

**Promoting Biblical Engagement Among Ordinary Christians in English Churches: Reflections on the Pathfinder Project**

Submitted by Isabel Cherryl Hunt to the University of Exeter

as a thesis for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Theology

In April 2016

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# Abstract

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This thesis contributes towards understanding of how 'ordinary' Christians, who have little or no experience of academic biblical study or theological training, might be enabled to engage more deeply with the Bible. I propose that attempts to cultivate the skills of biblical engagement among ordinary Christians might be shaped around *lectio divina*, this ancient practice being adapted for the situation of contemporary readers. The adaptations would involve use of a range of modern media with which to encounter the texts, working in small groups in order to make space for a more intentional engagement between the voices of multiple ordinary interpreters, and employment of strategies to enable readers to navigate a perceived tension when approaching the Bible: one between head and heart, academic learning and spiritual growth. More specifically, I propose that the promotion of biblical engagement among ordinary Christians should be undertaken as a planned programme with a suite of different resources, which complement one another in both style and aim, together with a sign-posted framework to show participants what each stage is designed to achieve. It should begin with a widely accessible introduction to the whole Bible that conveys the overall narrative and historical setting while communicating the sense that the reader is a participant in the ongoing biblical story. This and subsequent resources should be selected in order to attempt to integrate cognitive and emotive approaches to the texts and, where possible, straight-forward terminology would be employed to maximise accessibility.

These proposals emerged from my evaluation of an experiment in promoting biblical engagement among ordinary Christians (Bible Society's 'Pathfinder'). Analysis of, and reflection upon, the rich qualitative data generated there led to my examining the process of developing biblical engagement in the context of the *lectio divina* tradition and in the light of contemporary theological reflection across a wide range of theological hermeneutics.

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Those appendices marked \* are completely or mostly the work of Bible Society personnel. Others are my materials.

It was not practicable to repaginate all of these sources.

## **Acknowledgements**

This research was partly supported by Bible Society and by St Luke's College Foundation, for which I would like to express my appreciation.

Huge thanks go to my husband, Richmond, to my mother and late step-father, Iris and Ken, and to the members of my church family, Isca Church, Exeter for their unfailing love and support through this work. I should also like to thank the staff and postgraduate students in the Department of Theology and Religion at Exeter for a congenial, collegial and supportive environment in which to study. Special thanks, for their advice and unstinting encouragement, go to Siam Bhayro, Susannah Cornwall, Dave Horrell, Emma Loosley, Susan Margetts, Bethany Sollereeder, Christopher Southgate and, most especially, to my wonderful supervisors, Louise Lawrence and Mike Higton.

## **Abbreviations**

BC: The Bible as a Contemplative Resource

BN: The Bible as Narrative

CBS: Community Bible Study

CEV: Contemporary English Version

ConBS: Contextual Bible Study

DQ: Diagnostic questionnaire (Appendix VI)

DS: Drama of Scripture

ES1: Evaluation Survey 1 (Appendix VII)

ES2: Evaluation Survey 2 (Appendix VIII)

Map: Maperio

Meek: The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth

MGS: Making Good Sense of the Bible

MJ: Miracles of Jesus

Pass: The Passion

PCP: 'Pathfinder Churches Prospectus' (Appendix III)

PCR: 'Pathfinder Church Resources' (Appendix IV)

PL: Pathfinder A5 promotional leaflet (Appendix II)

Reel: Reel issues

RRC: Reading Romans in Context

WO: Word in One

YGTT: You've Got The Time

# INTRODUCTION

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## **Aims**

My aim here is to explore how understanding of the Bible may be promoted among 'ordinary' Christians, those who have little or no experience of academic biblical study or theological training. I am going to argue that cultivation of the skills of biblical engagement among ordinary Christians might be shaped around the practice of *lectio divina*, an approach to the biblical texts which offers the structured aim of spiritual formation within a context that assumes an integration of cognitive and emotive approaches to the scriptures.

I will further propose that the framework of this ancient practice be adapted to contemporary settings. Both audio- and audio-visual resources present a wide and stimulating range of possibilities for encountering the biblical texts and may also raise awareness of the inherent multivocality of the printed word revealed in different oral and visual presentations. This multivocality may also be experienced as ordinary Christians read their scriptures together so I propose that attempts to promote 'ordinary' biblical engagement should be undertaken within groups small enough to allow sharing of differing 'ordinary' interpretations. Where contributions from specialists are required, ideally, these should be from theologically trained Christians who are located in the same or a similar ecclesial setting and in a manner that does not 'shut down' contributions by ordinary readers. Furthermore, I suggest, efforts should be made to incorporate such academic, cognitive information concerning the biblical texts together with emotive encounters; rather than isolating 'information' about the Bible from reading which is formational in intent, the two should be integrated.

I also aim to show that the promotion of biblical engagement among ordinary Christians is best undertaken not as a piece-meal adoption of one resource after another but as a planned programme, using the approach of *lectio divina* as a framework, which conveys a sense of aim and purpose; ordinary Christians are interested in biblical engagement not as an end in itself but as a means to deepen their experience of and relationship with, God and this should be the goal of any such project. The design of a programme allows selection of a suite

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of different resources, which complement one another in both style and aim; these should be presented within a sign-posted framework to show participants what each stage is designed to achieve. It should begin with a widely accessible introduction to the whole Bible that conveys both the chronology and historical setting of the individual books while also communicating something of what Christians perceive as the Bible's 'big story'. The latter then forms the basis for communicating the sense that the reader is a participant in the ongoing biblical narrative. For all resources, straight-forward terminology should be employed to maximise accessibility.

I aim to justify these proposals by exploring the results of my evaluation of a pilot project designed to promote biblical engagement among ordinary Christians (Bible Society's 'Pathfinder'). The data from this project included a rich and diverse set of comments on, and responses to, a set of resources which aimed to develop their biblical understanding in different ways. My deductive analysis of the data aimed to answer evaluative questions as to the perceived success of the project as a whole, and its individual components, and this led to my making some of the proposals above. However, my inductive analysis suggested other, more complex issues were also detectable within the data and three of these seemed of particular relevance to my overall aim: how biblical texts are encountered through different media, the multivocality arising when individual readings are shared in small groups, and perceived tensions between learning about the Bible and using it as a spiritual resource. In the course of my reflection I found the tradition of *lectio divina* to be an appropriate conversation partner for exploration of these three themes: it provides a framework for understanding biblical engagement as part of spiritual formation, it is familiar to some Christian traditions as it forms the basis of some modern resources, including some of those used in Pathfinder, and it has a long history of use. Moreover, the three themes are all raised within debate about its use in mediaeval biblical engagement. Exploration of these three themes in the light of contemporary reflection on some of the topics raised, and conversation with *lectio divina*, was the basis for the other, more substantial proposals I make here regarding the fostering of biblical engagement by 'ordinary' Christians. However, since these all emerge from the Pathfinder data I am first (Part I) presenting the details of the Pathfinder project and what can be learnt from an

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evaluation of its success before proceeding (Part II) to explore the three issues in conversation with both *lectio* and a variety of voices from contemporary theological hermeneutics.

### **The immediate context of this research**

The immediate context of this thesis, which made it possible, was the Pathfinder project, the nature and structure of which determined the methodology chosen. This project was conceived and run by personnel from Bible Society; each church group taking part worked through some of a range of fourteen different resources, which together aimed to give participants a better grasp of the Bible's 'big story', to equip them with skills to make sense of the ancient texts and apply them to the modern world, to promote participants' spiritual growth, and to lead to activities which would raise the profile of the Bible in their communities. From late 2009 until early 2012 it was run, as a pilot project, in eight churches across seven denominations. My own involvement began in late 2009 when the project was already being set up and churches recruited. As an outsider, both to the churches involved and to the organisation devising and running it, I was asked to visit the participating church groups and prepare a report for Bible Society evaluating the success of the programme.<sup>1</sup>

As there has been little evaluation of resources designed to help 'ordinary Christians'<sup>2</sup> engage with the Bible, whether they be individual books or exercises, or larger-scale programmes comprising a battery of such resources,<sup>3</sup> Pathfinder presented an ideal opportunity to explore which sorts of factors might be important in such a project. It was anticipated that, in the course of the fieldwork necessary to complete the Pathfinder evaluation, data would emerge that would shed light on the process of biblical engagement being undertaken by the project's participants and show what sorts of resources might best facilitate it further. This proved justified; the participants' responses to Pathfinder provided some clues as to what kinds of biblical engagement-

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<sup>1</sup> My own situation is that of a female Christian believer who has been part of the 'new' charismatic church movement for nearly four decades. That this is perceived as a slightly unusual situation for a theologian is illustrated by two reactions to my decision, in mid-life, to embark on theological HE. One person at my church asked me why I wanted to do it and one of my fellow Masters' students asked 'Do Charismatics *do* theology?'

<sup>2</sup> I unpack this term below but I use it as a short-hand for Christian believers who lack formal training in academic theology.

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter One for a survey of research into such resources.

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promoting resources were perceived as being fruitful (or not) but they also raised some other pertinent issues regarding the participants' approaches towards, and interactions with, both the resources and the biblical texts themselves. Consideration of these issues will, it is hoped, contribute towards the better design of such resources in future.

In brief, then, this study may be seen to have two facets. The first of these, the evaluation, was shaped by the research questions brought by Bible Society, namely how successful was Pathfinder in meeting its overall aims and how effective was each individual resource of which it was composed? An evaluative programme of questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with project participants, was designed and conducted to answer these questions, and the results were subject to a thematic analysis. Conclusions from this were presented in a report made to Bible Society in late 2012 (Appendix I); the overall conclusions regarding how successful the whole programme was, according to its own aims, are examined in Chapter Two, with a view to highlighting those findings which might contribute towards design of future such programmes. The second facet involved reflection, within a broader theological context, on the rich data generated by the evaluation; these largely comprised transcripts of oral responses, by ordinary Christians, to the resources in particular and to the overall concept of biblical engagement. Both of these facets have contributed towards the goal of this thesis: to establish some factors and strategies which might better promote the use and understanding of their scriptures by and among non-theologically trained Christian believers.

### **Pathfinder**

Since the immediate context of this project is Pathfinder, a brief description of this will set the scene for explaining the choice of methodology.

The main phase of the Pathfinder pilot programme involved the use of a number of resources, some produced by Bible Society itself and some from other bodies. The four core elements to the programme were experienced by most church groups in the first year of the programme, although the actual order varied; these included an overview of and introduction to the whole Bible, an introductory hermeneutics course, a small group meditative resource and another focussing on both listening skills and reflection on one's life and values.

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Other elements of the programme were drawn from a range of ten other resources which were selected for use by one or more groups, in the second year, depending on their situation and interests.

Each resource addressed an aspect of biblical engagement from a different perspective and addressed one or more of the programme's aims: helping participants grasp the 'big story' of the Bible; helping them make sense of the text, interpret and apply it; enabling personal spiritual formation and transformation and, fourthly, promoting some kind of encounter between their local context and the biblical texts. The resources which formed each element of Pathfinder varied a great deal in format and presentation; while some employed a combination of upfront teaching and small group activities others featured audio or video-based materials. Although most elements involved the participants meeting in small groups once a week or fortnight, a few anticipated ongoing activity by individuals through the week, sometimes expressed as 'homework'. Some elements of Pathfinder involved study, others promoted a meditative encounter, while others provided opportunities for both self-examination and the development of skills in listening, both to others and to God. 'Making Good Sense of the Bible' (MGS), for example, is an introduction to hermeneutics that draws on the findings of historical criticism and focuses on issues such as genre while also exploring the characteristics of a virtuous reader. Other elements of Pathfinder make use of historically important modes of biblical engagement, such as *lectio divina* and Ignatian imaging. Notably 'lyfe' is consciously modelled on *lectio* and also includes picturing biblical scenes imaginatively; engaging imaginatively is also employed by Pathfinder's 'Community Bible Study'. This difference in focus is to be expected; as I shall discuss below, other contemporary theological learning tools for ordinary Christians likewise include some programmes, or elements of programmes, with a basis in what might be termed critical study and others with foci in the areas of spiritual experience.

In addition to this central, 'development' stage of the project, Bible Society notified the participating churches that there would first be a so-called 'diagnostic' stage to establish where the church members were in their existing levels of biblical confidence and knowledge; they were also alerted to the fact

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that the project would be subject to formal evaluation by an outside researcher, during and following the programme.<sup>4</sup>

Through contacts forged by personnel, a total of eight churches were recruited into the programme by Bible Society although only seven participated throughout the whole study. The aim was to have as wide a denominational range as possible and the eight recruited included representatives of seven different church 'types' across various English locations. Altogether around 170 people were involved, with individual church groups beginning with between 15 and 30 members.

## Research Methodology

### Rationale for methodology

Fuller details of the investigation of the Pathfinder project can be found in Chapter One but the methodology is outlined here in order to set the scene. My initial approach to this project was determined in part by the pre-established structure of the Pathfinder project itself, and the arrangements made by Bible Society, but also in part by reflection on the project's goals and possible routes of analysis. Initially, a hybrid of quantitative and qualitative methods was planned. As Alan Bryman (1988: 126) notes, 'when quantitative and qualitative research are jointly pursued, much more complete accounts of social reality can ensue'.<sup>5</sup>

### *Avoidance of bias*

Studies of a sociological nature, both quantitative and qualitative, are subject to a number of effects which interfere with the reliability of the results. These, it might be inferred, could be increased in the case of Christian believers reporting on their interactions with their sacred text. They could include the desire of participants to please the interrogator(s) or to appear more 'spiritual' than they in fact were; in addition they may have a tendency to be influenced by the

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<sup>4</sup> Bible Society introduced the concept of 'confidence' in the Bible in this diagnostic stage (see p.57). I use it here, and below, in the sense in which I understood Bible Society to intend it: as confidence that the Bible is a reliable and authoritative source of revelation concerning the nature of God and that it is relevant to how one can and should live Christianly in the world. This can and does sometimes overlap with its use to refer to how confident people feel in their ability to understand its ancient texts.

<sup>5</sup> The proposed methodology was given a Certificate of Ethical Approval by the Ethics Committee of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences on 19/11/09.

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perceived objectives of the project (Bryman, 1988: 112). My 'negative identity', as neither an employee of Bible Society nor an author of any of the materials, which was established at our introductory session and reinforced by regular repetition at subsequent meetings, would hopefully have helped counteract those effects in this case, although they can never be ruled out.<sup>6</sup>

Efforts were also made to maintain openness in wording for questionnaires, focus groups and interviews. This, hopefully, not only made room for both positive and negative answers, and helped avoid biasing responses, but would have promoted answers which were 'likely to be a better fit with informants' actions, since those ideas are the ones that are salient enough to be reported' (Arksey and Knight, 1999: 152; see also Gillham, 2000). Efforts were also made to employ intonation and body language in order to encourage contributions in a manner that would communicate interest without influencing the participants' responses (Swinton and Mowat, 2006: 61-6).

### ***Generalisation***

Another issue arising with regard to both quantitative and qualitative data is the danger of generalising from a small number of samples. Since congregations became involved through the serendipity of individual contacts, it would have been impossible to claim that each congregation involved in Pathfinder was necessarily a 'typical' congregation, representative of its denomination/church group as a whole. Similarly, Pathfinder groups were made up of volunteers and hence likely to be, by self-selection, people already disposed to take the Bible seriously and to be interested in furthering their knowledge of and interaction with it. The composition of each group could not, therefore, be presumed to be representative of their congregations as a whole, either in their attitudes towards, and knowledge of, scripture or in their social profiles, that is, features such as gender, employment status or age distribution. Furthermore, the sampling of interviewees was 'opportunistic' (Swinton and Mowat, 2006: 69). Therefore, it cannot be claimed that conclusions from the data can be extrapolated to wider contexts on the basis of sampling representatively. Nevertheless, inasmuch as participants of both genders and a variety of ages

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<sup>6</sup> I did not conceal my own ecclesial situation as part of the leadership team in a church in the 'Salt & Light' family of charismatic churches; this network has no distinctive 'official' theology of scripture but espouses the position of the Evangelical Alliance UK.

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and occupations, across a number of different church contexts, were responding to a specific set of resources that were all designed to achieve a given set of aims, it seems reasonable to claim some value for the data in speaking into the design of any such future resources and programme.

### ***Analysis of data***

#### *Quantitative data*

Quantitative data are commonly gathered, as they were here, through the deployment of instruments such as surveys and questionnaires open to analysis and presentation along well-established routes, including calculation of means and percentages with statistical significance measured according to standard procedures.<sup>7</sup> However, subsequent experience with the Pathfinder groups showed that a proportion of those taking part found the paper questionnaires irritating, inaccessible or both; consequently, there were poor response rates from some of the wider congregations and some groups reported the paper instruments were contributory to high drop-out rates from the programme itself, in the early stages. Aside from reducing the volume of quantitative data, these responses suggested that any conclusions based on it would be skewed towards those participants who were more comfortable using such instruments. Additionally, the high number of variables present in this study, a result of its location in churches of different types, sizes, composition, context and theology, rendered it impossible to arrive at any statistically meaningful conclusions regarding these variables from the quantitative data. Consequently, more emphasis is placed here upon the qualitative data collected and its analysis.

#### *Qualitative data*

It was decided, in consultation with Bible Society and the churches involved, to arrange focus groups among the Pathfinders at each location, at three or four points during the project (see p.72 for a timetable of visits), and to supplement these with one-to-one interviews with a sample of those participating. Qualitative data thus gathered could be subjected to a number of differing

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<sup>7</sup> See Andrew Village's *The Bible and Lay People* for a clear example of a quantitative study in the field of practical theology (2007).

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analytical approaches such as grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), and could be viewed according to specific epistemologies.<sup>8</sup>

It was anticipated that the qualitative data from this project would include comments, from Christians with little or no theological training, that related specifically to their experiences of resources designed to promote their engagement with the biblical text. Given the wide range of Christians from different contexts, and the range of different resources, it seemed likely that the data produced would display a good deal of variety, the exact nature of which was unpredictable. In view of this, and in light of the specific questions being posed regarding the degree to which Pathfinder had achieved its aims, I opted to pursue a thematic analysis of the qualitative data that incorporated both deductive and inductive approaches to coding the data.

### *Thematic analysis*

Thematic analysis may be viewed as a process for encoding qualitative information, rather than a method in itself (Boyatzis, 1998); as noted by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, it is a foundational component of several other approaches and is equally applicable within any epistemological framework. However, as Braun and Clarke argue, it may also be viewed as a method in its own right, one 'which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data' (2006: 78). Since I was not aiming to produce a *theory* of what was happening as the Pathfinder groups worked with these materials but, rather, to establish some factors or strategies which would enhance the design of future such instruments, it did not seem appropriate to apply grounded theory or any further methodology to the thematically coded data. Instead, I sought themes within the data collected from focus groups and interviews by working through the transcripts and coding the material present.

### *Coding*

For the purposes of the evaluation of the Pathfinder programme as a whole, I initially drew together the aims that Bible Society had articulated and sought to answer the following questions:

How worthwhile were the diagnostic phase and the evaluation process?

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<sup>8</sup> See Swinton (2006: 28-71) for a consideration of qualitative research in the context of practical theology.

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Did Pathfinder enable a better understanding of the Bible's 'big story'?

Were participants better able to interpret, understand and apply the biblical texts?

Did the programme contribute to their spiritual formation and/or have a positive influence on their relationship with God?

Did it help them in any way to forge links between the Bible and contemporary society?

These questions could be posed of the data; any chunks of dialogue or group discussion pertinent to answering these questions could then be coded appropriately. This might be viewed as 'deductive' thematic analysis, where pre-existing questions determine the analysis of the data. However, both outside and within these coded sections of data, other themes could sometimes also be found. Although this process is to some extent determined by the reviewer of the data, and is subject to caveats regarding the bias of the reviewer and their pre-existing interests and hunches, this is, ideally, data-driven, inductive coding.<sup>9</sup> Given the unknowability, at the outset, of what points of interest might be made by participants, I decided to analyse the data thematically using QSR NVivo 9 software.<sup>10</sup> This software allowed data to be grouped, simultaneously, under different headings to which they pertained. This enabled the data addressing the concerns posed by Bible Society (coded deductively) to also be examined for other features which might, for instance, note unanticipated outcomes (good or bad), or raise issues which were important pedagogically, such as accessibility or availability of materials. These and other, more theologically oriented comments, I found as I attempted to code inductively.

It is important to note the subjective nature of this analysis; given the nature of this work as being towards a PhD, it was not possible to have a group of people blind-coding to check allocation of data chunks to themes. It is highly probable that other themes would be detected by other analysts. Nevertheless, there were data present in the corpus that I saw as illustrating a number of themes which I found to be particularly thought-provoking from a theological point of view and with regard to the aim of this thesis.

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<sup>9</sup> See Braun and Clark (2006: 83-4) and Boyatzis (1998: 29-53) for discussions of these two approaches.

<sup>10</sup> See a parallel process described by Swinton and Mowat (2006: 176-8) and the NVivo website (QSR International, 2014).

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In summary, although some find grounded theory useful in analysis of qualitative research, I was not seeking in this project to form theories and take them to test against the data. Rather I sought, firstly, to find answers to specific research questions posed by the designers of the material I was evaluating and to see if that addressed the topic of biblical engagement by ordinary Christians which interested me. Secondly, I was looking for other aspects of the data which also expressed what seemed to be interesting points regarding the same topic. For the purposes of this thesis, then, I carried on the thematic analysis until I felt I had data grouped in a way that enabled me to address the questions which Bible Society had posed and, at the same time, presented me with some interesting perspectives from which to examine the process of biblical engagement by Christians without formal academic theological training. It was hoped that reflection on the results of both deductive and inductive coding would suggest strategies by which such engagement might be promoted.

### **Further methodology: following inductive thematic analysis**

#### ***Three themes***

##### *1. Encountering the Bible in different formats*

In the course of inductive thematic analysis I found some comments in the data that pertained to the importance or relevance of the medium/media through which the biblical text was encountered or experienced. These comments, it seemed to me, did not merely relate to visual pedagogy (see, for example, Goldfarb, 2002) but also raised issues regarding the impact and authority of visual and other unfamiliar presentations and interpretations of the biblical text. These different articulations, or voices, appeared to possess the potential to promote engagement with the text at a deeper level than the silent reading that is employed by most modern British readers, most of the time.

##### *2. Benefits and problems of multiple voices*

While writing my report, I noticed the presence of comments relating to the value of 'peer learning' during group work; I had this grouped with other topics as one of the outcomes of Pathfinder and it can be viewed as a point of general pedagogical practice. However, I also noted the value being ascribed to hearing *alternate voices* during group work and the questions this raised regarding

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evaluation of different readings. This goes beyond peer learning as it touches on the issues of the multivocality of scripture and on the locus of authority in the interpretation of scripture. 'Multivocality' is defined as 'susceptibility to interpretation in a number of ways; ambiguity, polysemy' (Oxford English Dictionary). In this thesis I apply the term to the Bible in two related senses. Firstly, I use it to refer to the range of different possible articulations and understandings presented when the biblical texts are spoken out loud or enacted. Secondly, I employ it to describe the range of interpretations to which they may be open as they are encountered, in any format, by any Christians. Although these are two distinct features they are interrelated since an oral or enacted reading is itself one interpretation, among many possible, of an otherwise silent text. The choice of this term is deliberate as it both describes, and highlights the relationship between, two key features which were noted in the study described here. As noted in Chapter Five I am not using 'multivocality' here to refer to the existence within the biblical canon of contradictions and ambiguities which resist attempts to harmonise them into 'the' biblical statement on something.

### *3. Head or heart?*

During the course of coding the data I also noted that some comments or dialogues included the use of terms such as 'intellectual' and 'academic'. In some instances these comments were reflections on how some resources were, or were perceived to be, too academically stretching, too 'hard', for the abilities of some participants; in other words, they were reflections on the pedagogy of the Pathfinder course. However, a sometimes over-lapping set of comments were seen to be contrasting two distinct types or approaches of resources. These were variously described as being for the head, academic, intellectual or analytical, as opposed to others which were of the heart, spiritual, inspirational or contemplative. One participant contrasted two specific resources in this way: Making Good Sense of the Bible (MGS) versus the *lectio-divina*-based small group resource, lyfe. The significance of these comments became clearer for me as I assembled my report for Bible Society; across the groups, and occurring in comments on several different resources, respondents appeared to be drawing a distinction between what they saw as 'academic'

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approaches to encountering the Bible and those perceived as being prompted by the Spirit or 'inspirational'.

Each of these three issues is pertinent when considering the role of biblical reflection in the context of Christian formation and how biblical engagement can be promoted in such a way as to facilitate such formation. Issues of authority or legitimacy of interpretation arise within each topic. Further, each of the three relate to one another. The medium by which biblical texts are encountered is, in each case, the result of a process of interpretation, whether of translation, or of dramatization (visual or aural). And the question of interpretation gives rise to debate on the meaning/meanings of scripture. Furthermore, the impact of texts through different media is linked, by the Pathfinder participants, to emotional responses (heart) as much as to an intellectual appropriation of new knowledge revealed during the text's reception (head).

Conducting an inductive thematic analysis of the data, then, led me to see these three themes which I felt raised interesting theological perspectives on the process of the encounters of ordinary Christians with their sacred text and might help me come to some conclusions on what sorts of strategies might best facilitate this engagement.

### ***Lectio divina – prototype and provocateur?*<sup>11</sup>**

At this point, taking stock of both the resources under evaluation and the rich data collected led to my consideration of *lectio divina* as a possible conversation partner in further reflection on the selected themes I had noted. There were several reasons to choose *lectio divina*.

Firstly, *lectio divina* represents a potential pattern or posture for deeper biblical engagement with the aim of spiritual formation that was perceived, by participants, to be missing in at least some elements of the Pathfinder project. This had become especially apparent in positive comments on the resource, *lyfe*, which is based on the process of *lectio*.

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<sup>11</sup> I am here using the term, *lectio divina*, less in the sense of the modern appropriation, which is viewed as a set of steps to follow when reading and meditating upon the Bible, and more in the mediaeval sense of the whole engagement with the text, a meeting which was expected to lead to an encounter with the divine and to change and mould the practitioner. This was set firmly within an arena established by the encounters of other believers, past and present. See Chapter Three for more on mediaeval *lectio*.

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Secondly, it was a practice of biblical engagement with a long Christian history, having developed within the monasteries of the early Middle Ages. It was true that, at that time, limited levels of literacy would have restricted the practice to what might be seen as 'professional' or theologically trained Christians, but it seems to have been a practice expected of all monks, not just the intellectually gifted. This historical pedigree might further the acceptance of similarly postured approaches towards biblical engagement within churches especially valuing tradition.

Thirdly, although modern appropriations of *lectio* differ in some respects from its monastic forebear, it is still being used as a mode of biblical engagement by contemporary Christians, within the Catholic Church and across different Protestant church backgrounds.<sup>12</sup>

Fourthly, although some of the dichotomies listed above under the third theme, such as 'intellectual' and 'inspirational', may be viewed as features of a post-Enlightenment mind-set, where Intellect and Emotion, or Reason and Faith, are seen as mutually exclusive realms, it will be seen (in Ch. 3) that this and the other two themes can all be found within discussions of the practice of *lectio divina* in its original setting: differing media of biblical encounter, a range of differing interpretations produced by Christians in their encounter with the text and an expressed tension between 'head' and 'heart'.

Given the contemporary appropriation of *lectio divina*, specifically its appropriation within Pathfinder's 'lyfe' materials, and its origins in a pre-Enlightenment age, I decided to employ this ancient practice as a conversation partner for the themes I identified within the Pathfinder materials. Accordingly, in each theme-focussed chapter, following examination of contemporary theological reflection on each theme there is a section where *lectio divina* and other ancient practices of biblical engagement are brought into the discussion of how to promote engagement with their ancient sacred texts by contemporary ordinary Christians.

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<sup>12</sup> See Canterbury Diocese (2015) for an example from the Church of England and Evan Howard (2012) for a consideration of its use within the evangelical tradition.

## INTRODUCTION

### **This study**

The first part of this thesis, then, will focus on the conduct of the research and the results of the *deductive* thematic analysis conducted to answer specific questions regarding the effectiveness of the Pathfinder resources. Chapter One outlines the churches involved and the resources comprising the Pathfinder programme together with the research instruments chosen to conduct this project. Chapter Two explores how successful Pathfinder was in achieving its aims and what these findings might contribute towards design of future programmes of this sort. One feature of the feedback received regarded the value of the process of feedback and reflection itself, suggesting that encouraging habits of reflection within church life will contribute towards any programme promoting discipleship. Another general response towards the programme of biblical engagement suggested that participants were aiming for growth in their own Christian discipleship rather than learning about the Bible *per se*. Paying more attention to the destination of any such programme, and agreeing it with the participants, showing biblical engagement to be a means to an end rather than an end in itself, may encourage perseverance and application among the participants.

Chapter Two goes on to consider what else may be learnt by the success of Pathfinder's specific aims: resources offering an overview of the Bible provided an increased understanding of the contents of the Bible, and of its historical situations, that was perceived to be valuable by the Pathfinder participants. In particular, the concept of the Bible telling, or being seen to convey, a 'big story' was seen to have implications for personal discipleship. Also important, though, was that it provided a means by which the ancient texts could be seen as relevant and authoritative for contemporary life. Wright's model of scripture as an ongoing drama (1991) suggests the texts be seen not as a rule book or manual but as a script to be improvised. Further, there was, overall, a positive response to resources that provided greater understanding of hermeneutical issues such as historical background or genre but fewer felt that their spiritual formation or their relationship with God had been affected positively by engaging in this programme of biblical engagement. Similarly mixed responses were made regarding the impact of Pathfinder on their confidence in the biblical texts and its profile in contemporary society. Finally, Chapter Two discusses

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other points of general applicability to the future design of such programmes of biblical engagement: different aspects of accessibility, the necessity of a clearly laid out programme with clear objectives, and the need for some coherence and progression through the programme and between different resources, such that the early stages are accessible to all and opportunities are provided for skills learnt to be applied subsequently in the course.

The second part of the thesis concerns the results of the *inductive* thematic analysis where the three themes noted above are further explored in dialogue with contemporary research and historical practices. The latter focuses mostly on *lectio divina*, which is introduced in Chapter Three where I consider some features of the practice in its original context. This context is found to differ in a number of important respects from that of modern practice and consideration of these differences will suggest some strategies that may augment the use of *lectio* and other resources today. Importantly, it will also be shown that the three themes found through inductive analysis of the Pathfinder data – the impact of the medium through which the text is encountered, the multivocality arising from readers of scripture and the tension between what were perceived to be head and heart approaches – can be found within accounts of mediaeval *lectio*. The following three chapters will each focus on one of the three themes, following a similar pattern in each case. Firstly, the examination of each selected issue will focus on the Pathfinder resources the responses to which evinced the particular issues most clearly. Each theme will then be examined in dialogue with both contemporary theological reflection on the issue and the historical literature on *lectio divina* and related modes of biblical encounter, before exploring how this dialogue might inform development of strategies to promote biblical engagement by ordinary Christians.

Accordingly, Chapter Four examines the importance of the medium during encounter with the biblical texts, including the cognitive and emotional responses reported by the Pathfinders when using audio and audio-visual resources. This is carried out in dialogue with the areas of performance criticism, Bible in film and historical modes of encounter with the biblical texts; it goes on to suggest that modern versions of spiritual formation, working with a *lectio divina* framework, might enlist different media as different means of ‘tasting’ or encountering the biblical texts. These media may provide a means of

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developing a holistic response to the Bible that is both emotive and cognitive, and the different articulations produced by each performance may also engender an awareness of biblical multivocality. However, they should be employed and discussed within a context of wider biblical understanding and within the body of the church.

The second issue that arose, although less prominently, was the multivocality of scripture. This was found to be a beneficial aspect of lyfe because it enabled all to feel able to contribute regardless of their level of familiarity with the biblical texts. Small group discussions featured in the course of a number of other resources (Community Bible Study [CBS] and *The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth* [Meek]); exchange of ideas was encouraged. However, a few expressed reservations concerning possible misinterpretations and others found some suggested readings unacceptable. How should Christian communities use, or deal with, plurality of interpretations and differing readings of texts, not just between different 'professionals' but also within the body of 'ordinary' Christians? The fifth chapter, then, explores the Pathfinder data on lyfe, CBS and Meek in conversation with contemporary and historical reflections on the multivocality arising from differing readings of scriptural texts. It suggests that exploration of historical practices within the church might allow some Christians and churches to find a 'safe space' within which to explore the multivocality arising from individual readings in community without feeling that it threatens their high view of the Bible. A range of possible strategies are explored by which Christians may be introduced to the concept of multivocality and helped to find an alternative to some modern and post-modern approaches to texts which may either restrict interpretive possibilities or risk losing any sense of the Bible having meaning for the church.

In Chapter Six I will look at the role of study in biblical engagement by ordinary Christians and the tension expressed between head and heart, Word and Spirit, academy and church. This will focus on data regarding MGS and lyfe since this issue was raised most sharply by comments made regarding those resources. For instance, MGS was widely perceived to be 'intellectual', 'academic' or 'analytical' while lyfe was perceived as more accessible because it was less intellectual and more practical than MGS. This raises the question: What impact should the findings of 'academic' study of the biblical texts have upon 'spiritual'

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biblical reflection and engagement, both individual and corporate? This chapter will go on to examine the relevance, and integration, of hermeneutical skills, and study more generally, within wider Bible reading and interpretation, and their role in the process of discipleship, including the ongoing debate on the importance of (historical) critical approaches. It will also discuss Anabaptist, Pentecostal and contemporary charismatic reflection on the role of the Spirit in academically rich Christian scriptural engagement. After discussing the concept of a second naiveté this chapter will argue that a training in critical reading of the text can foster a deeper and more fruitful Christian engagement with the Bible if it is developed within a community minded to read together critically.

These three issues, together, led me to formulate the following over-arching question, which shapes this thesis: How might we promote biblical engagement among non-theologically trained Christians in English churches? The concluding chapter will summarise the contributions this thesis has made with some proposals for the future development of programmes of resources to foster greater biblical literacy and deeper understanding of the scriptures by ordinary Christians, in the context of spiritual formation.

# **PART I: THE PATHFINDER PROGRAMME AND ITS AIMS**

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This first Part consists of two chapters. Chapter One begins by describing the 'landscape' of Pathfinder both in terms of its ecclesial setting and of the background of research into the ways in which those Christians who have not been academically trained in theology interact with the Bible. It goes on to describe the churches involved with, and detail the structure of, the Pathfinder programme, including the format and aims of its individual elements. It then provides the rationale for the methodologies employed in evaluating the programme, exploring the responses of its participants.

Chapter Two begins the process of examining the data produced; it discusses the results of the deductive thematic analysis of the data, conducted with a view to answering the questions posed by Bible Society concerning how successful the programme was according to its own aims. This enables me to draw some preliminary conclusions as to how a programme of biblical engagement aimed at 'ordinary' Christians might best begin to meet its goals and also sets the scene for the further analysis in Part II.

# CHAPTER 1. Pathfinder: the landscape and route

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Pathfinder ... a person who, or thing which, opens up new ways<sup>13</sup>

## **Pathfinder: the church and research landscape**

In one of the promotional materials for Pathfinder, and in tune with the name of the programme, it was described in terms of a journey, 'to help you find your own path of spiritual growth'.<sup>14</sup> However, deepening personal spirituality was not the sole or even the central focus of the project; it was also designed to improve understanding and knowledge of the Bible and to result in a project promoting the profile of the Bible within the extra-ecclesial community of each church. Speaking to the Bible Society personnel responsible it became apparent that the programme was conceived as one means by which to meet a number of perceived challenges regarding the ways in which the Bible is viewed and used in English churches and in wider culture. As discussed below, these perceptions were backed up by the results of surveys and reports from several sources; they included concerns over levels of biblical literacy and the degree to which contemporary Christians struggled to know how to read, let alone appropriate, their ancient sacred texts. I begin this chapter then, by describing the specific challenges and the general Bible-reading landscape, the broad context, within which Pathfinder was designed to address and work.

## **The expressed need for ordinary Christians to engage (more) with their scriptures**

In recent years there has been a cross-denominational move advocating increased biblical knowledge among all Christians. There can also be found, across different Christian traditions and within academic circles, the idea that it is desirable that 'ordinary' adult Christian believers, and not just the 'professionals' (that is, clergy, other church leaders and academic theologians),

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<sup>13</sup> Oxford English Dictionary.

<sup>14</sup> Pathfinder Promotional Leaflet (Appendix II) cover.

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should think theologically. Indeed, the role of the professionals is to *train* and enable the others to reflect theologically. This concept, which presumes a role for the ordinary believers in biblical engagement within the church yet, at the same time, seems to imply the need for some 'training' to enable it, can be seen in both church documents and academic writings. The Anglican Hind report on *Formation For Ministry Within a Learning Church* notes that theology, defined as knowledge of God, is 'vital for every Christian, and that even though clergy might properly be expected to be "theologians" this is not a "professionalism" that belongs to them alone' (Archbishops' Council Working Party, 2003: 27, §3.3). It sees the expertise of ordained persons as being 'developed as part of the whole Church's commitment to learning and being equipped for service' (2003: 27, §3.4). Even given the importance of the Magisterium within the Roman Catholic Church it is nonetheless clearly stated, by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, that 'all the members of the church have a role in the interpretation of scripture' and thus 'ministers of the word have as their principal task not simply to impart instruction, but also to assist the faithful to understand and discern what the word of God is saying to them in their hearts when they hear and reflect upon the scriptures' (Houlden, 1995 [1993]: 69, 70). More recently, the last Pope argued that, to achieve 'an increased emphasis on the Bible in the Church's pastoral activity, all Christians, and catechists in particular, need to receive suitable training' (Pope Benedict XVI, 2010: 126-7, section 75).

Within the academy, over 30 years ago, Edward Farley, in his widely cited *Theologia*, described the central task of church leadership as the facilitation of theological understanding (1983: 154). More recently, Elaine Graham and co-writers acknowledge that theological education should be aligned 'towards patterns of learning and teaching that ... foster theological literacy among the whole people of God' (Graham *et al.*, 2005: 3). Ministry is seen as 'facilitating the vocation of all Christians through processes of understanding, analysing, and reflecting. The purpose of theological education, therefore, is to equip people with skills and strategies to enable them to reflect theologically' (2005: 5).

At the same time that churches and others have been stressing the value of ordinary Christians being theologically 'active', concerns have been raised over the degree to which this same constituency is familiar with the Bible and also

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how it is viewed and used in both churches and in wider culture. These concerns have centred on a perceived lack of confidence in the ancient texts, arising in part from an uncertainty in how to read them, which leads to a reduced level of engagement with the Christian scriptures and widespread biblical ‘illiteracy’, both inside and outside the churches. One particular prompt for initiating the Bible Society Pathfinder project, on which this thesis is based, was a 2007 ComRes online and paper-based survey of 3,468 British Christians, (1,687 church members and 1,781 leaders), the results of which were weighted to the 2005 Church Census figures in terms of ethnicity, churchmanship, denomination, and ITV region. The executive summary of this survey included the following observations concerning most churchgoers:

[They] struggle to apply [the Bible’s] principles to modern life or explain them to non-Christians in an inclusive and effective manner. We find many churchgoers would appreciate material and guidance from their leaders to help them relate the Bible to modern society so that they can overcome these barriers to making the Bible’s teachings more applicable.

Indeed, churchgoers feel there is scope for using the Bible more widely across all church activities and would welcome resources that help them engage with the Bible on a personal level – many feel this is very important to their spiritual growth. ...

... congregation members want a more challenging and open approach to Bible discussion, beyond Biblical exposition as monologue. Ultimately, congregation members believe this kind of engagement with the Bible will give them a much better understanding of the Bible’s over-arching themes and lessons (ComRes, 2008a: 4).<sup>15</sup>

Elsewhere, the survey report noted that congregation members think the church should ‘take a more active role in promoting the Bible in society’ (2008a: 8) and that they ‘are keen to be supported in *engaging* with and *understanding* the Bible to a greater extent’ in order to promote spiritual growth (2008a: 13, emphasis original). Their focus group members ‘explained how they would like a better understanding of the Bible’s over-arching messages and stories’ but ‘relatively few feel that they have it’ (2008a: 22, emphasis original). The survey concludes:

people are most in need of guidance on the whole story of the Bible, of its cultural context and the modern application of its principles –

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<sup>15</sup> The full survey, to which I was given access, has not been published but a summary document is available online (ComRes, 2008b).

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something that might best be accomplished by engaging with the Bible in small groups. Indeed, many would like to see resources to help them establish and run their own home groups, or better provision through the churches to do so during formal meetings.

The most important message to take away from this research, though, is that there is a **significant unmet demand for resources that will help both Church leaders and congregation members more effectively engage with the Bible** (2008a: 24, emphasis original).

The general impression, that many British Christians have difficulties of some sort with using the Bible, is backed up by the later findings of the 'Apprentice '09 Survey' organised by Spring Harvest (annual Christian festivals held in England) and the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity. Out of the 2,859 attendees of Spring Harvest who responded, an average of over 42% (over 40% of those in leadership and nearly 47% of those not), had 'struggled with' reading the Bible in their personal spiritual life within the previous twelve months. Although the under-35s were under-represented in the sample (17% total) it was noted that the figure for this question rose to over 50% for both 18-25 and 26-35 age groups (Spring Harvest and London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, 2009: 9-10, 49). More recently, and on a global stage, the Anglican report on its 'Bible in the Life of the Church' project, looked at 'how "ordinary Anglicans" view and understand the Bible' and found that there was 'some decline' in biblical literacy (Anglican Communion, 2012: 3, 5).

As a result of these sorts of findings, and their own personal experiences with Christian congregations around the country, Bible Society personnel spoke to me of a 'Bible crisis' consisting of both low biblical literacy and low confidence in these ancient texts. This was in part related to the perception of negative attitudes towards the Bible within the broader culture; although the ComRes survey had concluded that militant atheists such as Richard Dawkins do 'not appear to have significantly worried active Christians' it did note that 'the more pervasive modern scientific and materialist culture does spark concerns' (ComRes, 2008a: 15).<sup>16</sup> Within Bible Society there was also the understanding that church-goers thought they did not know how to handle scripture and particularly didn't feel confident in applying it to everyday life outside the church. Personnel there expressed the idea that, for some Christians, the Bible's role

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<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, a more recent ComRes survey of the general public showed that many still view the Bible as an important book (ComRes, 2011). For wider attitudes towards the Bible see Lambert (1999: 314-15).

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was reduced to it being a source of comfort and a 'manual' from which to draw short pieces of text to inform personal life; there was often little grasp of the Bible's 'big story' or of how to approach the different genres within it.

### **The paucity of reflection on resources for biblical engagement by ordinary Christians<sup>17</sup>**

As noted above, those who responded to the ComRes poll expressed a felt need for resources which would help both individuals and congregations to engage with the Bible, in order to promote spiritual formation and better enable them to employ the Bible in their daily lives in the public arena. There is already a plethora of Christian publications aimed at the 'ordinary' Christian's interaction with the Bible, as any visitor to a Christian bookshop will testify, although few have been subject to formal analysis.

#### ***Guides to accompany reading the Bible***

A good proportion of resources aimed at ordinary Christians are aids and study guides to parts of, or the whole, Bible, such as the 'For Everyone' series, written by Tom Wright and published by SPCK (see, for example, Wright, 2008). Some, including this series, utilise the findings of historical and other biblical criticism but all tend to include some application of the passage to the reader's everyday life, and therefore can be seen to be operating in the arenas of personal reflection and spiritual formation. They may be straightforward books, to read from cover to cover, or may be presented in a workbook format, to encourage reflection; each may then be employed by individuals or small groups.

Feedback from church goers indicates that just under half of them (ordinary and professional) make use of daily Bible reading notes while between 20 and 38% employ other aids to biblical understanding such as on-line sources or commentaries (ComRes, 2008a: 16, and 26 of its Appendix ii).<sup>18</sup> However, there are no structures or studies in place, that I could find, exploring how they are used, or the effects of these publications on those who read and work through

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<sup>17</sup> See p.39 for a discussion of the term 'ordinary'.

<sup>18</sup> I use the term 'professional' Christian here because my study included churches of different types; the expression includes clergy in those denominations which have them but also covers those fulfilling similar roles within other types of church, however they may be designated within that church structure. These people would mostly (but not always) be those with some formal theological training, usually at HE level. The term may also be applied to confessing scholars of theology, whatever their position within a church.

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them. Indeed, it would first be necessary to establish the criteria one might use in any such assessment of effectiveness.

### **Alpha**

The 'success' of programmes aimed at promoting biblical engagement, or Christian formation or education of any sort, would also require one first to decide what metrics to use and then agree valid means of measuring them. There are a few studies examining such programmes but they vary considerably in the nature of the research and the factors upon which they focus. For example, at the very beginning of any spiritual path in the Christian tradition, the Alpha course is designed to help enquirers to 'explore the basics of the Christian faith' (Alpha International, 2016).<sup>19</sup> This programme, which typically consists of ten sessions, does this by means of short talks and discussion which draw both on passages from the Bible and examples from life. Each session is accompanied by a meal and seeks to create a space for people to be introduced to the Christian faith. While it seems to have been successful to some extent, in that it has drawn many of these enquirers into churches across a wide range of types of congregations, there have been criticisms;<sup>20</sup> these have been on both theological grounds (Hunt, 2004: 77-86; McDonald, 1996) and regarding pedagogical aspects, such as Alpha being too middle-class in its assumptions and style and in the course assuming too much pre-existing knowledge (see, for example, Hunt, 2001: 46-53, 65; McDonald, 1996; Percy, 1997). Making use of a variety of tools including questionnaires and interviews, Stephen Hunt conducted studies on a nationwide basis (2004); his conclusions and those of others were subsequently summarised in an essay by Andrew Brookes within a wider collection of articles he also edited (Brookes, 2007: especially 135-86). Relevant to the responses found in the Pathfinder project (detailed in Appendix I and explored below), a number of observations emerged from these works that relate to learning experiences generally, and why some participants may not complete such a course; these include references to the impact of the learning environment, both social (in terms of

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<sup>19</sup> Alpha is very well known as an evangelism course for 'seekers' but it was developed from an original course designed as an introduction for Christians who wanted to know more about their faith (Brookes, 2007: 14).

<sup>20</sup> See Hunt (2004: 173-95) for a discussion of whether or not Alpha 'works'. See also Brookes (2007: 150-2) for a discussion of the spread of churches involved; he notes that it appeals most to those with 'Evangelical-Charismatic' churchmanship (152). Also see Brookes (2007: 158-62) for a review of surveys indicating its effects on participants.

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group dynamics) and physical (Hunt, 2004: 107-32; Murray, 2007), the length of learning sessions (Hunt, 2004: 179) and two related factors: mistaken assumptions concerning participants' prior knowledge (Brookes, 2007: 109) and the expectations of participants themselves (Hunt, 2004: 82-3, 173-6).

Although not based on participant responses, Brookes (2007: 187-224), John Drane (2007) and Stuart Murray (2007) in the same volume, point out that Alpha is a mostly modernist 'product' operating in a context that has become increasingly post-modern since it was designed. Thus, as James Heard notes, Alpha presents a 'stripped down' or 'no frills' version of Christianity in an attempt to make it accessible to the unchurched and the first few sessions are presented as rational arguments for belief (Heard, 2007: 343). On the other hand, as Murray acknowledges, it has some elements that are features of post-modernism: an emphasis on relationship, its nature as a *process* evangelism course and its space for dialogue (Murray, 2007: 389). However, Alpha seems, to Murray, to assume its guest is a 'a post-Enlightenment rationalist' (391). Drane (2007: 376-7) feels that, whereas spirituality may be expressed through lifestyle (such as the Alpha meal), through spiritual disciplines like Bible study, and through the charismata, Alpha only sees it expressed through the latter. Therefore,

Alpha's understanding of spiritual experience strikes me as being at least limited, in cultural as well as in Biblical terms, which also means it will be limited in missional terms, because it will by definition be unable to recognize as genuinely spiritual encounters many of the things which today's spiritual searchers would value (377).

Alpha has been studied more than other courses, perhaps because it is the best known due to the numbers taking part and it has had national advertising campaigns. Despite this, beyond Martyn Percy's comment that what Alpha terms 'the basics of the Christian faith' seem to include 'an appeal to a largely inerrant Bible' (1997: 15) and Hunt's assessment of ways in which it may be seen as advancing fundamentalism (Hunt, 2004: 84-8), there is little reflection concerning how this resource affects the engagement of participants with the Christian scriptures. Aside from Alpha, there seems to be far less published analysis concerning other courses, be they process evangelism programmes or those designed for established Christians.

***Spiritual reading***

Some publications aimed at ordinary Christians, while often including engagement with the Bible, have a focus on spiritual experience and growth rather than Bible study *per se*. Engaging with the biblical texts specifically within the context of what might be termed Christian discipleship, or spiritual formation, has sometimes been referred to as *lectio divina* or 'spiritual reading'. *Lectio divina* is a term used in contemporary discourse on Christian spirituality to denote a particular pattern of prayerful interaction with scripture; this pattern is derived from a medieval practice of the same name that formed a key element of monastic life. As David Foster OSB notes, explorations of this practice, and its usefulness in the development of Christian discipleship, often focus on *lectio* as a process with several stages (2005: 3). In mediaeval practice these were reading the text, meditation, prayer, and contemplation of God (Guigo II, 1978: 82). The intended goal was, and is, internal transformation involving a growth in holiness of the participant as a result of engagement with God by close and meditative reading of the Bible; this transformation is both mediated by and expressed in prayer and should be evidenced by a character that evinces Christian virtues (Foster, 2005: 5, 26, 86, 140-1).

