summed up in three challenges, namely:

- 1) Changing a culture – a culture of declining biblical literacy;

- 2) Restoring confidence – in the Bible as a living word for all;
- 3) Taking some small steps - on the road to a renewed biblical literacy.

A quote from George Guthrie shared on Twitter in fact came to sum up the project perfectly. It is shared above. “The fight for biblical literacy in our churches will involve the taking of thousands of steps on a long journey. But first we need to get on the road”.

DEUTERONOMY : LIVING BY GOD'S WORD

Why the Bible?

O God, you have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you. (St. Augustine)

We read the Bible not to be informed but to be transformed. (St. Benedict)

One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.
(Dt. 8:3; Mt. 4:4)

The Importance of Scripture

Before embarking on a detailed summary of the content of the project, two preliminary and crucial questions deserve some consideration. The first concerns the importance of scripture: why does biblical literacy matter? This was expressed very early on in the project by a Methodist local preacher who, after a session about biblical literacy, asked "For a person who attends church, enjoys its worship and leads a good life, why is the Bible important?" One suspects that this is an unspoken question on the minds of many believers. A serious question deserves a serious answer!

Biblical Literacy in Context

Biblical literacy needs to be set in the widest possible context. It relates to creation theology and fundamental issues concerning why we are here and what it means to be human. A central tenet of the Christian faith is that we have been created "to know God and to enjoy him forever" (Methodist Catechism). In a very real sense, people of faith are the true humanists, because they understand that to be fully human entails relating to the divine. This is beautifully summed up in the famous quote above from St. Augustine. Authentic human living means allowing God to draw us ever closer to himself and finding our true life and vocation in him. To be fully human means entering into God's purposes of blessing for the whole of creation.

Now God graciously seeks us in many ways, but one crucial way is through scripture. The Church holds that the Bible is a gift from God to all, a means of grace through which our relationship with him is awakened and nourished. In her book *Encouraging Biblical Literacy* (Grove Books; Cambridge ; 1997), Margaret Killingray rightly reminds us that ultimately biblical literacy is not about knowledge of the text of the Bible, but about knowledge of the God revealed in the Bible. And she uses "knowledge" here in its proper biblical sense of intimacy and relationship. In similar vein St. Benedict counsels that we are to read the Bible not to be informed but to be transformed into the very image of God. In a more narrowly Methodist context, we are reminded of the Methodist Quadrilateral – namely that our knowledge of God comes through Scripture, tradition, reason and experience, with scripture holding pride of place. So the Bible matters. As the book of Deuteronomy reminds us "one does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God".

The Ten Commandments

Within this overall answer, can we be more specific and delineate particular and discrete reasons for engaging with the Bible? The project grappled with this issue and eventually came up with its Top Ten reasons for reading the Bible, a kind of Decalogue for biblical literacy! These ten commandments are split into two groups of five. The first grouping is more general in nature and concerns the importance of the Bible for society at large. The second grouping is more directly relevant to the Church and to Christian discipleship. These “ten words” do not deny that the Bible can at times be a difficult and puzzling book, with which we often have to wrestle. Yet they affirm that there is much positive and crucial about delving into scripture.

General Reasons

1. The Bible is (to quote an old newspaper advertisement) “a right riveting read”! Although it is commonplace to refer to the Bible as a library of books, yet it does indeed contain some amazing literature of diverse and wonderful genres. Here are to be found story and poetry, philosophy and history, lament and letter. One might almost say that there is something for all tastes. And although the literary quality does vary, some biblical books do reach the heights. Our appreciation of the Bible as literature has been greatly helped over the last thirty years by academic biblical studies, where literary and narrative approaches to scripture have taken centre stage. Anecdotally, this was brought home at a secular book club. As part of the project, the members had been persuaded, instead of studying a novel, to read the book of Jonah as literature. At the end of the course, one member exclaimed “Wow! Why had no-one told me there was such great stuff in the Bible?!”
2. The Bible is crucial for understanding our western history and culture. As already noted, the project began in the Year of the Bible, when the church celebrated the four hundredth anniversary of the publication of the King James Bible. Many books written to commemorate that event spelled out the significance of the Bible – and the KJV especially – for the development of western literature and culture, as well as the English language. Two American reports, commissioned by the American Biblical Literacy Project, highlighted the importance of the Bible for those studying English and American literature. Indeed they produced evidence to show that students who had a certain level of biblical literacy performed better in modules than those without. Some American colleges actually provide extra-curricula biblical literacy classes to help literature students. Anecdotally this finding has been supported by a number of English teachers in private conversations as part of the project. Granted too that Christianity has not only shaped western culture but is still a major world religion, then the Bible is crucial in our multi-faith context for understanding one of the major faith communities. Indeed the Old Testament is of supreme importance for an appreciation of the three great Abrahamic religions.
3. The Bible can awaken faith and bring life. A fundamental principle of the project was that the Bible is God’s gift to all, not just to the Church. This is in-line with a major tenet of the Protestant Reformation. As with all of God’s gifts, people have the

freedom to respond to the Bible as they will and biblical literacy is not about coercion! Yet if, as we know, the Bible has life-giving and transforming power, then there is good reason for “getting the Bible out there”, in ways that make sense to people and help them engage with it. In the present spiritual climate there is no false optimism about the ease of the task, only a recognition of its importance.

4. The Bible can be a source of inspiration and comfort. This fourth reason for reading the Bible, closely related to the preceding one, draws especially from the experience of the Gideons. Research has shown that, for both believers and non-believers, one of the occasions when they are likely to pick up a Bible is in times of difficulty and stress. Sometimes, when life is hard, the Bible comes into its own. This perhaps has important repercussions for the relationship of biblical literacy to pastoral care. There is also evidence to suggest that some people, whilst professing no faith, have been inspired by the Biblical message to a real commitment to some worthy cause.
5. The Bible is a stimulating conversation partner in thinking about current issues. One way of viewing scripture is to regard it rather like a member of the panel on the BBC’s Question Time programme. On many of today’s major topics, the Bible’s voice is worth hearing. This is not to assume that the Bible is always relevant. Because of its contextual nature, often it addresses issues and concerns that are not ours. There are times when its outlook frankly is a hindrance not a help. And yet it is precisely its old, strange and sometimes alien character that means scripture can offer a different and challenging perspective that is worth consideration. The Bible has an amazing capacity for being re-interpreted over and over again so as to speak a living word. Certainly over the last decades biblical scholarship has underlined the important contribution the Bible can make to the ecological agenda, to liberation movements, to feminism, to tackling injustice and poverty, to interfaith dialogue and creating a fairer society – to name but a few issues! Indeed the Bible constantly holds before us a picture of the world as it might be and that we are called to help create.

Particular Reasons

6. The Bible is our major witness to Jesus, his life and significance. Being a Christian is about love for and allegiance to Jesus the Christ. The Bible not only provides biographical information about Christianity’s founder (how much is the subject of perennial academic debate!), but more importantly grapples with Jesus’ significance for life, the world and faith. To take Jesus seriously means taking the Bible seriously! That includes, of course, both testaments, for it is impossible to fully understand New Testament thought about Jesus without knowledge of the Old. After all, Jesus was a Jew!
7. The Bible has shaped and continues to shape the Church’s identity and self-understanding. There is no such thing, said John Wesley, as a solitary Christian. To follow Christ means to belong to the body of Christ, the Church. Donald English once reflected humorously that when he became a Christian, no one told him that, as

well as accepting Christ, he had to join the church! It is scripture that helps us to understand the nature and role of the church, especially as an agent of God's kingdom on earth. Indeed, as history bears witness, it is the Bible that enables the Church to critique and purify itself when it loses its way. If we want to hear what God is saying to today's Church, then engagement with the Bible matters.