There are a large number of books and web sites offering resources for this type of biblical engagement.<sup>21</sup> However, the meditative approach towards scripture that forms the core of *lectio* was also the basis of the design of the Bible Society small group resource, *lyfe*, which features in this study. Given the Bible-centred focus and the stated goals of *lectio*, both ancient and modern, it seemed to provide a suitable conversation partner and possible model for an exploration of how contemporary biblical engagement by ordinary Christians might be facilitated. Accordingly, it is treated in much greater detail later in this thesis.

I could find no published studies of the impact of modern appropriations of *lectio divina, per se*, although a few post-graduate dissertations exploring aspects of the effects of the practice on ordinary church members are listed by the Theological Research Exchange Network (TREN; see, for example, Jorden,

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<sup>21</sup> See Chapter Six, pp.238ff for further exploration of these resources.

## CHAPTER 1. Pathfinder: the landscape and route

1999).<sup>22</sup> Several experimental projects have examined the effectiveness of similar practices under the umbrella of 'Passage Meditation'.<sup>23</sup> These experiments suggest that such activities may promote mindfulness in, and the well-being of, the practitioner (Shapiro *et al.*, 2008) as well as promoting altruistic behaviour and forgiveness (Oman *et al.*, 2010) towards others. However, none of these studies specifically help us to explore the ways in which *lectio divina* does or might function within a programme to promote biblical engagement by ordinary Christians.

### ***Broader and deeper programmes of theological training***

This thesis is focussed on how biblical engagement might be furthered among *ordinary* Christians rather than clergy and other theological specialists within the church. However, with the concerns churches and para-church organisations now have for theological literacy within the church, even ordinary believers now find themselves with access to broader programmes of biblical engagement that include some critical academic examination of texts. Such an approach is found within some of the resources included in the Bible Society Pathfinder project being explored here. Perhaps the closest parallel I could find to Pathfinder is 'Exploring Christianity'. This programme, originating in the Diocese of Bath and Wells and being taken up by other dioceses at around the same time as Pathfinder, is open access and designed for those who 'want to explore faith, deepen their commitment and learn together with other interested students' (Diocese of Bath and Wells, no date). It is comprised of six modules, generally taken over two or three years, covering both Old and New Testaments, Church history, Christian ethics, doctrine and spirituality (Diocese of Bath & Wells, 2010 [2003]). Thus, like Pathfinder, it includes both elements centred on Bible study and others focussed more on spiritual experience and formation. Although there has, as yet, been no formal published assessment of this project, informal feedback is being obtained during its use across a number of partner dioceses. A report written for the Diocese of Swansea and Brecon, where it was called 'Living faith' (Davies, 2012), draws on feedback for the module on 'Spirituality and Prayer' from both group-leaders and participants; some issues which recur

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<sup>22</sup> Others may be found by using the TREN search engine (Asbury Theological Seminary, no date).

<sup>23</sup> For an explanation of Passage Meditation and survey of research into its effects see Flinders and co-workers (2007).

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in the data are the value of learning in groups and the accessibility of the material to those who lack confidence and/or experience of study. Other feedback, from participants across four modules, collected by those running the programme in the Diocese of Llandaff (Briony Davies, personal communication), also strongly supports the value of learning and discussing in groups. Their responses to a short survey also brought up the subject of accessibility and raised issues concerning the supporting materials.

To summarise this section, there is a plethora of resources available, singly or forming elements within broader courses, which share the aim of enriching Christians' engagement with their scriptures in a variety of different ways. However, with the exception of the high-profile Alpha course there has been little published work providing any evaluation of theological learning materials for those who have no academic theological training. Furthermore, many of the data obtained have related to general pedagogical factors rather than pertaining to theological reflection upon the role of biblical engagement within the process of learning and spiritual formation.

### **'Ordinary' Christians and 'ordinary' theology**

If there has been, overall, little evaluation of the materials and courses designed to enable non-'professional' Christians to engage more deeply with the Bible, what is known of their *existing* beliefs and practices concerning their scriptures, and how might this information contribute to a better design of such materials? In this section I will clarify how and why I use the term 'ordinary' and discuss what is known from studies of how ordinary Christians relate to their scriptures.

### **'Ordinary' Christians**

This thesis is concerned with exploring what materials or strategies might best promote biblical engagement, in terms both of knowledge about, and confidence in, the biblical texts, among *ordinary* Christians rather than theologically educated 'professionals' such as ordained clergy. The term 'ordinary' is applied to churchgoers, as readers, by Andrew Village; he uses it to denote 'those who have not been trained in academic biblical scholarship' (2007: 1). The same adjective has been used by other practical theologians, with the same and other nouns and in other, but similar, contexts. Notably, 'ordinary readers' is a term defined, popularised, and problematised, by Gerald

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West. He employs it to indicate interpretations by readers who are not only untrained in theology and therefore tend to be pre-critical, but also situated in marginal contexts, be they political, economic and/or social; consequently, the multi-dimensionality of the term has been critiqued (West, 2007: 2; Jennings, 2007: 49; Lawrence, 2009: 23). Nonetheless, West and others working in this area have produced a number of studies of readings by such a constituency, largely in African contexts; notably, in these studies, there has been a stress on listening to the ordinary readers rather than imposing an 'academic' reading upon them. By contrast, in the UK, Andrew Rogers notes that ordinary readers have access to more critically-based resources and that the existence of different approaches to the biblical text across the body of the laity requires a more nuanced description of 'ordinary'; this term may then cover what is in fact a spectrum of readerly positions with 'only *some*, little or no Bible-related theological education' (Rogers, 2009: 31-4, 34, emphasis original).<sup>24</sup>

### **'Ordinary' theology**

In a similar vein, 'ordinary theology' is defined by Jeff Astley as 'the theological beliefs and processes of believing that find expression in the God-talk of those believers who have received no scholarly theological education' (2002: 1; see also Astley and Christie, 2007). Astley defends the value and relevance of ordinary theology against its critics (2002: 45-52, 123-45) and seeks to characterise it as, among other things, the theology of the laity, of significance, and bringing meaning, to the lives of those who hold it. It may not be expressed explicitly so may have to be sought within 'ordinary' communications, such as conversations and prayers; he draws on both Rowan Williams and von Balthasar to describe it as a 'celebratory' or 'kneeling' theology, and finds similarities with what Barth termed 'irregular dogmatics' (2002: 52-86). However, Astley sees ordinary theology as being on the same spectrum as academic theology, rather than being an entirely different 'animal' (2002: 86-8). As such, he distinguishes it from belief systems referred to as folk, common or implicit religion, preferring to describe it as 'the theology of those *churchgoers* – the great majority – who remain innocent of academic theological reflection

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<sup>24</sup> Rogers found some intermediate categories useful in considering the results of his fieldwork but, for this study, I find his nuanced definition of 'ordinary' appropriate to describe most of the Pathfinder participants. I can make no specific claims about the 'ordinary' status of my respondents; I have, however, identified where responses were from the local church leaders.

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outside the church' (2002: 93, emphasis original). While acknowledging that ordinary theology 'will be regarded by many as too superficial, naïve, anthropomorphic, incoherent, confused, over-personal, superstitious, uncritical and varied to warrant our attention' (2002: 125) he argues that post-modernists at least should not despise it on grounds of it being insufficiently coherent or systematic (126-8). Its reliance on biography and narrative may be a strength since stories 'reach places where (academic) theologies do not and cannot reach' (133); in fact, 'ordinary theologians are the ones who are least likely to forget and ignore their own lives as they do their theology. ... For most ordinary theologians, theology is to be found within life, rather than books' (134). Consequently, Astley stresses the potential value of this theology to those who practice its academic cousin; this value is present not only for those professional Christians charged with pastoral care of other, 'ordinary' Christians but for all those seeking to do theology reflectively. He does note the dangers of the term 'ordinary' (Astley, 2002: 47-9). In common parlance, the term may be employed derogatorily in some circumstances, when it is opposed to 'special' or 'valued'. In contrast, the importance of patterns of lay belief lies in the fact that 'speaking statistically ordinary theology *is* the theology of God's church' (2002: 162, emphasis original).

On balance, therefore, I find 'ordinary' a suitable adjective to be used in this study, with the noun 'Christians', to designate those believers – and here, specifically those who are associated with churches – who have no formal title or role within their Christian community, aside from possibly leading a small group, and who have little if any formal theological training beyond hearing sermons and similar instruction in churches. It is these people for whom the Pathfinder materials were designed. Furthermore, resources designed to enable them to engage with their scriptures will need to take into account their pre-existing framework of biblical understanding.

### ***'Ordinary' theology: where 'ordinary' Christians are***

My study was conducted across a number of denominations and types of church with differing ecclesial theologies and the project's evaluation did not involve exploration of the existing personal theologies of participants beyond some of their experience of, and attitudes towards, the Bible. Nonetheless, there is a growing corpus of work on the theology of ordinary Christians.

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Astley's work included discussion of how ordinary theology might be explored (2002: 97-122), and subsequently several research projects have sought to capture something of its content, both among those attending church regularly and those visiting for whatever reason. One strand of this has focussed on non-urban churches and congregations. For instance, a survey of visitors to a group of rural churches, examined their ideas of holiness (Littler and Francis, 2005) while a study of prayers and comments left by visitors to one rural church noted that they demonstrated an enduring belief in 'the kind of God who shows love towards the sick, the disturbed, the dying and the bereaved, who listens to human requests and who may influence significant events, even by intervening on the stage of human history' (Brown and Burton, 2007: 51). The value of ordinary prayer in mapping the content of ordinary theology has been explored further by Tania ap Siôn (2010) and another project employed a thematic analysis of charismatic worship among young Scots; the latter revealed the influence of not just the Bible but 'the wider flow of charismatic communication seen in the way that festivals, worship leaders, preachers, prophets, and publisher reproduce and circulate particular styles of theology' (Ward and Campbell, 2011: 241). These were all seen as manifested in narratives of intimacy and revival, although there was also evidence of more traditional doctrinal formulations.

More recently, a collection of essays, *Exploring Ordinary Theology* (Astley and Francis, 2013), has contributed further to this field, exploring the ideas of ordinary theologians on various aspects of Christian belief, including Christology (Christie, 2013), eschatology (Armstrong, 2013a), discipleship (Walton, 2013) and the expression of God's love in practical action (Thompson, 2013).<sup>25</sup> While it is still a relatively young field, these works have all demonstrated the existence, and something of the nature, of some ordinary theologies to be found amongst 'non-professional' theologians, from both inside and outside formal church congregations. They have not only underlined the differences between the beliefs and understandings of 'professional' and 'ordinary' Christians, or between academy and church, but have also raised the question of where power lies in determining normativity. Some have suggested that, if the Holy Spirit is understood to inspire all believers, then the doctrines and beliefs

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<sup>25</sup> See also Christie's fuller treatment of ordinary Christology (2012).

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espoused by churches should be open to modification by the tried and tested belief systems of ordinary believers rather than be determined by theologically trained gatekeepers; in other words, the locus of authority in determining normativity should shift towards the majority (Armstrong, 2013a; Astley, 2002: 154-62).

Nevertheless, ordinary theologies, however characterised, do not emerge from nowhere. Whether it be through participation in liturgy, through singing worship songs, by corporate or individual reading of the Bible or by listening to sermons, believers forge their own personal ordinary theology. Of course this process is also bound to be influenced by their sociological contexts and experiences but some ordinary theology must inevitably be derived, directly or indirectly, from engagement with the primary source of Christian doctrine that is drawn upon in all their ecclesial contexts: the Bible.

### ***How do 'ordinary' Christians engage with the Bible?***

When considering materials that are designed to promote biblical engagement, it is obviously relevant to know the ways in which ordinary Christians generally view the texts and use them. Astley, citing a couple of studies over recent decades, suggests that 'what evidence there is shows that biblical fundamentalism is a minority position in mainstream denominations' although he also notes that 'some confusion in their attitudes to scripture' was also apparent (2002: 151). Similarly, Hull feels that, for some adult Christians, 'beliefs about the Bible itself' are in 'the obscurity of unconscious or semi-conscious influence, where it can so easily produce superstition and guilt' and that these beliefs need to be subject to 'the conscious reflection of faith' (Hull, 1985: 119). A lack of clarity in the ways in which people view the Bible was also evident in the 1988 study of 445 ordinary Christian church-goers across ten parishes in one Anglican diocese (Fisher *et al.*, 1992); faced with questions asking what they believed about the Bible in relation to what it contained regarding history, science, God and ethics, between 19% and 38% of respondents either weren't sure or failed to agree or disagree. The authors concluded that 'many of these highly committed Anglicans found it difficult to identify or articulate their own attitudes to the Bible' (1992: 389). Possibly related to this uncertainty were the results concerning how often people read the Bible; while 18.2% said they read it every day, and 16.6% said about once a

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week, 47.6% said they read it only occasionally and nearly 10% never read it or failed to answer the question (1992: 384).

More recently, the 2007 empirical study by Andrew Village, *The Bible and Lay People*, posing over 200 questions to 404 attendees of eleven Anglican churches, sought to explore, not only how often ordinary Christians encounter the Bible (through, for example, personal reading or liturgy), but also what their attitudes towards it are, what they believe about it, and how they interpret and use it. The latter were tested, not by asking them directly, but by presenting participants with the gospel story of Jesus healing the possessed/epileptic child following his transfiguration (Mark 9.14-29); this was followed by a choice of statements which effectively forced them to express their understanding of the story in a way that revealed something of their attitudes to the text (Village, 2007: 84-6). Using a number of scales to indicate parameters such as how literally they took the Bible, and also attending to other features, such as type of Anglican church (characterised as Anglo-Catholic, broad church or evangelical charismatic), educational experience, personality type, profession and gender, Village was able to explore possible correlations between different variables which *might* indicate causality. Among these were a number of observations that may be pertinent for a consideration of materials designed to promote biblical engagement.

Village noted, across the traditions, 'a bimodal distribution, with people either never, or hardly ever, reading the Bible or doing so almost daily' but responses did indicate frequent readers were twice as common among evangelicals than broad church members (Village, 2007: 43); frequency also correlated positively with charismatic belief (147-9). It did not correlate with age, gender or general levels of education but, for those with some experience of higher education, those who had studied theological topics read the Bible more frequently than their counterparts in other academic fields (46). Noting that his results indicate the existence of some 'committed Christians who do not read the Bible very often' except in corporate settings (Village, 2007: 52), Village, desirous of a higher degree of biblical literacy, suggests '[t]he empirical evidence of low levels of Bible reading among some apparently literate Christians points to the importance of organizations that encourage and promote Bible reading among lay people' (53).

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When turning from his findings concerning the *frequency* of reading the Bible to consider rather *how* readers view and read their texts, Village notes that the degree to which participants scored on a scale of biblical conservatism (with a low score being most liberal) correlated negatively with educational level across the Anglican traditions, while there was no significant correlation found against their age or gender (Village, 2007: 41-2). In a consideration of how literally ordinary Christians read the Bible, Village (2007: 63-71) found that, while evangelicals are much more likely to read biblical stories literally than the broad church or Anglo-Catholic participants, they are *less* inclined to take parables as being literal accounts of real events (65-6). While Village notes that this puzzles him, and accepts that non-evangelicals may be 'more likely to confuse event and story' (66) he does not consider the possibility that the greater time evangelicals spend reading the texts might sensitize them to the distinctions in genre, leading to an increased appreciation of the nature of a parable. Overall, his examination of literalism indicates that it correlates negatively with higher levels of education *except* for evangelicals; for this group, he suggests, literalism is a:

statement of trust in the Bible and in the God of whom it speaks. A literal belief is seen as a faithful and true belief that honours the power of God and the veracity of scripture, even if a modern Western perspective makes some events seem highly implausible. Education, and especially theological education, may offer the tools for interpreting parts of the Bible in a less literal way, but these are eschewed in order to maintain a relationship of trust and submission (Village, 2007: 70).

However, all things are not always taken equally literally, with key events such as the resurrection being accepted as literal much more frequently than other biblical accounts seen as less central to faith. Therefore, there would appear to be a possible doctrinal influence on the understanding of the texts in these cases (2007: 68-71).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> The question of how ordinary church-goers read and interpret their Bibles, 'ordinary hermeneutics', is also the subject of work by Andrew Rogers. Using an ethnographic approach he examined the largely implicit hermeneutics of two churches, noting that '[t]he most explicit hermeneutical goals for both congregations were to hear God speak through encounter with scripture, and its twin, that scripture should be relevant for life today' (2013: 119). His thesis (very recently published) explores this topic much more deeply and is drawn upon in Chapter Six (Rogers, 2009; Rogers, 2015).

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Overall, Village's work indicated that how a biblical text is read and interpreted may be influenced by education, experience, including charismatic practices, and by the reader's personality (2007: 161-2). He sums up the huge importance of attitudes towards scripture in a later paper:

A key predictor of how ordinary readers engage with the Bible is what they believe *about* the Bible. For many the Bible is not simply a source of theology, it is a theological object in its own right. It is the *Holy Bible* and may shape attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, even if it is rarely read and often misunderstood. Indeed, many ordinary 'readers' are in fact ordinary 'hearers', who know the Bible exclusively through hearing it read as part of collective worship (Village, 2013: 131, emphasis original).

Pertinent then, to a consideration of how ordinary Christians might be enabled to engage more fruitfully with the Bible, is an appreciation of what they believe, of how they encounter, view and interpret the scriptures, of their theology of the Bible. Resources designed to promote engagement with the Christian scriptures might be expected to have a wider application if they take account of the different starting points their users may have. Questions are also being raised as to how much ordinary theology should determine what the Church then takes to be normative, these questions relating to whether the locus of authority should be in the text or in the testimony of the Spirit within the church. However, the studies discussed here have not produced any data relating to how ordinary Christians respond to materials designed to enable biblical and theological reflection. What kinds of theological learning are fruitful for them?

### **Christian learning**

The topic of Christian education is a huge one and the term itself is used in a variety of ways in different contexts (see, for example, the editors' preface to Astley and Day, 1992). Given the scope of this thesis I am restricting this brief survey to what Astley and Day refer to as 'Christian Formation' (1992: 14-15), the field of experiences designed to lead to greater understanding and application of the concepts of the Christian faith, and I am applying it specifically to adults.

In *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?* John Hull examines sociological, psychological and theological issues affecting adult learning in churches. The challenges he finds to include cognitive dissonance between Christian worldviews and those of wider society (Hull, 1985: 97), fear of new

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learning (1985: 113), the fact that for 'many religious adults thinking is actually distressing' (1985: 121) and the association of learning with youth and with passivity and ignorance (1985: 202; see also Barton, 1991: 143).<sup>27</sup> Calling on teachers to question these assumptions by modelling learning themselves, and acting as a minister to the learner, Hull defines the task of those who educate Christian adults as 'facilitating those kinds of learning experiences which, while not delivering the Christian adult from ideology, which would be both impossible and undesirable, do set him free from naive and absolute ideological enclosure' (1985: 85).

Astley similarly suggests that we should speak of theological learning rather than education, since such terminology avoids the implication that the practice is for children or is merely cognitive. Some learning has to be lived and has the potential to transform the practitioner (2002: 4); indeed 'learning only takes place when the learner changes' (19). Such learning may occur through a number of activities, including the act of worship (9), not just through what might appear to be the formal learning activities of hearing sermons.

In his influential *Theologia*, Farley (1983) outlined the historical transformation of theology into two different entities: theology as knowledge of God and theology as (academic) discipline of study; he lamented the subsequent fragmentation of theology into separate pursuits such as systematic theology and biblical studies caused in part by a drive to train professional Christians, (what Rogers terms 'expert' readers, 2013: 124) in the skills needed for ministry. Although this thesis is not concerned with theological higher education, or the type of training undergone by those aiming to function as 'professional' Christians in churches, debates around that topic are relevant since it is those professionals who will be involved in designing and delivering training to and for the non-professionals and because the shape of theological education at the Higher Education level will shape what is taught in churches. With regard to this, and in the context of an examination of training within American theological schools and seminaries, Dale Martin argues:

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<sup>27</sup> Some of the features he notes, including cognitive dissonance, may be found in some adult learning more generally (see, for instance, Daines *et al.*, 1993 [1988]: 3-10).

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There are few places in our societies where people are taught to think theologically in an adult way. Most churches don't do it. Most schools don't do it. So whereas modern adults mature in their views of psychology, personhood, and nature itself, they continue to act like children in their assumptions about God, faith, and right and wrong when discussed religiously. I contend that churches must self-consciously teach their members how to think theologically like adults. But that means that leaders of churches, whether ministers or others, must be taught not only how to think theologically themselves, but also how to teach others to think theologically as adults (Martin, 2008: 73-4).

The same is true of biblical interpretation: 'people must be taught how to read the Bible with mature theological lenses' (2008: 74). Martin's study was based on interviews with both teachers and students in a number of theological schools, of different denominational affiliation, in the U.S.A.; he bemoaned the often perceived role of biblical scholars in these schools as 'gate-keepers' and the dominance of historical criticism over other approaches to the text (2008: 14-17, 27-8). Among the remedies suggested, by Martin and his academic respondents, were recapturing the pre-critical stance whereby it was anticipated that a text could be read in a multiplicity of senses and at different levels of meaning (47-70), theological interpretation (71-92), congregational readings in the context of community (95-6) and a scripture-centred curriculum (97-101).

Schüssler Fiorenza agrees with Martin in his analysis of the current situation in American theological schools, and also finds it problematic, but suggests, rather than a return to earlier paradigms, a 'radical democratizing' of the entire field of biblical studies which would allow the Bible to exert its democratizing influence (Schüssler Fiorenza, 2009, especially 5-6; see also Schüssler Fiorenza and Richards, 2010). In contrast, Richard Briggs (2011) having traced how the situation Martin describes came about, and having found value in the historical (and other) critical enterprise, then goes on to argue that this enterprise has become an end in itself, to the detriment of any existential, transformative engagement: 'the critical impulse once unleashed has proved to be a voracious beast' (2011: 86) and 'critical enquiry ... has become the limiting context when one cannot proceed to substantive engagement with the subject matter of the text as it pertains to church life and Christian discipleship' (2011: 87). To remedy this, he seeks to inform pedagogy through consideration of scriptures which seem to relate to believers reflecting on scripture: namely the meditation on 'the law of the Lord' by the implied author of Psalm 1 and Daniel's reading of

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Jeremiah (Daniel 9.2) that drives him to prayer and confession. These suggest a model of Christian education focussing on the virtuous character of the reader (Briggs, 2011: 87-8).<sup>28</sup>

The role – and necessity – of historical criticism in the theological education of *ordinary* Christians are also discussed and questioned by Village in the context of a discussion of the interpretive horizon preferences (author, text, reader) of his respondents (2007: 89-94). He notes that church-based theological training often tries to get ordinary Christians to appreciate the distance between horizons in order to encourage them not to appropriate the text too swiftly and simplistically to their own situation; however, he feels that this might sometimes be doing a disservice to such believers. Rather than worrying how the text is being read, he wonders if theological training in churches should not focus instead on the *consequences* of readings and thus he, too, suggests a concern with *virtuous* reading.

The immediacy of being able to connect a text to your own world, rather than viewing it as the strange product of some distant culture, is something precious that should not be destroyed lightly in the pursuit of some sort of objectivity. What matters is whether reading the text leads to the sorts of beliefs, practices and behaviours that are in line with the overall tenor of the Gospel message (Village, 2007: 93).

When considering the role of reading the Bible in ordinary Christian formation, Rogers goes further and provides a suggested framework for a virtues-based approach to hermeneutics. Drawing on a number of writers who have previously put forward particular virtues as being necessary or desirable for biblical interpreters (2013: 123-4), he suggests they be brought together to

enable an enriched hermeneutical apprenticeship. Such a virtue account links hermeneutics to discipleship, where growth in hermeneutical virtue is for every disciple. Consequently, any potential divide between 'expert' and 'ordinary' readers is lessened, since the connection between critical scholarship and virtue is not direct, and the 'expert' reader may not be more honest or courageous (for example) than an 'ordinary' one (124).<sup>29</sup>

Along with a call for an openness towards the voices of ordinary, usually pre-critical readers, other scholars argue the need of critical openness in Christian

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<sup>28</sup> More recently, Briggs has again discussed the manner of training in biblical studies for Christian professionals, specifically with regard to the Anglican tradition (2015).

<sup>29</sup> Rogers has written much more on this in his thesis (2009), recently published (Rogers, 2015), and employed this approach when designing 'Making Good Sense of the Bible', the hermeneutics resource which was one of the core elements in the Pathfinder programme.

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education generally (Hull *et al.*, 1994) and for the indispensability of critical biblical engagement if we wish, in the process of formation, to allow the text to challenge us; '[i]n reading the Bible critically, we recognize a discussion partner, a text that we did not create ourselves and that can therefore surprise us, but that sometimes for this very reason can throw a sudden shaft of light on to our questions and problems' (Barton, 2007: 179-80).

This brief survey gives a flavour of current debate on the purpose, structure and aims of theological training for professional Christians but it is relevant to this thesis because some of the issues also arise in discussion of education for ordinary Christians by churches and para-church organisations (such as Bible Society). Indeed, the same issues can be found within responses to the Pathfinder project examined here. Some of the participants' comments concerned issues of a more generally pedagogic nature, such as accessibility, including the language and modes of teaching. Others could be seen as more theological in nature. Some, for instance, concerned the aim and shape of the training – a focus on application to discipleship and the development of virtuous character rather than learning for its own sake. Others raised issues such as the relevance and use of the findings of historical criticism and the value and challenge of a multiplicity of readings within a congregation. These issues will be examined further in the later chapters of this thesis but this introductory survey demonstrates that the themes arising within the Pathfinder data are echoed within academic debate.

### **Pathfinder: the route**

#### **Pathfinder's aims and large-scale structure**

The concerns expressed above (p.31ff.) resulted in the design, by Bible Society, of the Pathfinder pilot programme, whose overall structure and aims were included in the promotional materials produced in association with it; these included an introductory A5 promotional leaflet (PL; Appendix II) and two other documents apparently aimed at church leaders: the 'Pathfinder Churches Prospectus' (PCP; Appendix III) dealt with the background, structure and aims of the programme in more detail, and gave an idea of the commitment expected of the church, as well as introducing the Pathfinder personnel; 'Pathfinder

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Church Resources' (PCR; Appendix IV) expounded the stages or phases noted in PL, and mentioned some of the possible resources to be used.<sup>30</sup>

In PL and PCR the programme's intended two-year structure is set out under three headings or stages beginning with the diagnostic stage. This was described in the PL as a time to '[r]eflect upon your journey with God and his Word so far', although, in the PCR the focus was on the use of 'various assessments to help ... discern ... current practice and relationship to the Bible'.

The diagnostic stage was to be followed by the major phase of the project: 'development'. Both PL and PCR described this stage as featuring resources that tackle four aspects of Bible encounter. The first concerns participants grasping the 'big story' of the Bible. The second aspect is helping them make sense of the text, interpret and apply it. Thirdly, resources in this stage should enable personal spiritual formation and transformation. Fourthly, some resources should encourage participants 'to experience the Bible through new approaches which also link us to our contemporary culture'. The PCR document talked of an 'engaging our communities' phase with 'community facing activity approaches' and linked this to what Bible Society refers to as the 'Key Cultural Drivers'. At the time the document was produced these 'Drivers' were seen to include politics, social issues (environment, science), education, and media. Elsewhere, and later in the programme, these had developed into politics, education, media and arts. It should be noted here that spiritual formation is presented as one programme goal among others rather than being viewed as the purpose to which other elements lead. Regarding the mix of resources offered, one Bible Society staff member subsequently expressed it thus, when addressing a Pathfinder group:

We want to give you something for your *heads*, where you put your thinking caps on, where you learn more about the Bible; we want to give you something for your *hearts*, that's your walk with God, the overall spirituality; and third we want to give you something for your *hands and feet* in the latter stages of the Pathfinder Project where you can go out and start applying things.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> It was not clear, subsequently, which of the project participants had seen any or all of these documents; there was no specific reference made to them in interviews or focus groups.

<sup>31</sup> This comment is explored further in Chapter Six.

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In addition to this major period of 'development', there was a third stage labelled 'evaluation'. This featured on the PL more prominently than on PCR but it was made clear that the project would involve some elements of assessment.

Although the more detailed PCP split these three stages, diagnosis, development and evaluation, into more, smaller parts, it also spoke of enriching a relationship with, and deepening understanding of, the Bible, as well as clearly stating the evaluative aspect of the project and mentioning a 'community-facing initiative'.

There were, therefore, a number of aspects to Pathfinder's aims, although all involved the Bible; while one was concerned with what might be termed spiritual formation (*heart*) the focus on increasing 'understanding' of scripture could be seen as involving 'learning', both how to read and how to interpret and apply the texts (*head*). And this was to lead to activities which promoted the profile of the Bible in the communities where these groups were located (*hands and feet*).

### **Pathfinder participants**

#### ***Pathfinder churches and groups***

The aims of Pathfinder, as expressed by Bible Society staff in their promotional materials, concern the use of the Bible by Christians in church congregations 'focussing on those within a local church who are already aware of, and concerned about' the issues mentioned above concerning the use of the Bible (PCP).

As noted in the Introduction, a total of eight churches were enlisted onto the programme by Bible Society but only seven completed it. Verbally, the aim had been expressed to have as wide a denominational range as possible and the eight recruited included representatives of seven different church 'types': Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, Roman Catholic, United Reformed, a free Evangelical fellowship and a large charismatic church. Most churches were situated in urban areas of differing socio-economic backgrounds but one of the two Anglican parishes was rural; the geographical spread was from the north-west down to the south-west and across to the Home Counties, but three churches were in or near the same city in the Midlands.

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Church members had the opportunity to come to a local meeting introducing the concept and to volunteer to join the project; over 170 were eventually involved across the churches. Regarding representation then, the Pathfinders were a self-selecting group of church members of different backgrounds and contexts, who were already both interested and motivated enough to commit their time to taking part in the programme and were, in many cases, already active in various areas of church life.

As noted elsewhere, no attempt was made to make conclusions specific to particular demographics within the participant groups since numbers were not high and there were too many variables within the experiences of different groups. However, material drawn from the Criteria Grid (Appendix V) completed by each church, and some of the questionnaires (see below and Appendices VI, VII and VIII), is brought together here to give some idea of the range of contexts, theological, cultural and sociological, inhabited by the Pathfinders.

### *Church A*

This was a Baptist church situated in an urban area close to a city in the Midlands, which had a congregation of around 120-150. Of these, approximately 25% were under sixteen, about 40% over 60 and most of the rest were over 30. No report was given concerning ethnicity but the gender ratio was about 55% female and 45% male.

The Pathfinder group size began at around 20 including the minister, with a 50:50 gender mix, and had reduced to ten by the completion of the programme. Several of them were involved with community-facing activities such as youth mentoring or practical support. Short interviews were conducted with 11 people including three who had dropped out; eight completed final evaluation surveys.<sup>32</sup>

### *Church B*

Church B was an urban Anglican church in the Midlands with a good mix of ages and a gender ratio of approximately 60:40, females:males, among its congregation of about 100 people; these were predominantly white with around 10% from various ethnic minorities.

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<sup>32</sup> Mention here of a final, or closing, evaluation survey refers to Evaluation Survey 2 (ES2) which is described below (p.75).

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The Pathfinder group began in the Spring of 2010 with over 30 participants, around a third of whom were male, but had shrunk to half that number by the Summer and was fewer than a dozen by the end, including two clergy facilitators. Two focus groups and five interviews were conducted but it was not possible to conduct a final group session and only two closing evaluation surveys were completed, both by the facilitators.

### *Church C*

Church C was a Methodist Church situated in the suburbs of a town in the Midlands, in an area which is mainly middle-class but with cases of deprivation. As one participant noted, 'there are lots of problems that people don't see, but on the surface it's a lovely village'. There were around 70 people attending one or both of the Sunday services although it was estimated that the church made contact with about 300 folk in the course of a month's church activities. Church members ranged in age from 16 to 94, with a ratio of approximately 70:30 females to males, almost all of whom were white British. The church was described as evangelical: 'traditional with some modern elements'.

The Pathfinder group began as a group of 25 people, 19 women and 6 men, aged 40-85, although 90% were over 50 years of age. Not all members completed all the feedback or were able to attend all the sessions but around 14 remained in the group to the end of the programme. Four were interviewed and five completed the closing survey. All had some degree of involvement with a diverse range of church activities, from being a circuit minister to flower arranging.

### *Church D*

The Anglican parish of Church D comprised three congregations. The first typically had a congregation of 58 adults and 13 children, while the second had 47 adults and 18 children; both had a female:male ratio of around 65:35. The third, meeting at a 'Church Centre', was smaller, with around 30 adults and five children, and had a gender ratio of 82:18. All congregants were ethnically white British. The churches, which came together to form this parish in 2009, represent different traditions within the Church of England (middle of the road and evangelical), and serve a rural community located within the outskirts of a large city in the north-west.

## CHAPTER 1. Pathfinder: the landscape and route

The Pathfinder group was originally around 15 including only three men, two of whom were clergy; it had dropped to about half that by the end of the programme. The eleven who stayed long enough to complete the first evaluation survey were all already involved in various church activities including PCC, music, youth and Christian counselling. Four interviews were conducted but only three closing surveys were completed.

### *Church E*

Church E was an Evangelical Church situated in the suburbs of a Midlands town. It is not far from a University campus, on an estate of post-war, former council housing, although many members come from outside the estate. The mainly white, middle and working class congregation of around 50 people had an approximately 75:25 ratio of women to men, including a few children and students.

Among the Pathfinders, some noted their involvement not only in a Day Care Centre and parents with children group but also in taking services at a local residential home. The Church E group began with around 30 members, almost half of whom were men (a higher ratio than the overall congregation), and included some from ethnic minorities; some of the group were professionals and some had learning difficulties or disabilities. Six of the group were interviewed. By the end of the programme there were around a dozen regulars and ten completed the final evaluation survey.

### *Church F*

Church F was a United Reformed congregation with around 200 members and a further 50 attendees located in what has been termed a 'suburban village' near London. Around 120 attended congregational meetings the style of which was described as a mix of traditional and contemporary. Congregants spanned a wide age range, from zero to over 100, of which around two thirds were female. Most were white although a small number of Ugandan and Ghanaian families also attended.

The Pathfinder group began with around 25-28 people, over three-quarters of whom were over 50, with a 3:2 ratio of women to men. Some led house-groups and around half-a-dozen led or preached at meetings in church or at a local nursing home which has connections with the church. There seemed to be

## CHAPTER 1. Pathfinder: the landscape and route

around a dozen regular Pathfinders by the close of the project but only three returned the closing evaluation survey.

### *Church G*

Church G was a charismatic church, part of a network of churches in Britain, USA and Australia. The congregation met in its own building on a trading estate of a town in the Home Counties. The regular attendees included around 100 children and youth, and 450 adults, some 200 or so being over 40. The church estimated itself to be around 10% non-white, (mainly African) with a gender distribution of around 55% women to 45% men.

Fifteen out of 17 Pathfinder group members completed the core group questionnaire but only nine were present by the time of the evaluation in Summer 2010 and only five or six attended regularly by the end of the programme; only one completed the final evaluation survey and that was someone who had joined the group part way through the programme. The original group comprised 10 men and 5 women, two thirds of whom were over 40, so the group did not represent the same profile as the whole church. The level of involvement in regular church-based activities varied from none (one was a recent believer) up to a high degree of voluntary service, including prayer ministry and giving financial advice.

### *'Church' H*

This Roman Catholic group was drawn from two congregations based in a city in the south-west of England. Beginning with about 18 interested individuals, the group shrank to around half that size following a Bible overview and introductory hermeneutics resource, after which they left the programme. Only one focus group was conducted with this group. Due to the short involvement of this group no criteria grids were completed and no interviews or closing surveys were carried out.

Aside then from the Church H group, which joined later for a short period of time, Pathfinder began around the end of 2009 and beginning of 2010 with approximately 165 participants. Based on 138 completed responses to the initial diagnostic phase, over 75% Pathfinders were aged 50 or over and nearly 60% were women. The programme ended about two years later with around 70 participants, although only 31 of these completed a closing evaluation survey.

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### ***Champions and facilitators***

Pathfinder was designed primarily to help 'ordinary' Christians in their biblical engagement, although comments from Bible Society staff suggested that they hoped that those with some prior theological knowledge would also benefit. To this end, each church centre chose a Pathfinder 'champion' who would promote it and liaise with Bible Society regarding planning the programme for their group. Clergy or other 'professional' Christians were not excluded but were not expected to *have* to participate; in practice, most did take part and some acted as the champion themselves. This will have had some impact upon the dynamics of the programme but its effects could not be measured and were outside the control of Bible Society.

Here and in Appendix I, I use the term 'facilitator' to refer in a more general fashion to some champions and others within the Pathfinder groups (both 'ordinary' and 'professional' Christians) who tended to take leading or facilitating roles where the resources required them.

### **Pathfinder's 'Diagnostic Stage'**

Bible Society asked each church that wished to join the programme to complete a 'criteria grid' they had devised (Appendix V) giving information on, amongst other things, church size and social profile, church meetings and activities, and the perceived role of the Bible within their congregation.

However, the diagnostic stage had been anticipated, by Bible Society, as centring on a modified version of the ComRes questionnaire (ComRes, 2008a).<sup>33</sup> It was suggested by them that the programme begin with Pathfinder groups and their congregations as a whole completing this document which they termed a 'diagnostic questionnaire' (the DQ; Appendix VI); this, it was anticipated, would give an idea of where the church generally, and the Pathfinders specifically, were in their use of the Bible and, if the two groups were compared, also of how representative the Pathfinders were of the church as a whole. If the same questionnaire were completed again at the end of the programme, by both congregation and Pathfinders, it would enable a 'before-

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<sup>33</sup> Although my opinion was sought on the selection and wording of questions, and approval obtained for it and other projected activities from the relevant ethics committee at the University of Exeter, the content was largely determined by Bible Society.

## CHAPTER 1. Pathfinder: the landscape and route

and-after' assessment of how much individuals had changed over that time against a base-line of how the whole congregation had fared.

### **Pathfinder's 'Development Stage': component resources**

Bible Society offered a range of different resources, which comprised the elements of Pathfinder. Four of these (at least one of the Bible overviews, Making Good Sense of the Bible, Iyfe and Maperio [Map] – see below for details) were viewed by Bible Society as 'core' and were undertaken by all or most church groups during the first year. Other resources, worked through in the second year, were chosen by church champions in consultation with Bible Society personnel to suit the differing church and group situations and composition. It was hoped that all these resources would address one or more of the four areas of development listed above (p.51): the need for a grasp of the Bible's 'big story' (an overview of the Bible), the ability to 'make sense' of the biblical text (training in how to read the Bible), spiritual formation and transformation, and engagement with the Bible in the context of wider communities and culture. The first two of these may be seen to fit the category of 'something for your *heads*', the next 'something for your *hearts*', and the last 'something for your *hands and feet*'.

Obviously, working through any one resource may have affected participants in a number of ways, not all necessarily planned or anticipated by the resource designers, and some had aims which covered more than one area. However, summaries of the resources are grouped here according to what seemed, to me, to be their self-identified primary intended sphere of action.

#### ***Bible overview***

Responding to the findings of the survey (ComRes, 2008a) discussed above, one core component of Pathfinder, targeted at helping participants better appreciate the 'big story' of the Bible, was a Bible overview. Two different resources were used in this role; all churches did one of them while some did both, allowing comparison.

#### ***Word in One***

One overview was 'The Word in One' (WO), a seminar series delivered by Rev. Andy Twilley, recorded and available on DVD; it is an hour and a half long and

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split into 16 sessions, each accompanied by notes within a Small Group study booklet (see Nationwide Christian Trust, 2008 for further details). At most churches, Rev. Twilley presented the first two sessions 'live' (in one evening) and then the Pathfinder groups followed the other sessions, two per week, via the DVD.

### *Drama of Scripture*

The second 'overview', Drama of Scripture (DS), was a resource then under development by Bible Society and was run as a two week 'taster' during the course of the Pathfinder pilot.<sup>34</sup> Each week consisted of a talk, led from the front with a PowerPoint presentation, broken up by group activities supported by handouts. Drawing on ideas in works by N. T. Wright (1991; 1992: 139-43), further developed by Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen (2006), the resource introduces the concept of the Bible as a 'story' or 'drama' in six acts. This allows Christians to see themselves as 'improvising' the second part of the penultimate act, 'The Church', the first part of which is found in the pages of the New Testament. Since Christians know something of the sixth act and end of this drama – that seen in the eschatological strands of the Bible – they are then enabled to 'improvise' their own role within the constraints of the biblical 'plot'.

The contents of this resource as it stood during the Pathfinder project, both the many visual illustrations and the worksheets with questions and exercises, presented a number of related ideas. The first of these was the concept of 'metaphors', how they act and are used, their impact upon the way we think about things, and their limitations. Metaphors of and from the Bible were considered. This allowed the introduction of 'story' and 'drama' as metaphors and some exploration of their usefulness. The general structure of a story was illustrated with reference to the story of the Good Samaritan. The second session, after reiterating some key points from the previous presentation, further developed the concept of Bible as drama, and its features, including the sense of shared action and improvisation, and the way in which some parts could then be more important than others. This was combined with a presentation of the biblical story as six acts and the advantages of viewing scripture in this way were outlined, including the way it rendered the Bible accessible to all (not just scholars), the avoidance of literalism, and the stress on relationality.

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<sup>34</sup> It has since been developed into a booklet (Spriggs and Simmonds, 2014).

### ***Training in how to read the Bible***

#### *Making Good Sense of the Bible*

Another core component of Pathfinder was a resource specifically designed to address both the lack of confidence in the biblical texts, and the perceived lack of skills in handling them, that had been expressed by survey respondents and observed by Bible Society personnel: Making Good Sense of the Bible (MGS). MGS was designed by Andrew Rogers and was the first, pilot version of what was later *h+* (Bible Society, 2012b);<sup>35</sup> its actual form was being revised during the course of presentation and, consequently, not every church centre had identical experiences. In its various incarnations, MGS comprised a number of sessions which asked how people read the Bible and introduced some basic hermeneutical skills to the Pathfinder groups. During MGS the participants examined the assumptions and preconceptions with which any reader approaches the text and also considered specific approaches, such as feminism. They discussed the role of the Holy Spirit and the ways in which the Bible might be authoritative, looked at how knowing about the author and about their historical context helps one read their text, and were also introduced to the concepts of genre and literary context. There was an opportunity to think about problem passages, such as the Canaanite conquest, and the groups also considered how to apply what they'd learnt in various activities: by using the hermeneutical skills, by passing on what they'd learnt to others, and by thinking through issues into which the Bible speaks. The topic of poverty and homelessness was used as a case study for the latter. Throughout the course and central to each session there was a framework introducing, and trying to develop, the desired qualities of a 'virtuous' reader, such as humility and faithfulness. The presentation involved teaching from the front, supported by PowerPoint, and various exercises one or two of which involved observing and analysing biblical usage within their own congregations.

#### *Reading Romans in Context*

Although not a core resource, this also aimed to address the issue of how to handle the Bible. Written and presented by Peter Misselbrook of Bible Society, and comprising two one-and-a-half hour sessions, a week or two apart, the

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<sup>35</sup> More recently it has been presented as a book (Bible Society, 2015).

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format was a mixture of lecture style interspersed with interactive exercises and was supported by PowerPoint presentations and several paper handouts.

Reading Romans in Context (RRC) opened with an exercise to illustrate the need to know something of a letter's writer and recipient, and the wider context of the document, in order to understand what it was intended to communicate. The session continued, focussing on Paul as a Pharisee, his likely beliefs and expectations, before introducing Paul the Apostle and his revised understanding. The material then covered the possible history of the church in Rome, focussing on the interactions of Jewish and Gentile believers, of Christians and Jews, of believers and the imperial authorities. It closed by raising questions as to how the letter reflected these situations and circumstances, and by encouraging participants to complete two tasks, 'homework',<sup>36</sup> before the next meeting. Firstly, they were asked to read or listen to the whole letter, asking themselves: Why had the letter been written? What were the letter's main themes? How does Romans speak to modern believers? Secondly, they were to look more closely at Romans 1.18-3.20, asking themselves three questions: How does Paul's viewpoint seem to change throughout this section? Who is he speaking about? From what perspective is he speaking about them?

The second session was intended to begin with a period of interaction, as participants 'fed back' what they had learned by doing the 'homework', and then to conclude with a summary from the front. This summary noted some 'enduring themes' of the letter, such as the 'Spirit as the source of the Christian life' and the 'need for unity among the people of God, across divisions of race, class etc.' before looking in more detail at Romans 1.18-3.20.

### ***Spiritual (Trans)formation***

#### *lyfe*

In the ComRes survey (2008a: 13), churchgoers had expressed a desire for resources that would enable them to use the Bible to support their spiritual growth. 'lyfe' is a resource developed by Bible Society specifically to promote spiritual formation and was a core element of Pathfinder. Although it is not

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<sup>36</sup> This was Peter Misselbrook's term.

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made explicit in the materials, the person responsible for designing lyfe described it as an adaptation of *lectio*, specifically for small groups who may not be familiar with the concept or the language of the process. Based upon material developed by Renovaré, but seeking to present ‘an entry-level version of what they were doing’,<sup>37</sup> it consists of six ‘zones’ each covering one aspect of a spiritual life which can be seen exemplified in Jesus: withdrawing and praying (Still lyfe), living a holy life (Real lyfe), being empowered and filled with the Spirit (Spirit lyfe), memorizing, quoting and teaching Scripture (Word lyfe), working for justice, peace and wholeness (Just lyfe) and integrating faith and everyday life (Whole lyfe).<sup>38</sup>

Each of these zones comprise an introductory session followed by four or five others, with a total of 32 in all; Bible Society suggested that the six introductory sessions, one from each zone, were worked through first. To support each zone there were a number of materials available on the web site: a short video-clip of a ‘talking head’ for each session plus a number of downloadable documents. For example, for Spirit lyfe, there were five articles on different themes related to ‘our interaction with the Holy Spirit’, (including worship and healing), a couple of short, one-page biographies of Christians that illustrate the work of the Spirit, (in this case Jackie Pullinger and John Wimber), and a hand-out for participants in each session.

It was suggested that lyfe groups should comprise four or five people and should try meeting, at least some of the time, in a public place such as a pub or coffee shop, in order to strengthen the connection with everyday life.<sup>39</sup> It was also intended that users start with the introductory session within ‘Still lyfe’, which sets the scene for how the group should read the given biblical text each time:

Read the passage several times through, read it slowly, use your imagination to picture the scene and soak it up. As you read, look out for one or two points that really impact you. We call these ‘shockers’ and ‘blockers’. Shockers – something from the text that stands out or

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<sup>37</sup> Information on design of lyfe taken from an interview with Rob Hare. See their web site for further information on Renovaré (2012). For more on Renovaré material see Chapter Six.

<sup>38</sup> The web sites have changed since I wrote this but lyfe’s resources may still be accessed through links on the introductory web page after logging in (Bible Society, no date).

<sup>39</sup> To the best of my knowledge, none of the Pathfinder groups did this; they met in homes or church buildings.

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surprises you. Blockers – something that raises questions or you find hard to understand.<sup>40</sup>

For all other sessions, except the introductory Still lyfe, the hand-out began with a 'Review' section, inviting groups to reflect on the success and usefulness of the challenge, if undertaken, from the previous session. Alternatively, they could consider the question set each time: 'Where and how did you experience God last week?'

Each session's hand-out then followed a pattern of sections. Firstly there was 'Read', where one found the biblical text for consideration in that session, taken from the Contemporary English Version (CEV) and printed in full.<sup>41</sup>

Secondly, there was a 'Reflect' section. Again, the introductory sessions in each zone, at this point, all explained what this section was about: the readers were asked to '[t]ake time to discuss what you've read and particularly the points that impacted you. Share your thoughts and listen carefully to one another. Use the questions to help you reflect'. To aid them there were a few bullet points 'setting the scene', sometimes offering some background information or context to the passage.<sup>42</sup> There were also a few questions to encourage reflection; the first of these was always 'What are the "shockers" and "blockers" for you in this passage?' but the others were specific to the text.

Next there was a 'Respond' section, where the group was encouraged to formulate some response(s) to the passage they'd been considering and their reflection upon it. They were asked to 'create a challenge' or to take up one or more of those suggested in this section, which were specific for the text.

The rest of each session's hand-out could include a relevant quotation, a suggested prayer focus, and/or a section on 'going deeper' that in some cases included a list of other resources in that zone which related to that session.

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<sup>40</sup> [http://www.lyfe.org.uk/pdfs/introduction\\_still\\_lyfe.pdf](http://www.lyfe.org.uk/pdfs/introduction_still_lyfe.pdf) (accessed 26/7/12). This is now only accessible if logged in on the lyfe site (Bible Society, no date). These words are also found in the 'Read' section of the introductory sessions for all other zones, except Real lyfe.

<sup>41</sup> The Contemporary English Version Bible was first published in 1995 by American Bible Society who describe it thus: 'The CEV is a meaning-based (or functional equivalent) translation done in a contemporary style using common language. It was designed to be understood when read and heard out loud, not just when it is read silently. It is one of the best Bibles for children and youth, as well as for new Bible readers who are not familiar with traditional Bible and church words' (American Bible Society, 2012).

<sup>42</sup> As of 2015 the sub-heading 'Setting the scene' has been removed from the materials even though they seem otherwise unchanged.

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They were also asked to make a note of any challenge agreed upon and to consider contributing to the lyfe Facebook site.