8. The Bible helps us in forming our understanding of discipleship and mission. This happens on both the corporate and individual levels of Christianity. A major task facing the Church today is to determine what mission, evangelism and discipleship entail in the twenty-first century. Church and society are going through an immense period of change; all the old foundations seem to have been removed. In Britain, as elsewhere, the talk is of fresh expressions of church, new ways of being church, as we seek to mission effectively in our post-modern world. The Bible is a crucial partner in such discussions and thinking. In Methodist terms, if we seriously want to work out what it means to be "a discipleship movement shaped for mission", then engaging with scripture is vital. But also at a personal level the Bible has real power in helping individual Christians to understand their own particular call and vocation, both in the church and the world.
9. The Bible can help in Christian thinking on moral and ethical issues. Part of the rapid rate of change in our world means that many difficult and complex ethical dilemmas now face us. Grappling with them is not easy and it is sometimes precisely in this area that the Bible can appear to be not only old but irrelevant. So many of our issues were simply not part of the horizon of the biblical authors. And yet the Bible contains some crucial ethical principles that should still inform our moral thinking (see the recent book by Jonathan Sacks : *The Great Partnership*), as well as its overriding demand on the Christian expressed through the three great love commands. It is also biblical faith that so often provides the motivation for living the moral life.
10. The Bible has the power to transform us. Here, for the Christian, we come to the heart of the matter. The Christian life is about transformation. St Paul expresses this clearly in Romans 12 : 2: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds". The Christian life is about being renewed in the very likeness of Christ, about being remade in the image of God. It was St. Irenaeus who memorably said "God became human that we might become divine". One of the ways in which this renewal takes place is through constant, prayerful and thoughtful engagement with scripture. Such one of the great lessons of history.

Taken together, these Ten Commandments are an attempt to answer the question of why biblical literacy matters. They also highlight that biblical literacy is not an end in itself but rather a means to an end. But perhaps they also help in one of the Three Peaks challenges, namely that of restoring confidence in scripture as a living word for all.

JOHN : SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

What is Biblical Literacy?

Post-Christendom churchgoers have a shrinking biblical literacy. With this shrinking literacy comes a waning trust in scripture as the authority for faith and life. Thus- a downward spiral.

(Christine McSpadden)

We are biblically literate not only when we know the text of the Bible, but when we live it.

(Margaret Killingray)

You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf.

(John 5 : 39)

Defining Biblical Literacy

Sitting in the staff common room of a famous theological college, a colleague suddenly turned to me and said, “OK, what is biblical literacy then? How would you define it?” In reply I mumbled some random and inchoate thoughts that satisfied neither him nor me! Yet it is a fair question. It forms the second preliminary and crucial question that deserves our attention.

The fact is that an answer is hard to give. As a discipline, biblical literacy is fairly new. One of the initial steps of the project was to try and discover what materials had been produced about biblical literacy. The stark reality was very little. There was a plethora of books, study guides, commentaries, material on DVD and the web designed to help people understand and engage with the Bible – especially in view of the Year of the Bible. But there was a dearth of material exploring biblical literacy itself, its nature and character or definition. Indeed very few studies have charted the history of biblical literacy or researched whether levels of literacy today are any lower than in previous generations. One ninety year old commented, “It’s no worse now than when I was a girl!” It is possible that, except at times of heightened religious fervour (such as during the Evangelical Revival), levels of biblical literacy historically have been fairly poor. The very term literacy points to a reading culture. Historically people’s engagement with scripture has been oral and visual. There are also proper questions about literacy generally in our society today. How does the level of biblical literacy compare to general levels of literacy within the population at large? And are we moving today to becoming, through the new social media, a much more oral and visual society. So more work and research needs to be done in this infant but growing discipline.

At one level it could be argued that biblical literacy is simply about the dynamic process of helping people to engage more and more with the Bible. The last section has outlined ten reasons why the Bible matters. If they have any merit, then biblical literacy could be seen in terms of inculcating an increasing appreciation for the Bible in these roles. Connected with this, biblical literacy might also be defined in terms of increasing fluency with the Bible (knowing your way around it) and increasing competence in reading and handling it (appreciating different ways of reading), as well as the growing ability to share scripture

with others. This seems to be part of the answer provided by Margaret Killingray in her book *Encouraging Biblical Literacy* (Grove Books; Cambridge; 1997).

Minimum Requirement

Yet some have tried to be more precise. From a faith perspective they have asked questions such as, “Does effective Christian discipleship require a certain level of biblical knowledge? Are certain levels of biblical understanding necessary for growth and maturity in the faith?” In other words these approaches ask about a minimum requirement of biblical literacy for being a Christian, suggesting that there is one. This minimum requirement is defined in terms of knowledge of certain fundamental biblical stories and/or themes. For example the very popular *Essential 100* (Whitney Kuniholm; Scripture Union; 2003) works on these lines. It takes the reader through one hundred scripture passages (50 from each testament), based around twenty themes, claiming that these 100 passages and accompanying notes will enable the reader to:

- Get the big picture of what the Bible is all about;
- Respond to the Bible in daily life;
- Hear from God himself and grow in relationship with him.

In a similar vein, the book *Storylines* (Croft and Pilavachi; Kingsway Communications; 2008) suggests that biblical literacy revolves around knowledge of six basic scripture themes – Jesus, Covenant, Kingdom, Salvation, Presence and Worship.

The Biblical Literacy Project America has suggested that there are 72 essential Bible stories and themes that people need to know to be biblically literate. The context of their report concerns levels of biblical literacy for understanding English and American literature. Yet their Bible Literacy Checklist, comprising 37 items from the Old Testament and 35 from the New (see appendix 3) is readily transferable to the life of faith and discipleship.

Marks of Biblical Literacy

Another approach that comes from a somewhat different angle is to ask whether there are any defining marks of a biblically literate person. As an attempted answer, again the Biblical Literacy Project America (adapted) suggests the following five. A biblically literate person is someone who:

- Has good knowledge of the outline of the Bible;
- Has good knowledge of key Bible stories;
- Has good knowledge of key Bible characters;
- Can recognise biblical quotes and sayings;
- Can relate the Bible to today.

All in all these approaches are but the beginning of what is required, namely some concentrated thought and reflection on exactly how to define biblical literacy. Is the ultimate test the one suggested above – namely not just knowledge of the text but living it out?

AMOS : A FAMINE IN THE LAND

Research Findings

Bible study groups are far more focussed on providing personal support to one another than on learning the Bible. Indeed...such groups often produce wooden interpretations of the Bible with little increase in knowledge. (Gregory Jones)

At times I was confounded by the dearth of biblical literacy – my own included.

(Christine McSpadden)

The time is surely coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.

(Amos 8:11)

The National Biblical Literacy Survey.

As noted earlier, part of the stimulus for initiating the project was the findings of the National Biblical Literacy Survey carried out in 2008. Using a methodology of interview and questionnaire, this major survey revealed a worrying picture of the state of biblical literacy in the country. As background to the further research carried out by the project, it is worth sharing some of its headline findings. (For the full report, see appendix 1)

- a) Over 70% of those interviewed aligned themselves with a church/denomination;
- b) In terms of Bible-reading habits, 75% owned a Bible (often an older version) but only 18% opened the Bible weekly, and only 7% daily – and this despite the 70% affiliation;
- c) For 33% the Bible was still important (sometimes in a latent way), but for over 50% it was irrelevant. Age-profile was significant here. Most regular Bible readers were in the 60+ age-band: the under 45's rarely bothered with the Bible;
- d) Bible reading was seen to be the preserve of older people, the holy or experts. So despite a good level of Bible ownership, we seem to have professionalised the Bible. Many respondents thought that the Bible needed an expert to help interpret it.
- e) As for Bible characters, some New Testament personalities were well –known, especially Thomas, Judas and Mary Magdalene (the result of recent media coverage?). But there was very little knowledge about others, including St. Paul. The Old Testament scored very badly. The only character with whom there was any acquaintance was Moses. There was little knowledge about Abraham, despite our multi-cultural society with its three Abrahamic Faiths, and little knowledge of Joseph despite a very successful musical!
- f) Many people had a good grasp of the basic story of Christ's cross and resurrection.

Yet knowledge of other New Testament stories was being lost, not least the parables. Awareness of any Old Testament stories was minimal and less than 19% had any knowledge of the Ten Commandments.

- g) Finally there was great confusion for many about Jewish and Christian festivals and the biblical stories that accompanied them. The religious background and content to our major festivals were a closed book.

The Project's Research

One of the project's major aims was to build on this research by carrying out a local survey in a rural area. Much of the national survey had been conducted in urban and suburban areas, so there was a desire to see how rural areas fared in comparison. The research began with an expectation that levels of biblical literacy might be slightly higher, owing to:

- The more conservative nature of rural churches and communities;
- The slightly more central place that church and chapel still held in rural communities;
- Locally, the presence of faith schools, not least three Methodist schools in the North Yorkshire Dales Circuit.

Using similar methods and the same questionnaire as the national survey, the first four months of the project were dedicated to this research. It was conducted both among the churches (ecumenically) and among community groups, with additional visits to individuals, all within the area covered by the North Yorkshire Dales Circuit. Much valued help was given by various groups in conducting this research. Most people were happy to be involved, although one lady memorably looked at the questionnaire, began to answer it and then suddenly tore it up in public view, saying "This is nobody's business but mine!"