### *Maperio*

The Maperio programme (Map) was designed by Creative Metier, a remote coaching consultancy that provides a variety of services for businesses in the public and private sectors; the Maperio programme available directly through their web site was described as being ‘inspired from the work of Creative Metier ... working with leaders and individuals as they navigate and work through change, helping people’ (Rankin and Rankin, 2009). The version of Maperio specifically put together for Bible Society was presented in person by trained facilitators. Viewed as a core resource, each of the seven Pathfinder groups who experienced this had a ‘taster’ session, ‘The Art of Listening – the Voice of God’, to introduce the practice of ‘Profound Listening’.<sup>43</sup> This was the very first week for each Pathfinder group, before the first full element of the full programme commenced. Following this, at some point early in Pathfinder, they had a second part, comprising a further three sessions of Map.

These three sessions, supported by not only the facilitator but also a workbook, each presented a perspective from which participants could reflect on their lives as Christians:

The River of Life - My life journey and the events and happenings that have shaped me into the person I am today and when and how God has been alongside me.

The Wheel of Life - What are ALL the areas of my life that are important to me and where I want (God wants me) to make an impact

Values House - What are my deepest held values and where and how do they show up. Where am I living and not living these values. How does that connect with my being a Christian?<sup>44</sup>

In the workbook the Pathfinders had space and resources with which to complete the exercises, including a Biblical Reflection section related to each exercise that was especially written for this Maperio Pathfinder Programme in order ‘to deepen the reflection process’.<sup>45</sup> These sections varied with the topic and included a number of different verses or passages that might be helpful

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<sup>43</sup> Quotations regarding the Map material are taken from the unpublished 46 page ‘Workbook to accompany Maperio Pathfinder Course With Biblical Reflections’, p.3.

<sup>44</sup> Workbook, p.3, emphasis original.

<sup>45</sup> Workbook, p.3.

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when reflecting on one's responses to the exercise concerned. For example, with the river session, Bible verses that involved rivers or waters were presented under headings that might encapsulate possible responses: Isaiah 43.2 if the reflection had been painful, Genesis 32.23-24 for those who found themselves in a time of struggle. As part of the Values House, there was a suggested reflection on the degree of integrity shown in the responses of Jesus and Peter on the night before the crucifixion.<sup>46</sup>

### ***Engaging communities***

The whole Pathfinder programme was designed to culminate with a culture-facing initiative, to be devised and delivered by the local Pathfinders, perhaps in conjunction with their church, and to be supported by relevant advice from Bible Society. To this end, the final sessions of the programme were planned to be a series of four, largely centred on talks led by Bible Society staff and covering the 'Cultural Drivers' (politics, education, media and arts). However, due to staff availability and church programmes, media and politics were merged into one session and a few churches missed one or two of the sessions.

Although no support materials, with stated aims, were provided for this activity, the topics of the 'Cultural Drivers' themselves may be taken to highlight the areas on which they were intended to focus. They were (presumably) designed to communicate to the Pathfinder groups a range of ideas on how Christians might be, and already were, involved in projects in which the Bible was presented to wider society.

### ***Resources with intended outcomes in several areas***

#### ***Community Bible Studies***

Community Bible Studies (CBS) were aimed at promoting transformation of participants and, through them, to have an impact upon their contexts. Designed by Bible Society's David Spriggs, and used by six of the Pathfinder groups, they consisted of a set of notes for participants, and a corresponding set for facilitators, designed to enable four small-group Bible studies. Both sets of notes began by briefly introducing the process and transformational intentions of *Contextual* Bible Study (ConBS), which formed the first part of

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<sup>46</sup> Workbook, pp.13 & 30.

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each study, and stressed that background knowledge of the Bible was not necessary (CBS Facilitator's Guide, Appendix XI, p.1). The accessibility of the material was further emphasised: 'There are no "right" or "wrong" answers – every person's contributions and insights are important' (Appendix XI, p.2). There was, understandably, somewhat more detail for the facilitator, who was also told that exploration of '[t]he nature of your community and how you could contribute to its flourishing' was 'a natural outflow' from ConBS (Appendix XI, p.1).

The four Bible studies focussed on one text each: Luke 4.16–30, Acts 2.1–18, Proverbs 17.14–26 and 1 Corinthians 1.26–31; 6.9–11. Both sets of notes, participants' and facilitators', included an ice-breaker activity, in addition to several ConBS questions, four or five 'Community questions', and an action point, for each of the Bible studies. Both sets of questions varied with the passage although each included 'Is there anything that is not clear to you in this passage?' within the ConBS questions. The 'Community questions' were related to the passage *and* the readers' context, asking participants to think about the area where they lived and its inhabitants; for example, Luke's account of Jesus at Nazareth asked about notable locals in the area where the church was located while the Pentecost passage questions focussed on local ethnic and religious diversity. It was suggested, at specific points, that the small group split into threes and came together for subsequent feedback. Other materials were to be worked through by the whole group, in 'plenary' mode.

This resource has some close similarities with lyfe. For instance, lyfe asks participants to '[r]ead the passage several times through, read it slowly, use your imagination to picture the scene and soak it up' whereas the ConBS section of CBS suggests they 'read the Bible text slowly and with deep attention. As we read it we seek to engage it not only with our minds but also with our imaginations and feelings' (Appendix XI, p.3). Another similarity can be seen in the way lyfe asks readers to 'look out for one or two points that really impact you. ... Shockers – something from the text that stands out or surprises you. Blockers – something that raises questions or you find hard to understand'. Paralleling this, three of the four studies in CBS asked 'What jumps off the page at you/what strikes you about this passage?' and, as already noted, they all

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asked 'Is there anything that is not clear to you in this passage?' (see, for example, Appendix XI, p.11).

### *The Miracles of Jesus*

The resource, *The Miracles of Jesus* (MJ), comprises a set of three television programmes produced by the BBC in 2006, that was supported by free downloadable materials for both educational and church settings, devised by Bible Society (2007). The programmes, which were distributed by Bible Society, are documentaries presented by Rageh Omaar, which include period dramatisations of incidents from the gospels acted out in Aramaic with English sub-titles (see BBC Press Office, 2006). Although Omaar does suggest some prosaic explanations for the miracles he is not really concerned with whether or not they happened as written but with their significance in first-century Jewish thought and what they might show us about contemporary opinions of Jesus. The first episode explores how the miracles might have suggested, to Jesus' contemporaries, links between him and stories and characters in Jewish history; it features the raising of the widow's son (echoing Elijah), the feeding of the 5000 (Moses with the quail and manna), Jesus walking on water (Joshua crossing the Jordan) and the turning of water into wine (suggesting the time of God's kingdom had come). In the second episode Omaar explores how the miracles might tell us what Jesus (and the disciples) thought about himself, specifically if he was believed to be divine; it includes the calming of the stormy sea, Jesus' baptism and time in the wilderness (the latter being portrayed as a time when Jesus was 'bewildered and frustrated'), the 'disturbing' account of the exorcism of Legion, the healing of the paralytic and the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter (seen as Jesus exercising God's role in deciding who is included in the chosen people). The episode concludes with the significance of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, his possible self-identification as Isaiah's suffering servant, the crucifixion and how he might have seen his death as fulfilment of that. The last episode covers the 'miracles' of the resurrection, conversion of Paul, and the growth of the early church, exploring what role understandings of resurrection played in the spread of the faith.

On the website entitled 'Church Resources' (Bible Society, 2012c), there was an 'Introduction' billed as a 'Churches study guide' that included suggested general questions for each episode, and there were also nine sets of notes for

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'youth'.<sup>47</sup> No specific aims were indicated for MJ but the 'Churches study guide' suggests that:

through the images of the Miracles of Jesus series, and in tandem with our Bibles, we can gain fresh insight about the miracles and enter into something of their depth and reality. Watching the programmes and discussing them together can strengthen our faith, develop our spirituality and enable our Christian witness to be more effective.

In practice, the effects of this resource, as raised in discussion with the Pathfinder groups, seemed to fall into two main areas. The first related to miracles (no specific mention was made of divinity or the resurrection) but the second was the more general area of how people view everyday life in Bible times and how an understanding of that affects their reading of the texts.

### *You've Got The Time*

This free, online resource consists of a set of 40 audio recordings, made by Riding Lights Theatre Company (2012), covering the whole of the New Testament text in the CEV.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, this narration of the New Testament differs from some others available in that a variety of readers and accents are employed. This results not only in there being different voices for each supposed author but also different readers voicing the characters presented in the gospels and different sections of the epistles. It is accompanied by a 40-day listening plan and Pathfinders were also offered support materials such as small group notes, now available on CD-ROM. In the context of Pathfinder, it addressed the issue of 'big story', ('listen to the whole of the New Testament for just 28 minutes a day over 40 days') and was also expected to help participants '[d]iscover the Bible in a new and exciting way ... You will be enriched and inspired' (Bible Society, 2010).

### *The Passion*

'The Passion' (Pass), is a four-episode, DVD-based resource produced by the BBC in 2008. The BBC calls this a 'fresh re-telling of the story of Jesus's [*sic*] final days on Earth, inspired by the Gospels and other contemporary historical

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<sup>47</sup> However, the other three episode-linked resources listed did not appear to be tailored to church groups despite their position on this page. None of these resources are now available on the web.

<sup>48</sup> This translation was presumably chosen to enhance accessibility since it uses 'common language' and 'was designed to be understood when read and heard out loud'. Further details of the CEV can be found at n.41.

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sources, and seen from the perspective of all the main figures involved' (BBC, 2009). Bible Society describes it as 'a unique, dramatic and inspiring perspective on the person of Jesus, Holy Week and Easter and the Christian faith' for which they had developed support materials for churches and schools, on a CD-ROM (Bible Society, 2009). It would seem, then, to be aiming to help readers to better understand the biblical text and also to inspire them.

### *The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth*

The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth (Meek) was a series of four presentations by Chris Sunderland, accompanied by a study guide, exploring issues of land and dispossession in the Bible and in later human history. The set of study notes 'offers an opportunity for individuals and groups to engage more deeply with the Bible passages that are used in the presentation and consider their relevance to issues faced by today's world'. The series begins with the story of Naboth's vineyard and asks participants to reflect 'Is there a place where you particularly feel at home?', before considering issues such as the relationship between humans and creation, different approaches towards land, and the pattern of dispossession and exploitation through history. Accounts of events are provided together with questions to provoke group discussion. It concludes by considering words of Jesus (parts of the Sermon on the Mount and the parable of the sower and seed) in conjunction with discussion of 'urban agriculture' and 'community-supported agriculture initiatives'. Therefore, it seems to fit the aims of promoting cultural engagement as well as informing on different approaches to the texts.<sup>49</sup>

### *The Bible as a Contemplative Resource*

The Bible as a Contemplative Resource (BC) seeks to introduce participants to a number of contemplative approaches to Scripture, including contemplation of short passages, and of single words, and imaginative immersion within a story.

### *The Bible as Narrative*

The Bible as Narrative (BN) consists of a set of notes to support six core small group sessions of around an hour and a half each. Each session is to be prepared for by reading a substantial chunk of the Bible, such as thirteen

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<sup>49</sup> None of the resources written by Chris Sunderland (Meek, BC and BN) are published or available on the web. Meek was only used by two groups, BC and BN by one each.

## CHAPTER 1. Pathfinder: the landscape and route

chapters of Exodus, and each session's notes are supported by a page of ideas to 'take it further' and a page of resources. This resource does not explicitly set out any aims but, from pages two and three, they would seem to include getting participants to read longer portions of the Bible than they might be used to, to engage in the chosen narratives with their emotions and imaginations, and to be open to personal transformation. Such engagement should draw them 'into seeing the whole sweep of biblical narrative and the process of God's revelation. And it invites us to reach out and ask God to inspire our hearts and minds with a fresh understanding of the Bible'.

### *Reel Issues*

Available in three formats, Reel Issues (Reel) consists of free online materials 'to help you discuss links between big-screen themes, everyday life and the Bible in a relaxed setting. ... ideas to help you discuss the latest films in the light of the Bible with friends from in and outside your church'.<sup>50</sup> The 'Scene' format is designed for youth groups and 'Clip' supports discussion with others who have watched a whole film. The third, 'Epic' format aims to help small groups 'dig deeper and connect the Bible with life's big issues'. The notes provided include suggested clips, an outline of the general plot, and notes for larger and small group discussions and activities, including related passages from the Bible, to stimulate reflection on the issues raised. Notes for over 120 different films are online, including drama, science fiction, fantasy, Western and comedy, with certificates mostly 12/12A/15 but including U, PG and 18.<sup>51</sup>

### ***Programme of presentation***

There was the intention to give all participating churches similar resources in the first year of the programme, that most began early in 2010. These included the one session taster of Map and a further three sessions of the same, a resource giving an overview of the Bible (WO, or DS which was under development during Pathfinder), MGS, which had been developed as a pilot hermeneutics course specifically for Pathfinder, and lyfe. However, due to constraints of staffing and pre-existing church programmes, such as Lent

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<sup>50</sup> Although the web address has changed over the past few years, this quotation is still used (Bible Society, 2012d).

<sup>51</sup> Only one church used Reel, in its 'Epic' format; they chose the films, which included *Amazing Grace* (released 2006) and *The Constant Gardener* (2005).

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courses, not all churches worked through them in the same order and some did both Bible overviews.

During the second year of Pathfinder there was even more variation between the churches as they, in conjunction with Bible Society staff, chose specific elements for their own contexts. See Table 1 'Pathfinder Resource and Visit Timetable' showing which resources were used by the churches and in what order.

Table 1 'Pathfinder Resource and Visit Timetable'

Church A	Church B	Church C	Church D	Church E	Church F	Church G	Church H
WO	WO	MGS	WO	MGS	MGS	Maperio	DS
Apr10	Maperio	*Jun 10	Maperio	WO	*Mar10	DS	MGS
Maperio	MGS	Maperio	Jul10	Jun10	WO	MGS	Feb11
MGS	*Jul10	lyfe	DS	Maperio	Maperio	Jul10	
lyfe	lyfe	Nov10	MGS	lyfe	July10	lyfe+3	
Nov10		DS	lyfe	Oct10	lyfe	YGTT	
MJ		RRC	RRC	YGTT	lyfe++	RRC	
DS	Reel	MJ	Mar11	DS	Meek	CBS	
Pass	DS	CBS	Pass	MJ	Apr11	Apr11	
CBS	YGTT	Jun11	CBS	Meek	MJ	BC	
BN	CBS	CDedu;media	MJ	CBS	CDedu;m+p;art	CDedu;	
16 June 11	3 May11	Jan 12	CDedu;m+p	May 11	Dec 11	Dec 11	
CDedu;m+p;art	MJ		Feb 12	RRC			
Feb 12	CDedu;m+p;art			CDedu; m+p; art			
	No final visit			Jan 12			

BC: The Bible as a Contemplative Resource

BN: The Bible as Narrative

CBS Community Bible Study

CD (edu, m+p, art): Cultural Drivers; education, media+politics, arts

DS Drama of Scripture

lyfe++ extra sessions beyond the introductory six

Meek: The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth

MGS Making Good Sense of the Bible

MJ Miracles of Jesus

Pass The Passion

Reel: Reel Issues

RRC: Reading Romans in Context

WO Word in One

YGTT: You've Got The Time

## **Pathfinder's 'Evaluation': methodology**

### ***Initial approaches to the project***

Since the conception, design and set-up of Pathfinder were outside of the investigator's control there were a number of pre-set dimensions to this project and it is useful, at this point, to consider the parameters of the research.

Firstly, the number of different churches and participants, limitations of time (both theirs and the investigator's), and their geographical spread, rendered in-depth congregational studies of the sort conducted in the USA (Hopewell, 1987) and the UK (Guest, 2007; Woodhead *et al.*, 2004) impossible within the scope of this project. However, this variety ensured that findings were drawing on a wider range of Christian worshipping communities than a narrow denominational focus could have.

Secondly, the huge number of variables (such as urban/rural and socio-economic context, age and gender profiles) among and between churches and the specific groups who volunteered to work through Pathfinder, and the relatively small numbers of participants involved, meant that it was clear from the start that there would be insufficient participants to generate quantitatively significant data sets for different demographics. Moreover, the number of variables only increased as the project proceeded. For each Pathfinder group the components or elements of the programme varied; while they all did some elements such as the hermeneutics course (MGS), none of them did exactly the same combination and those that were in common were taken in differing orders at the different churches. In addition, the exact numbers of participants varied throughout the project, both within each group and between churches, due to some participants withdrawing from the programme.

In view of these variables, some of them anticipated early on in the project, it was decided in conjunction with Bible Society that, to meet their aims in evaluating the project, the bulk of the investigation would be qualitative, consisting of my meeting at intervals with each Pathfinder group, functioning as a focus group. This would be supplemented with individual one-to-one interviews with a few participants at each centre. However, from the point of view of providing material for theological reflection, the modest and more

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intimate scale of the groups being met with was a positive feature since it promoted quite detailed and often very thoughtful reflection among participants.

As noted in the Introduction, it was, at first, hoped that the use of the diagnostic questionnaires and the feedback sheets accompanying some resources throughout the project, would provide some quantitative data to complement the data from focus groups and interviews.<sup>52</sup> Since the ComRes-based DQ did not seem to assess pre-existing biblical knowledge and experience of the texts, at the first or second meeting with the groups I asked the Pathfinders alone to do a further 'Evaluation Survey' (ES1; Appendix VII)<sup>53</sup> that I had devised; this focussed more specifically on which parts of the Bible and its stories they were familiar with and what role it played in their lives. I did endeavour to ensure that questions used were straightforwardly worded and avoided bias, in accordance with suggestions from a number of methodological studies such as Gillham (2000). In developing this instrument I was unable to refine the composition of the survey by piloting it since there were no groups comparable to Pathfinders with whom I could test it; I was only able to refine it informally, with advice from a number of colleagues.

### ***Development of methodology***

Nevertheless, as the project proceeded it became apparent that there was, within the Pathfinder groups and their churches, an aversion to completing questionnaires or surveys that rendered data collection by this means untenable with some congregations and difficult even with the committed Pathfinder group members. Oral feedback, both informally and within focus groups indicated a high degree of impatience, irritation and/or confusion associated with having to complete such forms, despite an acknowledgment that the Pathfinder programme was a pilot and that they had been warned that evaluation was a key component of participation. For example, one interviewee, in response to an invitation for general comments about the programme, suggested that there were too many introductory sessions and 'if you start at another group, to make sure they all come back, don't do the form-filling'. This antipathy towards 'form-filling' had two major consequences for data collection and analysis.

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<sup>52</sup> For consideration of the value, but the many limitations, of qualitative research methods, including focus groups and interviews, see Bryman (1988).

<sup>53</sup> I referred to this as a survey, rather than questionnaire, for reasons of accessibility. See next section.

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Firstly, since all but two churches failed to obtain diagnostic questionnaires from a substantial proportion of their general congregation at the beginning of the programme, it was impracticable to assess the degree of representation of the congregations by their Pathfinder groups, or to complete the 'before-and-after' comparison of the congregation with the Pathfinder group, that Bible Society had anticipated. Consequently, the congregations were not evaluated at any later stage in the programme. Furthermore, rather than repeat both their questionnaire and my survey in full at the end of Pathfinder, with a view to providing such a 'before-and-after' snapshot, only selected questions from the diagnostic questionnaire and the initial evaluation survey were re-presented to the Pathfinders in a single 'Evaluation Survey 2' (ES2; Appendix VIII) at the close of the programme. Even then, the responses to this single final survey were mixed, with very few returns from some centres and a total of only 32 out of the over 70 committed enough to still be participating at the end of the project. It is likely that the few responses to this survey were from those who find such instruments accessible and those who feel strongly enough about Pathfinder to complete the form.<sup>54</sup> As a result of this it is not possible to make meaningful comparisons of the responses of the groups, individually or *in toto*, to the same questions before and after. Therefore, the data from these surveys which is cited here relates only to those questions concerning participants' self-perceptions of the effects of Pathfinder, and any opinions regarding elements of the programme which did not also emerge in the focus groups. Aside from some data gleaned from resource-specific feedback sheets, which had been employed by some of those who delivered the individual resources on the programme, the bulk of my analysis was based on oral responses from groups and individuals. However, for the purposes of this thesis, the wealth of qualitative data produced during this project, in the form of interview and focus group transcripts, renders far less important any limitations to the volume of quantitative data.

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<sup>54</sup> It may be relevant that, with regard to the question concerning the highest educational level obtained by the participant, of the 32 ES2 submitted, six had 'O' or 'A'-levels, sixteen had a qualification at OND or Bachelor's Degree level and four had higher degrees. (Four did not answer.) I cannot prove it but it seems likely that this was higher than the initial Pathfinder cohort as a whole and that those with experience of further or higher education were more inclined to fulfil requests to complete such instruments. (I had not asked about education at the start of the project for fear of implying that a high educational level was required of participants.)

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Secondly, on further questioning, it transpired that *some* of the resistance to questionnaires was a consequence of the inaccessibility of the instruments. The champion at one centre reported that some who had begun Pathfinder had found the questionnaire itself was off-putting because they didn't understand the questions. A participant at the same centre came up to me personally and said they didn't understand the word 'diagnostic' so they had concluded that the programme would be too hard for them. I had already noticed that several people at this centre had not completed all the answers and, during the focus group, it emerged that this had been because they didn't find some of the questions accessible or meaningful. More specifically, my records made shortly following the meeting note that:

Several said they'd never heard of [Richard] Dawkins and had to look him up on the internet ... Most had no idea what 'liberal' biblical scholarship was. ... One said she was so exhausted by the time she reached this question, the sheer number of options made her put it away for another day. Another said she simply couldn't face answering them. I think we have to face up to the fact that the more complex questions are very daunting for some participants.

One of the other centres noted that some participants there had also experienced difficulty in understanding some of the DQ questions with which they were presented and at a further two centres there were comments to the effect that the preliminary, evaluative meetings had put people off.

This early response to the evaluative process sensitized me to the issue of accessibility and its potential to skew results. Subsequently, I endeavoured to ensure that questions, both written and oral, were phrased in straightforward English. I also, when coding transcripts, made note of comments concerning terminology and accessibility of material in regard to the Pathfinder materials.

Despite these difficulties in obtaining quantitative data via written, textual instruments, the project proceeded to generate rich and interesting qualitative data that formed the bases for both facets of this study: answering the evaluative questions posed by Bible Society and provoking further theological reflection on the use of the Bible by ordinary Christians.

***Qualitative data collection and analysis***

*Focus Groups*

Aside from my initial, introductory meeting with each church group, whenever I met with the Pathfinders I posed a number of questions; some of these were specific to the resources they had studied since my previous visit and some related to their experiences of the programme in general at that point in time. These questions were designed to promote discussion, in a semi-structured manner, rather than limit the room for responses. Also, I attempted to phrase the questions in such a fashion that they invited both positive and negative responses. (For an example of the format, see Appendix IX.) Since there was opportunity for interactions and dialogue between members of the group (which in fact often generated the most interesting comments), and not just between individuals and me, these meetings are referred to here as 'focus groups' rather than 'group interviews'.<sup>55</sup> They were, with permission, recorded for later transcription.

*Interviews*

At some point during the first year of the programme, I carried out some one-to-one interviews (and one with a married couple) from each Pathfinder group. The purpose of these interviews was two-fold. Firstly, I was interested to ask people for their impressions of the programme materials, and any effects they had experienced, in a setting where they would not be embarrassed by having others hear what they said. I hoped that a deeper level of reflection on spiritual issues might be possible with this privacy and that this might enable me to assess, to some degree, how well Pathfinder was achieving its aims regarding spiritual formation. Additionally, I wanted to ask people some questions about how, as individuals, they perceived their relationship with God; I thought their responses might help shed light on the Pathfinder journey they were engaged upon.

A semi-structured approach was taken towards interviewing. Before asking about the programme specifically, I asked the interviewees a set of questions, concerning the way they perceived their current relationship with God and how they viewed the Bible, in order to gain some background to their responses and

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<sup>55</sup> For a review of the use of focus groups, see Morgan (1996) and, for a brief survey of their advantages and disadvantages see Arksey and Knight (1999: 77-8).

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to underline the fact that I was interested here in their comments as individuals. I then moved on to a standard set of open questions related to Pathfinder and its possible effects but was ready to ask more, subsidiary questions if the responses suggested that would be useful.<sup>56</sup> Throughout the interview process I tried, both verbally and via body language, to stress my desire to hear both positive and negative responses and avoid, to as great a degree as possible, having an effect upon participants' responses, although this is obviously always going to be a factor in any dialogue (Swinton and Mowat, 2006: 61-6). Often the responses generated during interviews matched those emerging from focus groups but, sometimes, a deeper response, or a more reflective or personal one, was offered when individuals were on their own. Interviews were, with permission, all recorded.

When considering the interviewees, who were generally a small sub-set of the whole Pathfinder group in any one centre, I have no way of assessing whether or not they were representative of the group as a whole. Since I was dependent on organisation by the local 'champion' and on the availability of interviewees for the hours and days I was visiting the area, my sampling was, to use Swinton and Mowat's term, 'opportunistic' (2006: 69); I had little control over who I could interview and was generally only able to speak with a handful of participants at each centre. One church was an exception to this pattern; it was arranged for me to speak to three people who had dropped out of the programme as well as a large proportion of the remaining group members. The interview script was modified for the former individuals in order to allow them to explore why they were no longer involved in Pathfinder.

### ***Analysis of qualitative data***

Interview and focus group transcripts, suitably anonymized, were made by a range of transcribers through a commercial company, TakeNote, but I read these through at least once while listening to the original recordings, in order to ensure their accuracy and correct them where necessary, to note where emphases were made and to gain an overview of the material. While acknowledging that 'a transcript is one interpretation of the interview, and no more than one interpretation ... transcription is neither neutral nor value-free'

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<sup>56</sup> See Appendix X for the basic set of questions on which each interview script was based. For examples of follow up questions, or 'probes', see Arksey and Knight (1999: 84)

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(Arksey and Knight, 1999: 141), I judged it unnecessary to have any other persons involved in the transcription. Transcripts from recordings of focus groups and interviews were then coded thematically employing NVIVO software.<sup>57</sup>

I made a decision to conduct coding and analysis assuming an essentialist epistemology (as opposed to a constructivist approach), seeking to identify semantic rather than latent themes; the participants' language was assumed to reflect their experiences in a straightforward manner (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 84-5). This was a decision based on the fact that the participants knew I was not responsible for having devised any part of the Pathfinder programme; I had (accurately) presented myself as not being personally invested in the success or otherwise of the programme or its elements. I stressed that I wanted to hear their honest responses and that such would be of most value to the designers and, ultimately, to the Church. Since they had no obvious reason to present me with a deliberately constructed non-authentic response, and since the project did not touch on any potentially sensitive areas in which I felt participants might want to project a non-authentic situation, I took their comments at 'face-value'. It is of course possible that, given the issue of accessibility noted above, some participants might have felt reluctant to offer their opinion, or concerned lest their comments leave them appearing foolish but, in practice, there were a good number of negative comments made, including some regarding material being too difficult; at least a good proportion of the data is critical and may be assumed to offer genuine insight into the processes involved.

Since data were collected over a period of nearly two years, it proved impracticable to read through all the transcripts before embarking on coding. Accordingly, coding was an ongoing process and was sometimes modified in the light of subsequent data. Coding began with some pre-existing broad themes that were pre-determined by the structure of the Bible Society project, so some responses were grouped together because they related to a particular element such as life. Other themes were chosen that related directly (positively or negatively) to the stated intentions and aims of the project as a whole, or of

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<sup>57</sup> The term 'thematic analysis' is sometimes used to indicate an examination of themes within documents, such as texts (see, for instance, Noble [1995]). Here I use it in the sense of a methodology employed in psychology and the social sciences, as detailed in Braun and Clarke (2006).

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its individual elements; in order to compile the evaluation report for Bible Society I needed to assess the degree to which those intentions had been achieved. So, for example, a sub-theme within the theme 'lyfe' was 'challenges', which was used to code any responses that referred to the challenges and how they worked, or their effects on individuals and the group. Coding of this sort was, then, deductive in nature.

For the purposes of the evaluation of the Pathfinder programme as a whole, then, I drew together the aims noted in the promotional material, (or 'ambitions' as one staff member preferred to call them), and sought to answer the following questions:

How worthwhile were the diagnostic phase and evaluation?

Did Pathfinder enable a better understanding of the Bible's 'big story'?

Were participants better able to interpret, understand and apply the biblical texts?

Did the programme contribute to their spiritual formation and/or have a positive influence on their relationship with God?

Did it help them in any way to forge links between the Bible and contemporary society?

The deductive thematic analysis conducted on the transcripts examined the data to see if they could provide material relevant to answering these questions.

However, with regard to further coding, given the fact that Pathfinder was a pilot and that its outcomes were therefore unknown, it seemed most appropriate to adopt an approach that also sought unanticipated patterns within the data. Accordingly, beyond seeking answers to the questions of how Pathfinder and its individual resources had worked out in regard to their stated aims, I looked for other themes apparent within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006, especially 83), attempting to code inductively. These other themes and sub-themes were, inevitably, detected in the context of the researcher's interests and situation. Some were noted due to their prevalence within the data corpus but others, although less highly represented, appeared to be significant to the overarching aims of Pathfinder or to the context in which it was launched. For example, some emergent themes suggested other, perhaps unintended, outcomes of the programme elements (positive or negative), such as 'better relationships'; other themes concerned other pertinent issues such as 'accessibility'. Others raised

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fundamental questions regarding how ordinary Christians might approach biblical texts.

Now that I have mapped the ecclesial and research contexts of the Pathfinder programme, and described its structure and components I move on to present the findings of my evaluation and its analysis. Details of the responses to individual elements and the programme *in toto* are within the report to Bible Society (Appendix I: Conclusions). In the next chapter I present an outline of the conclusions of the *deductive* analysis aimed at judging how effective Pathfinder was at meeting its own aims; this is, here, examined with a view to beginning to draw some conclusions regarding how to promote biblical engagement by ordinary Christians. Consideration of the results of the *inductive* analysis appears in Part II.

## CHAPTER 2. Pathfinder: the journey

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In this chapter I will survey the results of my deductive thematic analysis to assess how well Pathfinder achieved its aims, which was shaped by the five questions I posed above (p.80). After asking how representative the responses may be, and the value of the evaluative process, I will explore how an examination of the successes and failures of Pathfinder might inform the design of any future programme aiming to further develop biblical engagement by ordinary Christians.

### Locating the starting and finishing points

#### Starting point: the 'Diagnosis' stage

As noted in Chapter One, there were difficulties with getting some participants to complete questionnaires. Given the self-selecting composition of the Pathfinder groups, the relatively small numbers involved (only 138 across the churches completing DQs even partially) and the huge range of possible influences on the results obtained (for example, type of church, gender, age, geography, level of education and socio-economic situation) there seemed little point in close comparison between the ComRes results (ComRes, 2008a) and those from the initial Pathfinders' DQs (Appendix VI), either as church groups or *in toto*.<sup>58</sup> However, a few simple observations may be made using the total Pathfinder figures and the figures for non-leaders in ComRes (since proportionally few professional Christians were present in Pathfinder groups). Both groups were asked 'How confident would you say you are in your Bible knowledge?' (ComRes, 2008a: S3Q3 and Appendix VI, Q2); despite differences in the distribution, a total of around 68% in both surveys declared themselves either very or fairly confident. 39% non-leaders in ComRes reported using commentaries and the figure was 38% among Pathfinders. 83% of ComRes non-leaders felt it important to know the Bible well (57% 'very') while a total of 96% Pathfinders felt it at least fairly important (72% 'very'). While far from statistically rigorous, these few snapshot comparisons at least suggest that the

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<sup>58</sup> For consideration of the influence of some of these factors on the way in which people respond to the Bible, see Village (2007).

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Pathfinders as a whole are not totally different in their responses to the ComRes respondents.

Regarding questions specific to the DQ and not taken from the ComRes survey, when the Pathfinders were asked if they agreed that more resources or initiatives would help them build their biblical understanding and use, 92% agreed at least to some extent. The responses to a follow-up question, asking which resources would be especially helpful, and offering four options, indicated that 62% would value resources that give ‘an overview of the Bible and its core themes’, and 81% those that would help ‘to make sense of the Bible and to link it to my daily life’. A smaller number, 68%, said they would like things to help them ‘make sense of the Bible and to link it to our culture’ but most, 90%, would find something to help them ‘to grow in my faith and follow Christ’ particularly helpful. This indicates that the Pathfinders starting the programme might be viewed on the whole as a group of people likely to engage with resources designed to help them meet these goals. However, it also suggests that *growth in faith and faithful discipleship* was their primary goal and that perhaps biblical engagement was seen as a means to that end, rather than a goal in and of itself.

### **Finishing points: evaluation along the way**

Despite the aversion towards paper-based assessment and evaluation, such as questionnaires and surveys, there was a degree of acceptance by participants that it was useful to measure the efficacy of the different resources forming part of Pathfinder. In contrast to the negative feedback concerning *text-based* instruments, at three of the centres individuals independently introduced the idea that time for feedback during the focus group sessions we had together was, in itself, valuable. When asked if Pathfinder had any effect upon relationships within the group, one suggested that, although the group were ‘pretty close’ already, the feedback discussions had helped. ‘We don’t often have an opportunity to just mull over things and share things; sometimes we disagree with each other, sometimes we disagree quite vociferously, sometimes we just burst out laughing. It’s that sort of interaction and there are not all that many opportunities to do that’. Another agreed, ‘because we’re too busy trying to keep the Church going at the moment, what with Elders’ meetings or all the other things that we’re involved with; this is quite a unique opportunity’.

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At another church, a similar sentiment was expressed in terms of time for reflection:

this part of the process is helpful, because I don't think we reflect well enough on what we do. I think we keep doing, when actually we could do with sitting still and sort of saying, 'Well, how was that; should we have done it differently, was it good?'. I think if that process becomes part of how we do things it would be good. ... You know, it's not just about saying, 'This was good'. If it wasn't as good as it could have been, why wasn't it and what do we do to put it right? I think if that sort of approach to things gets incorporated within how we function within the church, it would be valuable.

And an interviewee at a third church found that:

it's interesting to have people like you come and ask us to comment on and analyse it because if this was in a home group setting, you wouldn't sit and reflect upon what you've learned, what you've gained, what you haven't gained and your expectations. So, in some ways, some sort of audit actually has been refreshing.

In conclusion, for churches embarking on some sort of biblical engagement programme, it seems it might be valuable to incorporate times for reflection and challenge; there needs to be a consideration of how individuals and the group have been affected and what room there is for improvement. This mutual accountability has potential to give 'added value' to any programme but especially perhaps in material designed to promote spiritual growth. Furthermore, the responses here suggest reflection is most valuable if conducted in 'real-time', orally, rather than assessed using paper or online surveys.

### **What can be learnt from evaluation of Pathfinder's success?**

In this section I examine how successful the Pathfinder programme as a whole was felt to be, by the participants, in relation to its four aims; these were summarised at the close of the last chapter and were posed as questions addressed to the data. However, rather than simply present an account of its perceived successes and failures, I am examining the participants' responses specifically to see what they might contribute towards the design of any future programme aiming to promote biblical engagement by ordinary church-goers.

## **Did Pathfinder enable a better understanding of the Bible's 'big story'?**

To address this 'ambition' of the programme, in the final questionnaire (ES2, Q1), 'an increased understanding of the "big story" of the Bible' was one suggested possible outcome of the programme; out of the 31 responses considered, 68% responded positively. However, this intended outcome of Pathfinder was largely addressed by the two different Bible Overviews described in Chapter One: WO and DS.<sup>59</sup>

### ***Word in One***

#### *Overview/'big picture' of the Bible*

All five church groups using this resource expressed appreciation of the usefulness of a Bible overview and/or a better grasp of the 'big story'. Despite various suggestions for improvement or reservations about this specific resource, the basic concept was thought to be worthwhile and some participants said that WO had helped them engage with parts of the Bible they did not usually read, or prompted them to study further. Two Pathfinders at one church compared their responses:

**Respondent 1:** It highlighted the bits that I wasn't familiar with and then encouraged me to perhaps look at that a bit more closely, again. Perhaps do a bit more reading around that, the bits I didn't understand or bypassed me in the past were – , it was an encouragement to do a bit more research into that.

**Respondent 2:** It was like that for me. I mean I've done reading the Bible in a year for a few years. Again, I don't study what I read, I don't connect it. I just read it so that I'm familiar with it. If there's something that's caught my eye, I do, but I just read it and it was like that with me. It kind of inspired me to maybe see that I need to read the Bible regularly, to study.

The group at another church also felt that WO helped them move forward in their understanding of the Bible as a whole and one interviewee said that:

the thing that amazed me was the one final [covenant] that included us and I found that quite amazing ... you know we're reading all about the Israelites and God's chosen people all through Old Testament and then suddenly, through Jesus, ...that final covenant. Wow! That's me! It's no longer just Jews. You know it but it hits you in a different way because

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<sup>59</sup> Further examples of responses and more detailed analysis of the resources can be found in Appendix I, §3.

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the covenant's become real and you are suddenly part of it ... and to be honest I'd never really looked at it like that before.

A third group noted that the process of doing an overview would be most valuable at the beginning of a course of study, as it could be more introductory, (they did it second, following MGS), but, in this context, they also raised the issue of how much existing Bible knowledge the materials assumed.

**Respondent 1:** We're such a wide range of people – for some people it was a bit basic and for some it wasn't!

**Respondent 2:** But who do you target? There's like me, who knows nothing and people who know the Bible from back to front, so how do you cater for all that? If it is supposed to be Bible study what's the point of people who know their Bible backwards and forwards, coming in the first place?

Another commented that 'we're all at various stages of our faith and we're all at various stages of our knowledge and really I think you've almost got to design the course for the lowest common denominator'. Others, at other centres, similarly suggested that the course assumed a good deal of pre-existing knowledge.

Judging from responses, this mis-match between the expectations of the 'audience' and the organiser seems to have been responsible for some leaving Pathfinder at this point – either because it was perceived as too 'basic' or 'too complex'. On the DVD it is certainly true that the presenter discusses the stories of some biblical characters with an apparent assumption that the audience are at least familiar with the outlines of their stories already, and many other characters may be alluded to without going into detail; WO would not make much sense to someone with little or no pre-existing acquaintance with the texts. This raises the issue of accessibility, in this case to participants who are new to the faith and relatively unfamiliar with the Bible. The responses from those who *were* used to the Bible, however, suggest that an over-view that was accessible to those with little prior knowledge could nevertheless be valuable to the more experienced readers.

### *Historical and geographical context, chronology*

The value of learning the historical background to some of the biblical books, and appreciating their chronology, were features mentioned by a number of participants across all the centres. For instance, a Pathfinder at one church felt

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that the way they read the Bible had changed since embarking on Pathfinder: 'I think now it's more ... a source of inspiration and perhaps, as I say, a challenge in how I'm actually living my life and whether I'm actually living out what I profess to be my faith'. When asked if this was due to any particular features of Pathfinder, they responded:

I think the bit we did that actually put the whole Bible in context, when we went actually right the way through the Old Testament and put it all in historical context, I think that changed it a bit because it made it less disjointed. It seemed to flow more because I think you automatically expect that it comes in some sort of chronological order and it doesn't necessarily, so I think that sort of helped.

Similarly, a Pathfinder from another group appreciated

... Andy doing these big chunks of the Bible. I felt they were really well done. The fact that he placed them geographically and time wise and the important people, I thought that was good, because we often forget that, you know, when you're reading – , you're studying something you're not always certain just where they are.

These comments were echoed by other participants at the centres, including one who said they'd hated history at school. Taken together, they suggest that WO's aim in regard to communicating historical context was found valuable in enhancing biblical engagement.

Related to historical context, but distinct from it, is the topic of how the Bible books relate to each other; this was raised by a number of participants at four of the centres. In each case, this feature of WO seems to have been valued because of the way it enabled participants to make more sense of the individual books of the Bible. For example, one said:

all this is new to me, and it made a great deal of sense because, having seen the timelines, you can actually then put things into perspective and to actually find out that two books were written at the same time you think, 'Ah right, okay, it doesn't follow, you know, it's not a sequential book'. That does tend to make a bit more sense because you can read through one book then ... you think, 'Hang on a minute. Is that happening afterwards or before?', because you haven't got the background to it. So, the timeline was good for me, I loved the timeline.

Similarly, in a different group, another Pathfinder said:

Chronological order itself is something because a lot of people know stories but they don't whether it's in this bit, that bit or the other bit or even if it's Old Testament or New Testament ... certain things begin to

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make a bit more sense if you realise that what they're talking about here is after the exile whereas what someone else was talking about was pre-exile ... just being able to place things is very helpful.

It would seem then, that the interrelationships between biblical books and the fact that the books are not presented in a chronological order within the Bible, was something that particularly struck a number of participants and gave them a new perspective on the texts.

### ***Drama of Scripture***

The concept of Scripture as a dynamic drama, integrating faith and world, appealed to a number of participants across the churches. For example, one participant noted that it 'was interesting insofar as it encourages one to sort of get absorbed into the story' and, from another group, a second said 'the idea of seeing the Bible in five acts, ... creation, redemption and that, I think that is quite helpful, you know, to get an overview of it'. Similarly, a Pathfinder at a third church:

found that really helpful, because to me it gave a very good overview of the Bible, and the story of the Bible as it unfolded, and the whole thread that was running all the way through. I found that particularly exciting, the fact that we were actually in the unfinished, final act of this, and that we know the ultimate end, and we know what's gone before. We are somewhere in the middle, working it out and trying to make sense of it, and make it relevant and in keeping with what's gone before and what's gone afterwards. So I thought that was, really, quite a personally exciting and challenging thing really, that somehow, we are working this out in some way, so I thought that was good, I enjoyed those two sessions.

This same person contrasted DS with WO specifically because of the integration with 'life' found in DS:

To me, it kind of, made relevant what we'd done ... in the Word in One, but this, to me, it sort of bridged that gap between, just looking at scripture academically and what happened, and then ... the relevancy in our lives. So, it came in the right place, I think, in the whole scheme of things, for me, but I found that really interesting.

And at a fourth church there was a further link made with BN, leading to the conclusion that both DS and WO had been especially instrumental in communicating the concept that a believer was part of God's big story.

In addition to these comments, occasionally, at other times in different contexts (groups or interviews), a few people mentioned remembering, or being influenced by, the idea of the 'drama' or the five or six 'acts' . It would seem that

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this concept, of being a part of God's own story as believers live their lives, is a powerful one that captures some people's imaginations and was effectively communicated by considering the texts as a drama or narrative.

One participant did reflect that this concept had its limitations and would not appeal in the same way to everyone:

The drama of scripture, for instance, is quite a new way of thinking for many evangelicals in terms of the narrative view of scripture, but one of the things that the book doesn't do very well, and for that reason, probably, Pathfinder itself didn't do, is to look at how – , well, if we are in the story of God, in what sense, or how, are we in the story of God? That's led me to keep thinking about that, so ... the 'how' is quite a key thing. So, in that sense Pathfinder has been a very helpful stirring pot ... For some people the idea of the story doesn't help at all. But for some other people, in a post-modern context it does help a great deal. For those who are more doctrinally-orientated, like believers in truth, rather than living in a relativist context, it doesn't really help.

It is interesting that the question of 'how' readers are in the story is raised and that 'story' is seen, by this person, as relevant to a post-modern context but not 'helpful' to thinkers in a modernist framework.

However, for another participant, when summing up at the end of the Pathfinder pilot, during reflection on links between the other resources and the 'Cultural Drivers' (politics, education, media and arts), there was a clear connection between this concept and the way life was to be lived:

...Drama of Scripture, where the idea of us living in the pre act five, or whatever, we know what the story is so far, and we know what the end will be, but we're in that middle bit, and ... this is part of working out that middle bit, the bit that we're in somehow, how we can impact on our own culture and our own time.

Taken together, even with some reservations that were expressed concerning the metaphor of drama, the responses to DS support the incorporation of an element conveying the concept of God's 'big story' into a programme of biblical engagement. Moreover, they suggest that this brief two-session introduction enhanced general understanding of the scriptures.

More specifically, one group noted not only that they would recommend DS to other churches but that it would certainly have been beneficial to have it before MGS. Another group suggested that DS would be most useful at or near the beginning of a programme of biblical engagement such as Pathfinder. Of the 24

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respondents to the DS part of the final survey (ES2, Q19), 58% said they would include it in a future presentation of Pathfinder.

### ***Conclusions regarding the 'big story'***

Judging from responses to both these 'overview' resources, many found it valuable to have an increased understanding of the broad historical background to the individual biblical books and some grasp of the chronological relationships between them. However, what seemed of additional value was the concept communicated particularly well by DS, the idea of a 'big story' tying all the disparate books together *and* of readers being part of that ongoing story, with its implications for a life of discipleship. Here we can see explicit lines being drawn between increased understanding – both of texts and of their historical background – and promotion of spiritual growth. The 'application' is perhaps clearer because the concept of story or drama is one that involves, draws in, the reader. It also provides the possibility, noted by Wright (1991), for moving beyond a narrow view of using the Bible in a deontological mode, searching for rules and regulations by which Christians might live under 'biblical authority'. It suggests a more dynamic, creative and yet no less biblically-based mode of life. These data support the idea of embarking upon a programme of biblical engagement for ordinary readers with a resource that communicates the 'big story' of the Bible together with some introductory historical background and an idea of the chronology of the biblical 'library'; this would not only be accessible to those embarking on biblical reading but would also set the scene for further, deeper engagement.

### **Were participants better able to interpret, understand and apply the biblical texts?**

In one sense, it would have been impossible to answer this question without first defining criteria for judging what is 'better' interpretation and then 'testing' the Pathfinders. When trying to gauge their own assessment of the achievement of this Pathfinder 'ambition' I deliberately chose to phrase the question in a more general way; in the final evaluation survey, 65% ticked 'an increased understanding of the contents of the Bible' in a list of suggested effects of Pathfinder. Within focus groups, I asked, 'Do you feel Pathfinder has helped you grow in your understanding of the Bible or helped you encounter the

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scriptures in a new way? If so, how?'<sup>60</sup> There were a number of people, across the centres, who testified to this programme having had a positive effect upon their understanding of the Bible. Some respondents attributed this effect very specifically to MGS (see Appendix I, §1.1.3) and this is discussed later (Ch. 6 pp.200ff). Here I've tried to give a flavour of the responses to the programme as a whole, given mostly at or towards its close. For example, when the Church A group were asked this question, one responded:

Absolutely. ... you look at it more in depth, I was thinking particularly, the story of Ruth, and when you start to examine the reasons why Ruth ended up with Boaz, and the fact that there was a famine in this land where they were living, and three men died. Naomi's husband and two sons died, which forced her, then, to go back to her kinsman. You read the story, and miss that bit. That, to me, was the depth. I think that, personally, as I've read other passages, I began to look more in depth into the deeper things that were going on, behind the actual story. Difficult to explain, but it's almost a mindset, really. I'm not a very avid reader, and I find that I can't read for long, because I start to lose interest. ... But I can pick up, particularly, the Old Testament and really begin to think about the background of what I'm actually reading.

Another there commented that 'I find myself asking a lot, "Who is the author actually speaking to, at this point?'. That seems to be cropping up quite a lot. Truthfully, prior to the Pathfinder Course, I probably hadn't thought about it that much'. And a third said:

it's encouraged me to look at the Bible from the viewpoint of – , I mean ... Am I looking at this from my cultural perspective, or how God would want me to see it? I've become very much more open to think about that, now, than I perhaps was before. Also, from what we're taught within the Church as well – , is that really Gospel based, or is it built around the culture, or the times that we're in, and how we've done that. ... Pathfinders has helped me to think like that.

From the Church B group, when they'd only worked through WO, Map and MGS, one noted that:

I'm not quite so scared about reading it now, and I say scared in the nicest possible way because not having knowledge makes you wary about reading and I've always been worried about having the background knowledge I need to be able to read the Bible. Whereas I'm fairly confident now that I could read it and not grasp the whole meaning of the text, but certainly a lot more of it than I would have before.

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<sup>60</sup> This was a key question I used in all focus group sessions. Sometimes the exact wording varied but the gist of the question was the same.

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Although the Church G group had shrunk a good deal by the end, those remaining were very positive in their responses. One, whose comment was endorsed by others, said:

it helped me personally to look at things in a different dimension. It's been very helpful and stuff that I didn't know before in respect of background because I think it's very, very important. Now obviously the Word of God stands on its own but it's good to understand what's going on especially relating to other people ... helpful to learn more and help you to move on.

At their last focus group of the first year of Pathfinder, the Church C group as a whole generally agreed on a positive response to this question, with three of them making the following comments:

**Respondent 1:** Yes, by really putting the emphasis on that, and perhaps also coming to read scripture in bigger chunks at a time. Doesn't mean to say you have to read more, full stop. But that you don't just read a verse here, a verse there, because it makes a lot more sense when you read a chunk together, a whole letter, a whole gospel, or a whole section. Pick out the similarities and the points that the writer's making, that sort of thing.

**Respondent 2:** [Someone] ... said if you read a little bit more before it and after it, it just enhances what you're trying to pick up in the middle which is maybe a one-liner. You know, the point that you're trying to make but as you say, if you read the whole thing it gives you a little bit more of the story, the point that you're trying to make.

**Respondent 3:** To me, though the first one [MGS] was difficult. I did look around at the passages and look behind them and try and fit it into some kind of picture at the time. I do make an effort to do that more than I did, so that's good.

Some at Church E felt that:

**Respondent 1:** Yes, it's been very useful in, kind of, looking at the Bible in context, and all that. That's been really useful.

**Respondent 2:** We've looked at using the Bible in a different way to what we normally do, which is looking at passages and finding out what it means. So, we've had a more overall picture.

**Respondent 3:** Yes, it did a whole sweep of the Bible, didn't it? It's been thinking about the Bible as a story and our part in that story. So, certainly the overview has been significant, I think, and we've looked at that overview through different lenses, I think, so that's been helpful.