As in the national survey, participants were asked about their possession of Bibles and their usage of it, both now and in childhood; its significance in their lives; its place in their schooling; their attitude to the Bible and their knowledge and evaluation of biblical ethics (the Ten Commandments; the Golden Rule). As our national calendar is based upon Christian festivals, and these in turn have biblical stories associated with them, participants were also asked about their knowledge of these biblical roots. Recognising that biblical stories are a source of entertainment and documentary on the stage, television and cinema, and that much information about the Bible may now be gained from these sources, questions sought to elicit their knowledge of non-print biblical presentations. Questions were also asked about knowledge of the scriptures gained through the social media. Finally, given that Christianity is a religion of story, participants were asked a series of questions on Bible characters and well-known biblical stories.

A large proportion of respondents self-designated as practising Christians, with 79% aligning themselves to one or more Christian denomination. Reflecting the Christian spread in the area, 35% designated as Anglican, 33% as Methodist, 4% as Roman Catholic and 7% as belonging to other traditions, mainly URC. No-one designated as belonging to another faith, again reflecting the demographics of the area. 16% designated as agnostic, atheist or of no

religion. Interestingly no-one designated as humanist. In terms of age, 50% of participants were in the 16-64 age band, 50% were over 65. 33% of respondents were male, 67% female. Concerning encounter with the Bible in Church over the last year, 63% classed themselves as regular worshippers (over 26 church visits), whilst 15% had never attended. The rest classed themselves as irregular attendees. As for previous connection with the Church, 64% said that they had attended a Sunday School for 4 years or more, whilst 34% had never attended. 53% had once belonged to a uniformed organisation.

The full results of the survey can be found in Appendix 2 but it is worth recording here the major conclusions:

1. Overall the findings supported the earlier results of the 2008 national survey. Thus there seems to be no significant difference in levels of biblical literacy in the rural area. The project's previous expectations were not met!
2. The findings reinforced the fact that, for the sake of the Church's life and mission, there is a significant and urgent task to be done in terms of biblical literacy.
3. There is some biblical knowledge and interest out there in the Church and community which might still provide the basis for a programme of biblical literacy. Such a programme could build on residual knowledge of bible characters and stories, as well as knowledge of the fundamentals of the Christian faith in terms of the foundational events of the cross and resurrection. Reclaiming some of the Christian festivals in terms of their biblical background might also be of use.
4. Helping people to re-engage with the Old Testament should be an important part of any biblical literacy programme.
5. Such a programme could also help people to appreciate the literary qualities of the Bible, as well as its relevance for life, faith and public issues today.
6. A biblical literacy programme should also aim at giving people confidence in their ability to read, pray and appreciate the Bible for themselves.

Declining Levels of Biblical Literacy

It is worth asking the question about what factors have led to these low levels of biblical literacy in our society. A number of possible reasons have been suggested:

- The increasing secularism of our age and consequent drop in church attendance;
- The post-modern distrust of sacred writings and authorities, linked to suspicion about meta-narratives in general;
- The increasing pluralism of our age;
- Changes to the religious education curriculum in our education system;
- Changing patterns of literacy in a digital age, not least the storage of information on the web rather than in one's head!

- The decline of Christian Sunday schools and uniformed organisations;
- The decline in expository and exegetical preaching in the Church;
- The decline in habits of daily devotion and Bible reading among believers;
- A culture of anti-learning and anti-intellectualism within the Church:
- Information overload in society at large!

Both surveys asked the participants questions about the lack of biblical engagement today. Interestingly, contrary to the bold assertions of Richard Dawkins and other ardent atheists, the so-called texts of terror (where God is portrayed as seemingly nasty, vengeful and immoral!) did not seem to be a major difficulty for people. The principal reasons offered were that:

- The Bible has been discredited by science. There is a credibility gap between the truth of science and the truth of the scriptures;
- The Bible is difficult to understand. Reading the Bible is like visiting a foreign land;
- The Bible is boring;
- The Bible is irrelevant to modern-day issues and concerns;
- The Bible needs an expert to help in its understanding;
- The Bible is only important for the holy, church leaders and students of theology.

One person simply responded that she did not read the Bible because the print was too small! Perhaps there is an issue about how the Bible is packaged and presented.

Bible Study Groups

Alongside this major research, the project also ran two smaller surveys within the North Yorkshire Dales Circuit. These were thought to be an important component in assessing the state of biblical literacy and engagement in the churches. The first concerned Bible study groups. Within the 22 circuit churches, when the project began there were 19 Bible study groups meeting regularly, with approximately 140 people attending. One suspects that this was higher than the national church average. Three of the groups met weekly, the majority (10) met fortnightly and the remaining six convened monthly. Of these groups, 8 were connected with the largest circuit church at Richmond. The rest were fairly evenly spread across the circuit, apart from one area (Upper Wensleydale) where there was a marked dearth.

Most of the groups were lay-led by a committed, enthusiastic and able cohort of leaders. However these leaders rarely, if ever, met together for mutual support and learning. The clergy participated when they were able, sometimes leading the occasional sessions. Two of the groups had regular ministerial leadership. In terms of origin, a number of different factors had led to the formation of these fellowships. Many of the groups in Wensleydale

were formed as the result of a convention held at least twenty years ago in the Dale by David Watson. They had also been encouraged by an energetic lay leader in the dale, who had devoted much time and energy to their maintenance. Other groups had grown out of Alpha Courses run in the churches (at ministerial instigation?), whilst two or three were started by the direct request of church members themselves. Only in the rarest case had they been instigated by direct ministerial policy.

Most of the groups were of mixed ability and had a membership between six and ten people. Within them there was, not unexpectedly, a variety of approaches in terms of content and delivery. Most of the fellowships began with a short time of devotion followed by the study for the day. Some would also spend time in intercession at the end of the session, whilst one at least prayed far more than they studied! Most of the groups appreciated a variety of content, which across the groups fell on a spectrum from the overtly exegetical (one group normally studying only one or two verses a session!) to the more thematic and life-centred. In most cases there was the use of pre-packaged material (books, CD and DVD, audio tapes): a few of the leaders actually produced their own material, based on their own studies. Interestingly a number of the groups had recently followed a pre-packaged course on Women in the Old Testament which they had very much appreciated!

Three issues were raised by the groups themselves as part of this research:

- The need for further training and encouragement of the leaders;
- The need to help groups address questions of the application of scripture to today;
- The question of how to attract more people into these groups.

In terms of this latter issue, research has shown that, in rural communities, born and bred locals are reluctant to join Bible study groups (innate shyness/ not part of their tradition?). This has been borne out within the circuit. There are also the more usual reasons of:

- Past involvement with groups had deterred people (the bad experience!);
- The fear of being shown up as lacking basic Bible knowledge;
- The Bible is to be believed, not studied;
- Why does the Bible matter anyway!

Pew Bibles

The second area of study was the availability and use of pew Bibles in the churches. Out of the 22 churches, 17 had pew Bibles available. Of these 12 offered a single version, 5 had multiple-choice! The most popular versions were the New International Version and the Good News Bible, with the Revised Standard Version not far behind. Interestingly this meant that no churches provided an inclusive translation. The churches that had no pew Bibles on offer were invited to think about their provision and those with multiple-choice were

invited to think about standardising. However the concurrent publication of the new Methodist Hymnbook, *Singing the Faith*, meant that scarce resources were put into its purchase instead!

As for the use of these Bibles in worship, this was an area more difficult to assess. Those churches that had Bibles also had systems in place for announcing their availability and for giving page numbers for the readings in services. From conversations with preachers it was also clear that some deliberately encouraged their use, not just when biblical lessons were being read, but also during other parts of the worship, notably the sermon. However, granted that some people understandably prefer to listen to the Bible reading rather than follow the written text, there was a general consensus that most pew Bibles were under-used by congregations!

PART TWO

ACTS : DEVOTION TO THE WORD

Encouraging Literacy in the Church

If Christians knew what dynamite there is in the Bible, they would change the world.

(Mahatma Ghandi)

At times I was confounded by the dearth of biblical literacy – my own included. Yet this might be good news for the Church in that people might hear the Bible anew, without the baggage of the past.