When asked to clarify if this had affected the way they looked at the Bible when on their own or in meetings, the response, from a fourth participant, was positive: 'in our house-group we don't just talk about the verses, but we think

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about why it was written, what the situation was at that time, etc'. At the same time, Respondent 3 above added that:

I think also an awareness of what we bring to that interpretation, what we bring to the text, really. So, greater sensitivity to understanding your own bias, maybe, or background in looking at it, which means you might otherwise jump to conclusions about the interpretation when actually there could be a different way of looking at it.

Finally, at Church F's last meeting, there was again a positive group response to this question with one member expressing it this way:

For me, the context, in the broader sense of the word, has been brought to me more fully, partly from the Hermeneutics course and partly also from the Word in One, although I disliked it intensely, I find there was an attempt to show how things progressed and I think that that's essential when you are reading anything in the Bible to know where it is, and why it's there, and so on. It just gives it a dimension which is essential, so, for me, that's been really, really important.

### ***Conclusions regarding biblical understanding***

There was by no means a unanimous response to the question concerning possible improvement in biblical interpretation, understanding, and application of the biblical texts being brought about through the Pathfinder programme. Nevertheless, overall, and certainly among those who completed the programme, there was a broadly positive response suggesting that participants understood it to have had beneficial effects upon their understanding of the Bible and the depth to which they engaged with it. However, the components of this deeper engagement varied between respondents. Reading or hearing larger portions of scripture, both with a view to gaining an idea of historical and cultural context or background, and to think about the 'big story' of the Bible, would seem to be features of this new way of understanding which recur in the comments made across the centres. In this respect, some of these remarks inevitably overlap, and echo, the topics covered and conclusions made in the previous section regarding the biblical narrative and historical setting. However, some responses introduce different aspects of how the Pathfinders viewed the concept of 'biblical understanding'; for some, at least, there was also an awareness of the effects of personal and cultural 'lenses' upon one's reading. There was also a sense of reading any passage more carefully and deeply, which should include taking note of its context within the larger document. The

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value of these aspects of biblical understanding for ordinary readers is considered further in Chapter Six.

### **Did the programme contribute to their spiritual formation and/or have a positive influence on their relationship with God?**

Paper instruments suggest that Pathfinder was somewhat less successful with respect to this ambition than with others, since only 35% respondents to the final (ES2) survey ticked 'a deeper relationship with God' in answer to a question regarding possible effects of the programme (Q1).

This aim was also addressed in meetings with participants by asking the open question: 'Has Pathfinder affected your relationship with God in any way?' or something very similar. Several people across the centres commented that it was difficult to answer this question since many things in life, both individually and in concert, have an effect upon one's spiritual growth. And, for some, as expressed by an individual at one church, Pathfinder 'helped me along the road' even if they couldn't be more specific about it.

Nevertheless, with this caveat, several felt able to answer this affirmatively and positively; and although some felt unable to say the programme had made a specific impact, no-one expressed the feeling that Pathfinder affected their relationship with God negatively. For example, one said that:

whenever you read God's word you intend to engage with him at some point, that's the whole point, but I must admit there is a deeper sense of seeking God through revelation, through the word. You know, for me, it's actually reading the word and saying, 'Lord just take me deeper into this word, I really want to know more about that'.

At another church a participant responded 'I feel closer, because I'm listening more. I feel I'm listening, that's the word I want really, I'm listening more, and I had a lot of problems in the last year really, so it has helped with that, yes'; meanwhile another said:

for me, because it's meant spending more time doing it; it's like any other relationship, the more time you spend with a person, the better you feel you're getting to know them, and the deeper the relationship is. So, kind of, in that respect, yes. Also, that personal sense of 'What is this particular passage saying to me, at this particular time?' which is like the communication with God, so yes, for me it's encouraged me quite a bit.

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Some Pathfinders identified specific elements of the programme that had helped them in this area. For one it was Maperio that had shown her that ‘everything’s spiritual in your life and, yes, it’s walking with God in everything’; for several others it was lyfe. Comments regarding this aspect of the *lectio-divina*-type resource focussed especially on the value of each section’s ‘challenges’. Someone from Church D group said these were good ‘because, so often I’ve been in Bible Study groups; you just go away’ but with lyfe ‘you’ve got something to work on, and they were very practical as well’; more specifically, Church G reported some of their number having had conversations with people outside the church as a direct result of the lyfe challenges. Meanwhile, others noted their value in promoting spiritual disciplines: ‘they’ve made me turn the radio off and pray or listen. On a week by week basis, it’s made me focus on work relationships and trying to be a positive influence’ (Church A). Another from the same group also reported an effect on her prayer life: ‘We had one of the challenges about prayer life where I said, “This week, every time I boil the kettle I’ll pray for somebody”. That reinforced the fact that I need to be praying at other times’. At Church F, a participant said, ‘one of the things I have started doing is Bible readings every day, which I wasn’t doing before. I’ve thrown away the business pages of the paper in place of Bible readings’, and one at Church E noted that lyfe had ‘got me learning scripture again’.<sup>61</sup>

### ***Conclusions regarding spiritual formation***

It is noteworthy that, regarding this topic, there is comparatively less material among the general responses to the whole Pathfinder programme than there is with respect to the previous two, despite development in this area also being one of the specified aims of the programme. Some of this may be due to the problem identified above, of it being difficult to pin down any one element that affects one’s experience of relationship with God and spiritual formation. Certainly the responses to this programme-wide question were not clearly positive across the groups. However, responses made specifically to lyfe, and notably with regard to its element of application, through the ‘challenges’, suggest that this resource did have an impact upon a number of participants which in turn supports the idea that it may be fruitful to explore a *lectio-divina*-

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<sup>61</sup> Responses to these and other aspects of lyfe are explored more in later chapters, especially Chapter Five.

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type model within any programme designed to develop biblical engagement with a view to spiritual formation.

### **Did Pathfinder help them in any way to forge links between the Bible and contemporary society?**

Some of the responses pertinent to this question were made in relation to the 'Cultural Drivers' (politics, education, media and arts) and the culture-facing initiative, in groups where it was undertaken. Although no support materials, with stated aims, were provided for this element of Pathfinder, the topics of the 'Cultural Drivers' themselves may be taken to highlight the areas on which they were intended to focus. They were (presumably) designed to communicate to the Pathfinder groups a range of ideas on how Christians might be and already were involved in projects in which the Bible was presented to our society. In this respect, they certainly seem to have achieved that aim for some recipients. As one Pathfinder commented:

Two things that struck me from the three sessions, particularly in a media context, are how much on one level is going on, in terms of Christian initiatives in society, but also it made me reflect on how much we've retreated over the past 150, 200 years from influence within society. So, it made me think, there's a lot to do. So, it was a very helpful broad base of reflection. Some of it came across as, kind of, these are resources we want to highlight so you can plug in recommended highlights, so a bit of, kind of, 'show and tell' about it, which is fair enough. I mean, it wasn't just Bible Society materials, there were a lot of other things in society as well.

Overall, although the Pathfinders were not unanimous in their assessment of the 'Cultural Drivers', the sessions do seem to have provided stimulus and ideas for a number of participants across the centres dependent on the participants' context; for instance, some churches were familiar with some of the suggestions for involvement in education, such as school governorship. Interestingly, in light of other findings (see Ch.4) two churches noted the especial relevance of the Media session to working with younger people; one person

found the Media one quite thought-provoking because I work with young people and I think there are a lot of possibilities for us to work to show the Bible to people who are not churched, people who are younger and of a different culture. I think that talk opened a few doors that we might think about, so I found that helpful.

Another in the same group felt that:

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we could relate to it far more than some of the other topics, because the media is so much in your face these days; you can't get away from it and it made us think more about the connection of the media and with some Christian principles really.

Aside from responses specific to the 'Cultural Drivers', which focussed more specifically on the profile of the *Bible* in societal debate, there were also some direct responses to one of the focus group questions: 'Has Pathfinder affected the way you think about the Church in relation to the society in which we live?'. This question was broad enough to include Christian involvement in ventures within society that did not necessarily overtly promote the profile of the Bible in those areas. Responses indicated that some felt that they and their church had already been outward-focussed in their society, before starting the Pathfinder programme. However, others responded positively, if not always specifically. After the first year or so, one reported that they thought to themselves "Okay, so this faith is, life I say I'm living and where does it fit? How do I do it?" I think it has probably changed how I look at other people as well'. Another said they felt more confident to speak about their faith and a third noted that they had 'been made aware of the relationship of Christians within the wider community' of people many of whom were of another faith or none. Other groups mentioned being encouraged to do more, or being provided with new ideas, but felt that they had already been involved in society-facing activities and did not indicate that they saw Pathfinder as having been hugely significant in this area. In one respect perhaps this aim of the programme was a more prominent destination for it, from Bible Society's perspective, since they wish to raise the profile of the Bible in wider society. However, this aim may be viewed as being at a tangent to the goal of biblical engagement with a view to spiritual formation expressed by some participants.

In regard to engaging wider society, one related concern expressed by Bible Society personnel was that believers lacked confidence in the Bible; indeed, DS included the promotion of confidence in the biblical texts among its stated aims although there was only one comment on this topic in responses to this resource, and that was negative. In spoken responses, some spoke of MGS increasing their confidence but others expressed reservations (see Appendix I, §1.1.2 and also Ch. 6). When reflecting back on the whole Pathfinder experience one participant asked a rhetorical question:

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Does the five-act Drama of Scripture help resolve for me ... God's choice and calling and his judgement and some of these big issues? Which is probably what makes me lack in confidence in talking about ... the Bible to a taxi driver or what have you.

There were also some pertinent questions covering this aspect in the ES2; although only 31 were received and these all came from those who had stayed with Pathfinder, if we take together the questions relating to their confidence in their ability to explain the Bible to others (Q11-13) between 40 and 60% ticked 'more' or 'same'. Turning to questions regarding 'all the blood and killing in the Old Testament' and 'seeming inconsistencies in the Bible itself' (ES2, Q7), for both issues only four (13% total respondents) said their confidence had increased in the course of Pathfinder. Taken together, responses to Pathfinder's aim to increase confidence in the text seem to have varied, perhaps due to there being different measures of 'confidence' and possibly also due to the different starting points of the participants.

### ***Conclusions regarding confidence in the Bible and links with contemporary society***

These comments suggest that participants found elements of 'application to society' of value but that Pathfinder did not always meet its aim of enabling this aspect of engagement with the Bible. Regarding future programmes, the responses may suggest that resources which promote reflection on how to live Christianly within wider society will be found most useful if tailored to the societal location of the church concerned. With respect to confidence in handling the Bible within contemporary society, there is little evidence of Pathfinder having much success. The question of the degree to which greater engagement with the texts may boost or actually diminish an ordinary Christian's confidence in the Bible is explored more in Chapter Six.

### **Conclusions from examination of Pathfinder's success in meeting its aims**

In conclusion, Pathfinder can be viewed as more successful in some of its aims than others. For the purposes of this study, a consideration of its success in these regards has highlighted the usefulness of several factors in any programme designed to promote biblical engagement by ordinary Christians; these include a Bible overview, including a sense of a coherent overarching

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biblical narrative and engagement with longer sections of text including whole books. It has also suggested that it is worth giving more consideration to how readers are enabled to see themselves as included in the narrative and to explore their own presuppositions and reading location. This might enable them to explore how their inclusion in God's 'big story' could affect their relationship with God in every area of their lives. Other useful features of such a programme would convey background information on the various contexts of the biblical books, and discussion of how to apply the ancient texts to contemporary situations, possibly drawing on the example of *lectio divina*. I now move on to consider what other insights into such programme design can be gleaned from a consideration of the Pathfinder data.

### **Other issues arising: pedagogy and accessibility**

Aside from addressing answers designed to assess how successful Pathfinder was according to its own stated aims, a number of other issues were noted within participants' response on one or more resources. Some of these were related to pedagogy in general. For instance, there were comments made on the excessive speed of delivery of WO, and on the use of PowerPoint by WO, DS and RRC. Other comments related more generally to the learning environment; opinions were offered on the best length of time for the Pathfinder sessions, the suitability of different resources to group work, optimum group size, and the importance of supporting learning with handouts.

However, other responses I noted and coded as relating to *accessibility* of various kinds and I felt this to be of particular importance for any learning programme aiming to encourage all sorts of 'ordinary' Christians to further engagement with biblical texts. For instance, Map and lyfe prompted responses concerning how some people with certain personality traits might find some resources more suitable or accessible than others. Some Pathfinders pointed out that access to and familiarity with the internet affected the ability of some participants to engage with materials on a number of resources, such as lyfe and YGTT. With WO and lyfe, there were comments relating to how much biblical knowledge was expected and whether they were, in fact, suitable resources for those with little knowledge of the scriptures. The question here was one of accessibility – and suitability – from the point of view of Christian experience. Related to these observations were comments regarding the

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relative depth and breadth one might expect within a resource seeking to communicate an overview of the whole canon and a sense of what was termed the 'big story'. Another set of comments related to accessibility of Bible translation; the use of the CEV in both lyfe and YGTT prompted comments regarding not only concern about the quality of translation but also some concerning its language grading. One described CEV as 'more direct and explicit' than the translation to which they were used, and another said 'it was down to earth for me'.

These accessibility issues should all be considered when designing any resources designed to promote biblical engagement. However, other issues that were noted in the Pathfinder data seemed to me to pertain particularly to the whole idea of a *programme* of resources to promote biblical engagement. These include the concept of intellectual accessibility (and the related topic of language grading), and the expectation of some applicability or outcome, beyond the practice of engagement itself, which is viable for the participant to consider. I felt that these topics, and a number of others noted within the Pathfinder data, all relate in some way to the topic of spiritual formation and they are considered in the next section.

### **Other issues arising: finding a route towards spiritual formation**

#### **The map of the journey**

As noted in Chapter 1, the PL cover said, 'Pathfinder is a pioneering project, designed to help you find your own path of spiritual growth'. However, it did not always seem that participants appreciated this aspect of the programme; indeed, there was considerable comment concerning the programme as a whole and specific parts of it, to the effect that it did not meet their expectations of a Bible Society project. At some places, and at different times, a number of Pathfinders mentioned the expectations of the programme, both their own and others. I do not wish to go into the variety of these expectations but do wish to note some general points.

Firstly, it is clear that people would prefer to be given a clear idea of what a programme is going to include, in what order, and what its aims are. Obviously, this was a pilot where some resources were undergoing development as the

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course progressed, and church leaders were choosing resources as they went along, so, however ideal, it would have been impossible to produce a detailed list of 'contents' at the beginning. The promotional materials (Appendices II, III and IV; see also Appendix I, § Introduction.2) did contain some ideas but it is unclear how well distributed these were among the 'ordinary' participants. Nevertheless, a clear communication, of both aims and route, emerges as a key factor in the success of such projects. Disappointed expectations were one reason given for people leaving the programme: 'some of those that came at the beginning, were expecting, because it was a Bible course, they were expecting to come and read something from their Bibles right at the beginning. Then they just drifted'. Even a number of those who didn't drop out, across several of the centres, commented that they hadn't been clear on what they were doing and why: 'we were always a bit in the dark as to what our next modules were going to be like' (Church B); 'I just wish that what was planned for us to do was up front and we knew' (Church D); 'We didn't have that advance knowledge of that. We were sort of, every week, just jumping ahead to try and catch up with what we're doing next week' (Church E). Consequently, the suggestion was that they would have appreciated having an overall plan, or 'route map', in advance: 'a clearer definition of the course itself prior to people actually signing up for it so ... they know' (Church G); 'a plan of what's happening at each stage in advance so that you know how long it's going to take and where you're going to be' (Church A). One group went further, putting forward the idea of:

some, sort of, course book, so an outline that ... I suppose you could do it with a ring binder and start off with the first eight pages, 'This is the outline, this is what we're going to do. This is where it's going to go,' ... in terms of that idea of, sort of, structure and the direction, then to be able to see how this bit which you're doing slots into that greater whole ... rather than just an individual standalone unit, and some of the rationale behind why different things are in there.

It was further suggested that having such a folder, and a certificate or some other acknowledgement that the programme had been completed, would give participants a 'sense of identity and ownership' of the programme.

These very practical, perhaps even commonsense, suggestions, and the other comments across the churches, make it clear that a 'road map', clarifying how the different aims related to one another, would have helped both Bible Society

## CHAPTER 2. Pathfinder: the journey

and the Pathfinders think about the aims of each programme element and the relationship of learning about the Bible to Christian discipleship. Given the responses in 'Starting point' (above), the Pathfinders were primarily interested in progressing on their personal and corporate spiritual journey so specific links to this might have helped inspire participation.

### **Progress on the journey**

A second issue related to expectation is the degree of coherence anticipated by the use of the term 'programme'. Comments were made across the centres concerning a perceived lack of linkage between the different resources – both their content and their methodologies. When asked in groups if they thought the different elements of Pathfinder complemented each other, hung together, or went together well, someone at one church said they didn't 'think the sessions followed on; they were very individual and gave very different insights ... you could juggle them around in any order, without missing a point. It didn't, sort of follow on'. Similarly, at another church, one felt that '[e]ach session had not much connection with the last one' and these comments were echoed at other churches. While there were positive comments concerning the variety of format and delivery between the resources, and the modular nature of the programme, some people found the changes in style between each resource more challenging. And a participant from a third group suggested that 'if we were supposed to put into practice something from the previous one, we've moved onto something else, so any chance of learning and embracing a change in our life and behaviour and belief from the previous ones have got submerged by the next one'.

This leads us to the third point: progress in intellectual challenge and accessibility. One Pathfinder drew an analogy with learning at school: 'When you're in primary school, ... you play in the sand and you just go where the sand falls, you know. You do your O-Levels, and you discover gravity; you do your A-Levels and you learn about electrons'. In contrast, his experience of Pathfinder's early stages was 'almost that ... you're sort of jumping ... up to O and A-Levels if you like, with all those concepts'. He suggested that a programme such as Pathfinder should begin with an element at 'foundation' level and work up, so that as many as possible could get an overview and then build upon it.

## CHAPTER 2. Pathfinder: the journey

### **The nature of the destination**

It is interesting that, while Bible Society do identify key elements within their programme, such as communicating the 'big story' of the Bible, or increasing people's understanding of it, they do not clarify the place of each of these elements within the whole. The programme is, amongst other things, attempting to enable participants to 'grow spiritually' (PL), to cultivate 'spiritual formation' and 'personal development' (PCR) but it is not entirely clear what part each element of the programme is expected to play in achieving this nor is it very clear what shape this 'transformation' (PCR) might take. Although Bible Society materials spoke of 'personal transformation' as *one* of the four foci of the Pathfinder materials, spiritual formation *per se* was not articulated as the primary goal. Perhaps this is a by-product of Bible Society's mission focus, which is 'wider circulation and use' of the Christian texts (Bible Society, 2013)? Its primary goal is text-centred; perhaps, therefore, there is a danger that knowledge of and about the Bible may be viewed as a goal in itself rather than a means to the end of discipleship or spiritual formation? Obviously, as a Christian organisation, they are also interested in promoting spiritual growth or discipleship and, if asked, would probably agree that *that* was the ultimate purpose of such circulation and use. However, if Pathfinder was designed primarily to achieve wider circulation and use of the Bible, then spiritual formation becomes more than a by-product but certainly a subsidiary aim. Indeed, perhaps the lack of a unifying theme or 'destination' for the Pathfinder journey was the cause of the unease expressed by some regarding their inability to see where they were going with the project? It is also possible that the impact, or applicability, noted in feedback to lyfe lies in the fact that *its* focus is on the role of the biblical text, that is to enable the further development of a relationship with God, rather than the text in and of itself. It more explicitly views the texts as means to the end of application than the other resources in Pathfinder - with the possible exception of Map.<sup>62</sup>

If we assume that spiritual formation *is* the overall intended goal of a reading of the Bible within the Christian tradition, (and we can see, above, that the aim in this respect was met, to at least some extent) we find that assessing how well

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<sup>62</sup> See Appendix I (§4) for the report on Map. It generated strong but mixed responses from Pathfinders, some of which related to its suitability for a programme of biblical engagement. Consequently, I am not considering it in detail in this work.

## CHAPTER 2. Pathfinder: the journey

Pathfinder met its aims, as answered by a deductive thematic analysis of participants' responses, does shed some light on how that overall goal might be seen as the ultimate outcome of a programme designed to nurture biblical engagement by ordinary Christians.

In Part II of this thesis I go on to identify a suitable conversation partner for some of the issues I identified in an inductive thematic analysis of the data from the Pathfinder programme; this is followed by an examination of each of three issues in light of reflection on contemporary research and historical practices that relate to each one.

# PART II: A CONVERSATION WITH CONTEMPORARY AND HISTORICAL PRACTICES

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In this second part of the thesis I examine some of the results of my inductive thematic analysis of the Pathfinder data, specifically the three themes I noted there: the cognitive and emotive effects of encountering the texts through audio and audio-visual resources, the value and challenges of hearing the differing readings of others as texts were read in small groups, and the perception among the participants that there was a difference, and sometimes a clash, between an intellectual exploration of the texts and any spiritual encounter with them.

There is a wealth of contemporary theological reflection on various aspects of these three topics but I am, in chapters four through to six, specifically focussing on those areas of enquiry that shed light on which strategies would promote biblical engagement among ordinary Christians. With this overriding goal in mind, I am also seeking to bring each of the three themes into conversation with reflection on the ancient practice of *lectio divina*. The choice of this conversation partner is partly due to its focus on encounter with the texts with the purpose of spiritual formation; this may provide a pattern for a 'route' or orientation toward a spiritual goal which was lacking in the Pathfinder programme. This became apparent through the responses to the Pathfinder resource, *lyfe*, that is consciously modelled on a *lectio divina* pattern. Secondly, *lectio* not only has a historical pedigree but is a process which is familiar through its modern expressions across different churches. Finally, examination of the mediaeval practice of *lectio* reveals that aspects of the three themes are not new to contemporary readers but may also be found there. Chapter Three sets the scene for the following three chapters on the selected themes; it highlights how they are apparent within *lectio divina* and notes other features of this ancient practice which may contribute towards formulation of strategies to foster contemporary biblical engagement by ordinary Christians.

## CHAPTER 3. *Lectio divina*: features of biblical engagement, ancient and modern

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As mentioned in previous chapters, the process of *lectio divina* features in this study both as a potential model for the orientation or posture of any proposed programme of biblical engagement for ordinary Christians and as a conversation partner for selected issues found within the data collected. A number of factors contributed towards the choice of *lectio divina* in particular for these roles.

Some responses, noted towards the end of Chapter Two, regarded a sense of lack of direction across Pathfinder. Moreover, occasional comments across the programme held up 'applicability' as a desired feature, with the implication that some resources were viewed as more relevant than others to the needs and expectations of the participants. With regard to this issue, *lectio* provided a basis for two of the Pathfinder resources, one of them the group resource, *lyfe*, which was responded to very positively by the Pathfinders; specifically its clear sense of approaching the Bible with the aim of personal challenge and application was noted, an orientation it has in common with *lectio divina*. *Lectio* would thus appear to provide a potential framework for the posture or orientation of any programme of biblical engagement for ordinary Christians: component resources could be identified as contributing in some specific manner to the *deeper, more intentional encounter* with the biblical texts central to the nature of *lectio*, within a process oriented towards *lectio's goal of transformation*. Given this thesis's focus on biblical engagement across churches of different types, *lectio divina's* long pedigree within church history perhaps renders it an especially acceptable model framework for those churches that especially value tradition. At the same time, in its different contemporary expressions across various church traditions, it is an approach familiar to, and it would appear popular with, many Christians.

### CHAPTER 3. *Lectio divina*: features of biblical engagement, ancient and modern

I am not, here, suggesting that *lectio* should simply be imported into modern churches in its mediaeval format; such would in any case be a fruitless enterprise since the cultural milieu and practices of that time could not be replicated even if that was thought desirable. Neither do I suggest that its various modern incarnations are sufficient in themselves to provide an adequate route into biblical engagement for ordinary Christians. I am suggesting that its orientation towards deeper biblical engagement with a view to developing spiritual formation provides a suitable posture and goal with which to embark on any attempt to encounter the Bible more deeply. Within this orienting framework I go on to suggest some strategies of spiritual reading which differ significantly from *lectio* in its original setting, notably the use of modern media to encounter the texts and the location of much engagement, and reflection, within small groups. It is possible that other ancient practices could also provide fruitful models for an orientation towards the biblical texts or for practical approaches by which to engage with them. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this thesis, centred as it is on a specific set of resources, *lectio divina* provides a suitable posture towards a deeper engagement with the texts and an agreed goal for the process of encountering them.

The orientation common to *lyfe* and *lectio* also led me to consider the practice of *lectio divina* in its original setting as a fruitful conversation partner for the three issues I noted within the Pathfinder data — the value of different media in encountering the Bible, the process of generating and evaluating different understandings of its texts, and the role and importance of both cognitive and emotive approaches in the process of biblical engagement — despite the fact that only the latter two issues arise specifically in responses to *lyfe*. The possibility of using *lectio* in this way was supported by the exploration begun in this chapter and picked up in the three subsequent chapters; while parallels should not be over-emphasised, none of the three issues are foreign to debate on mediaeval approaches to the Bible including *lectio divina*. Therefore, consideration of *lectio* in its original context may contribute to further consideration of the implications of these issues for plans to promote biblical engagement for ordinary Christians.

This chapter, then, seeks to examine mediaeval *lectio divina* with a view to establishing that the three themes I noted in the Pathfinder data are not peculiar

CHAPTER 3. *Lectio divina*: features of biblical engagement, ancient and modern to that programme, nor even to twenty-first century readers, and may be found also in this ancient practice. After a brief consideration of the stages in spiritual reading as described in *The Ladder of Four Rungs*, this chapter will further examine the practice in its original monastic setting. This necessarily brief survey will be structured around the *lectio divina* steps of reading or otherwise encountering the text (*lectio*), of meditation or processing of the passage (*meditatio*), and of the outcomes of such spiritual reading, both in terms of prayer and contemplation (*oratio* and *contemplatio*) and in the monastic literary outputs that were the fruit of such practices. In the course of this survey I will show that three issues noted within the responses of the Pathfinders – the importance of the medium, the multivocality of scripture and the relevance of study – were not unknown to their medieval forebears.

### **The Ladder of Four Rungs**

A text often referred to in relation to *lectio divina* is the *Letter of Dom Guigo the Carthusian to Brother Gervase, about the Contemplative Life* which was written by a Carthusian monk around 1150.<sup>63</sup> Otherwise known as *The Ladder of Monks* or *The Ladder of Four Rungs* it sets out four stages or steps within a process of scriptural engagement that together ‘make a ladder for monks by which they are lifted up to earth from heaven’; these ‘rungs’ are reading (*lectio*), meditation (*meditatio*), prayer (*oratio*) and contemplation (*contemplatio*). The writer describes these as four distinct activities.

Reading is the careful study of the Scriptures, concentrating all one’s powers on it. Meditation is the busy application of the mind to seek with the help of one’s own reason for knowledge of hidden truth. Prayer is the heart’s devoted turning to God to drive away evil and obtain what is good. Contemplation is when the mind is in some sort lifted up to God and held above itself, so that it tastes the joys of everlasting sweetness (Guigo II, 1978: 82).

This could be seen as a process of exposure to the texts, followed by the use of one’s reason leading, through prayer, to the desired outcome of an encounter

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<sup>63</sup> There are a large number of manuscript copies of this document, which have been grouped according to what appears to be the earliest text and its subsequent modifications by redactors. For further details see the ‘Introduction’ to the translation by Colledge and Walsh (Guigo II, 1978: 15-22). This translation, of what they consider to be the work of Guigo, also contains a discussion on, and translation of portions of, a later (possibly late 14<sup>th</sup> Century) Middle English version (39-51). A translation of a similar English manuscript is available on line (Bolton Holloway, 1997-2015). Quotations here are taken from Colledge and Walsh’s 1978 translations (of Guigo and of his Middle English redactor) unless otherwise noted.

CHAPTER 3. *Lectio divina*: features of biblical engagement, ancient and modern with God. However, all four activities are mutually dependent and all necessary (see also Leclercq, 1958/9). In particular Guigo follows other writers of the period in likening the process of *lectio divina* to that of bovine digestion, the first two stages being ingestion (*lectio*) and mastication or rumination of the nourishment (*meditatio*) in order to derive benefit from it.

Reading seeks for the sweetness of a blessed life, meditation perceives it, prayer asks for it, contemplation tastes it. Reading, as it were, puts food whole into the mouth, meditation chews it and breaks it up, prayer extracts its flavor, contemplation is the sweetness itself which gladdens and refreshes. Reading works on the outside, meditation on the pith: prayer asks for what we long for, contemplation gives us delight in the sweetness which we have found (1978: 82-3).

The first two steps are, at the same time, seen as acting to take what is learnt to the heart prior to generating the transformation of character that is part of the process: 'what is the use of spending one's time in continuous reading, turning the pages of the lives and sayings of holy men, unless we can extract nourishment from them by chewing and digesting this food so that its strength can pass into our inmost heart?' (93). Furthermore, in order to benefit from the interaction of the four steps, there is a need for some wider understanding of what the scriptures or the church Fathers are actually saying, in order to guard the practitioner from going astray from right doctrines during their meditation: 'how is it possible to think properly, and to avoid meditating upon false and idle topics, overstepping the bounds laid down by our holy fathers, unless we are first directed in these matters by what we read or what we hear?' (84-5). Indeed, the process of digestion of a passage, during *meditatio*, can be pictured as the practitioner being able to 'chew it and break it with mind and reason'.<sup>64</sup> Thus, while *lectio* is a spiritual discipline, aiming to transform the Christian's character and enable a closer union with God (what Leclercq terms 'a spiritual "contact"', 1958/9: 565), it would seem from these passages that there was an expectation that the practices of learning and exercise of reason would have an important part to play in those capable of them.<sup>65</sup>

It is clear that diligent reading and meditation do not guarantee success. God's grace is also needful: 'what use is it to anyone if he sees in his meditation what is to be done, unless the help of prayer and the grace of God enable him to

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<sup>64</sup> From an alternative Middle English manuscript translation (Bolton Holloway, 1997-2015).

<sup>65</sup> Indeed, Wansbrough reads Guigo's account of *meditatio* as including study (2010: 172)

CHAPTER 3. *Lectio divina*: features of biblical engagement, ancient and modern  
achieve it? ... We can do nothing without Him. It is He who achieves our works in us, and yet not entirely without us' (Guigo II, 1978: 94). However, there is an expectation that the reader will *need* to read and meditate upon the texts in order to drive them to desire, leading to prayer. God *can* reveal himself to the one not seeking him but it is rare: 'we should do our part, which is to read and meditate on the law of God and pray to Him' (Guigo II, 1978: 95).

It is interesting that in their 'Introduction' to their translation, Colledge and Walsh note Guigo's warning that a merely intellectual meditation achieves nothing of spiritual worth (cf. Guigo II, 1978: 85) and see this demonstrating 'his adherence to the traditional anti-intellectualism of mystical theology' (29-30). In their description of the differences found in a translation of *The Ladder* into Middle English, they further note that:

Guigo had said that the sweetness of contemplation was withheld from pagan philosophers, notwithstanding that they were able to arrive at a knowledge of the highest and truest good by the use of their reason. The anti-intellectualism of the translator, traditionally drawn from the spiritual exegesis of Matthew 11:25, is even more emphatic: 'For this understanding is hidden from the wise men of this world, and it is shown to the humble and the meek so that they can truly understand and experience it. ...' (43).

To support this contention they quote further from the Middle English translation, where it speaks of how God may reveal things to people of no learning whatsoever; even a 'simple poor old woman' can still delight in God and 'some poor simple laborer who is so stupid that he could not argue anything out to save his life, can still attain to this teaching and this wisdom as perfectly as the wisest man in the land, whoever he may be, provided that he does what is in him' (Guigo II, 1978: 44). It is clear then, that both versions of *The Ladder* with which Colledge and Walsh engage insist that God's action is essential for the practitioner to achieve anything of spiritual benefit or worth. It is also true, as we will see below, that the author/redactors were working within a medieval context where monastic practices were being defended against what might be termed 'more intellectual' activities being promoted in scholastic circles. Nevertheless, this 'anti-intellectualism' needs to be qualified. The picture created by *The Ladder* is one where the essential first rungs are reading and meditation employing reason. This suggests that the label 'anti-intellectual' might be anachronistic and that it could mislead a modern reader as to the key

CHAPTER 3. *Lectio divina*: features of biblical engagement, ancient and modern elements of *lectio divina*. A closer examination of what was involved in *lectio* in its medieval forms will help to clarify how ‘intellectual’ a pursuit it actually was.

## ***Lectio and meditatio***

### **Encountering the texts**

#### ***Reading***

Although *lectio* in its classical form is a product of monasticism, access to and use of biblical texts and stories had been a feature of Christian practice throughout the history of the church and not only among ‘professional Christians’ such as monks or clergy. Among writings of the early church, Gamble (1995: 231-7) finds evidence not only of texts being read aloud to congregations (what might be termed aural reading) but also of private reading by individuals in their homes (see also the much earlier work by Harnack, 1912). Indeed this reading is encouraged by figures such as Clement of Alexandria and Chrysostom. Despite acknowledging the limitations imposed by literacy levels possibly as low as fifteen percent, Gamble concludes that, in the early centuries, ‘the church strongly encouraged its literate members to religious cultivation through the private reading of Christian books’ although this exhortation was sometimes combined with an injunction to avoid non-Christian texts (1995: 237). Indeed, the *Apostolic Constitutions*, cited by Gamble (233-4), suggest that, at least from the point of view of literature, no other reading materials are useful (*Apostolic Constitutions*: Book I, Section II, iv-vi). In this light, it is interesting that Mary Sandor (1989) begins her account of *lectio divina* by noting the limited role allowed for reading among the early eremitic desert monks; in writings associated with them, reading is one of the worldly distractions from which they were attempting to escape, although there is an assumption that texts had featured in their lives at some point (by hearing or reading) as they were expected to have memorized biblical passages (Sandor, 1989: 85-8).

In contrast, reading had an increased role within early coenobitic monasticism where it was viewed as a form of work. The latter perception was partly the result of reading being viewed as an activity involving muscular activity since it

CHAPTER 3. *Lectio divina*: features of biblical engagement, ancient and modern  
was usually performed out loud.<sup>66</sup> In monastic communities, reading, silently or out loud, was initially seen both as a means to learn scripture, and other religious writings, and a way to avoid idleness and impose discipline among monks, although it also provided guidance in how to live (Sandor, 1989: 89-93). As such it came to form a key element in the training of novices and oblates and, in the rules of the early monastic communities, was seen as a regular part of an individual monk's daily routine (Sandor, 1989: 88-9). For instance, The *Rule* of St Benedict prescribed certain hours each day for *lectio divina*, dependent on the time of year, with more on Sundays and in Lent (Cochelin, 2011: 67; Lawrence, 2001 [1984]), and had provision for hearing all the Psalter each week (Boynton, 2011: 13).<sup>67</sup> Indeed the Psalter was their reading primer (Cochelin, 2011: 66). Later, as liturgy developed to occupy more of the monastic timetable, Bible readings formed an integral component of the liturgical pattern that undergirded the monastery's day, week and year (Boynton, 2011). The written texts surviving from the medieval period reflect the different types of reading undertaken. There are individual books of the Bible, or groups of books, such as the Psalter and the Gospels. There are also collections of verses (*florilegia*) from the scriptures and the Church Fathers, brought together for specific reasons; the latter were likely used in private devotions and also as aids to memory for preaching (Carruthers, 2008 [1990]: 217-19). Alongside these are the pandects and multi-volume whole Bibles, some of which are of a larger scale and probably designed to facilitate public reading in the low light conditions of night-time communal devotions (Reilly, 2011).

### **Learning**

Within the monasteries, and later the training of the scholastics, not only basic literacy but also the skills of grammar<sup>68</sup> and rhetoric were seen as necessary (Leclercq, 1982 [1961]: 72; Sandor, 1989: 94). The texts employed as part of

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<sup>66</sup> The degree to which silent reading was conducted is a matter of debate, as Sandor notes (1989: 91), and she accepts that there is good evidence for communal silent reading by the 12<sup>th</sup> Century (Sandor, 1989: 104; see also Saenger, 1997). However, there is also evidence that the practice of reading aloud continued during the Middle Ages even after silent reading had become more prevalent (Leclercq, 1982 [1961]: 15) and it was, of course, maintained within the liturgy.

<sup>67</sup> For more details, see *The Holy Rule of St. Benedict*, (1949, XLVIII, 'Of the Daily Work').

<sup>68</sup> As Leclercq (1982 [1961]: 17-18) points out, *grammatica* included reading, writing, and an ability to understand and use texts.

CHAPTER 3. *Lectio divina*: features of biblical engagement, ancient and modern  
their vocation included biblical books and the writings of the Church Fathers but they would have encountered some classical writings in the process of being trained in the grammatical skills needed to read the scriptures (Lawrence, 2001 [1984]: 34-5; see also Smalley, 1983 [1952]); the writings of pagans were, however, used with caveats.<sup>69</sup>

Leclercq finds support for this within the works of a number of writers such as Boniface's instructions to a pupil; the prologue of his *Ars grammatica* is summarised as communicating that, since the authorities are available in Latin,

[t]he authors and the grammarians of antiquity must, then, be studied—but their works must be integrated into the life of the Church. What is not in conformity with Catholic tradition must be eliminated; what the latter has introduced into the expression of religious ideas must be added. The norm is the Latin inherited from the Church and from the doctors who were read every day. But the knowledge of grammar is absolutely necessary for the understanding of this reading, for Holy Scripture has its subtleties which are a hazard which could prevent its contents being understood (1982 [1961]: 39).

Leclercq later points out that '[t]he premiss held by all who work with Holy Scripture is that grammar is a necessary introduction to it. Since Scripture is a book, one must know how to read it, and learn how to read it just as one learns how to read any other book' (72). However, he maintains that the pagan sources used in learning, having been memorized thoroughly, were then available to be shaped according to the desire of their possessors:

The vital use they made of [ancient literature] is something that we can no longer achieve in our times. Ovid, Virgil, and Horace belonged to these men as personal property; they were not an alien possession to which to refer and quote with reverence—and with bibliographical references. Medieval men claimed for themselves the right to make the authors conform to usage, to the actual needs of a living culture. Each of these authors was quoted freely and from memory and even without acknowledgment. The important thing was not what he had said or meant, nor what he was able to say in his own time and place, but what a Christian of the tenth or twelfth century could find in him. Wisdom was sought in the pages of pagan literature and the searcher discovered it because he already possessed it; the texts gave it an added luster. The pagan authors continued to live in their readers, to nurture their desire for wisdom and their moral aspirations. ... The authors had really, in the words of Rhabanus Maurus, been 'converted' to Christianity (Leclercq, 1982 [1961]: 119).

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<sup>69</sup> See Smalley (1983 [1952]: 88-9) for a very long and detailed list of the suggested preparation necessary for someone with no scholastic education who wanted to engage in *lectio*.

CHAPTER 3. *Lectio divina*: features of biblical engagement, ancient and modern

Similarly, Cochelin (2011: 67) notes that '[t]he seven liberal arts (grammar, rhetoric, and logic forming the trivium, and arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy constituting the quadrivium) were all devised with one main goal: a deeper understanding of the Bible'.<sup>70</sup>

### ***Close encounters - texts known, seen and heard***

Once practitioners of *lectio divina* had studied, however, they were not wholly dependent on written texts. Although monks could read there was a concomitant expectation that they would memorize the texts and this was not merely to avoid the need for multiple copies at a time when copying was time-consuming and expensive; memorization was seen as an essential and laudable skill (see below). It is likely that their memory of texts would have consisted of mental images of a page; Hugh of St Victor suggested that repeated use of the same copy of a text facilitated visual learning and the layout of glosses may have served the same purpose (Carruthers, 2008 [1990]: 265-73 especially 267). These internal images would have been supplemented, externally, by the memory prompts, or *memoria*, available through the existence of *florilegia* and other collections of extracts. There are also other visual cues to take into account in a typical medieval milieu; these include but are not exhausted by, statues, stained glass windows and other architectural biblical story 'cues' (Cochelin, 2011: 63-4).<sup>71</sup> Finally, we have the aural exposure to the texts, being read out during meal times in the monastic refectory, or increasingly forming part of the liturgy (Smalley, 1983 [1952]: 44-5; Boynton, 2011), the unceasing routine of monastic worship. It could be said that medieval practitioners of *lectio divina* operated within a context drenched in biblical texts, in different media, both externally and internally, but perhaps the most important component was memory.

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<sup>70</sup> Sandor (1989: 95-6), Leclercq (1982 [1961]: 19-21), and Smalley (1983 [1952]: 30-1) all mention Cassiodorus as a rare early example of someone who promoted and emphasised the need for study and 'curiosity' in their own right.

<sup>71</sup> A good example may be seen in the set of mosaics at Monreale, Sicily, telling the stories of the Bible.

## Engaging the texts

### ***Memorization and recollection***

In her study of memory in medieval culture, Mary Carruthers argues against the common assumption that extensive memorization of texts is primarily a feature of oral cultures and that its importance declines as literacy increases (2008 [1990]: 12). She cites contemporary sources to support her claim that memorization was viewed as a highly admirable skill both in the ancient world and within the medieval context in which *lectio* evolved; memory was one of the five divisions of rhetoric, of which many thought it the 'noblest', and the process of memorization was seen as a technique which could be taught and learnt. Indeed, the possession of a good memory of the classical texts of one's society had an ethical dimension (11). In ancient and medieval texts concerned with the virtues, memory formed a key part of prudence, this virtue being understood as encompassing all human knowledge: past (memory), present (intelligence) and future (foresight; Carruthers, 2008 [1990]: 83). As such, what one had memorized had a profound effect upon one's character: '[t]raining the memory was much more than a matter of providing oneself with the means to compose and converse intelligently when books were not readily to hand, for it was in trained memory that one built character, judgment, citizenship, and piety' (2008 [1990]: 11). Considering the writings of Albertus Magnus and Aquinas, Carruthers notes that 'both make the conscious cultivation of memory and the practice of the memorial arts a moral obligation as well as a scholarly necessity'; consequently 'possessing a well-trained memory was morally virtuous in itself' (2008 [1990]: 87-8). For this reason, the possession of a good memory was noted in hagiographic writings and canonization proceedings for various saints including Aquinas, Anthony and Francis of Assisi.<sup>72</sup> 'The choice to train one's memory or not, for the ancients and the medieval, was not a choice dictated by convenience: it was a matter of ethics. A person without a memory, if such a thing could be, would be a person without moral character and, in a basic sense, without humanity' (2008 [1990]: 14).

The texts one memorized were further seen as enabling one to shape one's life in an appropriate fashion. Carruthers finds, within John Wycliff, Augustine and

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<sup>72</sup> Augustine saw memory as not only an analogy of God but as the point of encounter between self and God (Fredriksen, 2006).

CHAPTER 3. *Lectio divina*: features of biblical engagement, ancient and modern  
others a 'commonplace': that the Bible is a shorthand account, a sign, a memorial, of truth that must be interpreted and adapted to the 'book of life' in Christ.

A work is not truly read until one has made it part of oneself — that process constitutes a necessary stage of its textualization. Merely running one's eyes over the written pages is not reading at all, for the writing must be transferred into memory, from graphemes on parchment or papyrus or paper to images written in one's brain by emotion and sense (2008: 11).

This memorization was not a 'mere' rote learning but had methodologies that could be taught (Carruthers, 2008 [1990]: 216). Those who practiced it, both ancient and medieval, employed techniques which included the committal to memory of immensely long works broken into short passages; these 'chunks' were then 'stored' in the memory in such a way as to allow the possibility of cross-referencing and of recovery in any desired order. The storage process involved the creation of mental images; Carruthers notes the ancient conception of memory as akin to impressions made on wax (2008: 16, 89) and suggests that this helps us understand the way in which character was seen to be affected by what had been read and learnt. Memorizing was seen as creating a *habitus/hexis*. It is 'the fundamental symbiosis of memorized reading and ethics ... each is a matter of stamping the body-soul, of character' (Carruthers, 2008 [1990]: 224; see also Sandor, 1989: 98-9).

Memorization would then be part of the context of medieval *lectio divina*, as something which had both already occurred and was ongoing; the potential backdrop or intertexts for any cogitation on a given passage was only limited by the practitioner's acquired memory of other parts of the Bible, and the act of encountering the text would have included its memorization if it was not already known. The metaphor of biting, chewing and digesting, or ruminating upon texts, found in Guigo II and other writers, is common and highlights the fact that *lectio*, the encounter with the text, is, in medieval accounts, difficult to disentangle from further engagement with it through *meditatio* (Carruthers, 2008 [1990]: 202-12; Leclercq, 1982 [1961]: 73).<sup>73</sup> Leclercq notes that, in both

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<sup>73</sup> Indeed Carruthers (2008: 207-9) notes that the metaphor may be extended to liken prayer to spiritual flatulence!

CHAPTER 3. *Lectio divina*: features of biblical engagement, ancient and modern rabbinic and traditional Christian thought, meditation *is* focussed reading of a text, including its memorization and comprehension.

For the ancients, to meditate is to read a text and to learn it 'by heart' in the fullest sense of this expression, that is, with one's whole being: with the body, since the mouth pronounced it, with the memory which fixes it, with the intelligence which understands its meaning, and with the will which desires to put it into practice (1982 [1961]: 17).<sup>74</sup>

### ***Meditation and the role of emotion***

If meditation may be seen as a concentrated form of reading, in order to commit a passage to memory, then is a differentiation between *lectio* and *meditatio* artificial? Carruthers suggests that a distinction between *lectio* and *meditatio* may be made. Firstly, she notes the scholarly understanding that silent reading was uncommon in ancient times and that this gradually replaced reading out loud, a process sometimes linked to a move from orality's 'earmindedness' to literacy's 'eyemindedness'. Admitting that meanings of terms changed during the history of monasticism, she nevertheless puts forward an alternative to this consensus, maintaining instead that the two different types of reading, out loud and silent, were both taught to ancient readers, but that they had different functions, being associated with *lectio* and *meditatio* respectively (2008 [1990]: 212). Carruthers supports her claim by examining in some detail the well known passage where Augustine speaks of Ambrose reading silently;<sup>75</sup> this she interprets as Augustine commenting on Ambrose's need to 'repair his mind' amidst his busyness by concentrated reading (214). Drawing on other examples from Augustine and Isidore of Seville, she suggests that '[w]hether or not the vocal chords are used is a secondary difference between the two methods of reading' (214) and that 'Ambrose's silent reading is not a function of whether the lips move or not, but of his single-minded concentration, the solitude and silence he creates for himself, even in a busy room' (215). This method of reading is ruminatory, breaking down the words thoroughly; indeed she suggests that the words used in Augustine's account of Ambrose suggest 'an intensely energetic, suspenseful, concentrated, and meticulous activity, which gives a vigor to meditation that the placid image of cud-chewing may not'

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<sup>74</sup> As he notes elsewhere, with reference to its role in stimulating prayer, 'the *lectio* which prepares the way for prayer is not just any sort of reading ... It is a slow meditative reading' (Leclercq, 1958/9: 567). See also Sandor (1989: 97).

<sup>75</sup> *Confessions*, VI, iii.

CHAPTER 3. *Lectio divina*: features of biblical engagement, ancient and modern (Carruthers, 2008 [1990]: 215). Carruthers further notes the suggestions in medieval writers, that learning texts was best done by reading them in a murmur rather than loudly and in a silent atmosphere to aid concentration (citing Martianus Capella; 215). More evidence for an understanding of the 'solitude' needful for concentrated learning is found in the writings of and about Aquinas and Francis of Assisi. Furthermore, this is not a merely intellectual concentration: in both these cases 'emotion-memory [*affectus*]' ... is the agent by means of which rumination and memorization takes place; in other words, remembering is an activity in which the emotions must be engaged in order for it to occur at all' (Carruthers, 2008 [1990]: 217, see also 84-5). Accordingly, there are accounts of highly emotional states associated with the production of work characterised by careful use of reason, such as the *Summa* of Aquinas (248-9).

As Sandor notes, there are references to spoken meditation in the Bible, in Psalm 36.30. However, the ninth century commentary on the Benedictine Rule by Smaragdus, which refers to the reading aloud of a passage, *lectio aperta*, prior to repeating it silently to oneself, *lectio tacita*, testifies to the use of both methods and reinforces the idea that meditation is the deeper form of reading (Sandor, 1989: 91). With regard to the role of emotion, there has been some debate over evidence of a discovery of 'self' in the twelfth century and the emphasis on feelings within the piety of that period, particularly within the Cistercian order. Sandor, in acknowledging the stress on affective piety within Cistercian thinking (1989: 101-2), notes that, consequently, reading 'became the locus of the encounter between man and God. ... it was no longer an activity which served merely to prepare for the principal monastic task of prayer, but was valuable in its own right' (102). It led to a desire to imitate Christ. Interestingly, Bynum, while exploring the twelfth century 'turn' to self, also stresses the role of models to imitate and the importance of belonging to a group in shaping behavioural patterns (see Bynum, 1982: 59-81 on Cistercians, especially 77-81, and 82-109 on individuals and groups). Perhaps the twelfth century 'discovery of self' contributed towards the increasing value placed upon silent reading to oneself (Sandor, 1989: 104-5). Certainly, as Sandor points out, while Bernard of Clairvaux criticised the use of man-made objects of beauty in stimulating the senses, he saw reading as an ascetic experience; *lectio divina* was useful since, 'the reader in this case is not seeking new information from

CHAPTER 3. *Lectio divina*: features of biblical engagement, ancient and modern  
the text he reads over and over, but desires rather to be moved each time to respond to the message of Scripture with an ever greater affective turning of the will to God' (1989:108).