(Christine McSpadden)

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

(Acts 2 : 42)

In part two of this report we turn to consider what the North Yorkshire Dales Biblical Literacy project has initiated, promoted and developed, bearing in mind its major aims and objectives. The hope is to present a summary that will be both factual and reflective. It is important to share both successes and failures, as well as some of the difficulties and tensions that arose. The third and final part will involve an overall evaluation of the project in addition to suggesting some ways forward for biblical literacy.

So we begin with the aim of encouraging biblical literacy within the Church itself.

Team Work

Working with teams was of fundamental importance in the prosecution and development of the project. Mention has already been made of two significant teams – the management committee and the local support group. But in trying to enhance reading and appreciation of the Bible in a local circuit setting, three teams in particular played a vital role.

The Circuit Staff Team

The project facilitator regularly attended circuit staff meetings. Staff were fully involved in discussions about the project, its aims and progress. Plans and ideas were shared, comments and refinements sought, and many of the practicalities were rightly worked out together. Staff were able to reflect back how the project was being received in the circuit, as well as pass on people's reactions to particular events. Indeed the staff fed in their own ideas about biblical literacy and ways of promoting it in the circuit. Meeting with the staff was also important for prayer and support, and for offering of fellowship in what could have been a rather isolated role for the facilitator. There were times when the project made heavy demands on already overworked staff and over-stretched churches and the staff meeting provided the right forum for the resolution of these issues. Regular discussion with

the Superintendent minister was of vital importance and most helpful!

Local Preachers and Worship Leaders

In terms of biblical literacy and Methodist Church structures, local preachers and worship leaders occupy a pivotal role. Through their ministry in worship they are ideally placed to help further the cause! Indeed in current patterns of church life, they are able to “reach” more people in the church than most. Very early on in the project a meeting was held to consider how local preachers and worship leaders might enhance the understanding and use of scripture through worship. Three areas were discussed:

- How they could help congregations to engage more with the Bible;
- How they could help themselves and each other in further engagement with the Bible;
- What resources were available to promote biblical literacy through worship.

A rich discussion ensued! The results of questions 1 and 2 can be found in appendix 4, which is worth a look! Indeed they were shared more widely through an article in the Methodist publication “Icthus”. At subsequent local preachers and worship leaders’ gatherings, further conversation took place around the ideas circulated. A list of resources was compiled and sent to all preachers and worship leaders, as well as being posted on the circuit website. It was hoped to set up a virtual lending library of resources, but this never materialised, partly due to problems of administration and partly due to lack of interest. Sadly the project facilitator also failed to keep updating the resource list. Yet the preachers and worship leaders were helped to see how they might be involved in biblical literacy.

Bible Group Leaders

The third important group was the Bible study group leaders. In occasional meetings common concerns and issues were discussed, as well as the sharing of experience and resources. The leaders valued such mutual support. Again a resource list was compiled and sent to all leaders, as well as appearing on the circuit website. This list very much included resources available on the web. Much of the discussion centred on how to make Bible study groups more open, attractive and appealing to others. Ideas shared were:

- the holding of short study series of four to six weeks duration, which offered a bounded commitment to people;
- within such a series, trying a variety of styles of meeting (rather like the old Wesley Guild approach!);
- possibilities of offering a taster evening to people as well as meeting around a meal;
- using different methods of Bible study as well as a variety of material;
- encouraging the formation of new groups for particular age-groups or interests;
- the need for more attractive publicity, including the value of personal invitation.

One particular concern expressed was the need for further training. This was an area where it was felt the project could meet a real need. As part of the initial research the project facilitator had visited each group. He was invited to maintain his links with the groups, especially through the leading of one-off meetings. This duly happened! As a result of these discussions, two new groups were formed in the circuit, one for younger people in the largest circuit church and one in Upper Wensleydale, an area of group deprivation! What was more difficult to discuss was the reasons why people left groups after a period of involvement, or why people were not attracted in the first place.

Preaching Series

At the heart of the project were the month-long preaching and study series provided by the facilitator. He spent a month at a time in one of the circuit churches, preaching on the Sunday and offering a mid-week fellowship to take further the Sunday content. Each series was publicised in advance in the church. An introductory leaflet set out the overall theme of the series, the subject for each week along with the Bible passages to be studied. Some background information about the theme was given. All of this raised the level of expectation and anticipation within the congregation and evidence suggested that many folk had done their homework! This had a positive impact on the Sunday act of worship. As for content, the series would concentrate on a particular book of the Bible, a more general biblical theme, or a modern-day issue with biblical reflections. Most appreciated were those that followed through a particular book.

As for the mid-week study group, the attempt was made to follow good adult-education principles, as suggested by Margaret Killingray in her book *"Encountering Biblical Literacy"* (Grove Books 1997). These included:

- assuming no prior knowledge of the Bible;
- engaging in basic Bible study, rather than the too technical or academic;
- using interactive techniques of study, rather than the talk or lecture;
- providing people with the tools to do their own study, rather than simply teach;
- ensuring that the study was related to real life and the concerns of those present;
- using a variety of learning methods to suit the needs of all present.

Over the period of the project, each circuit church was able to have at least two separate experiences of this approach. Churches found it to be rewarding and enriching. As a result, one church went ahead and organised its own further series, whilst the circuit staff and local preachers looked for ways to roll out this method more widely.

The Liturgical Year

The project viewed the celebration of the Church's year as a valuable way of increasing biblical literacy within the church, not least the seasons of Advent and Lent. Each Advent of the project's duration, daily Bible readings for prayer and reflection were provided for use

(in hard copy and on-line), not just in the circuit, but in the wider district. In the first year, these readings were linked to suggested practical actions that people were invited to take on. In addition there was the provision of weekly worship resources and sermon ideas on the Sunday theme. All the material was produced in a modern and attractive format, by a talented and hard-working team.

Lent was even more exciting!

Year One.

This coincided with the celebrations surrounding the 400th anniversary of the publication of the King James Version of the Bible. The project assembled an exhibition charting the story of how the Bible had come down to us, from biblical times to the present day. From Ash Wednesday to Pentecost Sunday, this exhibition went on a circuit pilgrimage, spending a week in each circuit church. It was accompanied by a special celebration copy of the KJV which was used in Sunday worship. Some churches also organised events for the public reading of scripture. Where the church was connected to a local school, the school was invited in to view the exhibition, maybe accompanied by a school assembly. Worksheets were provided to help the children engage with it. The exhibition also found its way later into one of the local and popular agricultural shows. The text accompanying the exhibition was posted on the circuit website. Fascinatingly, in many churches where the Bible and exhibition lodged, people brought out some of their personal old or interesting editions of the Bible to add to it. They were very keen to share the story behind the edition!

In addition to visiting the exhibition, people were encouraged to read the New Testament in forty days, using a scheme provided by the Bible Society. There is evidence that some attempted it! Others became involved in the Big Read, using Tom Wright's book "Luke for Everyone".

Year Two

The project's emphasis now was on the theme of Praying the Scriptures. A six-week Lent course, devised by the facilitator, was run in two different centres within the circuit. The course was designed to introduce people to various ways, ancient and modern, of praying the Bible. It was practical and experiential in nature, including sessions on Ignatian spirituality, Lectio Divina, Celtic spirituality and prayers of lament, as well as praying the Bible through hymns and art. Those attending were given suggested daily passages to pray in that week's "style" and the weekly material was also available on the circuit website.

In addition, each church in the circuit was invited to prepare a Prayer Station on part of Christ's passion story. These stations were collected together and used during Holy Week in three different circuit centres, giving people opportunity to walk the passion, prayerfully, with Jesus. This all culminated in a circuit Quiet Day, where the prayer stations were once more on display.

As in the previous year, folk were again encouraged to share in the Big Read, this time using Tom Wright's book "Matthew for Everyone".

The Old Testament

This leads to a consideration of the Old Testament. In line with the research findings, re-engaging people with the Old Testament is an important aspect of biblical literacy. Lent in the third year of the project majored on this issue. At the invitation of a local Churches Together group, the project devised and delivered a Lent course entitled “Jesus BC”. This looked at six familiar images of Jesus in the New Testament against their Old Testament background. It was especially designed to show how knowledge of the Old Testament can enhance our understanding and appreciation of the New. Concurrently the project also led another home-grown series in a neighbouring circuit, in the form of a basic introduction to the Old Testament through the lens of Christ’s passion story. Events in that story were looked at anew with the help of their Old Testament roots. This was accompanied by a study day on the Wisdom Literature. Again the aim was to show how indispensable the Old Testament is to a proper understanding of our Christian faith, as well as to life today.