It seems then, that the tone of *meditatio* in monastic practice may have been both rigorous and vigorous, involving both intellectual concentration and the reader's emotional involvement. There is no attempt at an emotion-less, objective use of reason apparent here, no division or tension between intellectual activity and the emotions within medieval accounts of *lectio divina*; on the contrary the two aspects seem to be complementary (Carruthers, 2008 [1990]: 205).

This conclusion might be seen to be supported by other observations; one scholar notes that 'the *Rule* of St. Benedict forbids that the books of Kings and the Heptateuch should be read in the evening, in case they might over-excite the hearers' (Smalley, 1983 [1952]: 24). Similarly, when contrasting monastic exegesis with that emanating from the Schools, Leclercq speaks of the former being 'addressed to the whole being; its aim is to touch the heart rather than to instruct the mind. It is often written in a fervent style which expresses an inner rhythm which the author wants to communicate to his readers (Leclercq, 1982 [1961]: 84-5). This last comment might, at first blush, seem to reinforce a *priority* of the emotions over the intellect within monastic encounters with biblical texts. However, within his detailed study of monastic culture, Leclercq is, here and elsewhere, stressing the differences between monastic and the later emerging scholastic milieu (see below). In his examination of monastic life, the point also emerges, as shown above, that although the goal of *lectio divina* within the monasteries was to achieve contemplation of the divine, preparation for the practice of *lectio* was, nevertheless, seen to involve a good deal of intellectual work.

In conclusion, a good deal of study – of languages, of classical works and the works of the Fathers, and of commentaries – was expected within the monasteries. Medieval monastic practitioners of *lectio divina* would have seen reading and learning huge swathes of texts as a means of developing their character. In contrast to the limitations of learning by rote, and having to recite a whole text to find a part, many would have been able to draw on and cross-

CHAPTER 3. *Lectio divina*: features of biblical engagement, ancient and modern reference topics and themes across not only the biblical texts but those of the Church Fathers. Despite the relative scarcity of written texts of whole books of the Bible, and the still rarer occurrence of pandects or multi-volume Bibles, the memorization of not only these but also patristic commentaries, meant that a whole range of texts were accessible, internally, to the one meditating on scripture. However, *lectio divina* was far from being seen as a purely mental process; in fact our modern divide between reason and emotion is anachronistic in their setting. The whole of the monk's energies would, ideally, be focussed on the text, and its 'digestion' in order to reach the desired goal. The integration of both intellectual effort and emotional engagement in *lectio divina* demonstrates not only the value but also the possibility of integrating these approaches to the text within contemporary biblical engagement, a point I shall return to in Chapter Six.

## Eventualities

### ***Lectio in the monasteries: oratio and contemplatio***

Although monasteries often carried out charitable actions in the wider society, such as hospitality and medical care, and their personnel were often engaged in generating works designed to enable others to access the scriptures (copying commentaries, *florilegia*, and other manuscripts for various settings) such 'outcomes' were not seen as the central goal of their life together and, more specifically, of their practice of *lectio divina*. Lawrence (2001 [1984]) describes the goal as 'spiritual growth in the search for God' while Leclercq sees that, according to Benedict, 'monastic life is entirely disinterested; its reason for existing is to further the salvation of the monk, his search for God, and not for any practical or social end' (Leclercq, 1982 [1961]: 18-19). For monks '[t]heir principal purpose is not to reveal the mysteries of God, to explicate them or derive from them any speculative conclusions, but to impregnate their whole lives with them and to order their entire existence to contemplation' (1982 [1961]: 223). While furthered by the study necessary to apprehend the scriptures, the desired sense of union with the divine is in no regard seen as the result of purely intellectual activity; indeed such activity is a potential distraction and there is a tension between a study of writings and a search for God that is furthered by detachment from anything else that might distract from God,

CHAPTER 3. *Lectio divina*: features of biblical engagement, ancient and modern including writings (22). Leclercq sums up monastic contemplation as eschatological, focussing on faith, hope and love: 'It is not, therefore, the end result of a discursive activity of the intelligence, it is not the reward of learning acquired through study, and it does not result in an increase of speculative knowledge' (Leclercq, 1982 [1961]: 67).

### **Tensions with the schools**

With the rise of the Schools towards the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, what has been termed an 'intellectual apartheid' (Lawrence, 2001 [1984]: 142) is said to have arisen between monastics and scholastics or, more specifically between their respective styles of exegesis, which employed different methodologies and led to different products (see also Smalley, 1983 [1952]). There is not room here to deal with this in detail but the modern gulf sometimes apparent between academy and church might seem to be presaged in the debate then. Leclercq summarises the difference in understanding of the term *lectio divina*:

In the school it refers most often to the page itself, the text which is under study, taken objectively. Scripture is studied for its own sake. In the cloister, however, it is rather the reader and the benefit he derives from Holy Scripture which are given consideration. In both instances an activity is meant which is 'holy,' *sacra, divina*; but in the two milieu, the accent is put on two different aspects of the same activity. The orientation differs, and, consequently, so does the procedure. The scholastic *lectio* takes the direction of the *quaestio* and the *disputatio*. The reader puts questions to the text and then questions himself on the subject matter ...The monastic *lectio* is oriented toward the *meditatio* and the *oratio*. The objective of the first is science and knowledge; of the second, wisdom and appreciation. In the monastery, *lectio divina*, which begins with grammar, terminates in compunction, in desire of heaven (Leclercq, 1982 [1961]: 72).

He goes on to cite Arnoul of Bohériss: "When he reads, let him seek for savour, not science" (73).<sup>76</sup> What is important to note is that, unlike some instances of what might appear to be its modern counterpart, this medieval conflict is not viewed as being between academic study on the one hand and unmediated access to and contemplation of a perspicuous text on the other. It is, rather, a tension between two groups who have both studied the text in terms of language and grammar, have both accessed earlier commentaries on it, and

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<sup>76</sup> This is said to be quoted from *Speculum monachorum* I; PL 184.1175 which Sandor (1989: 100 n.53), translates as "they should not seek knowledge [*scientia*] so much as wisdom [*sapientia*]"

CHAPTER 3. *Lectio divina*: features of biblical engagement, ancient and modern both see it as Holy Scripture. Indeed proponents on both sides value study,<sup>77</sup> but they differ in their *aims*. The Schools seek clarity, to formulate and categorise the content of the text; the monasteries seek encounter with the divine for which the text is a vehicle. Accordingly, the literary products produced by the two groups also differed; the monks wrote 'primarily to provide food for meditation and inspiration for conduct. The object of the scholastic treatise, on the other hand, and of the debates that underlay it, was to advance inquiry and speculation' (Lawrence, 2001 [1984]: 138).<sup>78</sup>

Despite the common ground, and numerous interactions between the two parties, there was recognition of the differences in aim and the scholastic route was considered by some writers, both monastic and non-monastic, as deficient or less spiritual. In his survey of the relationship, Leclercq, (1982: 194-202) notes that 'everyone was acutely aware of a profound difference between scholastic and monastic milieux, and, consequently, between the kinds of religious knowledge to be acquired in each' (197); he cites examples including Oddo of Ourscamp 'who, having been made a cardinal at a later date, considered this promotion as a punishment for his past school-life, of which he says: "I chose, despite divine prohibition, to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil"' (Leclercq, 1982 [1961]: 196-7). Another is Peter Comester who distinguishes between those 'who do more praying than reading: they are the cloister dwellers; there are others who spend all their time reading and rarely pray: they are the schoolmen' (cited in Leclercq, 1982 [1961]: 198-9). Leclercq also points out that the two groups employed different terminology and thought processes: the monastic style was literary and poetic, and depended on the scriptures and Church Fathers as authorities, while the 'schoolmen' used more analytical language (199-202). Cochelin sums up the difference between the two in terms of their approach towards the text: the schoolmen seek to make the text their own, prior to teaching or preaching it; the monks 'wanted to immerse themselves in the text, making themselves the text rather than making the text their own' in order to contemplate God (2011: 67). Among the monastic writers, there were those 'for whom any effort at investigation is pride of intellect

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<sup>77</sup> On the monastic side see, for example, Hugh of St. Victor (Smalley, 1983 [1952]: 102-6)

<sup>78</sup> This did not mean that monastic writers did not feel free to discuss the text. Smalley notes the originality of thought shown during the Carolingian revival, exemplified by Paschasius Radbertus and John the Scot, who 'both use the permission to "discuss" which St. Eucher had given when he inserted *disputatio* into his definition of *lectio divina*' (1983 [1952]: 38).

CHAPTER 3. *Lectio divina*: features of biblical engagement, ancient and modern and who would be inclined to view laziness of the intelligence as a form of faith' (Leclercq, 1982 [1961]: 207) and others were concerned that intellectual studies *could* lead to loss of humility, but there was also acknowledgement that knowledge was better than ignorance (205).

In summary, although the monastic and scholastic contexts had different aims and methods, and the monks expressed reservations about those of the schoolmen, there was a recognition within both that learning was useful and necessary, and a good deal of interchange between them. When thinking about contemporary programmes promoting biblical engagement, this similarity in method alongside a difference in aim will appear again, between formational and academic approaches to reading the Bible.

### **Multivocality**

For all medieval readers of the Bible, the outcomes, whether in contemplation of God, or in preaching to a congregation, were dependent on the interpretation of the texts. Since my concern here is to unpack the process of *lectio divina* rather than to discuss different ways of interpreting the Bible I will examine the different senses of scripture, such as literal and allegorical, later in this study (Ch. 6).<sup>79</sup> However, for this chapter it is pertinent to note that, even within the literal sense of the Bible there was an acceptance of a plurality of readings. Sandor notes that, for St Bernard of Clairvaux, it was not a problem that a text might yield different meanings to different readers; she cites from and translates his *Sermo de diversis*: “In the ocean of this sacred reading the lamb can paddle and the elephant swim” (Sandor, 1989: 110). She links this acceptance of diversity to the phenomenon of silent reading, ‘whereby the reader of Scripture reproduces internally the words of its divine author, and allows the Word of God to speak in place of his own human thoughts’ (111).

Among the scholastics, Aquinas is drawn on by Eugene Rogers in order to show that the *sensus litteralis* could be seen to allow for ‘a certain ordered diversity of readings’ which were then to be evaluated by the virtuous interpreter (1996: 64). Commenting on this work, Fowl notes that

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<sup>79</sup> For a detailed survey of this, during the medieval period, see the work of de Lubac, especially the first volume in the English translation (1998).

### CHAPTER 3. *Lectio divina*: features of biblical engagement, ancient and modern

[f]or Thomas, a determinate literal sense would limit edifying scriptural interpretation to the well trained, possibly leaving the untrained to the mercy of the 'infidels.' ... Rather than eliminating interpretation, a thomistic account of the literal sense fosters ongoing interpretation within the community of believers (Fowl, 1998: 39).<sup>80</sup>

Within the medieval reading of the Bible, then, we find accepted a plurality of meaning although there *are* boundaries to what it can mean; a text can have more than one meaning but it cannot mean 'anything'. For some commentators, it seems that the boundaries are determined by a doctrinal and biblical 'framework' accepted by the wider Christian community past and present, while others stress the need for virtue in the character of those involved in interpretation and evaluation. Once more, parallels may be found between the ancient practice of *lectio divina* and features in modern reflection on biblical engagement.<sup>81</sup>

## Conclusions

I show, in this brief survey, that *lectio divina* developed within a context of deep and continuous 'multi-media' exposure to the biblical texts, through both visual and aural reading, while immersed in an environment saturated with biblical images. Furthermore, its practitioner was often equipped, through study, with a memory allowing different texts to be set alongside one another and relatively easy access to be made to the works of the Fathers or more recent commentators. Thus, the biblical narrative, and theological reflection upon it, formed a matrix within which contemplative reading was performed. *Lectio divina* was seen as a practice where one's whole being, reason and emotion, was involved in the encounter with the text and, through it, with the divine. There was acceptance of individual insight into the texts but, at the same time, the works of the Fathers were seen as authorities, providing some kind of limiting framework within which readings could be judged. The goal of such biblical encounter was seen as a greater level of intimacy with God; whatever

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<sup>80</sup> See Chapters Five and Six for further mention of how Fowl views the role of the community.

<sup>81</sup> I am aware of the difference between modern and mediaeval understandings of the term 'literal' in relation to the meanings or senses of the biblical text. However, since modern readers may assume that what they see as a singular 'literal' reading is a 'traditional' way to read the Bible, I feel it is helpful to stress that, to the contrary, the texts have traditionally been seen as being open to a multiplicity of readings, i.e. multivocal. See Chapter Five for more discussion of this topic.

CHAPTER 3. *Lectio divina*: features of biblical engagement, ancient and modern  
other activities medieval practitioners might engage in, a greater degree of  
contemplation of the divine was the primary and dominant goal.

As I move on to consider each of my three themes – the use of different biblical  
media, multivocality, and the perception of a head/heart distinction in  
approaches to the scriptures – the resonances between these themes in  
contemporary biblical engagement and within historical practices such as *lectio  
divina* will enable the use of the latter as a conversation partner. Drawing on the  
experiences of mediaeval readers will facilitate the identification of strategies  
with which to promote biblical engagement by modern day ordinary Christians  
and provide a ‘road-map’ to enable these believers to employ the Bible as a  
means to the end of discipleship.

# CHAPTER 4: *Lectio* – encountering the text in different ways

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## Introduction

This chapter considers different forms of encounter with the biblical texts other than the modern, popular understanding of ‘reading’, that is looking at a printed page and silently reading the text in one’s head; I term this *visual* reading. Other forms of textual encounter include hearing the text read aloud by oneself or others, which I have chosen to call *aural* reading, and, thirdly, watching an enacted presentation of the text or, through reading meditatively, imagining oneself to ‘be there’ as either an observer or participant, which I term *imaged* reading. The chapter is divided into two sections, the first dealing with aural, and the second imaged, reading. In each section I begin by examining the data from the Pathfinder project concerning the resources in question, which suggested the importance of the medium in which the biblical texts are encountered; these resources are reported as not only conveying information about the story but also having a powerful emotional impact on some aural and imaged readers, as leading readers to re-examine the Bible, and as bringing the texts ‘alive’. I go on, in each section, to consider that mode of reading and to survey relevant current fields related to the topic – performance criticism and ‘Bible and film’ respectively – before examining the historical role of each mode of encountering the texts. I conclude by discussing how programmes designed to promote biblical engagement by ordinary Christians might, by working with a *lectio divina* model, enlist different means of ‘tasting’ or encountering the biblical texts. These programmes might release the potential of such alternate reading modes within a context which minimises their possible weaknesses. This discussion of aural and imaged reading also raises the question of how differing performances of biblical passages, presenting alternative articulations of the texts, are received; this forms the topic of the following chapter.

## **Aural reading encounters with the Bible**

### **Pathfinder Responses to You've Got the Time (YGTT)**

YGTT is billed as enabling the user to 'fit the Bible into your busy lifestyle', the emphasis in the promotional material being on the idea that one could listen to the Bible at the same time as being 'on a lunch break, at the gym, walking the dog or doing the shopping'. Moreover, the resource was expected to help participants '[d]iscover the Bible in a new and exciting way ... You will be enriched and inspired' (Bible Society, 2010).

With regard to the first 'design feature', among the three Pathfinder groups that used it, several acknowledged the flexibility of being able to listen to Scripture while travelling or doing other things, such as shopping. However, interestingly, there were also comments regarding the value in being able to listen to the text *at the same time* as reading it, with the act of listening enhancing the time they would normally spend in reading the Bible. In fact, one participant who had listened while driving nevertheless reflected that he 'found that I got *more* out of it ... when I'm listening and looking at a Bible *at the same time*' (my emphasis). Another commented that using YGTT was 'a very powerful experience for some of us ... It did help that it was a dramatic presentation, rather than simply a read translation, and the characterisations were very effective for that reason as well'. In fact, one group reported going on to use parts of this New Testament recording as an 'imagination, meditation, reflection' within a series of Bible studies. While the employment of a variety of readers and accents was found to be distracting for a few, most found a dramatized reading added to their appreciation. One even reported that a friend had 'described the effect of listening to dramatized scripture as mainlining scripture into the brain. He thinks, as you read, you edit. He said there wasn't any kind of capacity for kind of editing as you were listening, so he found it a very powerful, transformative experience for him'.

The impact that YGTT had upon its users seemed to relate to three or four of its features. Firstly, there was the process of *listening* to the text, which appeared to have offered a profoundly different experience to reading it silently. Perhaps this was unsurprising in a culture which gives priority to the written word and where people are less accustomed to being 'read to'. This seems to have been

#### CHAPTER 4. *Lectio* – encountering the text in different ways

facilitated by its professional presentation by trained actors, which perhaps enabled listeners to realise the dramatic impact of the texts. It is also possible that the absence of verse numbers, together with the length of each passage (around 30 minutes), allowed a more holistic view of the text to emerge, although this was not mentioned and, within the recording, chapters *are* ‘announced’.

Secondly, YGTT employed a translation ‘designed to be understood when read and heard out loud’ (American Bible Society, 2012), which was also, to these participants, a less familiar version of the Bible. The novelty of hearing the CEV drove some listeners back to other translations for further study. While it aroused both positive and negative reactions, the value of the CEV might lie in its very strangeness – whether liked or not it forced the participant to become a listener, or an aural reader, rather than just a hearer of the word.

Thirdly, the process of listening to a chunk of the Bible meant that the aural reader not only lost the ‘capacity for ... editing’ noted above but that they also encountered books or passages which they had not come across before, heard some of them as an uninterrupted whole for the first time, (some of the shorter epistles, for example), and, moreover, gained an appreciation of the similarities, differences, and links between different parts of the Bible:

you picked up things when you were listening, especially if you were listening to a whole chunk, that you don’t necessarily pick up when you’re reading. I mean we were saying that having listened through the Gospels, it became apparent how John, actually, was quite different in some respects. Having heard the same story several times over, how differently it came out.

A fourth, perhaps more minor feature of the participant feedback on YGTT, touched on above, concerned the impact of accents among the performers of the New Testament. Three of the centres raised this issue; while some respondents said a few accents were annoying, ‘a bit dodgy’ or ‘weird’, and one thought the ‘Jamaican voice’ of John the Baptist ‘sounded like a drug runner in the Caribbean’, several others had found them a source of humour, noting, for instance, that having an Irish Gabriel was ‘hilarious’. Aside from revealing the stereotypes operating among some of these groups, these comments showed the importance of considering something such as the accent in which a biblical text is delivered. Is it best to have an accent which is unremarkable, so that the

## CHAPTER 4. *Lectio* – encountering the text in different ways

aural readers focus on the text's content and are not distracted, or is it good to have a variety of accents, not only to maintain interest and better communicate but also in order to provoke thoughtful reflection on the part of the hearer?

Taken together, these comments suggest that listening to a dramatized reading of the Bible, particularly of an unfamiliar translation, can promote a deeper engagement with the text, one which may include further study of the written text but which can also be transformative and affects some participants at an emotional level.

### **Aural reading – an introduction**

While the development of audio Bibles has met perceived needs in the majority world, to enable those without literacy skills to hear 'the Word' and to enable groups of Christians without printed Bibles to hear it together,<sup>82</sup> in the more widely literate and book-rich minority world, it is probably fair to say that it has been viewed principally as a resource for those who are visually-impaired or as a means of hearing the Bible while engaged in another activity, in other words for those who are 'time-poor'. This is the case with YGTT, which was billed as a time-saving resource for those with a 'busy lifestyle'. However, the results of this project suggest that use of audio-format biblical texts may be a potent means of engaging more deeply those Bible users who, most of the time, either only *hear* short, lectionary-style lengths of scripture read aloud and/or usually read the Bible silently on their own.

The responses to a number of surveys suggest that, regarding the printed text, 'Bible reading is surprisingly infrequent among some church goers' and, among Anglicans, seems most often encountered within the evangelical Protestant tradition (Village, 2007: 43-44).<sup>83</sup> Given the number of those within traditions

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<sup>82</sup> Ethiopia is one such situation where the use of audio Bibles has been promoted in areas where literacy skills are low (Bible Society, 2012a).

<sup>83</sup> Peter Brierley's figures for personal Bible reading, taken from the 2005 English Church Census, appear to support this general impression, with regard to other, non-Anglican evangelicals but did not deal with Bible reading in other contexts such as congregational (Brierley, 2006: 232). Elizabeth Fisher's figures, from over 400 Anglican respondents, lead her to observe that 'any regular thirty minute television programme is given greater time commitment by most of these churchgoers than the foundation document of the Christian faith' (1992: 384-5). ComRes, (2008a: 38) notes that 'Leaders of Independent and Anglican churches are the most avid Bible readers; 63% and 62%, respectively, say they read the Bible every day. Among congregations, however, it is the Independent and Pentecostal members who read most often; 39% and 42%. Of this group, only 36% of Anglicans say the same'. The relationship between Village's data and these figures is difficult to assess due to the fact that some ComRes

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using a lectionary (Brierley, 2006: 25-31, 232), it is probably the case that the majority of British church-goers encounter the biblical text most often aurally, in some cases accompanied by printed Bibles. There have been criticisms of the limitations of the lectionary, and the manner in which its texts are presented (for example, Hartman, 2013; Sloyan, 2002, especially 101; Sundberg, 1990; Wright, 1991) and, also, some consideration of the problems in translating texts designed to be delivered aurally (Loubser, 2004; Rhoads, 2006b: 171). However, very little, if any, empirical work seems to have been done on the impact on hearers of encountering the biblical text through different media rather than the printed word.

I would, at this point, like to draw a distinction between the three different activities of reading the biblical text out loud to oneself when alone, reading aloud as a corporate activity and listening to another person or people reading aloud, either 'live' or through a recording; I use the term 'aural reading' for all three. (The last could be viewed as the action of being an 'audience' to a 'performance' of the text as we shall see below.) The data collected in the course of Pathfinder only relate directly to this third type of aural reading, although the benefits and effects noted there may well also be found associated with the first two activities.<sup>84</sup>

The data regarding YGTT indicate that hearing the scriptures read, or performed, is not only experienced as qualitatively different from the modern, Western, individualistic means of engagement through silent, visual reading to oneself but that it also enables the texts to be encountered in a way that is not accessible through silent textual reading. And these effects are not restricted to this resource. Some of the features found in responses to YGTT are echoed in

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respondents selected 'other' denomination and, within this category, self-identified as 'evangelical' (7) whereas this label is a self-designation that might also be chosen by people within a number of different denominations, including Anglican.

<sup>84</sup> Are these noted effects peculiar to the Bible and are some a result of reading in a group? Both reading aloud oneself *and* hearing works of literature read aloud are currently being proposed by 'The Reader Organization' as a means to improve well-being, especially but not exclusively for those with clinical memory loss in whom reading aloud as a memory task has been shown to promote rehabilitation (Kawashima *et al.*, 2005). The Reader Organization offers anecdotal evidence that their activities are successful (The Reader, 2016) and this seems to relate to two aspects: the *reading aloud* and the *sharing* with others in the group. While YGTT was, for most of the Pathfinder users, employed while on their own rather than in a group context it is, of course, a possibility that the positive effects of listening to scripture noted by participants are at least partly attributable to the effects of *listening* rather than listening to the Bible *per se*. However, their increased appreciation of the scriptures they heard is genuine and is text-specific.

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the reactions from David Rhoads's audiences when he presents 'performances' of various New Testament texts:

They comment on the new insights that come from hearing in contrast to reading, how unique it is to experience the whole story/letter at one sitting, how they get drawn into the world of the story, how inflection and tone give fresh meaning to this line or that episode, and how the story/letter/apocalypse impacts them in new ways (Rhoads, 2006a: 121).

Moreover, from the point of view of the performer, Rhoads's experience is similar to that of some of the Pathfinder 'audience'; whereas they noted the way in which listening to the oral presentation removes the possibility of ignoring any segments of the text Rhoads, when preparing for his presentation, observes that:

[w]hen you memorize, it is not easy to screen out details or to consider them inconsequential. ...No longer is there an atomistic approach to the text. Rather the exegete becomes immersed in the whole world of the text of a gospel or of a letter—imagining its characters, settings, and events, its past and future, its cosmology of space and time, its cultural dynamics, and its socio-political realities (Rhoads, 2006b: 175).

There seem to be two points arising within these responses regarding the importance of speaking or hearing (aural reading) the biblical texts. Firstly, there is an increase in understanding and appreciation of the texts, the relationships between them and the details within them, that is a cognitive effect. Secondly, there is an other-than-cognitive impact reported; this impact involves the emotions but may not be simply emotive. Being 'drawn in' to the text may also affect cognitive understanding of the account. Since each aural expression or performance of a written text represents, through its inflection and tone, a particular articulation or interpretation of the passage, the reception of this understanding of the text by the aural reader may have an impact upon the 'receiver' that is both emotive *and* cognitive.

### **Contemporary reflection on aural reading**

Rhoads's work is one strand among a good deal of recent work in the field of performance criticism of the New Testament texts and the wider studies of the oral antecedents of the biblical manuscripts handed down to us today. This area of research reminds us that aural 'reading' began before the 'texts' were actually written; such studies have highlighted how many of the New Testament

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'books' would have begun life orally.<sup>85</sup> In the case of narratives, such as the gospels, these may, in part or as a whole, have evolved over time as they were performed by those gifted in story-telling, while the New Testament letters were written communications which were to be read aloud to the intended recipients (see, for example, Horsley *et al.*, 2006; Davis, 1999; Iverson, 2014). In this light, hearing the scriptures being read or performed is not a new or modern practice but one with a long history. Much research in this field has rightly focused on the value of such study for better exegetical understanding of the texts: what might be learned from features such as alliteration and rhetoric (and the impact of this on translation), the possible impact of bodily gestures etc. However, here I wish to focus on those aspects that may contribute towards the development of a resource(s) which would be integral to a programme aimed at promoting biblical engagement by ordinary Christians. Of particular relevance is a consideration of the role of oral delivery, or performance, in providing a particular articulation or construal of a text which makes an impact upon the aural reader.

### ***The emotional impact and transformative effect of aural reading***

In his survey of first-century literature on performances Whitney Shiner (2003: 2), notes that Quintilian describes there being different advantages to hearing something spoken and reading it yourself from a written text; the former stirs the emotions while the latter allows time for critical reflection. Quintilian also highlights the key role of emotion, among other strategies, in acting to draw the audience in to the performance and convince them of the position being advocated (*Institutio oratoria* 10.1.16-19). Shiner goes on (2003: 57-76) to discuss in some depth the importance of emotion in aural reading at that time and to explore the various ways in which the audiences would have been drawn to participate in, and react to, the performance (2003: 143-90). He observes:

While much of the study of the Gospels through history has been concerned with an intellectual analysis of the texts as a basis of doctrine or ethical behaviour, in the ancient Mediterranean world oral performance was generally oriented toward emotional impact. This is one

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<sup>85</sup> The same is true of the majority of early Christian writings including sermons (Harrison, 2013: 1-2) and this area of research provides an important new angle from which to consider the possible origins and early reception of the New Testament 'texts', but calling it a 'paradigm shift' in the field seems premature (Rhoads and Dewey, 2014).

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of the most fundamental ways in which oral performance affected the way the Gospel would be received (Shiner, 2003: 57).

Since emotional impact was considered an essential aspect of verbal performance and recognised by rhetoricians as being important in swaying opinion in an argument, Shiner suggests that the narrative gospels were ‘clearly a more successful vehicle for creating emotional impact’ than those consisting mainly of sayings, such as the *Gospel of Thomas* (Shiner, 2003: 57-8).

A related point is made by Joanna Dewey in her examination of Mark as an aural narrative; while she finds the narrative structure helpful in understanding the gospel she also notes the way in which the first audiences would have been drawn into the story as participants, identifying sequentially with the characters portrayed there. This was part of its intended transformative power:

hearing the Gospel of Mark performed is the experience of becoming part of a world in which both miracles and persecution are real. The hearers enter a world in which the courage to move forward in following Jesus—in spite of and through human failure—becomes a possibility, even a reality. The aural story does not primarily convey historical information; it gives meaning and power to a way of life (Dewey, 1992: 56).<sup>86</sup>

Telford notes that Shiner’s conclusions regarding the role of emotion are open to questioning (2007). Nevertheless, consideration of the oral origins of some New Testament documents, and their possible mode of delivery, could shed light on the impact of listening to it performed by trained actors, as reported by Pathfinders. Although they were not seeing it acted out visually, the fact that many of these texts originated as oral ‘texts’ might explain why they were effective in stimulating a response from our modern aural readers. With regard, particularly, to the narrative texts, it might also be that their nature as ‘story’ is communicated more clearly when received aurally, rather than read silently. Modern readers are trained to read for information, not for transformation, (Griffiths, 2011) but having to read aurally might better enable the text’s communication as story. Moreover, if a text began life as a performance, with all the internal features of composition, such as rhetoric, designed to elicit the involvement and emotional participation of the audience, then realising the full

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<sup>86</sup> Elsewhere (1994) Dewey draws on work by Eric Havelock where he examines the reasons behind Plato’s condemnation of poetry. Objective evaluation is impossible where both performer and audience are immersed in ‘an act of personal commitment, of total engagement and of emotional identification’ (Havelock, 1963: 160).

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power of the ‘text’ may actually require it to be *heard*.<sup>87</sup> More research is needed on the impact on hearers of aural encounters with the biblical texts and how these differ from silent readings.

### ***Aural reading as a means to communicate what writing does not – hermeneutical considerations***

The possible origin of a text as an oral performance has implications for any putative public reader. As Rhoads noted, if one ‘reads’ aurally, either to oneself or to others, one has to consider the manner in which a document might be presented, which in turn necessitates a deeper engagement with the text by the reader/performer; this engagement then results in a performance providing a specific articulation or interpretation of the passage. Texts in general provide a limited means of communication in relation to oral interchanges; irony, humour or seriousness are just some elements of the ‘silent language’ of the body which can be lost in the transition to writing or print (Olson, 1994: 91-114, especially 111). As Bobby Loubser points out with reference to the New Testament, specifically,

one can imagine what a difference some information on the illocutionary force would make to the interpretation of key Biblical passages. Did Jesus, e.g., command the rich young man to sell his possessions or was it a suggestion? Did the apostle Paul speak of the false apostles in a sarcastic, ironical or humorous tone? When Jesus confronted the Pharisees, did he do it in a loud or soft tone; was he harshly condemning them or moved by sorrow? How much more would we have understood if we have [*sic*] access to the pitch, tempo and rhythm of the first performances, if we had access to the background noises, smells and gestures accompanying the oral performances? We would have been able to grasp irony, sarcasm, satire and humor where today we stare ourselves blind against lifeless propositional statements that often do not seem to fit in the context. (Loubser, 2004: 302-3; see also Olson, 1994: 111-12 regarding the statement “This is my body”.)

However, this loss of dimensions of meaning is not the only problem, according to Loubser. The use of printed texts can desensitize readers to the plurality of possible meanings within the text:

It is clear that the enterprise of dismantling the text into kernel sentences and then to generate dynamic equivalent translations, runs the risk of reducing the associative meanings of the text. The silent reader of

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<sup>87</sup> Although her focus is on the process of listening to early Christian sermons, prayers and catechesis, and its role within the creation of a ‘cultural literacy’, Carol Harrison’s study emphasises the importance of aural reading in the early church (2013).

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translations from the KJV to the GNB should be sensitised to the danger of misreading the oral-manuscript text and context, and to the high level of interpretation that has gone into Bible translations. It might be inappropriate to print warnings on Bibles as on cigarette packages (*Warning! Silent reading leads to deficient understanding!*) but it might serve a purpose. ... our reading practices, encouraged by the clarity and fluency of modern translations, almost inevitably leads the silent reader into biblicism. The readers are led to treat the text as they would treat other modern texts, viz., with regard to consistency, canonicity, manipulability, feedback, structure, etc.

He goes on to wonder:

The question is whether some of this power of the original can be regained through our scholarly input. There is no reason why something of the force of the oral gospel that was preached far into the second century cannot be retrieved. It is now time to resurrect the forgotten audience and the oral performances that moved them (Loubser, 2004: 311-12, emphasis original).

A warning against the possibility of ‘bad reading’ is also made by Eugene Petersen in a book exploring a modern *lectio divina* for ordinary Christians: *Eat This Book* (2006: 82). Echoing the claims of proponents of orality and the Bible, Petersen sees the printed text as potentially ‘dead’ (84) or ‘dehydrated’ (88); ‘if we are to get the full force of the word, God’s word, we need to recover its atmosphere of spokenness’ (87).<sup>88</sup> In his view, *lectio divina* may be seen as ‘the strenuous effort that the Christian community gives ... to rehydrating the Scriptures so that they are capable of holding their own original force and shape in the heat of the day, maintaining their context long enough to get fused with or assimilated into our context’ (88).

Of course, dehydrated scriptures, like strawberries, do not necessarily regain their original shape and consistency once water is added. We may applaud Loubser’s desire ‘to resurrect the forgotten audience and the oral performances that moved them’ but inasmuch as any performance is one possible interpretation of a script or text, there is no possibility of recovering an original. As a contemporary Christian meditates upon a biblical passage, their experience will differ from hearing it read dramatically and both will be different

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<sup>88</sup> Both Shiner (2003: 7) and Rhoads (2006a: 123) use a related metaphor – that of the text as the fossilized remains of an oral performance – although the latter attributes it to Dennis Dewey.

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from any other performance, past or present. Even if a production is recorded, the context of the listener each time it is performed will not be the same.<sup>89</sup>

So, reading aloud, or performing, a biblical passage presents a particular articulation, an attempted ‘re-hydration’, of the text. This articulation by the performer is itself a form of interpretation and each occasion will present a fresh if similar ‘hydrated’ form of the text. While this opens up the possibility of some performances misrepresenting the force of the passage concerned it may also open the reader to the possibility of receiving different understandings. The hermeneutical tension apparent in this encounter with the performances, or textual articulations, of ‘others’ will be explored in more depth in Chapter Five. For now, it is sufficient to highlight the role of each textual performance in generating a possible explication or construal of a text whose meaning or significance in its silent, printed (or memorized) form is unarticulated and therefore underdetermined.

### **Reflections on the historical role of aural reading**

Earlier, I drew a distinction between three modes of aural reading: reading aloud to oneself, reading aloud as a corporate activity, and listening to another person reading aloud. The first of these three is, as we saw in Chapter Three, likely to have been a common practice among those few early literate users of the biblical texts from late antiquity onwards and on into monastic life; it was viewed as integral to some understandings of *lectio divina* as a mode of ‘ingestion’ of the text, or *lectio aperta*. By the means of repeating the text, out loud or in a murmur, it could be memorized, internalised for subsequent meditation. The second and third means of aural reading have both occurred throughout church history, and persist within some contemporary churches. Corporate reading aloud is found within monastic services and more widely throughout liturgical churches today. However, it may be that the third, aural reading, has the longer and more widespread history; for much of church history, most ordinary Christians would have been illiterate and could only have encountered the text itself (as opposed to its manifestations in art and church architecture) if it was read in their vernacular by another person.

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<sup>89</sup> Harrison notes that, even with a modern recording of a musical performance, ‘the actual performance is not as repeatable, or as easy to analyse, as the recording might lead us to suppose’ (2013: 16).

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Again, here, I wish to draw out features of the historical use of this reading that may have practical application to the development of a programme aimed at promoting biblical engagement by ordinary Christians; I will focus on the first and third types of aural reading.

##### ***The emotional impact and transformative effect of aural reading***

The role of both emotion *and* intellect within early Christian reading practices and also within the later mediaeval monastic understanding of *lectio divina*, and the inclusion in these practices of both saying and hearing the biblical texts, have already been discussed (see Ch. 3). Both study of the texts and an emotional process were implicated in the formation of memories which were understood to shape the character of the reader. Given the current scholarly focus on the aural receptions of the biblical texts, and the role of emotion in this process (see pp.131-136), it seems that there is a long and current Christian tradition of expecting some form of emotional engagement when visually or aurally reading at least the narratives and epistles within the biblical genre. Two points of relevance to the present study arise from this historical perspective, the first of which concerns the relationship between emotion and cognition. In the ancient world, it was recognized that there was a danger that an emotional engagement might distract from a focussed reading of the text, although Quintilian seems to anticipate this happening more in an audience setting (*Institutio oratoria* 10.1.18-19). The opposite strategy, to focus on the cognitive rather than the emotive aspects of a reading, would appear to imply a lack of engagement by the whole person and thus the danger that there is a lower chance of the reading being transformative within the reader. However, it seems likely that the degree of emotional engagement will depend on the intellectual coherence of the reading: a performance presenting an unconvincing construal of the text is less likely to engender an emotional or cognitive response. An historical perspective emphasises that the two modes of response are not disconnected. They are not only both required but interdependent.

Secondly, the perceived role for reading aloud to oneself was not to enable the practitioner to subsequently recite it by rote; it was intended to form structured memories which would enable them to build a foundation upon which they might engage in creative thought and develop character (Carruthers, 1998: 7-24). Thus, aural reading was seen to have a transformative purpose.

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### ***Aural reading – hermeneutical considerations***

Reading aloud has, of course, always been an interpretative act. Giving an example, where Irenaeus is concerned about where a reader should pause for breath, Gamble notes that ‘in the absence of word division, punctuation, and other decoding aids to read was to interpret’ (1995: 227-229). Consequently, some knowledge of the scriptures was considered necessary for one to read them publically.

Reading aloud later became incorporated into the liturgy, the performance of which would have been the site of most encounter with the biblical texts and would have helped shape understanding:

Just as the written Bible was frequently accompanied by glosses and commentary, likewise *the performance of Scripture was a form of interpretation*: biblical texts were fragmented, altered, and combined with other texts in ways that reflected traditions of biblical hermeneutics. The ensuing juxtapositions in turn provoked new interpretations. The liturgy shaped the understanding of scriptural exegesis because it rendered audible, in real time, the relationships between the different parts of the Bible; even those few who used the Bible as a written book frequently heard and uttered its words in the context of worship services. Thus liturgical performance was the single most important factor influencing the reception of the Bible in the Middle Ages (Boynton, 2011: 26-27, my emphasis; see also King, 2006: 5).

These examples from church history highlight the hermeneutical power inherent in any public reading of scripture, not only in determining the meaning by intonation and stress, but that exercised by the juxtaposition of different texts with one another.

One further feature of *lectio divina*, of liturgical readings and of other, similar practices of biblical engagement with a long history within the church, is the fact that they were not experienced by individuals isolated from other believers but by those situated within a broader community and tradition. Within its original monastic setting, reading silently or aloud to oneself in a meditative manner as part of *lectio divina* was but one form of encounter with the biblical texts among others and was conducted among a community of believers, past and present; there was ‘a “hermeneutical dialogue” between the mind of the reader and the absent voices which the written letters called forth, at times literally in the murmur of ruminative meditation’ (Carruthers, 2008 [1990]: 231). Gregory the Great, using imagery derived from I Corinthians 3.10-17, ‘casts the act of

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Biblical interpretation as an invention process, an act of composing and fabrication' of erecting a building upon its foundations (Carruthers, 1998: 19). One's meditation upon those foundations was built up of materials available to everyone. Consequently, although the resulting edifices were personal, the 'memory work' involved was 'also fully social and political, a truly civic activity' (Carruthers, 1998: 21). Such understanding of mediaeval practices underlines the positioning of mediaeval interpretations of the scriptures firmly within a community sharing common practices. This interaction would have served to mediate and evaluate shared readings.

### **The role of aural reading in contemporary biblical engagement**

As noted above, many English Christians hear the Bible read to them regularly as part of their church's liturgical pattern. Therefore it would be wrong to say that aural reading of the biblical texts is much of a novelty to them.

Nevertheless, the impact of YGTT as reported by the Pathfinder participants suggests that hearing a well performed reading, in an accessible translation, and hearing longer passages rather than isolated lectionary 'chunks', has more effect in communicating the texts. Of course, the practices of individual and communal aural reading of the Bible, or reading aloud oneself, are also found in other settings. Contemporary guides to the practice of *lectio divina*, or other programmes designed to promote spiritual formation through biblical engagement, sometimes suggest reading the texts aloud in order to enable a deeper, slower encounter with them. So David Foster OSB, in his *Reading With God*, suggests reading aloud slowly to oneself so that you may hear 'with your ears rather than with your mind' (2005: 15). Also, he suggests that, since the scriptures were designed to be listened to, there is value in hearing someone else read; when 'listening, we have to take it as it comes; someone else is in charge of the words' (2005: 19). With regard to group approaches to *lectio*, Jo-Ann and Kenneth Badley put forward a sample group exercise in reading texts formatively which involves reading the book of Ruth aloud, with different students reading the various characters' dialogue. Interestingly, Jo-Ann Badley also makes use of a translation unfamiliar to her students because it 'will help them encounter in a new light a story they may already know well' (Badley and Badley, 2011: 37). However, there seems to be very little reflection, or empirical

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research, on the impact of aural reading *per se* or the influence of hearing different translations.

What, then, might studies of aural/oral reading, past and present, contribute to the development of a programme designed to help contemporary Christians encounter their sacred text? Firstly, they suggest an integration of emotive and cognitive responses; any such programme should include resources enabling and encouraging an expectation of both types of response through encounter with differing performances, and thus with different articulations of the texts. These resources should not only help the practitioners to open themselves up to a fresh understanding because of the novelty of hearing a different voice; they will, at the same time, also make clear to readers that differing understandings of the scriptures are both possible and fruitful. Exposure to differing articulations of a text may prove challenging for some, especially those from ecclesial backgrounds not receptive to more than one received or authorised understanding. Nevertheless, the fruitfulness of the process, as testified to by the Pathfinders, suggests that the challenge is worthwhile.

Secondly, as noted by writers on the mediaeval period and by those proposing contemporary modes of biblical reflection, memorizing passages has a profound effect on the reader's relationship with the text. The concept of 'memory verses' is still very much alive and well, as any search of the internet will show;<sup>90</sup> furthermore, despite the proliferation of digital means of instantly accessing the Bible, the idea persists, as can be seen in the existence of apps for memorization of Bible verses, some of which will read them to you.<sup>91</sup> While there is the danger that memorizing isolated passages may lead to them being insufficiently understood because they are out of context, the experience of mediaeval practitioners of *lectio* (echoed by modern performers of the gospels) suggests that learning longer passages by heart has value in promoting a deeper engagement with the text's content. Whether or not memorization of long passages is feasible in a modern society where everything is only a 'Google' away remains a question.

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<sup>90</sup> A Google search for 'Bible memory verses' yielded over one million results (accessed 23/01/15).

<sup>91</sup> For example, see 'Bible memory: Remember Me' (Google, 2015).

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Given Griffith's argument that religious reading differs in goal and nature from reading for information (2011), we might then ask if an historical perspective suggests more than this and raises the question: is there much formational value in memorization of scriptures in and of itself? Does learning by rote, which was seen as something performed by children or slaves (Carruthers, 1998: 30-1) have any value for Christian discipleship? Rather, if the memorization is to be effective within a process of formation, is it not more likely that, to be fruitful, its use needs to be situated within a broader framework of practices, including perhaps study of the Bible's overall structure and composition, its 'big story' and some understanding of hermeneutics? This then reinforces the need for a portfolio or programme of different resources to build up these skills in tandem.

In conclusion to this section, then, I would like to suggest that, when designing a programme of resources aiming to optimise biblical engagement by ordinary Christians, there should be included some element of aural reading, *both* reading aloud oneself as an individual practice *and* listening to others reading. Aural reading is not just useful but an essential practice within a suite of other practices/resources to facilitate the reception of text. Christian practice across the centuries suggests that reading aloud to oneself facilitates a slow formational reception of the text, as opposed to an informational approach. 'Passive' aural reading of longer passages (that is hearing others read or perform), may promote an awareness of the 'big story' and of how texts relate to and differ from one another. It also enables an experience of the texts which differs qualitatively (as in exposure to different translations and articulations) and modally (experiential and emotive rather than merely cognitive) from the silent textual reading and aural reading of a short lectionary passage from a familiar translation which are the forms of engagement most often encountered by many ordinary Christians.<sup>92</sup>

In preparing resources for such engagement, care should be taken in both the selection of the translation(s) to be used and the choice of accents employed.

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<sup>92</sup> With regard to listening in the early church, Harrison notes the work by McGilchrist suggesting that cultivation of the art of listening promotes a more holistic approach to what is being communicated; it enables an intuitive and empathetic (right-hemisphere of the brain) engagement that balances the more rationally structured analysis of the left-hemisphere (Harrison, 2013: 15-24).

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The latter are likely to be of most importance in passive aural reading through listening to a performance, because reading lacking any visual component is likely to leave the reader more sensitive to unusual features in the oral delivery. There also needs to be a hermeneutical sensitivity to the possibilities presented by a text, including especially the issues of multivocality raised by a consideration of its possible illocutionary force. Furthermore, the setting of the reading needs to be considered carefully. Users should be encouraged to reflect on pre-established lectionary juxtapositions and to explore other possible settings for hearing the passages. Learning from *lectio divina*, which involved the practitioner in an ongoing communal process of memorization, arrangement and articulation of the texts, would suggest that these exercises are of most value and less danger when the practitioner is embedded within the community of the church.

### **Imaged reading encounters with the Bible**

#### **Pathfinder responses to visual media resources**

##### ***Miracles of Jesus (MJ)***

Much of the response to MJ concerned its intended aim of unpacking the deeper significance of the miracles in relation to their context in Jewish thought, with several groups noting how they had gained fresh insight into their Old Testament context. However, it was notable that Pathfinders also indicated that this resource made an impact at an emotional, not just a cognitive level (see below and also Appendix I, §6.1.1 and 2). This related, in some cases, to the gritty reality of what life – and in particular suffering – was like in the first century Middle East:

the image that most people get of Jesus, is fair haired, blue eyed, with a little halo, floating about, doing nice things, and so the starkness ... the reality: dark clothes, you know, sweat, beards, ... very realistic as to when you think about it, how it would have been. It got people thinking and changing the images that are often there, which are all nicey nicey.

There were reservations as to the way in which some of the Bible stories were portrayed and a recognition that these portrayals were, in fact, interpretations; for instance, one noted that the raising of the widow's son looked like 'a classic sign of CPR gone a bit overboard' and others were concerned that Jesus

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appeared fearful during the wilderness temptations. Other items that were not mentioned but may have caused disquiet included Legion's exorcism, where Jesus was portrayed as grabbing the man and shaking him quite hard, or the presentation of the healing of the paralytic, where Jesus upturns the mat that is still suspended above the ground and the man falls to the ground. Generally, however, even the groups that expressed reservations still felt that MJ would be valuable for Christians who have familiarity with the texts; with others it should only be used with caution or led by someone with greater biblical knowledge. Overall, this resource was found to provide a valuable and thought-provoking encounter with the texts, even if, as one noted, it 'gave a visual interpretation of what you read'.

However, the very impact – and memorability – of a visual medium raised a few questions in some of the Pathfinder groups, regarding the dangers of the visual 'account' superseding or over-riding the text upon which it is based (see Appendix I, §6.3.2); this was partly linked to the origins of the resource as a television programme produced by a corporation (the BBC) committed to presenting non-biased viewing materials, but was mostly related to the effects of film as a medium.

If you're using that material with a group of either people who aren't Christians yet, or new Christians, there's a real risk that they go away with what's on the film, rather than what's in the Bible ... that's the risk, I think, of using a secular material, without really much warning.

This respondent also felt that 'you see quite a powerful image on film, and that tends to be what you go away with remembering' and 'the film sticks in your head much more powerfully'. So the concerns were not simply that the visual depiction of the narrative was not faithful enough to the text but that viewers would take away the possibly distorted, visual depiction, *even if they had previously been exposed to the text*. A similar comment arose in discussion by a different group: 'the visual images are more powerful than the written word'.

### ***The Passion (Pass)***

As with MJ, this visual resource made an impact on some of its users; comments included that 'you could really feel the characters, you could feel the atmosphere. It was like you were being, almost like, sucked into it', and '[i]t's like you were a participant instead of just watching it. You were a part of it'. Others

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spoke of the text coming ‘alive’ or being made ‘more vivid’. The features of this resource which appeared to have contributed to its success in achieving its ‘aims’ included its evocation of the historical context of the story and its script’s ability to generate dramatic tension. One Pathfinder suggested that the Bible stories in film format ‘probably had more emotional impact’ but, as with MJ, the emotive was combined with the cognitive:

it hadn’t even dawned on me, although I’ve read the story hundreds of times, ... Whenever I read that Jesus was in the temple it hadn’t dawned on me that it was during the run up to that week. How stupid, you know, but that just brought it home, which made it even more intense then, what he was doing, what he was teaching at that time.

Again, there were comments regarding how much interpretation was involved in adapting the biblical text to a film format, that the script had gone ‘beyond’ the biblical texts in a number of respects. As one Pathfinder astutely observed it is ‘interesting in a way, in that, in these days if you read a book and then see the film, the film seems short because the book has all ... but with the Bible it’s actually the other way around; the Bible just has the bare facts. It’s the film panning it out - total reversal’. Another noted that ‘[t]he dramatization was interesting, as well; it often didn’t agree with what the Bible said and I think that came up well in discussions afterwards. It was a dramatization with a bit of dramatic license thrown in’. In some cases this necessary filling in of the ‘back-story’ had an effect upon how people understood characters within the story; one said it had changed her view of Judas while another commented that it had caused them to look more closely at the less central characters, such as Pilate and Herod.

Unlike MJ, with Pass there was no concern expressed about exposing people who had little Christian experience to the resource. This may have been because this film interpretation of scripture was in a purely dramatic format, rather than a dramatized documentary like MJ, or perhaps it was that the resource followed more closely the Pathfinders’ expectations and interpretations of the biblical texts concerned. On the contrary, Pass was seen as a useful resource for others. One participant, reflecting both on her own viewing experience and that of the youth group with whom she had used it, noted that ‘children of today, that is their learning style that they’re used to and particularly

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with our young people ... [who] have got very serious dyslexia issues and for them to be able to discuss based around a visual image was great’.