Previously the project had trialled a five-week course written by the facilitator called “Images of David”. This invited participants to take a tour around David’s portrait gallery in the Old Testament. Pictures considered included David the Celebrity Hero; David the Ideal Ruler; David the Traitor, Adulterer and Serial Killer; David the Singer-Songwriter; David the High Priest and David the Philosopher. It also asked questions about the David of history, exploring issues such as the historicity of the Old Testament, its authority and inspiration. Some of the preaching and study series mentioned above focussed on Old Testament material, such as the creation accounts in Genesis. However it was the series on Old Testament characters that were particularly well received, not least Jonah and Amos!

Pot Pouri

Alongside these initiatives, a number of other schemes were introduced.

- 1) *Handwritten Bible*. This was a Methodist Connexional idea, rolled out to coincide with the 400th anniversary celebrations for the KJV. Within the circuit a number of centres, church and non-church, were opened where people came and took part, by writing a selected portion of scripture for inclusion in a national handwritten copy of the entire Bible. Some people also chose to decorate their portion in the style of an ancient medieval manuscript. One centre was at Gunnerside Methodist Primary School in Swaledale, at the time when the Bible exhibition was also visiting. The children were so moved that, in response, they wrote a “rap” based on the Street Bible of Genesis 1. Entering a local tournament of song, they won a number of prizes (once the judges had been satisfied that the Street Bible was a legitimate translation!).
- 2) *Circuit Bible Quiz*. In the project’s first year, a circuit Bible Quiz was introduced. Churches (Methodist and others) were invited to send a team of four people to take part. Smaller churches were encouraged to join together to form a team. The quiz night was based around a pie and pea supper. Teams were told in advance some of the biblical books that would be the subject matter for each round. Each member was also given a specialist subject to prepare for an individual round. This ensured

that people came having done a little homework, all part of biblical literacy. Such was the enjoyment – and competition(!) - that the event was held again in year two.

- 3) *Bible Roadshow*. At one stage in the project, grand plans were drawn up between CODEC and the project to hold a major Bible Roadshow in the North of England. The idea was to hold concurrent events at a number of venues in the north east and north west, led by well-known biblical scholars and teachers. For various reasons this never materialised. However a major weekend entitled “Godly Ways” was held in two centres, covering two Methodist Districts (Darlington and West Yorkshire). The weekend explored how we might engage with the Bible in the twenty-first century. There was a variety of sessions on the Friday and Saturday, led by respected scholars and the weekend at each venue culminated in a Sunday-morning act of worship. The weekend touched about 70 people. However, in the cause of biblical literacy, perhaps the larger vision still needs to be pursued.

Training

As noted above, one of the issues raised by local preachers, worship leaders and Bible study group leaders was the need for further training. With this in mind, the project organised three training days, one for preachers and two for group leaders. In conjunction with CODEC, a day school was held on the Bible and preaching, with the title “Imaginative Preaching”. Its aim was to introduce participants to new and creative ways of sharing God’s word in preaching. It explored something of the rationale for preaching, before looking at a variety of styles of sermon. The leader led by example, preaching two sermons during the day which were then opened up for critique by the group! The project teamed up with Lindisfarne (the North East Regional Training Partnership) to deliver two separate days on leading Bible study groups. Called “Let the Bible Do the Work”, again their aim was to explore a variety of new and different approaches to Bible study. Granted the nature of rural communities and circuits, it was important that all three events were held locally, to try and ensure ease of access. However the project did also publicise and promote study and training days being held further afield, even aiding in the provision of transport.

And Finally....!

In a more light-hearted vein, the project launched an “Extreme Bible” competition. People were encouraged to submit a photograph of themselves reading their Bible in the most bizarre place. These were posted on the circuit website and a winner chosen. Snaps included reading the Bible on a tractor; whilst mending a roof; during a pantomime rehearsal; in the midst of a picnic. But first prize went to the photograph of someone reading whilst lying in an open, stone coffin! Sadly we were not overwhelmed with entries – too frivolous?!

MATTHEW : THE GREAT COMMISSION

Encouraging Literacy in the Community

Why did nobody tell me there was such good stuff in the Bible?

(Member of secular book club)

Literacy enables us to read both the word and the world. It is a dynamic reality, a never-ending life practice that involves putting those skills to work in reshaping our identity and transforming our world.

(David Nienhuis)

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.

(Matthew 28 : 19-20)

From the outset, a major thrust of the project was to try and get the Bible “out there”. This was based on the belief that the Bible is God’s gift to all, not just the church. As a word of life and a means of grace, the Bible needs to be shared universally. Biblical literacy is a fundamental aspect of the Church’s mission and evangelism, a part - fulfilling of the Great Commission. Yet in our day and age, such an objective is hard to achieve. There are forces both within and without the Church that make it especially difficult. Inside the Church there is a lack of confidence about faith sharing, as well as in the importance of scripture. In our communities there is either apathy or antipathy toward institutional religion and a post-modern suspicion of the old authority structures. In more conservative rural communities there is an added reticence toward anything new-fangled, including a biblical literacy project! People were worried about the “hidden agenda”! So there have been some minor successes and some failures, all of which are recorded here. Some of these initiatives were particularly related to life in rural areas, some were more general in scope.

Agricultural Shows

An important date in the rural calendar is the annual village show or agricultural festival. Here the local community gathers, celebrating its life and strengthening its ties. The show also provides an attraction for tourists and visitors, boosting the local economy. On both counts, an ideal venue for attempting some biblical literacy! Concerning village shows, a way in was easier where church and community already had good relations. Here it was possible to build on already existing work. As for agricultural festivals, one of the largest in the area was unable to accommodate the project’s advances! At some others, however, the church was already involved and welcomed the project’s input. Indeed only in the last few years one show (at Muker) had intentionally invited the church to have a presence and the project was able to provide some impetus and help. In terms of content, the project offered Bible exhibitions, quizzes (with prizes!), study resources, bookmarks and balloons to take away, and the opportunity for engaging in various crafts around biblical themes. A prayer box was also provided into which people could put prayer requests, with the guarantee that these would be honoured at the next Sunday service. An important aspect of the church’s

presence was to have volunteers on hand who could talk with people, at their request, about faith and the scriptures. One exhibition entitled “The Bible for all Seasons” provoked a number of deep and helpful conversations.

Beer and Bible

Another focus of rural village life is the village pub. Spurred on by initiatives elsewhere, the project began to hold Beer and Bible evenings. Through the help and contacts of a local church member, a small group was introduced to a sympathetic landlord and ideas outlined. With his consent and backing, the group launched the venture in a low-key way, meeting monthly in the pub for a drink. Whilst there, as part of the evening, they would stage a short, witty and entertaining drama based on a Bible story or theme, inviting any who wished to join them for conversation afterwards. For all members of the group, this was outside their comfort zone and there were real anxieties about how it would be received (to say nothing of the nervousness of the group about performing!). We were also mindful that the livelihood and reputation of the landlord were at stake! However from the very first it produced some interesting conversations and reactions. Thus the work expanded into holding regular evenings around a meal (thus helping the landlord), with readings, drama, prayers and live music. These were especially linked to major festivals, such as Harvest, Christmas and Easter and personal invitations were issued. A number of non-church people became part of the regular gathering. Here was a fresh expression of church in embryo.

Meanwhile the project identified other pubs where similar initiatives might be tried and there was talk of expanding into local cafes. Based on the experience of a local vicar, there were thoughts of these Beer and Bible evenings hosting a short course (DVD based) on the big questions of life and faith. The project ran out of time before these plans could be put into operation but the North Yorkshire Dales Circuit, through the pioneering group, has been challenged to continue the work here. Finding church people who are happy to be involved might be an issue. But there is real scope and potential for biblical literacy and faith sharing through ventures like this, let alone the building of relationships between church and community. A lovely by-product was the humbling opportunity to offer some pastoral support to the landlord and his family at a difficult time.

The Bible and the Arts

Another way of promoting biblical literacy in the community is through the arts. Here a number of ventures were tried.

- 1) *Art Groups*. The North Yorkshire Dales Circuit already hosted an annual art week, led by the Superintendent Minister. This was held at various venues and anyone was invited from novice to professional! Here people could explore biblical themes and stories, expressing their current or personal impact, through a number of different media. An exhibition of work produced was held at the end of the week. The existence of this group was a timely reminder of initiatives related to biblical literacy that were already established and doing good work. The recognition and valuing of what is already happening is crucial to any specialised church project.

- 2) *Christian Theatre Weekend*. Much time and effort were spent in organising what was hoped would be a major event in the project's calendar. Two excellent Christian theatre companies were invited to spend a weekend in the circuit (one in Swaledale, one in Wensleydale). Each delivered two performances on the Saturday, afternoon and evening, and each contributed to worship on the Sunday. The performances were held on neutral territory and were well publicised as widely as possible. As an act of encouraging biblical literacy in the community, the idea was that church members specifically invited others along, to see and hear the Bible "performed" in a witty, engaging and relevant way. The performances were first – rate, as was the involvement in worship, but the attendances on the Saturday were extremely poor at all venues. The event simply never took off! This inevitably led to much reflection, although the reasons for the poor response are still hard to fathom. Were people reluctant to invite others to something unknown and untried? Was this something outside people's experience? Was the timing an issue, with just too many other attractions happening on a June summer weekend? Was it just one event too far for busy people? Would it have been better to put all our eggs in one basket at one central venue? Were our plans too grand? Or did people need more information about the exact nature of the content? At one level we shall never know! However.....
- 3) *Street Theatre*. One positive spin off was the decision to engage in some street theatre! It was decided to call a group of interested people together and think about staging an open-air drama. The result was a decision to enhance the traditional Good Friday walks of witness in two of the major market towns in the circuit (Leyburn and Richmond) by including a suitable Holy Week production. A relevant piece was found and the services of a producer from a well-known local theatre, a church member, were procured to direct! Volunteers were sought – most of whom had little or no previous acting experience – who were then divided into two companies, as the dramas were to be staged concurrently. After six weeks of rehearsal, on a cold but clear Good Friday morning, the two plays were performed in the middle of each market place – one right in the middle of the live market itself! Both events were deeply moving, for players and audiences alike. Indeed many from the passing crowds stopped to watch and listen, being obviously engaged. Plans are now afoot to develop this approach in future years. As a postscript, the drama was also staged later in the day, indoors, as the worshipful culmination of a Good Friday pilgrimage in Swaledale. Again people were deeply moved and appreciative.
- 4) *Film Nights*. Another planned venture was the use of film nights to help people engage with the Bible and biblical themes. A series of three bi-monthly family nights was arranged in one of the churches and the films chosen. The idea was to meet around a meal, watch a high quality film and then discuss its themes, in age-appropriate groups and ways. Unfortunately issues in the particular church meant that the series never materialised. Other circuit churches showed an interest in the scheme but already over-full programmes and lack of people power led to the plans being shelved. Something for the future!

- 5) *Book Clubs*. Aware that a number of secular book clubs met in the area, through the local library service who oversaw them, an offer was made and publicised for the project facilitator to lead a short series, in their chosen style, on a biblical book – read as literature. One group took up the offer and spent four weeks reading the book of Jonah. This was an eye-opener to most participants and produced the comment shared above: “why did nobody tell me there was such good stuff in the Bible!”

The Bible and the Media

From time to time the project tried to connect with local radio around the theme of biblical literacy, with very little response (other than a willingness to advertise events). This may be because the approach came from an unknown and untried project rather than through well-established channels. However a major success was achieved through Garrison Radio. Located within the North Yorkshire Dales Circuit is the largest military establishment in the whole of Western Europe – Catterick Garrison. Within the Garrison are the headquarters of Garrison Radio, which serves not only Catterick Garrison but the eight other major army garrisons in the country. Through the invaluable help, support and clout of the Garrison chaplaincy team, Garrison Radio were persuaded to take part in the Big Read 2012. This entailed broadcasting the whole of Mark’s Gospel in two-minute sections as their “Thought for the Day” on the main breakfast-time show during Lent. The readings were recorded at their studios by willing volunteers from the Garrison church, who were delighted to be involved. The radio station was also open to broadcasting an interview with Tom Wright, writer of the accompanying material, but sadly logistics finally meant that this never happened. But this was an effective way of getting the Gospel out there into a vast number of local homes.

Background Support

As in any project, whilst much of the work was up-front, some of it concerned providing background support to others, especially those working with children and young people.

- 1) *Holiday Bible Club*. For many years a major ecumenical Holiday Bible Club, called “Kings Club”, has been run in Wensleydale, attracting up to 150 young people. It is excellently organised and run, and has a good reputation in the area. Regular training events are held for the adult volunteers involved. It was here that the project was able to provide a little help for the staff, by producing background information, notes and commentary on the biblical book at the heart of each year’s theme. As an experiment, jointly with the staff, the project also hosted an evening event for parents. The aim of this was not only to share something of the work of King’s Club, but also to engage the parents in some light biblical introduction, based on the work their offspring were doing. Sadly in both years that it was offered the response was not great – despite the excellent cheese and wine on offer!
- 2) *Schools Work*. Little has been written about the project and local schools for the simple reason that this was an area where much first-class work was already being carried out by educational staff, circuit staff and others. Not just in the three

Methodist schools within the circuit, but in many of the Dales villages there was a strong tradition of partnership and co-operation between church, school and community. Therefore it was not for the project to intrude or take over, only to offer support where this was sought. The project facilitator did engage in some schools' work, especially around the Bible exhibition, and occasionally provided suitable resources. It needs to be added that work with children and young people did not fall within the facilitator's comfort zone!

- 3) *Free Bibles*. The project was able at various events to arrange for the distribution of free Bibles or individual Gospels, often through the agency of the Bible Society. And, not related to the project but of interest for the promotion of biblical literacy, one circuit church, as part of its mission, specifically bought Bibles which were then offered as a free gift to visitors. These Bibles were on display in the church, situated in a picturesque village, which was open to visitors every day. In the short time that the scheme had been in operation, at least 60 Bibles had been taken.

It Pays to Advertise

Finally all of the above initiatives were accompanied by regular publicity and advertisement in the local community. The project employed the press, in terms of local newspapers and community magazines; events were advertised through flyers in shops, libraries and public houses; listings of events were posted on community websites, offering information and invitation. All of this was in addition to the usual networks (oral and written) employed by local churches – not to be underestimated in the rural community! But more general information about the project itself was also shared, both through articles written by the facilitator for local publications, and personally by visits to local community groups.

LUKE : THE WORD ON THE WAY

Encouraging Literacy through Social Media

Digital social media are real places where people gather and we must be present in these places just as we would be present in any other physical locales.

(Keith Anderson)

For the Church today, using social media in communicating the faith is the modern equivalent of John Wesley “becoming more vile” for the sake of the Gospel.

(Peter Phillips)

Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?

(Luke 24 : 32)

Introduction

The church is charged with the communication of the gospel. In pursuance of this task, at various periods in her history, the church has been quick to embrace new technologies. The early church saw the advantage of using the new codex (book) form over the scroll for her scriptures. The success of the Protestant Reformation was due in part to the reformers' ready embrace of the new invention of printing for the dissemination of the Bible. That we are living through a communications' revolution today needs no documenting. It is reckoned that, whilst there are seven million regular church-goers in Britain today, thirty million people use Facebook daily. We live in an age where social media provide a real community and gathering place for people. Aware of the possibilities and pitfalls, the Church needs to embrace these new technologies for the sake of the gospel - which therefore means for the sake of biblical literacy. If we fail to do so, then in the words of Peter Phillips, the Director of CODEC, the church in this country will end up like the Amish. In light of the quote from Luke's Gospel above, the challenge is this: how can we help people's hearts to burn within them whilst the scriptures are opened up to them on the digital super highway – a new kind of walk to Emmaus!

With this in mind, one of the aims of the project was to explore the use of social media in the promotion of biblical literacy. In fact this was a double-edged goal: both to see how social media might be used in developing biblical literacy but also how biblical literacy might be used to encourage engagement with social media. This was against the background, noted above, of both the physical and psychological issues associated with the new technologies.

The Circuit Website.

Prior to the start of the project, the North Yorkshire Dales Circuit had already set up its own website. Thus one of the immediate and simplest things to do was to add a separate page

dedicated to the biblical literacy project. This page was also linked to a new District webpage similarly designed for the project. Over the course of the project these pages were used for a number of purposes.

Background Information. Firstly it was used to provide background information about the project, its aims and objectives, the sponsoring bodies and the facilitator. Here people could learn something of the reason for the project, why it had been set up, what it hoped to achieve and some of the strategies it hoped to employ. Based on the research outlined above, it also provided some information about the state of biblical literacy in this country today and therefore why the promotion of biblical literacy was an important missionary task for the church.