### **Summary of data**

Considering both, the responses to Pass and MJ indicate that these ‘dramatic’ resources communicate the biblical accounts in a fresh, sometimes provocative way that often caused users to return to the text, and to re-view it with fresh insight and/or new questions. Furthermore, the accessibility of these media to users of different ages and abilities suggests that it would be foolish to neglect the potential of such resources when assembling a programme promoting engagement with the Bible.

Speculating on why a dramatic presentation has such effects, it may be that the shock of perceiving the familiar stories in a different format or medium, from a different angle as it were, disables the ‘recipient’s’ ability to filter the content according to their preconceptions. This may be a particularly valuable function given the high degree of familiarity some Christians have with at least some portions of scripture, notably the Gospels or the New Testament in general. On the other hand, for those less familiar with the biblical accounts, these media constitute a means for communicating the Bible’s ‘story’.

However, there were concerns voiced by some participants who felt that the dramatization involved some unanticipated interpretive moves with regard to the original text. Thus, there are hermeneutical issues around any such visual adaptations.

### **Imaged Reading – an introduction**

Both MJ and Pass were BBC productions designed for TV broadcasting and subsequent DVD sales. However, the Bible has long been an inspiration for ‘moving pictures’, from the early days of cinema onwards, with attempts to directly portray biblical stories in films such as *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) and Cecil B. De Mille’s two versions of *The Ten Commandments* (1923 and 1956). Furthermore, as with Jane Austen and Shakespeare, the Bible is often the source for film adaptations which set its stories in a contemporary or otherwise ‘alien’ context. So, the films *Bride and Prejudice* (2004) and *Forbidden Planet* (1956) employ their source texts in a way not too dissimilar to

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the 1989 Polish TV series *Decalogue*, directed by Krzysztof Kieslowski. More recently, biblical inspiration for screen films seems to be on the increase; the number produced in 2014 led to it being referred to as ‘the year of the Christian film’ (McKay, 2014) or ‘the Bible movie’ (Shone, 2014). Therefore, those seeking to promote deeper biblical engagement by ordinary Christians have a great number of potential film representations to draw upon.

Of course, resources such as *Reel Issues* (Bible Society, 2012d) and those produced by the Damaris Trust (see, for instance, Lister *et al.*, 2012) already employ film to explore issues of faith and are not restricted to using those with stories from the Bible, in either its original setting or a contemporary context. For instance, issues of ‘the big questions of destiny and the divine’ are brought up in discussion of *The Adjustment Bureau* (Price, 2011) and what it means to be human is explored through an examination of the film adaptation of *Life of Pi* (Lister *et al.*, 2012). The development of this type of resource demonstrates the importance of film as a medium in our culture (see, for example, Johnston, 2006: 25-39) and one which is central to pedagogy (Goldfarb, 2002).

Unsurprisingly, then, one Pathfinder respondent had also noted ‘how powerful a tool of visual image is for learning the Bible. I just wonder whether, because of the learning environment that we’re exposed to so much these days, we need to have a Bible in a visual form’.

One reason for the powerful impact reported for filmic presentations of the Bible may lie in the nature of the texts which are most often subject to film or televisual adaptation. Not only are there powerful narratives within this ‘ancient narrative book’ (Wright, 1991: 14), including the oft filmed accounts of Noah, Moses or Jesus. There is also the powerful textual device of imagery, found frequently within the biblical writings: images such as kingdom, family, sonship and supper communicate the Bible’s message (Farrer, 1948: 42-52):

These tremendous images, and others like them, are not the whole of Christ’s teaching, but they set forth the supernatural mystery which is the heart of the teaching. Without them, the teaching would not be supernatural revelation, but instruction in piety and morals. It is because the spiritual instruction is related to the great images, that it becomes revealed truth (42-3).

These images, and the narratives in which they are often contained, have the power, it has been suggested, to draw people in and change the way they view

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the world (Wright, 1991: 22-3). The visual presentation of such stories gives them flesh and has the potential to enhance their effect. Any programme concerned to promote biblical engagement cannot ignore visual presentations in modern media and must utilise imaged reading to at least some extent. Here again, a distinction is called for in my use of terms. I am using ‘imaged reading’ in two senses. The first type of imaged reading would be the ‘reading’ made by someone watching a representation of a biblical story based, however, loosely, upon the written text. In practice, even when a close adherence to the Bible is aimed for, as with Zeffirelli’s 1977 television series *Jesus of Nazareth*, the result is an interpretation of the text(s) with a considerable amount of ‘back-story’ rather than an acting out of a biblical ‘script’ (see p.154). Another type of imaged reading is that undertaken by someone following a programme of textual engagement based on Ignatian spirituality, where the reader may imaginatively immerse themselves in the biblical account, either as an observer or as one of the Bible characters (St Ignatius, 1998 [1964]).<sup>93</sup> In the Pathfinder responses surveyed above, and in my discussion here, I am using the term in the first sense, of watching a visual representation. However, some of the points made may apply similarly to individual, internal, imaginative immersion in the story in the absence of its external representation and this is touched upon in the historical section below.

### **Contemporary reflection on imaged reading**

The Bible and film is an area of research that has generated a good deal of scholarly interest over recent decades (see, for instance, Marsh, 2008 for a bibliography). This interest is broad-ranging and approaches the subject from a number of different angles. For example, some works focus on it from the viewpoint of reception and how it illustrates the role of the Bible in public life (Reinhartz, 2013), or they initiate conversations between the films, the texts and the culture (Walsh, 2003); meanwhile, others examine how films are exploring specific biblical themes such as shame (Jewett, 1993; 1999). Many focus on films covering, or alluding to, the life of Jesus Christ; these are often classified roughly according to whether they are ‘bathrobe’, or ‘swords and sandals’, dramas such as *The King of Kings*, attempting to directly portray the life of

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<sup>93</sup> For the role of imagining as ‘onlooker participants’ see, for example, David Fleming (2008: 55-59, especially 57).

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Jesus, or if, instead, they feature the figure of Jesus in a metaphorical or allusional sense.<sup>94</sup> The latter type can vary from the obviously referential, such as *Jesus of Montreal* to the much less obvious *Shane* (Baugh, 1997).

Given the wide range of this field I will, here, only focus on those studies which seem relevant to issues arising from my data but will also note where questions arising from the Pathfinder project do not feature in much of the literature on Bible and film. Firstly, to supplement the findings from Pathfinder, I will discuss evidence regarding how faith groups have generally responded, individually and corporately, to attempts to portray biblical stories and characters in film. Secondly, recognising the impact of any past experiences on someone coming to the texts, and following up comments in the Pathfinder data regarding film over-riding text (see p.143), I will ask how prior exposure to films which treat biblical themes or narratives affects the subsequent reception of biblical texts, especially those featuring in the films. Thirdly, I will examine specific issues that arise in the process of filming biblical texts, and what impact these might have on subsequent interaction with and understanding of the originating material. Some of these issues would be common to any dramatization of the Bible while others are peculiar to filming.

### ***Faith responses to the Bible in film***

With regard to how ordinary Christians might be affected by seeing their sacred text portrayed in film, W. Barnes Tatum includes responses to Bible films, by faith groups, in his survey of the portrayal of *Jesus at the Movies* (1997). Some of these are very positive, where the film is seen as being faithful to the text(s) and/or challenging to believers in a positive way; these include *The King of Kings* from 1927 (1997: 44-57) and *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1966; Tatum, 1997: 112-15). Other films are found wanting, sometimes for the reverse to these features – they are not sufficiently faithful to the texts and/or theology or they are seen as conforming to and affirming the prevailing secular culture; examples of these include *King of Kings* (released 1961; Tatum, 1997: 83-85), *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell* (both released 1973; Tatum, 1997:

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<sup>94</sup> See, for example, W. Barnes Tatum (1997: 7). Lloyd Baugh further distinguishes between different types of films in the second group: “Christ-figure” if the metaphorical foil ‘embodies the total dynamic of the Christ-event, or “Jesus-figure,” if the character referred to embodies only some aspects of the life and death of Jesus, without any particular reference to his total salvific mission and to his Resurrection’ (1997: ix).

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127-130). However, although he takes some of the faith-based responses from published reviews in the religious press, or reported through the general press, it is uncertain if they may all be assumed to represent popular feeling among Christians. Furthermore, aside from citing individual reviewers testifying to being personally affected or inspired, there is no clear indication of how ordinary Christians in general might have been affected in their subsequent relationship with or understandings of their texts.<sup>95</sup>

When surveying critical responses to more recent biblically related movies one sometimes find the same film attracting very different responses from within the Christian community. For instance, in Trevin Wax's article surveying 'How Christians Are Responding to the Noah Movie' (2014) there is an assortment of positive (a thought-provoking adaptation despite its theological weaknesses and extra-biblical material), negative (flawed by its unfaithfulness to the Bible including its portrayal of God's judgment without his mercy), and mixed responses which echo both these opinions. Perhaps the difference in reaction is, in the end, down to whether or not one tolerates deviations from the biblical source texts because the film provokes thoughtful reflection and debate?

Reactions to Ridley Scott's *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (released 2014) also raised another important issue, that of emotional engagement in the story, which had been noted by some of the Pathfinders in response to their resources. *Christianity Today* reviewer, Brett McCracken, noted that 'with the help of thousands of CGI artists and 3D technology, the supernatural onslaught of frogs, flies, hail and bloody water confronts the viewer viscerally in a way that written words or picture books cannot' (2014). Similarly, regarding *The Passion of the Christ*, Mark Goodacre reports that

This film gets inside your head and demands a reaction. ... The images are so compelling, so moving that they demand a lot from the viewer. Ultimately, the difficulty with a film like this is that its sheer emotional intensity demands a strong reaction. As Mel Gibson himself says, 'Film, I think, is visceral. It has the power to draw you in and have you experience something on an emotional level that you may not be able logically to explain' (Goodacre, 2004: 44).

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<sup>95</sup> For instance Tatum cites Moira Walsh as being confronted 'with wonder and awe and mystery, and with some fresh awareness and insight' having seen *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. (Walsh, 1965: 297 cited in Tatum 99). See more on p.154.

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Pathfinder responses had included the observation that their views on some biblical characters were affected by their presentation in drama. The question of how casting and scene setting in film adaptations can implicitly inform people's understanding of biblical texts was illustrated in one other facet of the fairly negative (secular and religious) critical reactions to *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014). This was the considerable level of debate about the director's decision to cast all white actors as characters living in the Middle East.<sup>96</sup> This, along with the criticism of the decision to have Judas played by a black actor in the film of *Jesus Christ Superstar*,<sup>97</sup> shows a sensitivity to the unspoken subtexts that the racial aspect of casting may create. Similarly, James Donaghy, surveying comment on BBC's 2008 *Passion* on his TV and radio blog for *The Guardian* newspaper, cited a comment by A. A. Gill: 'with typical waspish condescension he conceded that James Nesbitt's Derry accent on Pontius Pilate "did bring a certain hint of religious bigotry and violence to the role"' (Donaghy, 2008). In this case, a (racial?) casting decision resulted in the use of an accent which, for at least one viewer, had its own sub-text. This reinforces the importance of accent that I noted earlier in the discussion of aural reading (see p.141).

Another feature of the Pathfinder responses was an appreciation of how Pass and MJ brought the period and the stories alive for the viewers. This, too, is echoed in Christian responses to other film and TV adaptations of Bible stories, such as Tony Jordan's production of *Nativity* for the BBC. Despite the negative headline on the website for *The Way*, a conservative evangelical website, 'Christians outraged with BBC nativity drama', only two of the following 62 comments on the production were unfavourable (Hopkins, 2010). The positive remarks included comment on how 'it really brought the whole story alive' and that it brought home the reality of the story, 'highlighting what it must really have been like for both Mary and Joseph to go through the challenge of such an unusual pregnancy'. Similarly, McCracken praises *Exodus* for its attention to period detail (2014).

In contrast to the response by the Pathfinders, the BBC's *Passion* was criticised by some other Christians for not having portrayed the crucifixion in the traditional manner (Revoir, 2008). This sort of comment is related to criticisms

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<sup>96</sup> See, for example, Chang (2014) and Koonse (2014).

<sup>97</sup> This reaction is noted by two reviewers (Ebert, 1973; Sweet, 2012).

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of film adaptations on the grounds of insufficient adherence to the biblical text, only in this case tradition is the authority seen as being challenged.

None of these comments, or the many others like them available in print and on the web, shed much light on the possible effects of these film resources on how Christians might subsequently engage with their scriptures. It does, however, seem that Christians may be drawn into the drama by its realism, shocked by an interpretation of the text not previously considered, or emotionally engaged by the cinematic devices employed. Any or all of these responses to viewing filmic interpretations of the Bible may, in the right context, promote a deeper level of engagement with the texts. In the course of developing a programme to promote such engagement it is this context of viewing which needs to be considered carefully.

#### ***The effect of prior exposure to film upon subsequent encounter with the text***

There does not seem to be much, if any, evidence available regarding this question from either scholarly or less formal web-based materials. There are books doing, or encouraging ordinary believers in, theological analyses of films, both those overtly biblical in inspiration and others where the source is implicit (see, for example, Baugh, 1997; Johnston, 2006; Stern *et al.*, 1999); however, there are fewer looking at how films affect the way one subsequently reads the texts. Larry Kreitzer first suggested ‘reversing the hermeneutical flow’ and, in several books, examines how films and literature may bring fresh perspectives to how we understand biblical passages (1993; 1994; 1999; 2002). For instance, what light may be shed on our reading of the story of Cain and Abel, especially Genesis 4.7, by not just reading, but also seeing screen interpretations of, John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* (1994: 94-125)? This approach is taken further by others including Robert Johnston (2004) and, although this ‘reverse flow’ approach has been subject to criticism on methodological grounds this has been directed largely towards the later developments of Kreitzer’s idea by others (Romanowski and Vander Heide, 2007).<sup>98</sup> Moreover, for the purpose of this study, my interest is in the fact that Kreitzer shows that the biblical texts *can be* read through the lens of films one

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<sup>98</sup> Although these authors also see Kreitzer’s own work as ‘under-theorized’ (2007: 60 n.3).

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has seen, rather than the question of *how* that might work in practice. As he notes '[f]or many people television and the movie theatre have become the primary means of gaining new information and sustaining intellectual stimulation' (15). Since readers bring their prior experience to the reading of any text, those exposed to filmic versions of biblical stories or themes are bound to bring such experiences to their subsequent engagement with the Bible. And although Kreitzer's stated aim is 'to reverse the flow of influence within the hermeneutical process and examine select NT passages or themes in the light of some of the enduring expressions of our own culture, namely great literary works and their film adaptations' (19) I feel the value of his work, for this study, is in making explicit what may be going on in the mind of anyone who is subject to the influence of modern media and subsequently reads a Bible. He does not, however, specifically examine how ordinary Bible readers read biblical passages after having seen those same texts represented in film.

A call to explore this area more comes in the work by Baugh (1997: 234-237); after assessing a number of films, in both the straight-forward 'Jesus-film' and the metaphorical 'Christ-figure' categories, in the epilogue he suggests a number of questions regarding the effects of the latter strategy:

how does it function? what dynamic takes place in the viewing audience as they experience the protagonist of one of these films, a dynamic which allows them to make both identifications and distinctions between the metaphor, the concrete and specific Christ-figure, and the transcendent reality it points to, the Christ figured? (1997: 235)

Although Baugh is not here referring to the 'Jesus-films' I would echo this call for further research and extend it to cover the effects of directly portraying Jesus, and the Bible more generally, in film. How do these films function? Especially considering work in the areas of neuroscience and experimental psychology that show the huge impact the medium of dramatic film in general has on its viewers (Zacks, 2015), an examination of the effects of Bible films on subsequent Bible reading and understanding seems way overdue.<sup>99</sup>

#### ***Issues arising from the process of filming the Bible***

I now move on to explore how specific issues, arising from the process of translating biblical texts to 'celluloid', might affect subsequent understanding of

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<sup>99</sup> For more on these effects see p.155.

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the Bible by visual readers of printed text and how these may inform our understanding of the responses encountered in this study.

### *The pictures in my head*

As shown in the Pathfinder responses, some Christians find some film or TV representations of biblical narratives unsatisfactory although, to judge from the responses listed by Tatum, they often disagree about which of them fall into this category (1997).<sup>100</sup> The reasons for such dissatisfaction vary. Sometimes the perceived short-comings arise from a sense that the presentation is being insufficiently reverent or that it has omitted something considered vital, such as the resurrection. However, it may be that the production simply does not meet the viewer's own preconceptions and prior expectations of the, to them, familiar story (Tatum, 1997: 6-12). This resistance to a filmed version of a well known text is not peculiar to the Bible. One has only to stand outside the cinema listening to Tolkein aficionados who have watched the latest offering from director Peter Jackson to realise that, if one knows and loves a text, its cinematic 'incarnation' can disturbingly clash with the pictures one already has in one's head. Some Christians have found dissonant filmed versions to be thought-provoking and ultimately fruitful as can be seen, for example, in some reactions to the musicals *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell* and to the 'Christ-figure' film *Jesus of Montreal* (1997: 127-133). However, film and TV can also foster an image which then determines the way in which that character or person is viewed in subsequent reading of the texts:

If it seems preposterous that contemporary media (specifically television and film) could influence our Christian faith, one need only examine how images of Christ portrayed over the centuries in other media—painting and stained glass as examples—have influenced and been influenced by theological understandings of Jesus: who Jesus was, what he did. If you were asked to picture Jesus, the image that commonly comes to mind is likely that of Jesus as a thin-faced, brown-haired, bearded, blue-eyed slightly effeminate, and gaunt northern European. So pervasive is this image of Jesus as a European that much of the world pictures Jesus in this same fashion (Stern *et al.*, 1999: 8).

Seeing film presentations of stories with which one is familiar from visual reading might then, fruitfully or not, provoke the viewer to reconsider existing preconceptions and readings, or it may reinforce existing understandings. This

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<sup>100</sup> See, for instance the differing reactions to *Jesus of Nazareth* (Tatum, 1997: 142-5).

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effect was noted by a few Pathfinders, in relation to how they regarded figures such as Judas; the power of film in this regard should not be underestimated.

##### *From Bible to script*

In other cases of Christian dissatisfaction, the complaint may be that the screenplay includes words or events that are not found in the biblical texts or that it juxtaposes things which are not found together in the original. 'Any perceived departure by a film from the written New Testament text can bring condemnation and protest' (Tatum, 1997: 11). This is a particular issue with the Jesus films, many of which, such as *King of Kings*, take a harmonising approach to the four gospel accounts. This feature appeared within the Pathfinder responses (p.144) and a number of scholars have noted the problem facing a screenwriter who is trying to use biblical narratives as their source material. Tatum cites Moira Walsh, reviewing *The Greatest Story Ever Told* in 1965: "'Shall we write 'additional dialogue' for Christ? What kind of small talk did He make, for example, at the marriage feast of Cana? Shall we provide motivation where none exists specifically, e.g. for Judas' betrayal?'" (cited by Tatum, 1997: 7). Moira Walsh continues: 'Shall we content ourselves with simply inserting famous speeches, such as the Centurion's astounding act of faith and the even more astounding one of the Good Thief, in their proper sequence, or shall we attempt to prepare for them in terms of character and dramatic context?' (Walsh, 1965: 296-297). Similarly, Richard Walsh notes the strategy employed by some writers who use new plots or characters in order to 'smooth out literary and cinematic problems in the rather episodic Gospels' (2003: 96).

These cinematically determined and dramatically necessary changes obviously modify the articulation of the relevant text and may then influence the interpretations made of the biblical account. David Howell also notes this need to fill in gaps in the narratives; in a survey of film representations of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, he concludes that 'textual stories are mutated by the change of medium. Film must fill in some of the indeterminacies of the textual narrative and in doing so offers interpretations of the text' (2007).

As noted above, one of the Pathfinders had expressed the fear that the memory of an unsatisfactory filmed version of the Bible might over-ride the textual

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original: ‘there’s a real risk that they go away with what’s on the film, rather than what’s in the Bible’. The tendency of visual memories or interpretations of books to over-ride the parent text is perhaps unsurprising. With regard to a literary adaptation for film, John Ellis observes, that it:

trades upon the memory of the novel, a memory that can derive from actual reading, or, as is more likely with a classic of literature, a generally circulated cultural memory. The adaptation consumes this memory, aiming to efface it with the presence of its own images. The successful adaptation is one that is able to replace the memory of the novel with the process of a filmic or televisual representation (1982: 3).

Ellis’s intuition receives support from some small scale studies on the effect of film in education. Jeffrey Zacks (2015: 95-6) notes experiments where subjects read an essay of historical fact either before or after watching a film that changed some of the facts around the same events. When their memories were later tested, they accepted as fact around 40% of the historical inaccuracies present in the films, even when they had been fore-warned that there might be inaccuracies.<sup>101</sup> As Zacks concludes ‘[t]hese studies probably underestimate how influential bad information in movies can be, because most of the time when you watch a history flick you do not read an accurate history just before or after’ (2015: 96). The underdetermined nature of biblical narratives and the contingencies of script-writing would suggest that this danger of confusing textual and filmic accounts is just as great, if not greater, in the case of Bible films and underlines the need for critical evaluation of biblical interpretations put forward by producers and directors no less than those offered from other presentations and articulations of the biblical texts.

### *Every picture tells a story (implicitly)*

A third and related issue arising from filming – or performing – the Bible is the setting or context. Where are the events occurring and, perhaps more importantly, who else is present? The importance of these factors is illustrated by John Dominic Crossan in his attack upon what he sees as the anti-Semitism of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004: 9-14). He notes that ‘the crowd’ at the trial of Jesus is indeterminate when you read the account but is determined by the director’s use of extras: should it be the same crowd as the

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<sup>101</sup> The original study (Butler *et al.*, 2009) also indicated that viewing the correct history reinforced the learning acquired by silent reading and that, when specifically told about an inaccuracy, they did remember it as such.

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one that cheered Jesus into the city the week before, and how sizeable is it? The answer will shape one's understanding of the role of the Jewish people generally in the events portrayed. Another example of implicit effects on the story might be found in the various film and stage presentations of the nativity. Are Joseph and Mary a young couple in love (as in BBC's *Nativity* from 2010) or is Joseph an older man perhaps remarrying after being widowed? The answer will influence our interpretation of their relationship. Even the costuming may influence the way in which characters are perceived, as in the cliché that the 'baddy' dresses in black. These visual influences on the understanding of texts form yet another illustration of the way in which each presentation of a biblical account is a different articulation of the textual original and forms the basis of possible differences in interpretation. Once again, the need for critical reception of any film based on biblical stories is highlighted.

This section has looked briefly at three factors arising when attempting to film the Bible which may then become issues for ordinary Christians in their engagement with both film and text: their familiarity with the sources and the dissonance in 'seeing' them differently from how they had been imagined, the cinematically necessary process of fleshing out of biblical characters and conversations in the script, and the interpretation implicit in the direction and portrayal of scenes and characters. These factors each shape alternative presentations or 'readings' of texts; these can, in turn, each pose fruitful challenges of pre-existing ideas or mental caricatures arising from limited reflection on the texts and this feature was appreciated by some of the Pathfinders in their responses. But the implicit assumptions made in the screenplay and scene-creation need to be identified and subject to critique rather than passively accepted. This also appears to have been appreciated by some of the Pathfinders. If film resources are to be of value in enabling ordinary Christians to engage more deeply with their text then training in critical viewing and evaluation of interpretations needs to accompany them.

### **Reflections on the historical role of imaged reading<sup>102</sup>**

Pertinent to any discussion of historical imaged reading is the work of the sixteenth century founder of the Jesuits, Ignatius of Loyola. Among other things, his five week programme features, in weeks two and three, instructions to form mental pictures of some of the biblical locations and people in order to meditate upon them deeply; the aim of each contemplation is to ‘derive some fruit’ or ‘draw some profit’ from the experience thus engendered (St Ignatius, 1998 [1964] especially 67-72, week two, day one). The continued use of such exercises today testifies to the value found in them but, while there are individual testimonies to the benefits derived, there seems to be little if any systematic study of the effects of such imaged reading on reception of the texts.

Of course, at the time the exercises were composed, the number of people exposed to such teaching would have been limited. However, as was noted in Chapter Three, even in a pre-technological age, there were ample opportunities for the other form of imaged reading or meditation, via exposure to the abundance of visual biblical imagery, especially for those in religious orders: in church, monastery and cathedral buildings, in the form of religious statuary and stained glass windows, in the acting out of biblical stories such as the nativity, Palm Sunday and foot washing, ceremonies around the sepulchre over Easter, and in Passion or Mystery plays (Boynton, 2011: 13, 25; Cochelin, 2011: 63-64, 69-70; Duffy, 2005 [1992]: 22-37). Although, for the monastics, the liturgy would probably have constituted a stronger influence on the hearers’ hermeneutical lenses (see Boynton, cited on p.138) ordinary people visiting churches were surrounded by biblical and other religious imagery and involved in dramatic ritual.

Religious art in contexts of less widespread literacy was, for the Western church and for much of church history, seen as being the ‘book of the illiterate’, a notion traced back to Pope Gregory the Great. In his exploration of this idea and its use through history, Lawrence Duggan cites Gregory:

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<sup>102</sup> There is no room here to consider the art of the icon in the Orthodox churches. Since the icon is primarily a means of venerating the original of which it is an image I do not believe that consideration of reflection on its use would be necessary or useful unless I were including Russian films of the Bible and/or the reactions of Orthodox Russian believers to visual readings of the Bible.

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Pictures are used in churches so that those who are ignorant of letters may at least read by seeing on the walls what they cannot read in books.

What writing does for the literate, a picture does for the illiterate looking at it, because the ignorant see in it what they ought to do; those who do not know letters read in it (cited in Duggan, 1989: 227).

Duggan notes that it is unclear if Gregory anticipated the unlearned being able to learn from pictures alone or if he meant it in the sense of them being reminded of things they already knew because they had been taught them. Is the teaching assumed to be ‘active’ (the image alone can instruct) or ‘passive’ (they can be taught by the learned, employing the pictures as visual aids or *aide mémoire*)? Later in church history, Bonaventura and Aquinas may be seen to distinguish three different functions for religious art: to teach, to arouse devotion and to aid memory (1989: 232) while a later writer notes the accessibility (to both literate *and* illiterate), and the emotive power of pictures (236).

This emotive power is explored by Sixten Ringbom, who identifies the functions of mediaeval religious art as adoration (as in cult images), didactic, and what he terms ‘empathetic’ (1984 [1965]: 11-12):

Here the attention is focussed on an attitude in the beholder which consists neither of thirst for information and guidance by means of *historiae*, nor of the revering and adoration of *imagines*, but of a deep emotional experience. A certain psychological state of mind is regarded as the primary goal for the beholder of the image, although, it should be added, this function does not necessarily exclude the other two functions of edification and adoration (1984 [1965]: 12).

At that time, meditating on (imaged reading of) such images was viewed as the first step in a process which ideally progressed toward contemplation of the abstract, of the divine; stories of devotion from this period testify to the power of images to stimulate spiritual experience and contain acknowledgements of the role of art in the first stages of contemplation (Ringbom, 1984 [1965]: 15-22).<sup>103</sup>

Focussing on the development of half-length portraits in the fifteenth century, Ringbom notes the psychological properties of these images: the ‘close-up’ format and the development of techniques to better portray emotional state ‘gave to meditation the immediacy of a quiet conversation; it had the “nearness” so dear to the “God-seeking devout”’ (48-52, citing from 48). Interestingly, although religious images came under attack from the Reformers, Duggan

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<sup>103</sup> Carruthers suggests that not only art but also church architecture can be viewed as aides to meditation (1998: 221-76).

#### CHAPTER 4. *Lectio* – encountering the text in different ways

notes that Luther (in *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments*) wishes he could persuade the wealthy to paint the whole Bible on the inside and outside of their houses so that everyone could see it (1989: 237).

However, alongside these arguments for the value of biblical images, other writers going back at least as far as Augustine, expressed concern that they not be misinterpreted (Duggan, 1989: 229, 234) and the later Council of Trent stressed the need for instruction to which the religious art might be a teaching aid (238). Duggan himself concludes that Gregory the Great was wrong if he meant that pictures alone could instruct as adequately as text; pictures have to be explained to communicate their meaning to the intellect although they might communicate well ‘to other parts of the psyche’. People viewing religious art ‘could be reminded of what they already knew, they might be moved to tears or wonder, they might be struck by a novel feature of the rendition, they might experience the presence of the divine - but these were all experiences open to the literate as well as the illiterate’ (Duggan, 1989: 244). The illiterate need instruction because they cannot read, or learn anything new from, a picture without supplementary help and may easily misinterpret it if none is supplied.

These discussions centred on the ‘reading’ of silent images. However, dialogue accompanied another accessible presentation of the Bible in the mediaeval period: the mystery play cycle. We may see today’s film and television adaptations of the Bible as the modern equivalents of these plays, which were performed in at least fifteen English cities (Elliott Jr, 1989: 3). The cycles covered the ‘big story’ of the Bible from Creation to the Last Judgment, including the Flood and the events of the Gospels, and, as dramatic presentations, they shared some characteristics with film adaptations:

characters are for the most part scriptural ... the dialogue (usually in verse) is partly scriptural and partly invented, but always in contemporary idiom; and the costumes are likewise partly scriptural and partly contemporary. ... the aim was the greatest possible realism and a determination to show the events as living, historical fact. (Dorothy L. Sayers cited in Elliott Jr, 1989)

This realism was important since the intention was to engender belief (Enders, 2002: 3) and a real sense of participation in the story for the audience (Beckwith, 2001: 87-9, 100-103). Sarah Beckwith sees the plays as sacramental theatre, a concept which may be seen expressed in the manner in

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which they were enacted in public space. In their attention to realistic detail, their coverage of the ‘big story’ and their involvement of large numbers of people it seems likely that the plays would have fulfilled a major and powerful role in conveying the faith to those watching. Indeed, Elliott notes that the later control and then suppression of the mystery plays was a result of political and religious changes in England, only later culminating in Puritan condemnation of the Mass as ‘theatre’. ‘The role of the stage as a teacher of doctrine was over – not because it had done its work crudely or badly, as Puritan critics of medieval plays were later to insist, but because it had done it so well’ (Elliott Jr, 1989: 5-6). These plays then, may be seen to have demonstrated some of the elements of reality, the conveyance of information about the story but also the emotional involvement, found among the Pathfinders who engaged in imaged reading of the televisual resources provided for them.

What do these reflections add to our consideration of the role of visual resources within a programme aiming to promote biblical engagement among ordinary Christians? Firstly, it demonstrates that consideration of the value – and dangers – of visual representations of Bible stories is not a phenomenon new to the age of cinema and television. Secondly, they support the observations made by Pathfinders concerning both the emotional impact of watching the portrayal of biblical accounts and the possibility of gaining a fresh perspective upon them. Thirdly, they show that concern over possible misunderstanding of visual representations of texts has also, in the past led to a desire to mediate or supplement their reception with other forms of instruction. Pictures alone may not tell the whole story.

### **The role of imaged reading in contemporary biblical engagement**

#### ***The power of the image***

In contrast to the mediaeval world, contemporary Western readers of the Bible are soaked in a multi-media dominated culture informed by narratives other than biblical. When they approach their sacred texts, Christians in this culture will inevitably be shaped by their prior encounters with other texts and world-views. However, *some* of this prior shaping will have occurred in their experiences of imaged reading of biblical stories. What those encounters will have been, and how much they dominate the reader’s approach, will vary with

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age and background but some images have become so iconic they may be difficult to avoid. So Kreitzer suggests that

for a great many more people than we might care to admit, Charlton Heston is the dominant mental picture of Moses and ... many people believe the Red Sea parted precisely as Cecil B. De Mille directed it to in *The Ten Commandments* in allowing the children of Israel to escape from Egypt. Probably a great many people have their understanding of Old Testament characters framed as much by Saturday afternoon viewings of biblical epics as through any close contact with the particular stories they depict as they are recorded in Scripture itself (1994: 13-14).

Of course, over twenty years on, with far more recent renditions of the biblical epic, this will no longer be as true as it was except, possibly, for older generations. While Kreitzer and others examined what light modern film interpretations might shed on our understanding of biblical texts, there seems to be little if any work on the ways in which ordinary Christians' understandings of their scriptures are shaped by their prior exposure to biblical epics or stories from the Bible recast in a different context. There is little or no evaluation as to whether or not the 'dominant mental pictures' that may be formed contribute positively or negatively in nurturing biblical engagement. Such research would be of interest to scholars in a number of different fields.

One Pathfinder noted that the BBC resources they used differed from the 'epic': 'it wasn't a blockbuster, it wasn't a very high up actor playing the part, and so it was much more realistic as how they lived and so on. It wasn't all the razzmatazz of a Hollywood movie, it was more down to earth, and it actually brought it home to you exactly how they lived at that time'. The apparent reality of the representation gave it some of its effect and the move, in recent biblical films, to attempt more realism in portraying the period may further enhance engagement with the texts by imaged readers. This study suggests that it is important to engage ordinary Christians in using good quality audio-visual resources in order to derive the benefits listed above here: a greater degree of emotional engagement and an ability to enter in to the stories and 'rehydrate' them to a larger extent.

### ***The perils of the image***

However, this study has also explored the potential pitfalls in the use of visual resources. Any film is bound to present one particular articulation of its source

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texts – it is an inevitable effect of translating the Bible to film. It will insert or rephrase dialogue to make a decent dramatic script, juxtapose scenes and events from different texts or different times, and show some characters in particular lights depending on their portrayal, presentation and ‘back-story’. And, despite the danger of the imaged presentation of the Bible ‘consuming’ the memory of the text it is supposed to represent, in contemporary society it is almost inevitable that contemporary Christians will at some point engage in imaged reading of their sacred texts.

Other dangers arising, from the viewer possibly misinterpreting the story seen on film due to ignorance of the text, are similar to those faced by Christians of an earlier age faced with silent non-moving images. Of course, the audio-visual resources under evaluation by Pathfinders are not pictures alone; they are sophisticated presentations with an oral component and a degree of realism unimaginable to the mediaeval writers who articulated these concerns. Also, present day viewers of such resources may have more access to the text and *may* have more prior awareness of the stories of the Bible than their forebears in the faith; it is impossible to be sure. Nonetheless, as representations of the Bible stories, films would seem to share not only the potential but also the drawbacks associated with their static forebears. Although they have a script which ‘explains’ the pictures they, too, should be accompanied by oral or written teaching to ensure that they are not misunderstood and thus interpreted. And, similarly, this will be facilitated if they are discussed and evaluated within the community of faith.

This study then suggests that, while the use of visual ‘versions’ of the Bible is vital and useful, their use should go alongside training in critical analysis of the films *and* their underlying texts in an attempt to enable ordinary Christians to appreciate and evaluate the filmed interpretation being presented.

Consequently, it is vital that these skills *and* the Bible in film be included in any programme aiming to promote ordinary Christians’ engagement with scriptures. One possible way in which critical ‘reading’ might be introduced is by the employment of a range of different audio- or visual-articulations of a particular text, such as different film versions of the Moses-Exodus narratives or events in the life of Jesus. In the same way that reading a variety of different English interpretations may make silent visual, or aural, readers aware that each

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interpretation is but one articulation or interpretation of the original language text so, imaged readers may be alerted to the possibility of multiple ‘readings’ through seeing a number of them in a setting where critical reading is encouraged and fostered.

### **Conclusions**

Any programme proposed to encourage contemporary English Christians to engage more deeply with the Bible should definitely make use of both audio and visual representations of their scriptures. The individual narratives and the ‘big story’ of the Bible may both be communicated effectively through these media. Due to the impact of the visual and its endurance in memory, care needs to be taken in choosing appropriate resources. However, any resource offers the opportunity to challenge participants to re-examine their preconceptions and encourage them to develop their critical faculties in understanding both the nature and content of the biblical texts.

Consideration of the practice of aural reading within *lectio divina*, of Ignatian spirituality’s imaged reading, and of the different means of imaged biblical engagement by the bulk of the laity in times of limited literacy, demonstrates that both aural and imaged forms of biblical engagement have a long history in the church and have proven fruitful for Christian formation. This encourages their use, through modern media, in contemporary biblical engagement. However, historically, these readings were often employed within the context of a personal deeper grasp of biblical literature and/or a corporate wider church community, with the opportunities this offered for sharing and evaluating understanding. Contemporary usage could learn from this history to employ such resources in a corporate setting and enable ordinary Christians to critically encounter their texts, both aurally and imaginatively, as part of the community of the church. However, examination of these practices leads us into consideration of another issue arising from the Pathfinder data.

I have noted that both aural and imaged readings necessitate the selection of a particular vocal articulation of the text and most imaged readings involve a whole range of interpretive decisions regarding the setting and context of the biblical account which have to be made in the process of constructing a screenplay. These result in what might be termed an imaged articulation. Of

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course, every translation of the scriptures is also a particular interpretation and each silent reader puts their own particular construal upon those words.

Nonetheless, the aural or imaged presentation of the translated text provides a further layer of possibilities in interpretation *and*, unless performed privately, presents that new possibility to other interpreters. Each presents one particular articulation of the text which is thus 're-hydrated' to a greater or lesser degree. Thus, the different modes of receiving the text as reader which have been considered here, illustrate clearly both the rich possibilities in hearing alternative readings and the potential pitfalls. These latter include the danger that these alternative articulations will not be given a hearing and the opposite risk that performances will be received in an uncritical manner which may not be fruitful in Christian formation. This reception of different readings will be considered more fully in the next chapter.

# CHAPTER 5. Biblical multivocality within community

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## Introduction

In this chapter I wish to explore the consequences and implications, for a programme seeking to enable ordinary Christians to engage with the Bible, of the multivocality arising when believers share their differing readings of the same text in a group.<sup>104</sup> Theologies of the Bible, and of the means of its interpretation, differ between Christian traditions; some rely on the authority of established tradition, and/or an authoritative body or magisterium, to set out an understanding of the scriptures and to rule on the validity or otherwise of variant readings. Others espouse the principle of *sola scriptura* with the expectation that individual believers, guided by the Holy Spirit, will be able to discern the 'meaning' of biblical passages for themselves. In the latter cases it is not always clear how any limits to possible meaning might be established in order to test the legitimacy of any specific reading. Any programme of biblical engagement which seeks to serve the whole Church will be most useful if its component resources can be utilised in as many of these different ecclesial situations as possible.

I begin by surveying the Pathfinders' responses to three of the small-group resources in the programme: lyfe, Community Bible Study and The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth. These each, in different ways, asked participants to read biblical texts and consider how they could be applied to contemporary situations, although they differed in the degree to which this reading was 'guided' by the materials provided. The responses evoked by these resources raised questions regarding how small groups – or congregations – of Christians deal with individually varying articulations and applications of the same passage; some disagreement regarding the validity of emergent readings was evident. While these questions in turn raise a whole host of other theological

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<sup>104</sup> The term 'multivocality' is also used when referring to the different, sometimes discordant, voices arising from different texts within the biblical canon. See p.174.

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issues found in contemporary reflection, I choose to focus on exploring a few specific areas which suggest strategies with which a programme like Pathfinder may navigate the hazards of individual reading in community: biblicist approaches leading to expectation of there being *no* legitimate multivocality, the use of a Christological lens, and the metaphor of the Bible as ‘story’, ‘narrative’ or ‘drama’.<sup>105</sup> I also examine, as a case-study, the ways in which one particular tradition, Pentecostalism, handles the multivocality inherent in its charismatic theology. I proceed to draw on discussion of differing understandings of texts in historical contexts before exploring further how this multivocality may be used and useful in contemporary biblical engagement in small groups. This project is concerned, as Bible Society was, with the promotion of biblical engagement by ordinary Christians across different traditions. Consequently, this approach, including the denominationally specific case-study, is pursued with the aim of discerning a range of strategies of which some would hopefully be transferable to other denominational settings.

Since the biblicist approach, in theory, only allows for there to be one correct reading of a passage, and since the Pathfinder responses to the richness of the emergent multivocality were broadly positive, this chapter focuses primarily on how a programme of resources to promote biblical engagement by ordinary Christians might ‘make room’ for multivocality in the expectations of the group; the next chapter deals more with factors which are seen to contribute to, and enable evaluation of, the outcomes of such multivocality in the light of further Pathfinder data, namely detailed study of the texts and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

### **Pathfinder responses to resources encouraging articulation and application of texts in small groups**

#### **lyfe**

The online materials for this resource describe it as being ‘about hearing God, through the Bible, in the company of others’ and ‘a conversation between friends seeking a richer relationship with God. Making discoveries together through hearing and reflecting on the Bible’ (Bible Society, no date). Its success

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<sup>105</sup> My use of the term ‘biblicist’ is explained below (p.177).

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in these aims is clear in Pathfinder feedback; it was described as 'very much a sharing situation' where ideas were 'pooled' with valuable results:

...there's always somebody that will come out with something that you just completely haven't seen before. Tipped it completely on its head and looked at it, 'Oh yes, I haven't seen that or thought about that'. ... when it's quite a diverse group of people as well. It's actually quite valuable, I think. You learn a lot, just from each other really.

This was echoed across the groups:

I think listening to what other people get out of the passages, makes you think of a passage afresh. Even though you've heard it before, you can think of it differently when you hear other people's, and know whether you want to take that on board, or not take it on board. So I do like listening to other people's explanation.

I like the way that we, sort of, have fed, maybe, off of each other. I mean, you're in a group, and you listen to what other people are saying, and then they'll come up with something and you think, 'I never thought of it that way'. I mean, ... X said 'I've been thinking about what things did Jesus do or didn't do, on the Sabbath' And I looked at him, and went, 'That has never occurred to me'. But it made me think, and it's things like that. I find it hard just reading the Bible and learning from it, but other people are great teachers.

Some suggested that part of the value of lyfe lay in the way it gave a voice to people with different approaches or stances towards the texts:

It was very good at giving people something to say, whether they have a particularly, sort of, intellectual approach to things or not, or emotional response; whatever your response and whatever you felt from it, that there was opportunity to use that.

It might not have been the academic reaction, but it was 'What ... struck you about what you've read?', and I think that was a very worthwhile way to do it. ... a lot of Bible study can become the academic dissection of something, and yet, kind of, how it impacted you, I think that's where the challenge at the end came in. It was more to do with 'What's your response to it?'

The open-ended nature of the lyfe process and its focus on applicability were seen as contributing towards this; several respondents showed that they understood that lyfe was structured to allow participants to share what the passage said to them, rather than, primarily, to teach them something (theological or historical) about it and one noted a 'richness as well because people were sharing their particular thoughts rather than answering the question within its limited confines'.

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The 'challenge' section of each lyfe session was especially praised by many participants; it seemed to have been very successful in stimulating participants to apply the biblical texts to their everyday life, whether that related to their development of spiritual disciplines *per se* or to their personal transformation expressed through their interactions with other people. The accountability built in to this resource (people were expected to report back to the group on how they had tackled the challenges) seems to have been integral to its perceived value. One group even used texting to remind each other of the current challenge!

One of the few reservations expressed about the material related to its sufficiency for those without supplementary knowledge of the Bible; it was pointed out that lyfe did not offer continuity through the Bible and that different approaches, such as working through a whole book or letter, also had value. Accordingly, it was suggested by one participant, lyfe may not be so appropriate for less experienced Christians:

I wonder how easy it is for people who haven't got much background. Each week you're dipping into something, just those verses. They perhaps have no idea what went before and what went after, is this a letter, is this a gospel? ... It helps if you've got a lot of background, when you keep doing different things each week, to be able to contribute more and think about it more. But if you're fairly new to the faith ...to do something completely different each week, is interesting, but seeing the progression is more difficult.

Similarly, the difference between lyfe and the type of more didactic Bible study with which many participants were familiar led to some concern over possible misunderstandings arising, as illustrated by this dialogue at one church:

I did feel that... where it talks about seeking justice and peace locally and globally, when we read 'Matthew 25, The Final Judgement', that there was a bit of a vacuum as to how this passage should be interpreted, about the goats and so on. Clearly, if you read this, 'The Final Judgement', from Matthew, you would assume that if you ministered to the sick, and those in jail, and hungry and thirsty, that would bring you into eternal life. So, the passage is difficult to interpret, and obviously it needs interpretation with other passages of scripture, but I don't know that there was really much explanation of that. And the responses, I'm not sure reflected the passage that we discussed very adequately.

Another in the group responded:

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I just looked again at that ‘Matthew’ passage, and... it could be giving us that impression, but I think, the challenge of that, was to discover ways to help you see people as Jesus does, ... So it was quite effective, that one, because I know that it said ‘surprise someone this week, with a real encouragement. Send a text, email, or make a call’. That’s one of the few things I did, and it bore fruit, so I remember that one. But not that... I found difficulty with the theology of the passage, or things like that. I think we really haven’t been looking at the Bible passages in that light. The practical outworking of that is in our daily lives, and our relationships, so that’s helpful.

This interchange reflected similar comments elsewhere: a few participants perceived the lyfe resource to be a form of Bible study in which the passage (and, implicitly, its ‘correct’ meaning) was explained to people; this understanding would naturally lead to concern when multiple articulations of a text were produced by the group with little or no adjudication as to their validity. At the same time, others understood, in line with its self-description, that lyfe was designed, rather, to promote meditative reading in a group, leading to participants sharing the meanings they found in, and how they were challenged by, each passage (see Appendix I §2.1.2).

In summary, lyfe was very positively received and seen to have made an impact on people’s discipleship; this was understood to be due both to its accessibility and openness to everyone’s sometimes differing reflections and to its ‘challenge’ feature incorporating a degree of applicability. Both of these were facilitated by its being designed for use with small groups of people. This positive response was qualified by a few reservations expressed over a lack of context and the possibility of misinterpretations deriving from the absence of further factual study content or the insufficiency of a participant’s knowledge base.

### **Community Bible Study**

As noted in Chapter One, this resource shared a number of features with lyfe: both asked participants to engage in slow, attentive reading, using their imaginations to picture the scene and to note any features that stuck out to them. However, CBS differed significantly in that it then proceeded to consider ‘community questions’ designed to provoke the groups to reflection linking the biblical passages with their own local contexts. It expressed the anticipation that this might lead to action within the community.

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A degree of multivocality might be expected when eliciting specifically local applications of biblical passages from small groups of Christians in different contexts; there certainly was a variety of responses across the six centres using CBS but there were also different perceptions of applicability within some groups. In Church C, one commented that some aspects were less relevant than others because 'our own community we haven't got a lot of people from other cultures and other countries'. However, another in the same group responded:

We all knew what the gist of the study were leading us to if we were set in a multicultural area and multiethnic area, so we all felt, all knew what we were aiming for. But then when we looked at our own community as has been suggested, we thought, 'Oh we don't have those sort of groups'. So it would be easy for churches in those sort of areas, like ours, to sort of just finish there, 'Oh, we haven't got the groups'. But especially the 1 Corinthians, when we talked about the build up of the Corinthian church and the different layers and stratas of the different groups, we started digging around in our own community and we realised that the layers and different groupings were there. Possibly not quite in as they may have visualised when they actually wrote the notes but, so I, we, found them very helpful when we began to think of the different groupings and the different people who were excluded and the different people who were at this level or that level or etc. so think we found it very useful.

Respondents to CBS mostly agreed that the passages alone did *not* in themselves lead the readers to make application to their own particular situations. In other words, any applications in thinking about the passage in relation to their local context were only constructed in light of the 'community questions' provided within the CBS materials. However, no one expressed the opinion that the focus on local application might be inappropriate or that the use to which the texts were put, by the resource, was inappropriate eisegesis. The responses to CBS differed from those to Meek in this particular respect: Meek was subject to accusations of eisegesis.

### **The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth**

The reactions to Meek, which was presented only at churches E and F, differed markedly. There were some positive responses at both but broadly speaking it was much better received by the Pathfinder groups at E than at F.<sup>106</sup>

There was a good deal of appreciation expressed at church E; the resource was described as 'stimulating' and 'relevant', and as having provoked a good deal of discussion around the social justice and creation themes. This was partly due to it having resonated with other recent input:

there's been spin-offs in terms of conversation elements, because the land issue has kept recurring several times, when you've had your eyes opened to it. You see it re-occurring ... one of our missionaries had returned back from Nigeria, and she was speaking simply about how sections of the Nigerian landmass have been just completely stolen, and it was really a repeat of the pattern there, of that story: Naboth's Vineyard, right through to the Scottish experience, right through to African colonialism, wasn't it, really? ... So it's quite amazing to see that pattern reasserting itself.

Given that the accompanying notes made clear the series' intention to make links between the texts and 'issues faced by today's world' it would seem to have fulfilled its own aims with this group.

Some of the responses at the church F were, however, quite different. While there was acknowledgement that the issues raised were important and required a Christian response, a good proportion of the participants reported feeling that the presentation and materials were reading a pre-decided issue into the biblical texts: 'there was a little bit of an agenda on environmental issues. They are important, but I'm not sure that this was the right place for them'. Another said that 'the selection of Bible passages appears to have been made to support and develop the writer's point of view in the mind of the user', beginning with 'a study that invites the reader to believe that the Naboth story is really one about caring for the earth (rather than one warning of the abuse of power and personal will)'. This person felt that the resource was 'trying to read into the

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<sup>106</sup> As noted in Chapter One, these churches differed not only in denomination but also in socio-economic background and location; it is impossible to tell if the differences noted arose from a primarily theological basis or had other ideological roots. However, considering the materials I find it significant that the objections focussed on the 'creation' and 'land' aspect of the studies and failed to even mention the strong anti-capitalistic themes. I would suggest that Meek's format (not a conventional 'Bible study') and its theme of challenge to a capitalist view of land, together might have rendered it unpalatable to certain respondents.