Forthcoming Events. The main section of the webpage was devoted to enabling people to keep abreast of what was happening in the project. This involved both reflecting on recent events as well as publicising forthcoming attractions. As with any website the crucial feature here was keeping the webpage up-to-date (which did not always happen!). It also helped folk within the circuit to know what was being done in their name (without waiting for quarterly reports to the circuit Meeting!) and perhaps to own the project a little more. There was evidence that some people had been attracted to certain events through this means.

Material On-line. Another important feature was the posting on-line of all materials that had been used in the project. This involved the preparation of material specifically designed for use on the web (especially in Advent and Lent), as well as ensuring that resources used in locally-delivered courses were made more widely available. The text of the Bible exhibition, the leaflets designed for the Praying the Scriptures and Jesus BC courses, Advent and Lenten readings, photographs of the Passion Prayer stations and the Bible Exhibition, all found their way onto the web. Indeed an encouraging aspect of the project was the occasional request that resources connected to some new and positive venture be posted on-line for wider circulation.

It is worth mentioning here that two of the more “fun” initiatives within the project were especially designed to encourage people to engage with the web. These were the Extreme Bible competition and the Favourite Bible Reading scheme mentioned earlier in the report.

Virtual Library. Whilst never taking off in the full-blown manner envisaged, nevertheless the sharing of resources on-line was a helpful aspect of the project. This was especially true of resources for worship leaders, local preachers and bible study group leaders. This also entailed sharing links to other useful sites on the web, partly as a means to introduce people to the plethora of material out there, partly to give people greater confidence in using the web. There is obvious scope for a much fuller use of a local virtual library for the promotion of biblical literacy.

Facebook and Twitter

At the beginning of the project, the facilitator was something of a technological dinosaur! An important requirement was therefore some basic yet intense training in the use of social

media. This was happily provided through CODEC and led to at least two outcomes for the project. The first was the setting up of a project Facebook Page, with links to the Circuit and District websites. This again simply spelt out something about the project, its aims and activities. The facilitator was also able to share information and reflection about the project through personal Facebook use.

More importantly the facilitator joined the Twitter- sphere and became a regular Tweeter, rapidly gaining followers. In terms of the project there were three benefits:

- The further publicising of project events;
The discovery of what was happening elsewhere in terms of biblical literacy. (As noted earlier, the strap-line for the project came through Twitter!)
- The opportunity both to initiate and to engage in conversations about various biblical topics with a much wider clientele and use Twitter as a way of promoting biblical literacy. Not least in importance and excitement were apologetic discussions with some atheists on line about the nature and meaning of faith and scripture. This was all part of keeping the Bible out there on people's radar.

There was a further intention for the facilitator to become a regular "Blogger" but, apart from two initial "blogs", this never materialised. Scope for the future!

Virtual Bible Study Group

However a major initiative was the setting up of a virtual Bible study chat room for the circuit. This was a six- month pilot project that happened toward the end of the project. Entitled "Crosswords", behind it lay a fourfold aim:

- 1) To give people in scattered rural communities the opportunity to share thoughts about the Bible and faith with a wider group and range of people than normal;
- 2) To enable those who found physical attendance at a Bible-study group difficult the opportunity to take part in Bible study;
- 3) To encourage greater confidence in the use of social media for faith and discipleship;
- 4) To provide one example of how social media might enhance the life of the church.

Using a pre-existing package for the purpose, the chat room was monitored by the project facilitator acting as the site manager. People had to apply to join the site: clear and simple publicity and directions were provided. The site manager could withhold access! Each month a different Bible passage was posted on the site, often accompanied by relevant pictures, and a few general and open questions posed. People were then free to share their own reflections on the passage or other people's comments in word, picture, U-tube clip or any way possible.

The venture got off to a very good start, with over 60 people visiting the site in each of the first two months. The on-line conversations did spark continuing discussion in at least one of

the circuit Bible studies! After a while, interest did wane: reflection suggested that one passage a month was too infrequent to sustain interest. Some people were put off by having to apply to join, although this was obviously necessary to guard the conversations. And perhaps a local circuit was too small a pool to be viable: a larger clientele might well sustain a more vibrant exchange. But as a pilot the scheme was invaluable in learning some lessons and there is great potential here.

Indeed this venture has been partly responsible for moves in the Darlington District to set up a similar scheme. This would entail people signing up to receive a daily email from the District, which would include a short Bible passage, short reflection and prayer. The material would be provided on a monthly basis by a local member of the District. This would not be intended to replace the connexional system of daily Bible reading: rather it could offer something more local and perhaps attract folk not already supportive of the national scheme.

Of course all of this only amounts to the taking of some very preliminary steps, context-based and governed by the art of the possible. The work of biblical literacy in the future will need creative dialogue with those engaged in initiatives and experiments within the field of communication and the social media. There is much happening here – biblical literacy must be at its heart.

TIMOTHY : SPREADING THE WORD

Sharing the Project Results with the Wider Church

Communities of faith have thrived on social networking for centuries. Paul was a consummate networker. (Verity A. Jones)

I believe the Bible is the best gift God has ever given to man (Abraham Lincoln)

Proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.

(2 Timothy 4 : 2)

Introduction

From the outset the North Yorkshire Dales Biblical Literacy Project was formed on the model of a local project whose outcomes could be shared more widely. Hence the fifth and final aim of the project – to share the results with the wider church. This report itself is written as a significant contribution toward that goal. Indeed the wider vision was that sharing information about this pioneering project might lead to the creation of a network of such programmes around the country. However the initial aim has been kept in mind throughout the project and has been fulfilled in a number of ways.

The Spoken Word

Apart from the facilitator “gossiping the gospel” of biblical literacy on his travels, the news has been shared through:

- a) *Church Services.* Hearing about the project, some circuits and churches invited the facilitator to lead worship on the theme of biblical literacy. On other occasions he used more general invitations to preach within and without the District to share something of the project and its work. There always appeared to be an interested response.
- b) *Study Days.* A number of circuits and districts specifically asked the facilitator to lead study days on the theme. These were often days for presbyters and deacons given over to Continuing Development in Ministry or annual events for local preachers and worship leaders. Some were circuit staff meetings. An important and stimulating part of these occasions was the opportunity for participants to devise their own contextually based programme for promoting biblical literacy.
- c) *Church Courts.* As a district based and funded project, ample opportunity was given for sharing news and information about the project around the Darlington District. These included presentations to the synod, to various district committees, to the district Superintendents’ meeting and to the district Supernumeraries. More widely the facilitator had opportunity to speak about the project at a number of events, including the Regional Ecumenical Officers gathering, the Harrogate Theological

Society and a seminar for CODEC. Regular reports were also made to the local circuit through the Circuit Meeting.

All of these occasions were useful, not just for spreading the word, but for the mutual sharing of ideas and initiatives, wise theological reflection on the project and the building up of prayer support. As is often the case some of the more critical responses tended to be the catalyst for further fruitful development!

The Written Word

The facilitator was also privileged in being able to promote the project through articles for various publications. Among these were:

- The Methodist Recorder. News about the project featured in a special rural church supplement;
- Icthus. Based on local discussions, an article appeared on the subject of the use of the Bible in worship and preaching. (This was in addition to an article on the Advent Old Testament Readings for 2011 which was also able to plug the project!). An offer has been made to provide a series on the books of the Old Testament.
- Country Way. An article on certain aspects of the project has also appeared in this publication;
- The ARC website. After extensive conversations kindly initiated by the Director of the Arthur Rank Centre, a good deal of information about the project has been included in the "Rural Discipleship" section of the ARC site.

In addition, as noted above, much information about the project could be viewed on-line at the circuit, district and CODEC websites. And one interesting spin off was that, due to early conversations between the project and Seattle Pacific University where research into biblical literacy was being followed, for a while the Dales Biblical Literacy Project appeared as a link on their website!

It is worth adding that, at the end of the project, a report was prepared for the local circuit where the project had been based. This was written to provide the circuit with an overview of the whole project, reminding the circuit of the philosophy behind the project and its activities. Its final section looked ahead, suggesting ways forward in promoting biblical literacy beyond the end of the official scheme. Which leads nicely to the third and final part of this report.....

PART THREE

ISAIAH : THE SUCCESSFUL WORD

Final Reflections

There was a discrepancy between the respondents' perception of how seriously their church took the Bible and how often they personally interacted with it. Most respondents thought that their church took the Bible quite seriously, whereas personal interaction with scripture was not very frequent. This was true for all age-groups.

(Seattle Pacific University)

It ain't the parts of the Bible that I don't understand that bother me, it's the parts that I do.

(Mark Twain)

So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

(Isaiah 55 : 11)

Introduction

“So then, how is your biblical illiteracy programme going?” Such the regular greeting of the facilitator by a local resident! In this third and final part, the time has come to share some reflections on the impact of the project and some wider issues raised by it, as well as to offer some thoughts on the way forward for biblical literacy. This is all based on the premise that the task of promoting biblical literacy is an urgent requirement for the church and that it should form a central part of her missionary and educational strategy. So much, it is hoped, has been shown in the previous pages.

The Project Itself

In some ways, without any formal assessment, it is difficult to discern what impact the project had. It is also hard to know what kind of formal assessment could have been devised to provide evidence of the project's effectiveness. At one point the idea of re-using the research questionnaire, at least within the circuit, was mooted. However it was felt that this was inappropriate to the task and would be unlikely to produce the evidence sought. This meant that any assessment was really based on people's reactions and comments, both publicly expressed in meetings and privately shared in conversation. This was compounded by some people's natural reticence to divulge how the project had impacted upon them and affected their approach to the Bible. Some evidence was gathered through the facilitator's Ministerial Development Review, but obviously this was more concerned with his leadership of the project than with its content and effectiveness.

That being so, nonetheless some things can be said both about the project's impact and about some of the lessons learned:

- a) Firstly the project quickly became well-known within the circuit and district, having a definite identity. Even within the community there was evidence that people had heard of the project and recognised the facilitator. Reactions were that the project was valued and appreciated.
- b) To those in the church already engaging with the Bible, the project provided valuable help, support and encouragement. It was a means for deepening and expanding their knowledge and appreciation of scripture, as well as introducing them to new ways of reading and prayer. It enabled them to make further links between scripture and life today. There was also evidence that, through the project, some took up more regular reading of the Bible, not least in doing the “homework” set as part of the preaching and study series.
- c) As for those in the church who were not already committed to the Bible, it is very difficult to judge the project’s effectiveness. One suspects from the evidence that, overall, it made very little difference to their outlook. There was evidence that some people attended Bible-study groups who had not previously been involved. And the Circuit Bible Quiz did encourage folk to read the Bible who had not previously done so. Non-Bible readers found the Bible exhibition interesting but there is no evidence that this led to any different engagement with scripture. One of the crucial questions raised by the project was how do you turn people on to scripture who, for whatever reason, have little interest in it. The project came up with no answers! In the current climate this seems to be a hard task. Perhaps in a very real sense we have to wait on the Holy Spirit to open people’s lives up to scripture and then be ready to respond through appropriate schemes.
- d) In what ways the project touched the local communities is even more difficult to assess. Perhaps in this aspect of promoting biblical literacy, the Parable of the Sower in Mark 4 is germane(!) - namely that as a church we simply have to make sure that we are sowing good seed, getting the Bible out there, and leave the growth to God.
- e) An important aspect of the project was that of building on the good biblical work that was already happening in the circuit and trying to support it rather than supplant it. The team-work approach was also crucial both in harnessing other skills and expertise, and in enabling the circuit to own the project rather than leave it to the “professional”. In this way too the work of biblical literacy will hopefully continue despite the ending of the actual project.
- f) There were both successes and failures in the project – as is to be expected in any project of this kind. Some ventures took off immediately and grabbed people’s attention; others took time to catch people’s imaginations or to raise their confidence levels to the place where they felt comfortable to be involved (which raises further questions about the time-scale of such projects); and some things just didn’t fire at all, often for reasons that were puzzling! So be it! In those things that did take off, their contextual relevance seemed to be important. It was also the case of learning the art of the possible and not asking people to run before they could walk. This applied especially to the use of social media.

In all this one needs to remember the project strap-line. In terms of the fight for biblical literacy, we need to take a thousand small steps on a long journey. This project took a few steps over a short period. The church needs to set out on the long haul if there is to be the culture change envisaged in the Three Peaks Challenge!

Wider Concerns

The project did highlight some wider concerns which it is worth recording. There is nothing especially new here and I suspect that most readers will readily identify with them. Yet to be true to the project they need to be catalogued.

- a) As well as meeting those reactions highlighted in the survey, namely that the Bible is boring, irrelevant and discredited, the project also came up against a more general anti-learning culture in the church. Some of the negative reactions to the project were part of a more generic resistance to learning, growth and development, which were not regarded as important features of Christian discipleship. Granted the amount of resources and effort that the Church has put into training and development over a considerable period of time, this continues to be a concern.
- b) As far as the Bible itself was concerned, in some people there were obvious feelings of guilt. They knew that as Christians they “ought” to read the Bible, yet in practice they did not, thus setting up feelings of inadequacy and shame. The project did try and put people at their ease about Bible reading, but more importantly it worked hard at moving away from the “ought” culture to one of enthusing people about the scriptures, their relevance and riches. It was also important to help people in the “how” of Bible reading, even more than the “why”!
- c) In terms of attending Bible study groups, in some there was the natural fear of one’s biblical ignorance being shown up in front of others. This is perhaps more pronounced in the tight-knit community of the village chapel where there is no room to hide! But for others, attending small groups was not part of their culture. This was especially so among the native-born Dales folk. Of course, on the positive side, the small village chapel itself acts like a small group for many and this has important repercussions for the style and content of Sunday worship. In terms of biblical literacy, there were good opportunities for leading Sunday worship in the style of a Bible study group.
- d) Promoting biblical literacy in the community had its own issues and challenges. One was the common response of indifference when people realised that the project was church-related. Another reaction was one of suspicion. This was church but not as they knew it! The facilitator often sensed a distrust, a feeling that there was a hidden agenda, that the project was really a form of covert evangelism, whose real aim was to bring people back to church! Some kept an interested distance! Building good and trusting relationships with people was a crucial part of the project and its influence.
- e) Yet, positively, the work in the community raised some important questions for church folk around the theme of “Guest Theology”. Some of the project’s ventures involved being guests in other people’s space – the public house, the café, the

agricultural show, the market place. This was very different to the more normal “host” model of mission where others were invited into the church’s space, which usually meant into the safety of its rules, ways and ethos and where the church could exercise control. It led to some deep reflection around the themes of Jesus the Guest in the Gospels, looking at his approach to mission; around incarnational theology and its relevance to mission; around the cost of discipleship and the taking of risks, as well as the whole theme of death and resurrection in the life of church and discipleship.

The Way Forward

This report has shared many of the initiatives undertaken by the project which it is hoped will spark others into action. Yet in conclusion there are four more general insights to share concerning the way forward.

- 1) *The Importance of Intentional Programmes.* All the evidence seems to show that biblical literacy does not happen by osmosis! Despite the normal and regular use of the Bible in the Church’s life, levels of literacy are declining. Therefore the church at all levels needs to devote time, effort and energy to devising and delivering intentional programmes of biblical literacy. Just as in education today there is investment in literacy programmes, so the church needs to act similarly to reverse the tide and change the culture.
- 2) *The Importance of a Biblical Literacy Network.* The Church needs to think seriously about the setting up of a Biblical Literacy Network. There are some good initiatives on biblical literacy taking place in circuits and churches. Some ministers are using sabbaticals for further reflection on the theme. Others are beginning to do some local research as part of further degrees. Now is the time to try and co-ordinate all of this work, to relate it to on-going work in universities and research centres, and to encourage districts and circuits to take the issue seriously. A Biblical Literacy Network, either Methodist or ecumenically based, could perform a vital role here, both in the promotion of biblical literacy projects and the offering of help and resources.
- 3) *The Importance of Further Research.* One senses that research into biblical literacy is in its infancy. Another national survey is planned by CODEC for 2014. However much more research on a number of topics would be extremely valuable, not least the question of what is biblical literacy; how one measures biblical literacy; the history of biblical literacy; levels of literacy in particular demographic areas; why levels of literacy have declined; ways of promoting biblical literacy and overcoming some of the problems.
- 4) *The Importance of Social Media.* For a number of reasons outlined above, the North Yorkshire Dales was not the most promising area for promoting biblical literacy through social media. Yet even here some good progress has been made. Looking both to the present and future of faith communication, it is vital that these media are harnessed and developed. Here is perhaps another area for further research and development.

Anderson K. "Where Two or More are Gathered" in
Reflections. Vol.98, Number 2. Yale Divinity School (New Haven : 2011)

Section Eight : Timothy

Jones V. A. "Living Theologically in a Networked World" in
Reflections. Vol. 98, Number 2. Yale Divinity School (New Haven : 2011)

Section Nine : Isaiah

Seattle Pacific University Website