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Bible some sort of “agricultural theology”. A third participant said that the author of the resource ‘was pushing his agenda on a few verses and then saying, “This is what the Bible says”’.

Another issue appeared to concern relevance to the Bible; there was concern that ‘we are here to learn about the Bible, and it wasn’t there. There was nothing in the Bible about this’. Another commented ‘I don’t think it was the sort of thing that you could discuss in a group and help people on in their Christian lives. There might be the odd thing, but there was the danger that we had to read too much and not the Bible, and that whole idea of the Bible Society is that it gets into the Bible’.

The seriousness of the reservations over these materials were illustrated by the fact that some of this group chose not to work with the materials. One participant left their small group ‘over distress with the group’s decision to continue with the trial of the material’ and another felt that ‘this series has provoked more disquiet and concern than any other by a very significant margin’.

Interestingly, no-one at this church made a link between their reservations regarding Meek and the work they had done earlier during the MGS section of Pathfinder, concerning different approaches towards the text, such as feminist readings. Neither did anyone suggest that the issues on which Meek was centred were not serious and worthy of consideration; there were, for example, no denials of the importance of social justice *per se*. Those within the group who were concerned seemed to feel that the focus was on the issues (social justice centred attitudes towards land) rather than the biblical text, and/or that there had been a misuse of the text to support a predetermined position; in other words, it was an example of eisegesis.

### **Summary of the data**

These resources, the responses to which are summarised here, have common aims of provoking reflection on scriptural passages and stimulating subsequent action arising from that reflection. With lyfe, although there are suggested ‘challenges’ for each study, the aim is to promote some individual response to what has been read and thought about. The accountability to the group appears

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to have helped reinforce the level of commitment to complete the chosen challenge. With CBS and Meek both the reflection and the hoped for application, whether it be a change in attitude or action, are expected to be group-based. The principal difference seems to lie in the fact that lyfe is designed to leave the nature of such reflection open-ended while CBS and Meek both guide the reflections towards specific topics.

While lyfe was spoken of positively by almost all participants across seven churches, and the variety of responses and readings were seen as being of particular value, there were one or two reservations expressed about possible mis-readings or misunderstanding arising from lack of deeper knowledge of the texts or their contexts. While those using CBS expressed no disquiet at having their reflections directed towards an application within their local community (even if they could not always find one), some of those working with Meek felt that the text was being misapplied to an ongoing issue of social justice.

Also of possible relevance to discussion of these responses is the reaction of one of those who dropped out of the Pathfinder project at an early stage. With regard to the Pathfinder programme they felt that

it was really good at getting people talking, getting them interested in a particular aspect, but I thought it was far too wide-ranging, and there was no conclusion. So therefore, I felt that the results of that were that it was almost like an 'anything goes'. ... I never really knew, 'Well is this what the Bible Society agree? Are we on the path, are we off the path, are we way off here? Are we alright, or is it, "don't care"?' ... I'm fairly fundamental in my approach, so I'm a bit more black and white. I want to know, 'am I right or am I wrong?'

It seems possible that this attitude of wanting to know (and thus, possibly, only expecting or being open to) the 'right' answer is found among others in the churches. This approach may be seen as an expression of what James Fowler termed the 'Synthetic-Conventional' stage of faith (Fowler, 1981: 151-73) where ideologies are not subject to critical examination.

These responses raise questions which are key to any programme designed to promote biblical engagement among ordinary Christians: How do and should Christians find 'meaning' in the scriptures? What should an 'ordinary hermeneutics' look like? Discussion of these questions could include consideration of empirical studies of how Christians read the Bible, and of

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debate on the relevance or not of authorial intent or the ‘plain sense’ of a passage, the distinction between interpretation and application and the differing understandings of the nature of the Bible and its application to contemporary life. The data from the Pathfinder project introduce the question of how to handle the presence of different voices (multivocality) – both within the biblical corpus as a whole and those emerging from differing readings of passages among a group of Christians. These issues are obviously linked; the discussion of how to find meaning will contribute to debate on how many meanings there may be and the limits upon them. Each topic is hugely important in its own right and they have been tackled by a wide range of scholars in fields such as practical theology, systematics, biblical studies (especially reader-response), and Christian ethics. It would need a library to do them justice. Here I will only try to survey some contemporary and historical reflection in a few specific areas which I feel are relevant when designing materials for use by ordinary Christians, centring on the specific issues of managing the multivocality arising when a community of Christians comes together to read and discuss its scriptures.<sup>107</sup> The specific roles of the Holy Spirit and of critical study of the Bible will be examined in the next chapter.

### **Contemporary reflection on dealing with biblical multivocality arising in community**

#### **Multivocality and Perspicuity**

As briefly noted above, the term ‘multivocality’ may be used in two different situations. Firstly, it may be that different texts within the biblical library seem to speak with contrasting voices; if multivocality in this sense is found unacceptable it could result in an attempt to produce one definitive message, either by harmonising different texts to produce one ‘canonical voice’ or by eliminating, with whatever justification, those voices discordant with what is assumed to be the Bible’s ‘main’ message. Old Testament demands for

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<sup>107</sup> The Pathfinder data were generated in the context of small groups. There is a large body of literature on the role, value and dynamics of small groups within church settings (see especially Walton, 2014) and much more general literature on group dynamics. Many of these findings were echoed in my own data. While I appreciate that some of that may be relevant to the discussion of how to handle disagreements in general arising within groups, I wish, here, to focus on the specific issue of multivocality within Bible readings which has the potential to disrupt the benefits of learning in such a group.

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circumcision of those following God are commonly 'trumped' by understandings of the gospel with reference to Paul's New Testament letters, for example. I have no room to discuss these strategies here, nor is this kind of multivocality the central issue arising from my data.

The multivocality that emerges when small groups of Christians read and discuss the Bible together is that of the *one* text generating differing articulations – and/or applications – from different readers.<sup>108</sup> Such a plurality of readings and understandings within a group was valued by participants in the Pathfinder programme as it was, also, in an examination of 'ordinary learning' among a cross-denominational set of church-based small groups; ordinary learning 'delights in a rich variety of different perspectives and points of view' (Savage, 2013: 202-3). Helen Savage suggests that the provisionality and openness to diversity within these groups rendered them accessible to people who found the prospect of Bible study 'daunting' and that even groups perhaps used to more definite understandings of the text coped well with the diversity of readings they generated:

Even in conservative evangelical groups, this view went hand in hand with a process that typically allowed several different hermeneutics to operate within a discussion, not only with little apparent discomfort or conflict, but with a ready acceptance that a range of positions might significantly enrich the discussion, and function as a gateway to truth. ... It did not mean that learners necessarily held that one view was as good as another; but it recognised that complexities articulated by individuals enabled the whole group to grasp a more real and complete appreciation of the truths revealed in and through the process of grappling with scripture (Savage, 2013: 203).

A similar openness to what he terms 'hermeneutical reader plasticity' was also observed by Andrew Rogers, in the small groups within the two churches subject to his theological ethnography; this was the case even in the church where the background assumption was that each text had an objective 'correct' meaning (2009: 26-7, 134-7, 209-10).

One of the tenets of Protestantism has always been the accessibility of the Bible to the whole people of God but this concept has itself been subject to different interpretations. At the Reformation, Luther argued for the perspicuity of

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<sup>108</sup> As noted in the Introduction, p.21f., I also use 'multivocality' to refer to the differing articulations of the biblical texts produced on each occasion that they are read aloud or enacted, as discussed in Chapter Four.

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the matter of scripture (*res scripturae*), that is the gospel. However, it seems this was widely understood, by many of those who followed him, as meaning that the Bible itself was clear and did not require any extra-biblical teaching in order for it to be understood by anyone (Barton, 1988: 84-6; Thiselton, 1992: 179ff). The concept that every believer can hear God speak to them through their reading of the Bible is dear to many Christians and is, I would suggest, an assumption at the heart of the Bible Society's Pathfinder project;<sup>109</sup> it is the multivocality that results from this expectation, the multivocality arising from different readers, which is at issue in the discussion here. While many Pathfinders appreciated hearing differing contributions from other group members, or suggestions linking passages to situations in the contemporary world, others were concerned that these moves might be unorthodox, or eisegetically imposing external ideas upon the text. Furthermore, if a belief in the 'clear meaning' of scripture is allied with an assumption that each passage of the Bible has only one meaning, it raises the question of how the group can determine which, if any, of their readings is 'right'. In some circumstances, as N. T. Wright points out in a discussion of the nature of biblical authority, this can result in a situation where 'we imagine that we are "reading the text, straight", and that if somebody disagrees with us it must be because they, unlike we ourselves, are secretly using "presuppositions" of this or that sort' (1991: 9); historically, as he goes on to note, this assumption of being able to possess *the* biblical truth has led to the splintering of Protestant denominations (1991: 13).

Over recent decades, the emergence of differing perspectives (such as feminist, post-colonial or ecological) and hermeneutical theories (such as reader-response), together with the development of contextual Bible studies and a greater focus on the role of ordinary Christians, has produced, and given greater prominence and academic legitimacy to, a vast array of differing understandings of biblical texts. One possible strategy for dealing with the multiplicity of different readings emanating from different readers is to see it as a manifestation of the interaction between reader and text (Fish, 1980) and assume a post-modern, extreme reader-response acceptance of all and any readings as valid, of an interpretive pluralism. Most scholars locating

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<sup>109</sup> This is supported by a comment from one of the Bible Society staff who conceived the project: 'I suppose there's an aim to give the text back to the people, to say, "it's your text"'.

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themselves within the Christian tradition, while they may value aspects of a reader-response approach, envisage there being some limits to the interpretations placed upon biblical texts; with John Barton they may quote from Umberto Eco: '*it is not true that everything goes*' (Eco, 1992: 144, emphasis original; cited in Barton, 2007: 114).<sup>110</sup> However, their alternative proposals vary. Some are surveyed here to see what light they might shed on strategies for fostering biblical engagement by ordinary Christians.

### **Biblicism – implicit denial of multivocality**

First, is a viewpoint which was hinted at in the response above from someone who dropped out of Pathfinder (see p.173). The model of a biblicist position, as described by Christian Smith in *The Bible Made Impossible* (2011: 4-5) would lead one to expect to find one 'right' interpretation for each passage and to be able to use the text as a handbook or manual from which one might derive definitive guidelines on how to live 'Christianly'.<sup>111</sup> Smith argues that this model of the Bible is incoherent; if it were true, then Christians would all agree on how to interpret and apply the biblical texts, which is patently not the case. They cannot even agree on which important issues they *should* have agreement (2011: 16ff, 24-5, cf. 43-54). He goes on to suggest that this position is a consequence of the embrace, by many Christians, of modernity's concept of epistemological foundationalism (2011: 150; see also others including Borg, 2001: 5; Cox, 1996 [1994]: 303). While Smith describes this approach within American churches, the work of Andrew Village suggests that similar attitudes, at least regarding specific parts of the Bible, can be found among some British evangelicals (Village, 2013: 60-70).

The biblicist attitude need not be seen as anti-intellectual. While it often includes a belief that anyone can understand the plain sense of a passage if they have a good translation in their language, and that the obvious, plain sense is the best way to understand the text, this understanding may in some cases also be open to relevant literary, historical and cultural information (Smith, 2011: 4). In one

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<sup>110</sup> For examples of criticisms of Fish's work, from a Christian perspective, see Thiselton (1992: 535-550) and Vanhoozer (1998: 317-20).

<sup>111</sup> Smith does make clear that he is describing a model of an approach rather than the formalised position of any particular group. However, he claims that 'this constellation of interrelated assumptions and beliefs informs and animates the outlooks and practices of major sectors of institutional and popular conservative American Protestantism, especially evangelicalism' (2011: 5).

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way, then, this expectation of there being a plain sense which constitutes *the* meaning of the text can be seen echoed in some academic institutions training professional Christians. Here, rather than accept a naive reading of the plain sense with no need of further study or investigation, there is instead, explicitly or implicitly, the acceptance of an historical-critical interpretation of a biblical passage as providing the *best* plain sense reading; biblical scholars may then be viewed as ‘gate-keepers’ by whom the readings derived from other approaches (reader-response, post-colonial etc) should be evaluated (Martin, 2008: 14-17).<sup>112</sup> This, then, is one possible answer to the questions raised by the multivocality arising from different readers: judge the readings, possibly by employing the fruit of historical critical research, to conclude which is the *one* right interpretation.<sup>113</sup> Of course, this need not invalidate a range of differing *applications* of the text to the reader’s own context but it might sharply curtail the scope of readings and applications considered legitimate. It also risks restricting the interpretation of the Bible to the professionals who have the necessary training and effectively disempowering ordinary Christians. None of the Pathfinder resources followed this approach; on the contrary, some of them promoted strategies that led to multivocal expressions. In light of the aim of this project, to establish the best strategy by which ordinary Christians might be encouraged to engage more with their scriptures, this approach appears of limited usefulness; the only implication would be the need to equip ordinary Christians with, at the very least, basic hermeneutical tools. I go on here to examine other strategies which, rather than provide means to test for the *one* right articulation of a text, instead create a framework within which an expectation of fruitful multivocality might be nurtured.

### **Expecting and accepting the multivocality of the scriptures**

In contrast to the biblicist model, Smith speaks of ‘scripture’s rich multivocality and polysemy’ (2011: 177). It is evident that, by this, he is referring in part to the different voices heard in different texts from the Bible; he uses, among other

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<sup>112</sup> As noted in Chapter One, Martin’s work was conducted in the U.S.A.

<sup>113</sup> Stephen Fowl refers to this approach as determinate interpretation: ‘One might even say that the aim of this type of interpretation is to render interpretation redundant by making the meaning of the biblical text clear to all reasonable people of good will. Determinate interpretation views the biblical text as a problem to be mastered’ (Fowl, 1998: 32). Such readings are ‘conceived of (at least implicitly) as a sort of property with which the text has been endowed’ and there is an assumption of a one-way route from interpretation to practice (33-4).

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metaphors, an image of the scriptures as a jigsaw; one can make several alternate pictures if different pieces are left out but it is impossible to construct only one picture making use of all the pieces (2011: 43-54). Perfect harmonisation is impossible. However, he also refers to the ambiguity inherent in the nature of the genre of biblical texts (127-31); repeatedly he stresses that the Bible is *not* a handbook in which one may enquire to find a 'Christian way' of doing something, whether it be running a business or a marriage.<sup>114</sup> Smith is not alone in this (see, for example, Wright, 1991), nor in offering strategies for not only explaining the existence of, but also handling, the differing understandings arising from differing articulations and interpretations of the Bible among Christians. Here I shall examine some possible broad approaches to scripture which may provide frameworks for building an expectation of a plurality of readings among ordinary Christians.

### ***Employing a Christological hermeneutical lens – following the New Testament writers***

Smith himself rejects a postmodern acceptance of any and all readings, suggesting instead a critical realist approach. His own prescription is to jettison the assumptions of Biblicism and accept the nature of the scriptures as they are: not a handbook but a library of documents of differing genres and voices.<sup>115</sup> To this library of jigsaw pieces one should apply a Christological hermeneutical lens, not to impose a picture that makes sense of all the pieces but to emphasise the central purpose of the scriptures, which is not to be a handbook for Christian life but to tell us of Christ. The employment of a Christological

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<sup>114</sup> Smith repeatedly attacks the idea that the Bible is intended to be used as a handbook (2011: 5-7, 80, 82, 93, 109-11, 124, 162, 176). Interestingly, when those embarking on the Pathfinder programme completed the initial 'diagnostic questionnaire', over 25% of them agreed the Bible is 'a manual for life'. One Pathfinder, when asked how they would describe the role the Bible played in their life, said that it was 'like a handbook from the manufacturer'.

<sup>115</sup> He cites Gordon Fee and John Goldingay in this respect: 'God did not choose to give us a series of timeless, non-culture-bound theological propositions to be believed and imperatives to be obeyed. Rather he chose to speak his eternal Word *this* way, in historically particular circumstances and in every kind of literary genre. By the very way God gave us this Word, he locked in the ambiguity. So one should not fight God and insist that he give his Word another way or, as we are more apt to do, rework his Word along theological or cultural prejudgments that turn it into a mine field of principles, propositions or imperatives but denude it of its ad hoc character as truly human. The ambiguity is part of what God did in giving us his Word in *this* way. Our task is to recognize and capitalize on what God has done' (Fee, 2005 [2004]: 370, emphasis original; cited by Smith, 2011: 129, n.4); 'The Torah and the Epistles record the solutions that early Christian groups reached to the questions facing them, and we understand those solutions in relation to their specific problems as part of their witness. We do not have to assume that these solutions are always universalizable and directly binding on us. They are part of the witnessing tradition' (Goldingay, 1987: 78; cited by Smith, 2011: 110-11).

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hermeneutical lens through which to interpret the Old Testament has a long and distinguished history, with Christian writers from the New Testament authors onwards finding typological and allegorical readings in the Old that enable readers to unpack the significance of the Christ event (see p.187). This strategy does not see the 'intended meaning' of the original text, or any original 'authorial intent' as the 'only' one for Christian readers. The New Testament reveals a 'second narrative' which gives fresh meanings to passages in the earlier Testament (Steinmetz, 2003: 55):

I do not have to believe that Second Isaiah had an explicit knowledge of the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth to believe that he was part of a larger narrative that finds its final, though not its sole, meaning in Christ. ... the meaning of his work cannot be limited to the narrow boundaries of his explicit intention. Viewed from the perspective of the way things turned out, his oracles were revealed to have added dimensions of significance that no one could have guessed at the time. It is not anachronistic to believe such added dimensions of meaning exist. It is only good exegesis (2003: 65).

Furthermore, since different New Testament writers employ the same Old Testament texts in different ways, and differing lines of teaching can be found within the New Testament books, it may be claimed that 'the New Testament canon canonizes diversity – diversity of interpretation and practice' (Dunn, 2012: 159).

In his exploration of *Reading the Bible After Christendom*, Lloyd Pietersen takes a Jesus-centred interpretive approach further than merely finding Christological understandings of Old Testament texts (2011: 69-84). After noting that Jesus' example and teaching should encourage us to seek readings which lead us to further love God and our neighbour, and contribute towards a realisation of the values of the heart of the law – justice, mercy and faith – Pietersen goes on to suggest that we read the Bible through prophetic, pastoral and poetic lenses, each derived from images of Christ he finds in the gospels; he does not see these approaches as exhaustive but hopes this strategy will 'demonstrate that there is no monolithic way to interpret Scripture – our interpretations are inevitably plural and should be celebrated as such' (2011: 70).<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Part of this approach dates back at least as far as Augustine's oft-quoted maxim: 'Whoever, therefore thinks that he understands the divine Scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build the double love of God and our neighbor does not understand it at all' as cited by Stephen Fowl (1998: 86, n.55).

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So one possible strategy for a programme aiming to promote biblical engagement by ordinary Christians and, at the same time, provide a framework for them to understand reader-generated diversity in reading, is to adopt and promote a specifically Christological hermeneutic to shape their understanding and applications of biblical texts. If adopted, it would have certain implications for the content and organisation of such a programme. Firstly, there would be the need for inclusion of good illustrations, from the pages of the New Testament and elsewhere, of the process and consequences of such a hermeneutic, with a view to creating an expectation of a plurality of possible readings of at least the Old Testament. An historical approach, using examples from throughout Christian history and across its traditions, might serve to assure users of the credentials of this approach. An overview of the content and structure of both Testaments would be an essential prerequisite or introductory element of such a strategy. Such elements were found within both Pathfinder's DS and MGS.

It might, however, also be observed that, while Pietersen's strategy provides something of an ethical filter by which readings may be evaluated, there is no integral means of weighing up alternative readings produced by a Christological hermeneutic. Among the Pathfinder materials, MGS was centred on fostering Christ-like virtues in the hermeneut herself but none focussed specifically on this approach. Meek came close, in that the last session read the story of Naboth in the light of the Beatitudes; despite this strategy, some of those at church F rejected the readings as imposing an external meaning upon the biblical texts. I would suggest that, while a Christological hermeneutic has a long pedigree within church history and a fruitful 'track record', it is of most use regarding the Old Testament, and even with Pietersen's wider framing, it alone may be inadequate with regard to training contemporary ordinary Christian readers.

### ***Scripture as testimony and as narrative***

The mention, above, of a second narrative, introduces another possible angle from which ordinary Christians might be positioned to deal with reader-generated multivocality; this approach sees both Testaments as testimony to the journey of God with God's people, the community living with God; this testimony, expressed through the various genres of the Bible, can then be

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viewed as a narrative or drama to be continued, lived and enacted, by members of the current community of God. This dynamic approach towards the Bible offers room for variety among the lived responses of God's people yet, at the same time, provides guidelines for it; consideration of the story as a whole will indicate that some readings and responses are incompatible with the overall narrative. N. T. Wright sees this way of viewing scripture as a means by which we may understand the *authority* of the biblical texts. The biblical narrative, albeit one which has to be constructed from a multifarious set of documents of differing genres including narratives, may be seen as comprising an incomplete 'script'. Readers live in the penultimate act, while knowing the story so far and the eschatological climax to which God is leading the 'plot'. Their lives are, then, improvisations, guided by the authority of the biblical 'script', consisting

in the fact of an as yet unfinished drama, which contained its own impetus, its own forward movement, which demanded to be concluded in the proper manner but which required of the actors a responsible entering in to the story as it stood, in order first to understand how the threads could appropriately be drawn together, and then to put that understanding into effect by speaking and acting with both *innovation* and *consistency* (Wright, 1991: 19, emphasis original).

The concept of seeing the biblical texts as the basis of a story which may then shape not only the lives but also the characters of its readers is also taken up by others: 'we become who we are by exposure to the Christian story and the demands of discipleship. ...How we respond to the story in the practice of our discipleship will then reinforce our basic habitus. Thus we establish our identity as Christians by living under the influence of the basic stories of the faith' (Ballard and Pritchard, 1996: 152-3; see also Lash, 1982: 471; Vanhoozer, 2005).

Viewing the Bible as a kind of script from which one should 'improvise' an application allows some room for a multiplicity of readings; differing performances may each be seen as a legitimate improvisation or 'riff' of possible enactments of the story within the lives and contexts of different believers. Judgement as to the validity of any such improvisation would be possible in the light of the script as a whole; does it constitute a convincing and congruent performance in its specific circumstance and setting?

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If one wishes to use this strategy with regard to designing materials to promote biblical engagement, it also, as with the previous strategy, would imply the need for an overall survey of the whole Bible. Elements of the programme should convey an awareness of genre and of the relationships between different biblical books but also communicate a grand narrative constituting the Christian story across the diversity of the biblical library. In Pathfinder, the in-development version of DS attempted to use this strategy. However, there would also be a need for an evaluative process by which different performances may be judged against the script: someone may suggest that shooting a doctor for carrying out abortions is a legitimate application of Genesis 9.6 (see, for example O'Boyle, 2002: 35-6) but most believers would, I suggest, find that a totally inappropriate improvisation of the text. The inculcation of mechanisms for critical evaluation by self and by one's community would necessitate the establishment of criteria against which suggested performances might be assessed. The only Pathfinder resource providing any kind of materials of this sort is MGS which raises questions of the situation of the reader and of the historical and literary context of the biblical texts.<sup>117</sup>

### ***A case-study: Pentecostal approaches to reader-generated multivocality***

#### *Expectations of multivocality within community*

Some branches of the church have had more cause to reflect on the topic of reader- or hearer-generated multivocality due to their theological understanding of the perspicuity of the scriptures and of the contributions to be expected from ordinary Christians. The Pentecostal tradition has, since it arose, been known for its emphasis on the ability of each Spirit-filled believer to apply the Bible to their own situation (Anderson, 2014: 222-5; Cox, 1996 [1994]). The central focus is on the meaning of the text for readers, resulting in the generation of multiple meanings for biblical texts, and this is reflected in preaching; 'narrative, illustration and testimony rather than esoteric and theoretical principles dominate the sermon content' (Anderson, 2014: 223). Allan H. Anderson notes that this has both positive and negative consequences:

They are usually unaware of their own biases and limitations and sometimes have an inadequate hermeneutic for the application of biblical

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<sup>117</sup> The roles of the Holy Spirit and academic input in generating and evaluating different readings will be discussed in the next chapter.

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principles to moral issues. They often have a pragmatic hermeneutic which selectively decides what parts of the Bible to take literally and then spiritualizes or allegorizes the rest, and they tend to exegete their experience in their testimonies, preaching and teaching. However, the strength of this hermeneutic lies in the serious role it gives both to the biblical text and human experience. There is a distinctive Pentecostal hermeneutic where the role of the Spirit in human experience is an essential part of understanding the biblical text. (Anderson, 2014: 225).<sup>118</sup>

The strengths and weaknesses of Pentecostal reading practices are also exposed in Jacqueline Grey's exploration of ordinary hermeneutics among Australian Pentecostals; her examination of readings from sermons and by ordinary believers displayed an enormous variety.<sup>119</sup> She finds that the 'dynamic' nature of Pentecostal reading experiences leads to a sense of encountering God and shapes both individuals and communities but that their tendency to see the text as applying directly to them leads them to 'annihilate' the distance between their horizon and that of the text; this opens up the possibilities of 'inappropriate reading' (Grey, 2011: especially 114-21). Reader-generated multivocality is thus expected within this denomination, but its sheer variety and volume raises the question of how to ensure that readings are 'appropriate'. What can this strand of the church contribute towards a consideration of how to promote biblical engagement by ordinary believers across other Christian traditions with regard to not only the *acceptance* but also the *handling* of a multiplicity of readings?

### *Managing multivocality in and by community*

With regard to managing the multivocality generated by experience among Pentecostal believers, French Arrington suggests that:

to guard against personal experience displacing Scripture as the norm or against excesses in interpretation, *active participation is vital in the Pentecostal community of faith where the members are bound together by bonds of love, interdependence, and accountability.* (1994: 106, my emphasis).

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<sup>118</sup> This focus on experience might also be seen as a point of commonality between Pentecostal practices and the processes of contextual Bible study.

The exact nature of the 'Pentecostal hermeneutic' has been the topic of much scholarly intra-denominational debate, especially over the past two to three decades. See Grey (2011: 36-61), for an introductory survey and numerous articles in *Pneuma* and the *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* such as those by McLean (1984), Cargal (1993), Cartledge (1996) and Pinnock (2009).

<sup>119</sup> Surprisingly, given the focus of her study, Grey does not make use of the term 'ordinary theology' or reference the work in the field.

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Clark Pinnock similarly expects a plurality of readings among charismatic Christian communities; it is 'inevitable, owing to the fluid nature of texts. There are many possible interpretations although not all of them are equally valid. Some are better than others. Interpretation involves testing and discerning'. Like Arrington, he suggests that, among the 'safeguards' the best is

the authority of the charismatic community. We are all members of a Spirit-community and not merely individualists. Every one of us has responsibility for the common life. All are called to teach, admonish, and judge. ... The main point is this—believers are not left to themselves. ... Even when few 'lay' people are theologically trained, the *sensus fidelium* works rather well. Mature believers can often spot a false apostle miles away (2009: 168).

However, while the community is necessary for managing and evaluating multivocality it may not be sufficient; this would especially be the case if all members of the community share the same false presuppositions regarding the text.

### *Managing multivocality by managing horizon fusion*

Grey's examination of ordinary Pentecostal believers, including the weaknesses of their approaches, led her to put forward a reading model centred in her tradition's concept of being 'participants in the ongoing history (God's story) of salvation' (2011: 154-86, citing 156-7); this focus on community and story, or narrative, to provide safe contexts within and against which readings may be evaluated, echoes those strategies seen above. However, Grey suggests that the Pentecostal sense of continuity with God's people throughout history, including the Old Testament, needs to be tempered with an awareness of the distance between 'them' and 'us', between the original authors and/or recipients and the modern believers; this is a distance not only of culture and worldview but one compounded by the discontinuities evident in Christian understanding of the relationship between the two Testaments (Grey, 2011: 164-70). Her model focuses on the question of textual meaning for 'me', 'them' and 'us; this retains the value of an individual's encounter with God, through the Holy Spirit, in reading the Bible ('me'), but sees this encounter as shaping the individual to be part of the Christian community, both Pentecostal and Christian in general ('us'). Furthermore, consideration of what the text meant to 'them' will not only bring awareness of the distance between the readers' horizon and that of the text but also give voice to 'their' testimony and give value to the action of God *in*

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'their' circumstances. Grey recognises that a full account of who 'they' were is impossible and a partial understanding, even of how they might be identified, never mind the details of their circumstances, would only be accessible to professional Christians. Nonetheless, she suggests that even some consideration of the question will be valuable:

The identification of 'them' will differ according to the critical skills, knowledge and resources of the Pentecostal reader. For a lay reader with little knowledge of the scholarly debates regarding authorship and redaction, the meaning for 'them' may refer to the 'old testament times' generally (i.e., the ancient society before the coming of Christ). In comparison, for a reader exposed to more scholarly issues, the 'them' of a text may be more specific. ... Despite this variance of knowledge, the purpose of appreciating the meaning of the text for 'them' is the attempt to understand the text from the general historic-cultural location and world view of the older covenant text. ... In this way, the reading for 'them' is not a domestication of the world of the Old Testament text making it simply a mirror reflection of contemporary culture and its values and worldviews (Grey, 2011: 165).

This model, of considering the text's meaning to 'me', 'them' and 'us', despite being designed with Pentecostals in mind, offers a possible strategy for other churches, not just for promoting an expectation of multivocality (the very model presupposes the possibility of different answers for 'me', 'them' and 'us') but also for introducing some principles of hermeneutics and thus managing the possible diversity generated by preventing an inappropriate premature fusion of horizons.

### ***Parallel strategies in different ecclesial situations***

A similar strategy to that of Grey was earlier put forward by Andrew Rogers, following his examination of Bible reading practices among two English churches belonging to contrasting evangelical 'tribes'.<sup>120</sup> Some of his concluding recommendations echo the themes, above, of community, Christological reading and 'big story' approaches; they include noting that churches should 'treat hermeneutical apprenticeship as a fully corporate activity' (2009: 282) and that there is a need to communicate 'the plot of Scripture's Story in the light of a Christological hermeneutics' (280). However, another recommendation for promoting a 'virtuous hermeneutical apprenticeship' within evangelical church congregations is to promote an awareness of the congregation's horizons

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<sup>120</sup> Roger's thesis is dated 2009 although it was only recently published (2015).

## CHAPTER 5. Biblical multivocality within community

(Rogers, 2009: 274-6) 'in order for genuine encounter with Scripture to take place' (274). Rogers notes that some areas of a congregation's horizons are implicit rather than explicit and, if not revealed by self-reflection, the former can prevent readers being open to challenge from the biblical texts; this reflective process would necessitate there being 'providers of theological education to prioritise such hermeneutical skills' (Rogers, 2009: 276). He also suggests that there should be 'strategies for strangeness', to maintain the distance of the text and prevent premature fusion of horizons; the most obvious of these, he observes, is attention to the text horizon. In the churches studied this happened most in small group Bible study settings (Rogers, 2009: 285-90). These 'strategies for strangeness', together with reflection on the reader's horizon, were manifest in the Pathfinder resource MGS, the core of which was designed by Rogers; it included materials on better understanding one's own position and presuppositions and others leading to examination of the literary and historical contexts of the biblical passages examined.

Taken together, the reflections above suggest that a multi-denominational programme designed to encourage ordinary Christians to engage with the Bible should include an overview of the narrative which may be read across the biblical library, together with materials that unpack how Christians read the Bible, including the Old Testament, as centred on Christ. However, this should be accompanied by resources that facilitate readers' own reflection on what they and their church traditions bring to the text, alongside others that support communication of historical and literary features of the texts; these could help nurture a constructive fusion of horizons.

I shall consider further the role of the community in this process (p.190), after first examining historical perspectives on this issue. The role of critical historical and other studies is examined in more detail in the next chapter.

### **Reflections on biblical multivocality arising in communities, historically**

As noted in Chapter Three, reading in community was a given for Christians from New Testament times onwards. The practice of *lectio divina* may have been carried out individually but each participant was part of a local and trans-local faith community and the written products of such meditations were subject

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to scrutiny by their peers. Furthermore, there was an expectation, built into early church and mediaeval exegesis, of a multiplicity of readings. Perhaps the most commonly encountered description of pre-critical biblical hermeneutics is that of the 'four-fold senses'; Gregory the Great is often cited in this respect, listing them as literal, allegorical, tropological and anagogical (de Lubac, 1998: 134; Thiselton, 1992: 812-13). As Henri de Lubac shows, with extensive examples from writers from the early church to the late Middle Ages, the different 'senses' of the scriptures were in fact discussed much earlier than Gregory and differed in number, name and order, not only between authors but even within the writings of the same authors (1998: 75-160). Nonetheless, despite a variation in the details of the way the senses were understood, it is clear that biblical texts were read with the expectation that they held not only at least one 'plain sense' or literal historical meaning (even if that was an allegorical meaning) but also a spiritual sense, which could be seen to encompass any non-literal allegorical, moral or anagogical reading of the passage.<sup>121</sup> This was related to the relationship between the Old Testament and the New, the former of which was seen as being fulfilled by, and thus being totally in harmony with, the latter.<sup>122</sup> Key to this was the ability to read the spiritual sense of the Old Testament, an ability which was and is dependent on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit; spiritual readings can only be made by those of faith, and spiritual understanding

cannot be a matter of pure technique or pure intellectuality ... the Spirit of Christ cannot be eliminated from it. ... This spiritual understanding does not impede the scientific work of the exegete any more than scientific work can replace the spiritual understanding' (de Lubac, 1998: 264).

de Lubac also discusses the ways in which readings were assessed for their validity (2009 [1961]: 73-85) noting that clear distinctions were made between heretical readings and those interpretations that were acceptable because they were consistent with a framework of Christian understanding about Christ. In this regard, the writings of the Church Fathers, the community of believers in the past, were seen as providing patterns of interpretation as well as the

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<sup>121</sup> As noted in Chapter Three, Eugene Rogers argues, from Thomas Aquinas's works, that even the 'literal' meaning was open to a diversity of understandings (1996: 65-8).

<sup>122</sup> The Church, de Lubac argues, has maintained a middle way between two extremes: to discard the Old or to return to reading the Old as the letter of the law (1998: 225-34, 242).

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contemporary community, with its shared narratives and traditions (Thiselton, 1992: 142-5).<sup>123</sup>

This framework of tradition, handed down from the Fathers, was disrupted following the Reformation. As noted above, the subsequent splintering of Protestant denominations was consequent upon the assumption that there could only be one right interpretation of biblical passages. However, the Reformers were not the only new tradition to emerge from the upheaval. The Anabaptist strand had its own distinctive approach towards the texts, characterised not only by a belief in the perspicuity of scripture but also by an openness to the inspiration of the Spirit and, consequently, the role of each member of the congregation in reading, and evaluating readings of, the biblical texts (Pietersen, 2011: 40-66):

A criticism of congregational hermeneutics is that it simply pools ignorance. However, Anabaptists, who were very biblically literate, believed interpretation involved listening to the Spirit and that Scripture was simple enough for all to understand, at least in part. Studying together enabled each to share insights the Spirit gave. Seeking consensus helped them discard unreliable interpretations and confirm those that were helpful. Furthermore, the Spirit's presence was promised in a special way in the congregation. Congregations were undoubtedly prone to domination by vocal characters and those with more experience or education. But its strength was its refusal to exclude its weakest members, since the Spirit was available to all. The ploughboy might sometimes understand Scripture better than the theologian (Pietersen, 2011: 59).

Other key features of Anabaptist hermeneutics were its Christocentrism – to the degree that, while not rejecting the Old Testament, Anabaptists tended to overemphasize the discontinuity between Old and New – and its emphasis on application and the need for obedience. Given these features, including their openness to expecting a plurality of biblical readings from ordinary members of the congregation (2011: 44), and despite an inadequate treatment of the Old

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<sup>123</sup> Thiselton illustrates the functioning of the community by drawing on the work of Gillian Evans, contrasting the writings of the charismatic Rupert of Deutz and Anselm of Canterbury. Thiselton concludes: '*Anselm is one of those who helps to shape the framework of tradition within the boundaries of which Rupert can engage in contemplation.* The images and figurative meanings of the biblical writings are thus placed in contexts which constitute, for him, trustworthy frameworks which have both a centre and an ultimacy' (Thiselton, 1992: 145, emphasis original). Both writers are learned and both view the scriptures as inspired, yet they work with those texts in quite different ways, though these may be seen as complementary. However, de Lubac contests the understanding, on the part of Rupert's biographer, Canon A. Cauchie, of a divergence of approach between Anselm and Rupert (2009 [1961]: 85-7).

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Testament (54-6), Pietersen argues that a consideration of their hermeneutics can inform a contemporary approach to reading the Bible in a post-Christendom, post-modern world.

With regard to considering how to deal with multivocality within a contemporary programme to promote biblical engagement, it would seem wise to draw on this considerable history of an expectation of guided diversity in articulating and applying the scriptures. Ordinary Christians who are assured that their differing articulations of scripture have antecedents with a long and fruitful history of use in the Church, past and present, are likely to have more confidence both in making their own readings and in giving a hearing to others. The creation of an atmosphere of expectation that 'even' ordinary Christians can read and hear God through the texts of the Bible, is an essential prerequisite to encouraging biblical engagement. In this regard, some appreciation of the history of biblical engagement and practices, such as *lectio divina*, would play a useful role in any programme attempting to foster contemporary biblical engagement among ordinary believers.

### **The value and role of reading in community with regard to multivocality in contemporary biblical engagement**

The work discussed above has drawn on experiences and reflections from a number of different Christian strands. It could be argued that these reflections are of limited usefulness if considering how to promote biblical engagement by ordinary believers in any and all traditions. Doubtless within some biblicist traditions, where texts are understood to have some pre-defined and prescribed meaning, it will prove difficult if not impossible to nurture a toleration for and awareness of the value of what other strands of Christianity understand as the multivocality of the scriptures, even supposing those organising such a programme were open to the concept. Even in churches whose theology allows for multivocality, and whose professional Christians understand and work with this concept, if the prevailing culture is steeped in modernist approaches to knowledge there may be difficulties in promoting the idea of biblical engagement among ordinary Christians as anything other than the receipt of established truth. Nevertheless, the evidence from small groups within Pathfinder, and from other studies, suggests that this format fosters an

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openness to diversity even in churches with generally low expectation of multivocality within their doctrinal framework. Therefore, at least with regard to small groups, some helpful principles may be drawn from our consideration of both historical and denominationally specific cases.

Firstly, a stress upon biblical engagement and reflection as something undertaken as a member of one's faith community, would be wise; even if specific exercises might be designed to be completed individually and incorporate private reflection, participants should be encouraged to be an integral part of a group of Christians, large or small, with whom they meet and share their lives and their readings of scripture. Indeed, the readings should be viewed as a means to shape their common life together. While teaching on the need for meeting in groups, and the nature of believers as members of the body of Christ, can easily be found in the pages of the New Testament, this emphasis on engaging the Bible as part of a group is something which probably needs particular emphasis in English culture which, in common with other Western cultures, has a worldview focused on the rights and autonomy of the individual. Within the Pathfinder programme, the lyfe materials provided the best example of this process in action.

However, being a reader in a community in which a multitude of readings may be articulated, heard and, if necessary, acted upon, is not sufficient in itself. Once the expectation of multivocality within a community has been established it remains necessary to evaluate the different articulations of the text that emerge. Consideration of biblicist approaches, as well as those of the Anabaptists and contemporary ordinary Pentecostals, brings up a common feature: a tendency to minimise or even abolish any sense of a difference in horizon between reader and text. Indeed, Grey's 'me', 'them' and 'us' model (2011: 154-86) specifically attempts to address precisely this fault, and both she and Rogers suggest a role for some basic hermeneutical skills. In a programme promoting biblical engagement by ordinary believers, these skills might, as a minimum, include a consideration of genre and some appreciation for the chronology and historical background of the biblical texts. Some of these aspects were delivered through the Pathfinder resources; overviews were included in DS and WO, some historical material also appeared in RRC, while MGS consisted of sessions covering various hermeneutical issues including

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genre and reader perspective. MJ and Pass were valued by Pathfinders, in part, due to their ability to convey the feel of the historical period they portrayed. Of course Grey's model does leave open the manner of interaction of the text's 'meaning' for 'me', them' and us'; the topic of how the fruits of academic study might interact with spiritual understanding of what the text means for the contemporary reader will be considered in the next chapter.

Aside from being part of a reading community which makes use of these strategies to handle awareness of horizons, what other features of such a community might be important? Some writers draw our attention to the need to consider the quality of communal life. John Christopher Thomas, notes the need for 'the presence of a sufficient level of knowledge of one another, accountability and discernment within this community to safeguard against the dangers of an uncontrolled subjectivism or a rampant individualism' (1994: 51-2). Since 'Scripture is primarily addressed not to individuals but to specific communities called into being by God' (Fowl, 1998: 8):

[t]he aim of faithful living before the Triune God becomes the standard to which all interpretive interests must measure up. One cannot begin to judge whether this standard is being achieved unless and until the interpretation of Scripture becomes socially embedded in communities of people committed to ordering their worship, their doctrines, and their lives in a manner consistent with faithful interpretation (1998:20).

Fowl goes on to remind us that communities, as much as individuals, are vulnerable to the temptation to only read from the Bible what they want to see, things that confirm them in their preconceptions and sinful attitudes, rather than allow the text to 'read' and challenge them;<sup>124</sup> he suggests that this risk may be minimised within a community that is actively seeking to maintain an awareness of this temptation and of its own sinfulness, an awareness that may be sharpened by practicing the virtues of forgiveness, repentance and reconciliation (Fowl, 1998: 62-96).<sup>125</sup>

Rogers takes this idea further. Drawing on a number of writers, including Fowl, his concluding recommendations are each linked with one or more 'hermeneutical virtues' such as honesty, openness, humility, and love; these, he

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<sup>124</sup> Fowl gives the Dutch Reformed church's use of the Bible to defend apartheid as an example of a whole community deceiving itself (1998: 96ff).

<sup>125</sup> See also n.146.

## CHAPTER 5. Biblical multivocality within community

suggests, should be learnt through a congregational hermeneutical apprenticeship (in Rogers, 2009; but also summarised in Rogers, 2013, especially 123-4). The application of his programme may be seen in the emphasis on virtues within the hermeneutics 'package', MGS, which was designed especially, by him, for the Pathfinder programme.

In the next chapter I go on to survey responses to MGS and discuss how these hermeneutical materials were viewed by the Pathfinders. This raised the much wider question of how this intellectual knowledge (including awareness of what texts meant to 'them') was to be used in conjunction with the process of listening to the Holy Spirit (for what it means to 'me' and 'us') and what were described as 'spiritual' or 'heart' readings arising from life.

### **Conclusions**

Varieties of readings occur across the community of faith but their reception varies with the theology of scripture in each church. In some traditions the ecclesial situation of the reader affects how their articulation of the text is received; readings by ordinary believers may not be given a hearing or may be ascribed less importance. Some contemporary churches expect Bible passages to have one 'right' meaning and it is generally expected that this will be validated by the findings of historical criticism. The application of this right meaning may then be open to the discernment of the community guided by the Spirit. Others anticipate the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in each believer to generate an application specific to them and their context. Any programme designed to promote biblical engagement among ordinary Christians needs to take account of differing theologies in this area and to provide strategies for handling multiple readings and creating some sustainable space for 'ordinary' readings; otherwise the very project of promoting non-professional biblical engagement is undermined.

The reflections above, on both contemporary and historical practice, suggest that there are a number of alternative routes whereby a programme promoting biblical engagement by ordinary Christians might make room for the expectation of a plurality of articulations of biblical texts. Historical examples would support the legitimated existence of such readings throughout church history and across denominational boundaries; this approach might be found acceptable by those

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churches which put more emphasis on authoritative tradition. Contemporary reflection suggests a number of different possible hermeneutical strategies for introducing the concept, and examples, of permissible multivocality; some of these might be more suitable for some ecclesial situations than others.

However, the discussion also raised the question of how such sometimes divergent readings might be evaluated in order to guard against the espousal of readings which militate against normative Christian understanding, or readings arising from the preconceptions and prejudices of the reader. The situation of the reader within an evaluative community would be a valuable concept to convey within a programme of biblical engagement. Commonly held concepts such as love of God and love of neighbour could helpfully be held up against suggested readings, as an ethical filter, to see if they are compatible with such basics of the faith. However, while the role of the group is valuable, any such evaluation will probably also rest on their, hopefully, Holy Spirit-mediated discernment influenced to a greater or lesser extent by any intellectual understanding of the scriptures which any of them possess. How these two 'factors' interact, both in generation and evaluation of different textual articulations will form the subject of the next chapter.

# CHAPTER 6. Head and heart: cultivating a holistic approach for ordinary hermeneutics

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## Introduction

The previous chapter explored means by which ordinary Christians might be enabled to explore and accept multivocality among their community readings of biblical texts. The existence of such multivocality, even if it is accepted as a feature of the nature and role of the Bible in the Church, raises the important issue of the evaluation of such differing readings and this, in turn, leads us to consider if and how ordinary Christians (as opposed to the authoritative bodies within the church, or academically-trained professionals) might be empowered to consider the validity of proposed interpretations and applications of the Bible. In the perceptions reflected in the Pathfinder data it would seem that both cognitive understanding and the work of the Holy Spirit are commonly understood to play a role, in both the generation of readings and in any subsequent evaluation of them; however, the relationship between these two factors is unclear and they are perceived as being different approaches to the texts which are in some degree of tension.

In this chapter, therefore, I will begin by summarising some of the Pathfinder comments contrasting resources such as MGS and lyfe, since a perception of two different approaches became most apparent in comments made regarding resources of these types. This is followed by an exploration of reflections on present understandings of the roles of study and of the Holy Spirit in biblical engagement by Christians, which is structured around specific comments from the Pathfinder data. The same two topics are further explored in the context of reflections on a selection of *historical* practices of biblical engagement. After an examination of how these issues are dealt with in contemporary materials designed to promote spiritual practices of biblical engagement today, such as

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*lectio divina*, the chapter concludes with suggestions for how they might be presented and treated within a programme of resources to facilitate biblical engagement by ordinary Christians. This presentation, supported by reference to church history, would seek to collapse the divide between ‘head’ and ‘heart’ approaches to the scriptures and equip its participants with the ability to integrate Bible reading skills with an openness to the Spirit.

### **Pathfinder responses to, and comparisons between, ‘head’ and ‘heart’ resources**

The intention of the personnel who put together the Pathfinder project was to provide a broad range of resources to meet their aims. However, as discussed above (Ch. 2, pp.100-102), the participants sometimes expressed uncertainty as to how the different elements of Pathfinder were expected to cohere or relate to one another. There seemed little grasp of Pathfinder as a *programme* of activities. It was in response to such a query that a Bible Society representative had addressed one small group (Church F), expressing the vision of Pathfinder quoted in Chapter One:

We want to give you something for your heads, where you put your thinking caps on, where you learn more about the Bible; we want to give you something for your hearts, that’s your walk with God, the overall spirituality; and third we want to give you something for your hands and feet in the latter stages of the Pathfinder Project where you can go out and start applying things.<sup>126</sup>

As noted in Chapter Two, there were positive responses from Pathfinders regarding the effect of the programme as a whole on their confidence in, and understanding of, the Bible (see Ch. 2, p.90ff.). At the same time, there was broad agreement among participants across the churches that some of the resources fostering this understanding did indeed require them to put on their ‘thinking caps’; in fact, a number reported finding the material in MGS too demanding (see Appendix I §1.2.2) and there was mention of others having dropped out of the programme altogether because they found this resource too difficult.

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<sup>126</sup> To the best of my knowledge, this comment was only made to one Pathfinder group but the responses dealt with here represent most of the groups.

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Nonetheless, a good proportion of the participants in Pathfinder specifically expressed appreciation for the value of learning the historical and literary background to biblical texts in the hermeneutics course (MGS), the detailed over-view (WO) and the exposition of the Letter to the Romans (RRC), even if this did require some hard thinking (see relevant sections of Appendix I and examples in sections below). These resources were sometimes contrasted with others, such as lyfe and CBS, which also generated a good proportion of positive responses but which were generally found to be much more accessible (see Appendix I §2.2.1 and §5.2.2). For example, one interviewee mentioned that she 'tended to come from a more contemplative style' so appreciated the contrast of what she termed the 'academic, historical' side of Pathfinder, that is the elements of the programme that dealt with issues of exegesis and hermeneutics. Another, who had struggled with MGS, was telling me how they were missing their usual weekly fellowship meeting, which had been replaced with Pathfinder sessions: 'Someone said that this [MGS] is more your head. The Wednesday morning Fellowship, which is the prayer and Bible study, is more the heart'.<sup>127</sup>

While the differences in format between these resources could simply be seen as a pedagogical factor relating to different interests, intellectual abilities and learning styles, the comments made often point to an understanding of there being two different approaches to reading scriptures. For example, some Pathfinders made a distinction between the value of MGS, as 'an intellectual exercise' and their need for 'the inspirational, emotional aspects as well', while others drew comparisons between an 'analytical' approach and *lectio divina*, between 'Bible study' as traditionally engaged in by the Pathfinder churches and explored in much more depth by MGS, and the kind of meditative approach promoted by lyfe. And, in the course of an interview with someone who was comparing MGS and lyfe, the participant contrasted 'the hermeneutics thing' with listening for inspiration from the Holy Spirit. I deduce that, in all these comments, a similar contrast was being drawn by Pathfinder participants although they expressed it using a number of different terms (see Table 2).

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<sup>127</sup> See also the sections on different accessibilities (Ch. 2, p.99) and the need for development of complexity from a very accessible start (Ch. 2, p.102).

**Table 2: Terms employed by Pathfinders to express a contrast between different approaches to the Bible**

<b>Head</b>	<b>Heart</b>
Making Good Sense of the Bible	lyfe
Historical/cultural study (hermeneutics)	Spirit-led
Academic/historical	Contemplative
Intellectual	Inspirational/emotional
Analytical	<i>Lectio divina</i> , personalised

I would suggest that these pairings are varying expressions of a commonly perceived contrast that might be summed up in the pairing ‘head–heart’. I cannot prove it but it seems possible that they express a facet of what might be termed a Cartesian worldview which in fact emerged also in the comment above by the Bible Society representative.<sup>128</sup> However, since I was working mostly with ordinary rather than professional Christians, this contrast may at the same time reflect a difference in *accessibility*; while some felt themselves excluded from what were perceived to be difficult aspects of studying biblical texts (‘head’) everyone might expect to read or hear the Bible and, through it, hear the Spirit address them (‘heart’).

Interestingly, when this topic came up in interviews and focus groups there was broad agreement that both these approaches, ‘head’ and ‘heart’, were of value. One church leader noted that some of his church group had begun with an attitude he summed up as ‘Well, I don’t need this; the Holy Spirit tells me how to read the Bible’ and ‘I know what I’ve been taught’; he went on to point out how, having completed Pathfinder, they had become much more open to the value of hermeneutical-based materials. At another church, there was also acknowledgment of the value of such a hermeneutical approach:

... it’s a stage further than reading. You have to learn to read before you can read the Bible. Learning to read isn’t a religious thing, is it, or a

<sup>128</sup> I acknowledge that the use of the term ‘Cartesian’ is problematic in that it implies an absence of dualism before Descartes, but have no room to explore that here.

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spiritual thing? But it's something you need to do before you can read the Bible itself. The hermeneutical is going a stage further than that. It is academic, but it helps you to understand it.

However, another participant there felt that Pathfinder 'underplayed what does the Bible speak to me today about':

the example could be, you know, the Wizard of Oz. Do you need to know that it was a parody of the American economy to enjoy it, or not? Well, a lot of people wouldn't know that, but they can still go and see it. So God can still speak to you through the Bible without knowing that it was written in the second exile period.

The writers of MGS, perhaps anticipating this kind of response, had included a session entitled 'What We Bring to the Bible' that concluded that 'the Holy Spirit and hermeneutics work together'; this fact was acknowledged by some participants when discussing this issue. However, an unresolved tension appeared to remain: *how* should they relate to one another? How should the apparent boundary between the two approaches to the text be negotiated?

The comments made spanned a number of different churches and types of church, including Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, United Reformed and free evangelical, so it does not seem to be peculiar to a specific churchmanship or pneumatology.<sup>129</sup> And the same questions arise in another study; in his work on the ways in which lay Anglicans read the Bible, Andrew Village explored the relationship between charismatic belief and strategies of biblical interpretation (Village, 2007: 145-58).<sup>130</sup> Village found a positive correlation between charismatic self-identification and the following beliefs: conservative understandings of the Bible, biblical literalism, Bible-reading frequency, belief in supernatural healing and conservative attitudes to morality; his evidence nevertheless suggested these factors were independent and not completely tied to one another. He suggests, rather, that charismatic experience shaped both biblical interpretation and expectations of the miraculous (147-51). For Village, this raised a similar question to that arising from my own data: 'What is the

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<sup>129</sup> All those considered here are Protestant churches; the distinction did not appear in responses from the charismatic church G. Unfortunately, the Catholic group of Pathfinders only completed DS and MGS so they were not in a position to compare these 'head' resources with any others. I have indicated the church sources here to clarify that quotations are from the data.

<sup>130</sup> Within his study of Anglican believers, most of the charismatics were, in effect 'charismatic evangelicals' (2007: 145), a fact he attributes to the ways in which charismatic beliefs have developed in the Anglican church in England (2007: 146-7).

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relationship between ‘biblical’ and ‘spiritual’ sources of revelation for ordinary readers of the Bible?’ (145).

As with the topic of multivocality, examined in the previous chapter, this question could be examined from a number of different starting points, drawing on diverse areas of research such as pneumatology, hermeneutics (biblical and otherwise), psychology and epistemology. Once again I have chosen to focus on a few specific areas of reflection, assembled around Pathfinder data, in order to explore the implications of the perceived head–heart tension for the preparation of materials to promote ordinary biblical engagement.

### **Contemporary reflection on the roles of intellectual study, and of the Spirit, in biblical engagement**

#### **The role of study and the findings of professional scholarship in biblical engagement by ordinary Christians**

‘[T]he hermeneutics has made the text alive’ (Church A).

‘[H]ermeneutics was so liberating ... It makes the experience of reading it quite different and quite extraordinary if you’re able to read it that broadly and fully and deeply (Church F).

These quotations illustrate the enthusiasm with which some Pathfinders responded to the resource introducing them to hermeneutical issues and skills (MGS). Near the beginning of Chapter One, I commented on the cross-denominational agreement on the need for all Christians, and not just the ‘professionals’, to engage with biblical texts. In many churches, this has been accompanied by a similar widespread agreement on the general value of biblical criticism in understanding the Bible.<sup>131</sup> This can be seen in a range of churches from Pentecostal (at least in the Minority World, see Anderson, 2014: 222-3), through Methodist (McMaster, 2002), to Catholic (Houlden, 1995 [1993]: 13-42) although, of course, there are also many churches where the findings of biblical criticism, along with those of the sciences, are largely rejected if they

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<sup>131</sup> I use the term ‘biblical criticism’ here to denote any attempt to critically examine the Bible, including historical, literary and canonical studies as well as what John Barton calls ‘advocacy readings’ such as feminist or post-colonial approaches (1984). However, some of the churches listed here might not welcome advocacy readings with the same enthusiasm that they display towards historical background material. See p.203.

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conflict with the conclusions drawn from a literalistic reading of the Bible (see my discussion of biblicism in Ch. 5, p.177ff.). Those churches taking a positive approach towards the fruits of critical study may not have formal positions regarding how useful it might be for *non-professional* Christians to have critical skills but they at least seem to assume that church teaching will take account of the findings of biblical scholarship. I will here choose to focus on this positive attitude towards the fruits of biblical criticism and examine the role of critical study in biblical engagement by ordinary Christians. I will, however, prompted by the Pathfinder responses, examine both the valuable contributions possible from scholarship *and* the tensions such findings may raise.

### ***The value, to ordinary biblical engagement, of insights contributed by professional readings***

#### *Academic study as a guard against acontextual use of biblical texts*

[MGS] made you so aware of how often, we have taken scripture and just pulled it out of the page and applied it, when perhaps it wouldn't have been appropriate really to apply that scripture, that it wasn't particularly in that context that it was written. So that was really helpful, to be able to get into the habit of looking at what was behind that particular piece of writing (Church D).

Some church sources explicitly express concern that teaching should counter a tendency for ordinary Christians to make simplistic or literalistic readings; for example, the Catholic Church document, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, warns against 'a kind of intellectual suicide' leading to 'false certitude' (Houlden, 1995 [1993]: 43-6). Furthermore, those who find value in disseminating scholarly findings may argue the need for training in order to combat the consequences of ignorance of these factors among ordinary Christians, although this can sometimes be expressed in terms which may appear somewhat condescending:

any pastor knows that if a typical congregation of Christian people is simply told to go and 'do theology,' what will come out will be a mishmash of favorite scripture verses quoted out of context, superstitions, fragments of civil religion, vague memories of poorly taught Sunday-school lessons of long ago, and the like. Not an inspiring picture. The polls of 'religious beliefs' indicate enormous confusion among professed Christians about the content and implications of their faith. If the people are to be the theologians, as they must be, theology as a fully

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responsible enterprise must teach them what it is to do theology in the community of faith. They must be taught, so that they can then surpass their teachers (Mudge and Poling, 1987: xiv).

This desire, to teach 'what it is to do theology' to the 'community of faith' lay behind the inclusion in the Pathfinder programme of the introductory hermeneutics resource, MGS. In interviews, some Bible Society personnel spoke of seeking for participants to learn to have a healthy engagement with the text; this would be one which 'recognises the riches of the many biblical voices ... and understands, particularly with the genre, that they work in different ways' and which helps them appreciate that the Bible is not a 'flat text'. Another expressed a desire to 'de-manualise' the Bible in the church and discourage an over-simplistic approach to the texts. Generally, this attitude sees a need for theological education of ordinary Christians in order to prevent them from making what, in the eyes of professional Christians, appear to be inadequate or erroneous articulations of the scriptures.

### *Raising awareness of horizons and perspectives*

I'll definitely consider what was the context that it was written in, who was it for, what was the historical context, what's the social context, who was it being presented to, how do I relate to that person, how does it relate to me? Yes, so definitely thinking through those sorts of things, and feeling a bit more confident then, in some of the things that Paul [the Apostle] says. ... I think his letters can present some of the most challenging things, but when you view them in the context that they were written for, it becomes easier (Church A on MGS).

[with regard to Paul's teaching on women]... what was written was revolutionary for its time and you have to see it in that context (Church C on MGS).

I found it very helpful to know more of what was going on, at that particular time in the Roman Empire and what was happening with the Jews and the Jewish nation (Church G on RRC).

MGS did not merely communicate the need to consider the immediate context of a verse within a larger passage but, as these quotations demonstrate, also raised the issue of the historical and social contexts of the biblical writers and their communities. RRC also covered these issues in relation to the Letter to the Romans. As discussed in Chapter Five (pp.184ff.) some contemporary readers have a tendency to be unaware of the difference between their own horizon and

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that of the biblical texts and the need to raise an awareness of this was highlighted in the study by Jacqueline Grey (2011).

Another aspect of MGS dealt with examining what the reader brings to the text and included something the materials termed 'ideological hermeneutics'; it examined feminist readings as an example of this approach. One female respondent who was, overall, more negative than positive about MGS, finding it too 'academic' and feeling that it wasn't relevant to her, nevertheless noted that she had, as a result of the session on feminism, asked that their small groups might do more studies on women of the Bible. Interestingly, however, as discussed in Chapter Five (pp.171ff.), the two groups which later worked through a social justice-oriented reading of Naboth's Vineyard (Meek) responded in markedly different ways, with some members of one group rejecting the materials because they saw them as 'imposing' meaning on the text. This would seem to suggest that there are limitations on how some perspectives might be received by ordinary Christian readers in some church traditions. I would imagine, for instance, that ordinary readers in some churches, even if they disagreed with the conclusions, might give a hearing to LGBT readings of texts key to the current debate on sexuality within many churches, while other ecclesial communities would refuse to hear such readings and insist that LGBT readings were examples of eisegesis. While some scholarly findings might provoke a challenge to existing understandings that is fruitful, and leads to reading of biblical texts that is transformational at either a personal or corporate level, others might be rejected as being inconsistent with theological stances that are espoused individually or by a denomination.<sup>132</sup> This brings us to consider some of the other tensions raised by making the findings of biblical scholarship available to ordinary readers.

### ***Tensions between professional/'head' and ordinary/'heart' readings***

#### ***Study necessary/useful but insufficient***

I think that Bible study should be on, focussing on through prayer and the Bible, on seeking God's guidance for the decisions in our lives. And that means recognising what prejudices, what attitudes, what assumptions

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<sup>132</sup> See Sparks (2008: 359-62) for a consideration of when it might be appropriate to introduce the findings of potentially controversial biblical criticism to general teaching in churches.

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we should close off, and instead recognising what questions, and what type of questions we should be asking as we study, and I haven't found that so far coming through directly. ... What we have been doing is both experiential and theological and if we simply share the theology and the interest and the intellectual buzz that is, I'm afraid, a blind alley. And so what we have to do is to share the experience and the new insights, not in a way which takes people simply down an intellectual joyride - or an intellectual horror ride if they don't like thinking. ... We have a theology which says our Christian faith is based on the word of God, as discerned by the Holy Spirit, and what this course ought to be doing for us ... is linking this greater understanding with how to pray our way into a reading and discern, through the Spirit of God, what the word of God is saying to us (Church F).

Firstly in this section, I should like to explain my juxtaposition of professional with 'head' and of ordinary with 'heart'. Ordinary and professional readers might all be considered able to 'access' inspiration from the Holy Spirit to guide their reading. However, while professional readers may also draw on the results of their intellectual, professionally-guided study ('head') these are only available to ordinary readers through the medium of church activities. (In as much as ordinary readers might study these issues on their own, they begin to move along the acknowledged spectrum between ordinary and professional readers as discussed by Astley and others [2002: 86-8; Rogers, 2009: 31-4]).<sup>133</sup> It is true that all ordinary readers have been shaped by some professional findings, through the media of 'Sunday school lessons, catechism, preaching, rituals, and the like' (Míguez, 2004: 339-41, citing from 340); nevertheless, some Pathfinder responses indicate the perception of a difference between the strategies covered in MGS and those pursued within biblical resources with a specifically devotional aim, a difference which they express in terms of intellectual/academic versus Spirit/personal. This supports my broad categorisation of the perception of ordinary readings as being 'heart' or 'spiritual' in nature in contrast with the 'head' readings produced by the academy.<sup>134</sup>

While academic study may contribute to transformational biblical readings, some Pathfinders warn that it should not be assumed that study alone will enable the reader to reach the goal of encountering God. Awareness of the

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<sup>133</sup> See also Chapter One (p.39f.).

<sup>134</sup> See also Astley's description of ordinary and academic theology as being couched in, respectively, 'mother-tongue' and 'father-tongue' (2002: 77-82).

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insufficiency of biblical criticism, alone, to support Christian biblical encounter, is also displayed in academic reflections on the differences between academic and ordinary readings. One study, by Hans Snook, from an intercultural reading project documented by Hans de Wit and colleagues (de Wit *et al.*, 2004), poses some interesting questions: 'Is a fruitful discussion between intuitive and schooled readings really possible? Or should one admit that, however valuable ordinary readings might be, academic approaches to the Bible are fundamentally different?' (Snook, 2004: 305). Despite an unbalanced comparison of ordinary and professional approaches<sup>135</sup> Snook suggests, in line with the discussion and Pathfinder comments in the previous pages, that scholarly findings could help protect readers against 'superficial or fundamentalistic' readings of the text; however, he also warns against the possible tendency to see such insight as an end in itself rather than as a means to 'use the text to reach a deeper understanding of one's environment and spirituality' (Snook, 2004: 311). This would seem to echo the Pathfinder comment above concerning academic study as an aim in itself being a 'blind alley' or intellectual joy/horror ride. Within Christian discipleship, the desired end of any such study should be to promote the biblical texts' ability to challenge the reader and result in spiritual transformation.

### *Differing aims*

...when you go on from here with Pathfinders, is there a sense of seeking God with it? Sometimes to me it was quite academic and I suppose I probably verge on the less academic when I come to reading the Bible, and therefore there's a sense of, I would hope or like to see that the next step is, 'This is all this. Now we need to get to know this God of the Bible, to seek him for what he's actually saying to us', you know, personal relationship, which to me was sometimes a bit absent. Or not as evident (Church B).

The question of differing ends, or aims, also arises in scholarly discussion of interaction between academic studies which are pursued from a self-identified confessional position and those undertaken within a non- or an a-confessional framework. The declared goal of *Biblical Interpretation*, by Robert Morgan with John Barton, is 'to make explicit a model for bridging the gulf between critical

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<sup>135</sup> His critique of scholarly readings as having less application than ordinary ones, using published commentaries as sources for the former, ignores the fact that many commentary series are not aimed specifically at confessional audiences or even written by confessing scholars (Snook, 2004: 305-6).

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scholarship and religious faith' (Morgan and Barton, 1988: 25); while the authors therefore focus a good deal on how Christian *scholars* may effectively integrate their studies and their faith, their conclusions also pertain to the wider Christian community. Their survey of developments in theology over the past couple of centuries leads them, also, to define the problem as one of *aims* rather than *method*:

It is often thought that the gulf can be bridged simply by popularizing scholarly methods and results. This has its place, and need not involve watering them down. But it does not solve the problem because the difference between the two sides is one of kind, not degrees, of knowledge. Scholars and worshippers are responding to different questions. Both the question of God and the question of Israelite, early Jewish, and early Christian religion are legitimate, but the question of the relationship between them cannot be answered simply by popularizing either side (Morgan and Barton, 1988: 18).

Any way forward which seeks to maintain dialogue with the extra-ecclesial culture needs to affirm the methods of criticism which it shares but acknowledge that believers approach the texts with different questions and different aims; only in this way can scholarly findings be of value to the church (Morgan and Barton, 1988: 271-4).

Communicating adequately, rather than simply popularising, scholarly findings, and doing so in a manner by which they can be found useful to the church, is obviously key to Christian education in general: Thomas Groome, also focusing on the importance of aim, sees the Kingdom of God as the ultimate purpose of all Christian religious education (1980: 49, 73). While arguing the need for input from biblical scholarship he warns against the Western tendency to 'reduce belief to intellectual assent' (59) and discusses how the modern turn towards experiential learning in general education reflects a similar biblical understanding of knowledge (Groome, 1980: 135-51). Finding inadequate the concept of theology as a theory to be taught and then put into practice, Groome's model of Christian education as 'shared praxis' consists of five components to be enacted within the Christian educational context: present action, critical reflection, dialogue, Story (the faith tradition found within the scriptures and church reflection on them), and Vision (the promise inherent within the Story and the response it invites; Groome, 1980: 184-206).

Employing this model involves five movements: naming and identifying present

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action, a process of reflection on participants' stories and visions, an encounter (mediated by an educator) with the Story and Vision of the Christian community, a dialectical hermeneutic between the two sets of stories and, finally, another between the two sets of visions (207-32). Speaking from within the Catholic tradition, Groome sees his model as applicable to other denominations and some other faiths and unpacks what he sees as the role of theology in this process (1980: 195, 227-30). Seeing the magisterium, or its equivalent 'guardian of the faith' as informed by both biblical scholars and the *sensus fidelium*, Groome envisages a key role for scholars in teaching but anticipates them being informed by reflection on the experience of their faith communities: 'we must refuse to hand the theological enterprise over to the exclusive domain of the specialists. ... scholars need to be informed by the shared praxis of the people' (229). This is a call for scholars who inform ordinary readings to be themselves ecclesially situated. However, this in itself may not relieve the tension between the difference in aims between scholarly and devotional readings; there is also a requirement for some interaction between the professional and ordinary readers, an intercourse which is not just one-way.

### *Bridging the gap: promoting communication between academy and church, between ordinary and professional textual articulations*

I wanted to join Pathfinders ... to improve my knowledge of the Bible as such, and there's theologians who are better at it. That's why they become vicars, and professors of Theology. I can't go that far, can't do that. I'm a more practical person, and I have to accept that, and I would find it difficult with any course. I've been to quite a few study courses, and I do always find it difficult, and I think other people do. The best thing for me, would be for somebody that we've had in the past to come and say, you know, 'We've studied this passage, and this is what it means, this is the background,' and actually teach us what it means, rather than us to try and do it ourselves, and I think that was quite difficult. I couldn't go and lead a group, teaching them how to interpret the Bible, I couldn't do that. We've all got talents in different ways, we're not all the same, are we? (Church B).

Whether or not academic study is conducted along confessional or a-confessional lines, the fact is that the pursuit has a different aim to reading with a devotional goal and requires a different skill set. Consequently, many writers have acknowledged what is sometimes termed a 'gap' between academy and church, or between Christian professionals and ordinary believers (see, for

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example, Anglican Communion, 2012: 11). Whether or not the former group are formally set apart by liturgies of consecration there is the possibility that ordinary believers, like the Pathfinder cited here, will view the activities of critical engagement ('doing theology'), or even just the consideration of the findings of biblical criticism, as something only of concern to the professionals; this may be allied to an attitude of passive acceptance of whatever conclusions the professional comes to, rather than a personal grappling with the problems thrown up by the biblical texts in all their 'otherness'. Rather than regard the Bible as the 'people's book' this attitude sees it as being mediated by a 'scribal class'.

Alternatively, ordinary Christians may feel intellectually ill-equipped to cope with the complexity of study, or, as noted above (p.203), threatened by findings that conflict with their existing understandings of the Bible: 'The effect on ordinary readers of dealing with the Bible in a scholarly way is often devastating, not because scholars intend it to be, but because the instruments used to approach the text are so different: power and knowledge rather than expectation and hope' (de Wit, 2004: 7).

In an article focusing specifically on the gap between '*academia* and *ecclesia*', Groome reiterates the value of theologically trained individuals and also stresses that theology needs to be done by all believers and needs to be 'for more than our heads' in order for it to effect a change in the world (Groome, 1987: 62); it needs to include reflection on praxis in light of the Christian Story and Vision. Others within the academy recognise the need for communicating scholarly findings, and/or the skills of critical reading, to ordinary Christians and combine this with a call for greater humility on the part of the academy, which needs to recognise that this is a reciprocal, collaborative communication, not just one-way. Astley also examines the potential conversations between ordinary and academic theology and finds grounds for optimism arising from their common use of metaphor and stories; despite this, he warns that some academically-based teaching 'seeks wholly to raze people's pre-existing theological fabrications to the ground, trampling their personal narratives and imaginative images, before attempting (often unsuccessfully) to build something entirely new and unrelated on the bulldozed site' (2013: 52). Educators should,

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he argues, begin instead by recognising that ‘most Christians are already reflecting theologically on their practice and experience; their theology goes all the way down’; therefore, effort should be spent on uncovering the ordinary theology of learners in order to render the teaching material into something that is accessible to them (Astley, 2013: 47-8).

In the inter-cultural project drawn on above (p.205), de Wit notes that non-Western ordinary reading groups find value in the scholarly findings regarding such aspects as the history and context of the biblical passage (what the Pathfinders might term ‘head’ materials) but, ‘[a]t the same time, they often justifiably ask their Western partner group, “Where can the Samaritan woman actually be found in your village?”’ (de Wit *et al.*, 2004: 509). This suggests that there were intercultural differences in the aims being pursued in the Western and non-Western readings. Snook’s study also produced evidence of a perceived head–heart distinction, in that Western reading groups thought their own readings tended to be more rational than emotional (Snook, 2004: 308-10). This supports the idea that there was a difference in aim between the groups, with non-Western readers perhaps seeking to include in their reading an application of the texts to their situations, while the Western groups possibly focused more on the historical and literary data as ends rather than means – exactly what Snook (p.205 above) warned against. In his conclusion, de Wit finds value in both approaches: ‘Interaction between spontaneous understanding and scholarly exegesis is essential for the health of both. ... an important learning of the project is that the dynamics of academic life rarely dispose its practitioners toward the perspectives of ordinary readers’ (de Wit *et al.*, 2004: 510). So communication between professionals and ordinary biblical readers may prove fruitful to both constituencies.

Some go further than observing that ordinary Christians can contribute insights that professionals overlook and that the professionals to whom they listen should be ecclesially situated; they suggest that the viewpoints of academics should be open to critical reflection and correction by ‘non-professional’ theology. One such call comes in the midst of an analysis of research into ‘theological action’; this study distinguished between four ‘voices’ of theology: an ‘operant’ theology evident in practice, an ‘espoused’ theology articulated by

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the practitioners, a formal theology expressed by theologians (the 'professionals'), and a normative theology derived from the scriptures, among other sources. Although both the normative and formal can contribute a critical eye, and sometimes novel viewpoint, to the former two they should also, it is argued, be open to questioning by the operant and espoused theologies apparent within Christian praxis and reflection by ordinary believers (Cameron *et al.*, 2010: 53-6). This viewpoint is echoed by Michael Armstrong in his explorations of ordinary church theology. If we accept that all believers may operate as 'signal receptors' of the Holy Spirit (Armstrong, 2013b) we should take seriously their views, even when they differ from what the professionals might define as orthodox, and we should not always assume the situation requires rectifying by better theological education:

the most obvious implication might be that the church and academy may well need to reconsider how it conveys orthodox theology to ordinary Christians, rather than to reconsider completely such orthodoxy.

However, where the results of ordinary theology differ from the norm in key aspects, but still find support in current theological debates, then it is more likely that the guidance of the Spirit is being reflected. In such situations, church and academy should allow these views to contribute to the discussions (Armstrong, 2013a: 104).

Despite possible scholarly reservations, the value in hearing readings from non-professional contexts which differ from one's own is also found valuable by Chris Rowland: 'at the end of the day, there may be an understanding of Scripture open to those in situations of marginalisation and vulnerability which is either closed off to, or remote from, the intellectual enterprise of the modern academy' (1997: 130). This sharing of scholarship will enable 'a common interpretative enterprise' where the academy offers 'parameters within which the search for understanding and exploration of the Scriptures can take place', and also enables discoveries to take place (Rowland, 1997: 131).<sup>136</sup>

A more negative response to academically sourced readings can be found in the work of Paul Griffiths, who describes his book on *Religious Reading* as 'a

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<sup>136</sup> See also Tim Gorringe: 'The community's awareness grows through debate and discussion and in this the person with the charism of scholarship has his or her part to play. What is that? It is not, what the academic situation so easily suggests, that of teacher to pupil, imparter of knowledge to the ignorant. There is a great deal more to reading Scripture than historical knowledge and on many counts the person with that charism is on all fours with, or in debt to, others without it' (from an unpublished paper cited by John Barton, 2007: 143).

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jeremiad against the pedagogical and reading practices of the academy, and more especially against the attitudes and techniques of professional scholars of religion' (Griffiths, 2011: 188). Alongside an exploration of religious reading, including the value of memorizing texts (28-32; drawing on some of the same historical precedents discussed in Ch.3 here), and a celebration of the richness and inexhaustibility (reader-generated multivocality?) of texts (41-2), Griffiths appears to envisage such religious reading as occurring in communities where what is – and is not – read is determined by a hierarchy of authority (60-65):

The key elements here are authority, hierarchy, community, and tradition. ... The use of authority in the determination of curriculum will usually be the most evident. Minimally, this means the presence of some acknowledged constraints upon what and how religious readers should read and compose, as well as (by entailment) upon the kinds of conclusions that can properly be drawn and taught from this reading and composition (Griffiths, 2011: 63).

Claiming that all reading is done within a framework of authority, even if it is not recognised or acknowledged, Griffiths' goes on to note that '[i]nstitutions of religious reading require teachers whose authority as such is not questioned, and submission to whose authority is itself a part of progress in religious learning' (66). This is related to his understanding of a religious account, which is:

in the eyes of those who offer it, comprehensive, unsurpassable, and central. Learning to offer such an account is, therefore, learning to engage in a strictly imperialist enterprise. All phenomena not themselves part of the religious account are to be interpreted by religious readers in light of their religious account, in the terms provided for them by their account. And this is one (perhaps the most important) dimension of discursive imperialism: the desire to write everything that is not already part of your account into its margins (Griffiths, 2011: 67).

This approach, if taken at face value, would appear to exclude much if not all critical reflection and minimise the possibility of any dialectic between religious texts and ever-new situations confronting religious readers. Moreover, the establishment of these authorities would require not only the moral and behavioural shaping he assumes but also the communication of (academically supported) information, as he admits (69). Despite Griffiths' concluding hope for more institutions that nurture the kind of religious reading he promotes (2011: 182-8), such practices within the communities he envisages would not seem

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likely to contribute to the deeper biblical engagement of ordinary Christians in ordinary churches (182-8). On the contrary, it would seem to be a recipe for prescribing textual articulations, closing down any contributions by ordinary readers or at least subjecting them to professional approval.

### ***Risks of critical study: Left in the desert?***

I felt throughout, whether it was the hermeneutics or what have you, there was no time to discuss the big issues, like genocide, or what is literal and what is parable. You know, we sort of skated around them a little bit. We made [in MGS] a whole list of terror texts but there was no time to discuss them, so you were left thinking, 'Hmm, there's more problems here than I realised' (Church E).

It would seem that, while many found that background historical and literary information about biblical texts and situations helped them understand apparently confusing passages, the Pathfinder 'head' resources may have left some participants feeling ill-equipped to deal adequately with the difficult issues that they raised. This seems to have been exacerbated by the structure of the programme where some participants felt they were not given time to explore the implications of the information or skills they were covering. Any such programme to promote biblical engagement runs the risk of exposing ordinary readers to what will be, inevitably for most of them, a limited amount of possibly challenging information which may disrupt their existing understandings of their scriptures. Can the findings of critical study threaten faith, creating as they do, perhaps for the first time, a critical distance between the ordinary reader and their text? Particularly with post-modern understandings of interpretation, can theological education leave ordinary Christians thinking the texts may mean anything at all?

The movement of a faith challenged by exposure to the fruits of scholarship is often considered in terms employed by Paul Ricoeur: a journey from a first naiveté which takes the biblical texts at face value and thus produces literalistic readings, through 'the desert of criticism' where the texts are distanced from the reader and deconstructed, to a 'second naiveté' where they may be embraced again by a faith informed by critical reflection.<sup>137</sup> Mark Wallace, in his study of

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<sup>137</sup> These terms are now used in many contexts but Ricoeur employed them in *The Symbolism of Evil* (1969 [1967]: 349-51).

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this concept in the writings of Karl Barth and Ricoeur, argues that they both saw the world of the biblical texts as

neither what traditional biblical critics investigate as the historical or authorial background behind the text, nor, as many post-modernist readers of the Bible argue, is it the self-contained and indeterminate play of meaning within the text that suspends all references to the 'real' outside the text. The world of the text, rather, is the literary and theological subject matter 'in front of the text' that potentially can liberate a 'critical' (Barth) or 'second' (Ricoeur) naiveté toward the text's claims on the reader's life and thought. Against the grain of historical criticism's disinterest in the text's theological subject matter and poststructuralism's antireferential poetic is Barth's and Ricoeur's concern for allowing the Bible to redescribe reality through its own controversial and compelling modes of discourse (Wallace, 1990: xiii).

After passing through, but never around, the first innocence of original understanding and the desert trial of rigorously examining the text's parts, the reader is asked to risk reading the text critically and naively once more—to become adult critic and naive child, as Ricoeur says—in order to situate her life and understanding within the horizon of the text's 'reality' (1990: xiv).<sup>138</sup>

This provides a positive and fruitful image of the destination of a process of training in critical examination of biblical texts, one in which faith is enriched and the reader is open to being challenged and transformed by the texts.<sup>139</sup>

However, in his study of how ordinary Christians read the Bible, Andrew Village questions how valuable theological education might be for them if the ideal move through these stages, to a mature, critical yet trusting attitude towards the

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<sup>138</sup> Interestingly for this project, Wallace also notes that in Ricoeur's understanding of texts, there is room for some multivocality: 'The biblical world is both open in the plurality of readings it can sustain and centred by the role of its God- and Christ-referents, which help coordinate the Bible's many voices. Yet these organizing referents do not create a homophonic world in which all of Scripture has only one meaning, a christocentric meaning. ... A hermeneutic of the second naiveté will focus on the give-and-take between text and audience; it will maintain that Scripture is more like a lively and open-ended game between its world and the world of the reader than it is a closed book whose meaning is exhausted by the standard theological lexicon' (Wallace, 1990: 119).

It should also be noted, however, that Vanhoozer finds more pronounced differences between Barth and Ricoeur, suggesting that closer parallels can be found between the approaches of Ricoeur and Bultmann (Vanhoozer, 1998: 414, n.208).

<sup>139</sup> Jacqueline Grey notes that, in the effort to establish a Pentecostal hermeneutic, some scholars in that tradition have also made use of 'Ricoeurian' categories (Grey, 2011: 45-6). She concludes that while this approach 'may be helpful to the Pentecostal scholar traversing the rigors of critical issues, it is not reflective of the general Pentecostal reader who remains untouched by the critical reflections of the academy and who remains in the first naiveté of uncritical acceptance' (46). However, in her subsequent development of a model that seeks to convey at least some of the fruit of scholarship to ordinary believers, she does not reflect on how this might move those readers forward, possibly into a desert of criticism if not to a fully matured second naiveté.

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scriptures, is not completed: 'I suspect that while many have tried to develop this insight and to work out what this second naivety might look like, rather fewer have succeeded' (Village, 2007: 90). This reflection arose in the context of his study on readings of the healing of the possessed/epileptic boy (Mark 9.14-29) during which he examined the factors affecting which reading horizon (reader, text or author) was preferred by ordinary readers (Village, 2007: 81-94). Although he admits that the means of forcing participants to indicate a preference for one horizon over the others was 'rather artificial' (Village, 2007: 84) and the study 'rather crude' (2007: 90), Village concludes that '[e]ducation, especially theological education, seemed to move readers to the author horizon and perhaps left them there' which might suggest 'that the task of education is sometimes left unfinished, destroying the first naivety without allowing the second' (90). He goes on to question the merit in cultivating an attitude of distance from the text, of trying to move people on from a first naiveté, in the context of a post-modern world where we doubt any claims to objectivity. In such a context :

it is equally possible to argue that someone who takes a generally literalist interpretation of scripture, and who believes that miracles can happen as described in the Bible, is more truly approaching the text in its own terms than someone whose beliefs are at odds with those of the original authors.

It could be that

a presupposition that a text is recalling something that actually happened, and that this sort of thing can and does happen in our world today, is precisely the kind of presupposition required to read this sort of text 'correctly'. It is reading with the grain of the text that allows the text to have some meaningful engagement with the reader... The question remains as to what is to be gained by challenging or changing this status quo (Village, 2007: 91).

Village then questions the proposed role for biblical criticism: 'can and should scholarship help ordinary readers avoid the dangers of pre-critical use of scripture?' (92). He suggests, rather, that it is the *aim* of the interpreter, and the consequences of their reading, that are most important; first naiveté with its literal approach to the texts does not necessarily result in 'bad' interpretations and applications. Ordinary readers with such an approach may not benefit from efforts to 'educate them' in critical study, but resources 'that stress the

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consequences of reading, rather than simply the meaning of the text, might enable some self-critical evaluation by those who otherwise would apply texts to their own lives as an unconsidered reflex' (Village, 2007: 94). On the other hand, for those others whose *non-literal* approach prevents them from relating the biblical passages to their own world, Village suggests a focus, in theological education for ordinary Christians, on resources that communicate the power of narrative to convey truth.

Part of Village's reflection, on the greater importance of the interpreter's *aims* than her level of theological education, draws on *Engaging Scripture*, in which Stephen Fowl discusses how it is necessary for Christians to be aware of their own sin and to maintain attitudes of forgiveness and reconciliation (Fowl, 1998: 62-96):

if Christians are to combat their well-documented tendencies to read scripture to underwrite their sin, then they must attend to *themselves*. That is, they must be primarily concerned with their common life, with the role of scripture in that common life, and with the voices of those both inside and outside the community which offer words of prophetic critique of the community and of its interpretive practices. ...

In the absence or disruption of these convictions, recognitions, and practices, *no amount of interpretive theory, no amount of ideological criticism*, will help' (Fowl, 1998: 85, my emphasis).

Given the presumed role for biblical engagement in Christian formation, Fowl's focus on the character and virtues of the interpreter, and her community, is a timely reminder that 'head' knowledge alone is not enough for a truly Christian engagement with the Bible. Nonetheless, there are some real problems with Village's suggestion that some readers are best left in a first naiveté, which appears to question the value of any critical engagement. Firstly, I would question whether a literalistic approach is truly 'reading with the grain of the text' in the case of every book or passage in the Bible. It is arguable that some texts, such as *Song of Songs* and *Revelation* were never meant to be read as literal and/or historical accounts and, in such cases, a biblicist reading would go *against* the grain of the text. Furthermore, even with regard to the specific text used in Village's study, it is unclear how the account of the healing should be applied even if it is taken literally, in a first naiveté; each reader must find its significance for herself and, given a multivocality of application, how may we

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evaluate which is a valid articulation of the passage without drawing on the resources of critical study and theological reflection? Granted Village suggests ethical evaluation of readings as a way forward; nevertheless, it is possible that a reading might be ethically in tune with 'the overall tenor of the Gospel message' (Village, 2007: 93) and yet not be the most appropriate articulation of the passage it seeks to apply. For example, taking Matthew 5.42 literally in a first-century Middle-Eastern rural context would have very different consequences to its adoption as a personal policy in a large twenty-first century English city where financial contributions to charities supporting those living on the streets is generally viewed as wiser than 'giving to everyone who begs from you' (New Revised Standard Version).

Secondly, we must accept that within the world view of many contemporary, English, ordinary Christian readers, it is impossible to take the account of the exorcism and/or healing literally. The tools of biblical criticism then provide a means by which to engage the text, to grasp the foreign horizon of the biblical world and appropriate the text for oneself. If such readers find themselves together in church communities with those who read literally then biblical criticism may furnish them with useful materials to guide theological reflection on their differences. Furthermore, if a programme of resources is structured in such a way as to provide room to explore possibly disturbing ramifications of what has been studied then it runs less risk of leaving its participants in a desert place where they are unable to interact fruitfully with their sacred texts.

### ***Conclusions to this section***

What does the work surveyed here contribute towards the overall goal of this project? In summary, the generally positive attitude among Pathfinders towards the value of scholarly studies concerning the historical and literary background of biblical texts is supported by much (though not all) reflection within the academy. Such input can act to prevent acontextual use of scriptures and to raise awareness of the difference in the horizons of ancient text and contemporary reader. However, there is, among Pathfinders and academy, a recognition that the pursuit of such studies *for themselves alone* has a different aim to the intended goal of biblical engagement as envisaged by the Pathfinder programme and its participants. Accordingly, the reservations expressed by

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some Pathfinders, regarding the need to employ academic findings towards the goal of pursuing God through reading the scriptures, in other words to pursue a different aim to that of scholarly study alone, are also acknowledged within the academy.

The enthusiasm, from the confessional sector of the academy, for academic input to ordinary Christian reflection is, however, tempered in some cases with concern that professional understandings should not 'trump' or 'close down' ordinary readings and that the insights of ordinary Christian readers should be listened to carefully. Furthermore, there are suggestions that the professional input should come from ecclesially situated professional readers, in other words from professionals who are embedded within the communities that they address, communities that are attempting to 'perform' the scriptures. The professionals should then be informed by praxis and be open to insights and critique from the ordinary readers of those communities. If we take these concerns seriously, it raises the question of how best to communicate scholarly findings in a way that respects, and learns from, the ordinary readers for whom they are intended.

The reflections on theological education reiterate the emphasis on an integration of biblical reflection with scholarship, providing opportunities for both professionals and ordinary readers to reflect on their own individual and corporate responses. This integration must acknowledge the different aims of those reading and articulating the biblical texts as academics and (in some cases the same) individuals performing the same texts within the church. Groome's work, in particular, with its use of the metaphor of 'Story', might bolster the case for including an overview of the Bible in any programme; this element was presented to some degree by the Pathfinder resources, WO and DS.

A further suggestion is that a safe space should be created in which ordinary articulations of the Bible can be heard without prejudice and where professionals can listen to and learn from ordinary readers; an essential element of this 'space' would be a means by which ordinary readers could be made aware of their own prejudices and preconceptions but also be empowered to offer their own articulations of the texts. This suggests a key role

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for resources such as lyfe, designed for use in, and promoting active participation by, individuals in small groups.

The encouragement of a questioning attitude towards the Bible, and towards one's own readerly location, does however run the risk of moving ordinary readers from a position of trusting uncritical naiveté to a point where they struggle to interact fruitfully with the texts at all. Quite how practices of self-reflection, at both individual and corporate levels, might be encouraged and nurtured within a programme of biblical engagement is not clear. None of the Pathfinder resources specifically engaged with this approach, although MGS did seek to raise awareness of reader horizons and nurture the virtues of interpretation; there was also some individual self-reflection within the Maperio materials. The fact that some of the responses to Maperio were negative suggests that there may be some inherent resistance towards such resources. As discussed in the Appendix I (§4, especially 4.3.2 and 4.3.3) this may have been partly a reflection of people's personalities and dispositions and may, in some cases, have been due to them feeling particularly vulnerable. This underlines the need for people to undertake biblical engagement in a 'safe' environment where they can offer and receive differing opinions and learn to be open to challenge. There is a need for a programme of resources to ensure that participants are carried out of the dangers of a simplistic approach to the Bible, through the trial of questioning their pre-existing understandings to a place where they can approach their sacred texts with faith, where they can 'see the world as the text depicts it, and the will is empowered to actualize the possible ways of being in the world that the text projects' (Wallace, 1990: 124).

Once one has established the value of hermeneutics for ordinary Christian biblical engagement that is 'spiritually sensitive to a possible Word within these words' it still remains for the interpreter to approach the Bible 'with the hope that the inwardly mysterious work of the Spirit might enable what has been studied historically and literarily to become for the reader the promise of new life, the promise of salvation' (Wallace, 1990: 24). I now move on to consider contemporary reflection on this 'mysterious work of the Spirit'.

## **The role of the Holy Spirit in biblical engagement by ordinary Christians**

### ***Reflection on interaction between Word and Spirit***

I think early on in the course there was an assumption made that, in fact, I think I agree with it, that we do need help in interpreting the Bible, whereas the role of Gideons, for instance, and in some respects the Bible Society itself, give out Bibles, New Testaments, and allow God, or seek God's blessing on it for Him to interpret the meaning of scripture to people. So, on the one hand people read it and make what they can of it. On the other hand, we're saying people need to be taught how to understand it. So, there's a bit of a dichotomy there, and I suppose we just have to live with that (Church E).

With reference to the tension noted in the Pathfinder data, between 'head' and 'heart' approaches to reading the scriptures, we have examined the role of intellectual academic study and now turn to those approaches broadly described as 'spiritual' or 'inspirational'.

All Christian churches endorsing the Nicene Creed 'believe in' the Holy Spirit, and many would acknowledge that the Spirit, who is understood to have inspired both the writing, preservation and collection of the books forming the two testaments, has a role in inspiring Christians to understand those same texts.<sup>140</sup> However, there was no explicit reflection in the Pathfinder data on how the participants experienced or understood the ways in which the Spirit enabled their understanding of the scriptures nor did any of the resources being used explicitly raise this question. Resources such as *lyfe* incorporated spiritual practices, and were contrasted, in participant responses, with more 'analytical' or 'intellectual' resources within the Pathfinder programme, but the *lyfe* materials themselves did not directly address the interaction of Word and Spirit, as such. Of the different *lyfe* 'zones' of spiritual life which, it was suggested, were demonstrated in the life of Jesus and should be emulated by his disciples, one dealt with Jesus being filled with the Spirit ('Spirit *lyfe*') and another with him memorizing, quoting and teaching Scripture ('Word *lyfe*'). There is a focus, within the 'Word' zone materials, on the need to immerse oneself in the scriptures and memorize them, to focus on Jesus and be able to communicate the gospel, to live distinctly Christian lives and engage with our culture; despite

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<sup>140</sup> Fowl gives examples from Protestant and Catholic documents (Fowl, 1995: 348, n.1).

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this, there is no exploration of how the Spirit helps us read and understand the Bible nor is there any suggestion in the central document for each session of the possibilities of engaging in further study of the Bible. Background information on each session's texts may be given in the 'setting the scene' section and there are links to extra online resources, two of which do mention the need for study alongside meditation on the scriptures, but no further resources on the specific texts used are given.<sup>141</sup> Meanwhile, the 'Spirit' zone sessions cover Pentecost, life in, and fruit of, the Spirit and the role of the Spirit in enabling us to reach out to God and worship, but does not mention the Spirit's role in enabling Christians to understand the Bible. This suggests that the lyfe resource as a whole, despite its roots in the process of *lectio divina*, may perpetuate the binary division in people's minds between 'head' and 'heart' or Word and Spirit.

Interestingly, there is correspondingly 'thin' coverage of the interaction between Word and Spirit in academic writings: there is not a great deal of scholarly consideration on exactly what the Spirit's role is or how biblical interpretation is enabled by the Spirit. Fowl asks

Are there particular exegetical methods that will generate Spirit-inspired interpretation? How might we know this? Are we left with a set of widely accepted convictions about the importance of the Spirit in interpretation without any way of giving force to those convictions in any particular act of interpretation? Are there ways of talking about the hermeneutical significance of the Spirit that do more in practice than pay lip-service to the role of the Spirit and then continue as normal? (1998: 102).

Much, though far from all, the reflection there has been on this topic has arisen from the Pentecostal and charismatic traditions that have most emphasised the work of the third person of the Trinity over the past century. Neither of these labels refers to a monolithic body of religious discourse; many non-Pentecostal churches, and individuals within them, with their distinctive theologies of scripture and pneumatologies, have been influenced to varying degrees by the

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<sup>141</sup> For instance, in one of the supporting resources: 'God desires not only to teach us through Scripture, but also to meet us there. And so we need to read with understanding; studying the text, reaching deeply into the context and intention of the human authors, immersing ourselves in the thought-world of Scripture so its message permeates us fully. But we need also to read with the heart, giving attention to the voice of the ever-present Spirit speaking to us now through these ancient words and seeking to be open to his delightful invitation to continual renewal through God's loving grace' (Webb, no date).

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charismatic movement (Hocken, 1988). However, despite the varieties of church belief present, these two strands within the global church share an expectation that the Spirit is at work enabling individual ordinary Christian readers of the Bible to meet with God and opening up the scriptures to them. As noted in Chapter Five, these traditions have generated much discussion on their methods of hermeneutics over the past two decades.<sup>142</sup> Nevertheless, despite this focus, even within these traditions questions remain as to how the work of the Spirit in Bible reading proceeds. In 1993, Clark Pinnock spoke of a 'deafening silence' on the topic among both evangelical and liberal scholars; suggesting that, by default, the role of the Spirit was perceived as merely to 'rubber-stamp what our scholarly exegesis concludes', he noted that 'Gordon D. Fee, a Pentecostal biblical scholar, can write a book entitled *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics* and say nothing about the Spirit's role in interpretation' (Pinnock, 1993: 7-8).<sup>143</sup> Pinnock asks how 'a theologically adequate hermeneutical theory' can fail to take into account the role of the Spirit, lamenting that it is not directly addressed even in Thiselton's 'magisterial' *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Pinnock, 1993: 8, n.13; referring to Thiselton, 1992). I would add that, while Thiselton's more recent extensive work on the Holy Spirit (2013) does discuss hermeneutics, especially Pentecostal hermeneutics, in some detail it, also, fails to engage the hermeneutical role of the Spirit in any depth.

Others agree that this is a neglected area of reflection, even within Pentecostal circles: 'For the Pentecostal the Holy Spirit plays a definite role in the interpretation and understanding of Scripture, but rarely are the specifics of this role explained. *As the Spirit's role in the inscripturating process is a mystery so is the Spirit's role in the interpretative process*' (Arrington, 1994: 104-5, my emphasis).<sup>144</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the subjective nature of spiritual experiences, most attempts to explore the role of the Holy Spirit in enabling Christians to

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<sup>142</sup> See n.118.

<sup>143</sup> A little later, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen also noted that, despite common beliefs on the role of the Spirit in biblical interpretation, little had been written on the topic in either Catholic or Pentecostal traditions (1998: 337).

<sup>144</sup> See also other Pentecostal scholars such as John Christopher Thomas who speaks of a 'dearth of serious critical reflection on the role of the Holy Spirit in the interpretive process' (Thomas, 1994: 42).

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interpret their scriptures deal more with the 'what' than the 'how'. In other words, there have been some attempts to articulate the role of the Spirit in reading the Bible but fewer discussions of how this works in practice. Given the subjectivity, some of these explorations have also sought to produce a set of criteria by which interpretations claiming to be Spirit-inspired may be evaluated. This in turn often leads into discussion of the role of critical biblical studies *vis-à-vis* articulations of scripture which are understood to be Spirit-inspired. Once again, here I am choosing to focus on a few aspects of recent reflection in this area, from both within and outside the Pentecostal churches, to see if they can offer suggestions for promoting ordinary biblical engagement across different Christian traditions in such a way that 'head' and 'heart' approaches may be integrated.<sup>145</sup>

### ***Drawing on biblical accounts of the Spirit's role in interpretation***

Several writers, across different church traditions, have suggested looking to the Bible for examples of how the Spirit inspires the reader's understanding and articulation of the scriptures. John Christopher Thomas focuses on the early church debates around issues arising with Gentile Christ-followers, in Acts 10 - 15, to establish three elements in the process of biblical interpretation: the community, the Spirit and the text itself. Noting that 'dependence upon the Spirit in the interpretive process clearly goes far beyond the rather tame claims regarding "illumination" which many conservatives (and Pentecostals) have often made regarding the Spirit's role in interpretation', he admits the dangers of subjectivism but 'the evidence of Acts 15 simply will not allow for a more restrained approach' (Thomas, 1994: 49). He does, however, go on to note that such subjectivism would be controlled by a community that shares not only an experience of the Spirit but also a respect for the biblical texts in their entirety, and understanding of their genre (Thomas, 1994: 51-5). This would seem to suggest a role for at least some rudimentary understanding of textual criticism.

A similar strategy is followed by Fowl, employing both Acts 10 - 15 and John 2.2 and 12.16 (1998: 97-127). He notes the role of the community in interpretation

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<sup>145</sup> Sometimes scholars journey from one Christian tradition to another, or occupy an ambiguous ecclesial situation, so it is often difficult to categorise their faith positions. Moreover, if the lines of thought thrown up seem fruitful for my own project, and if the practical outcomes are workable across different churches, then their origins should not preclude their application to ordinary Christians in general.

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of not only the Hebrew Bible texts but also the work of the Spirit among the Gentile believers (1998: 114). The church's experience of the work of the Spirit shaped the lens through which they viewed the scriptures, the same scriptures by which they interpreted the work of the Spirit (1998: 114-19). As discussed towards the end of the previous chapter, Fowl sees a virtuous community as the best arena for judging different readings thrown up by what he views as inherently multivocal texts (Fowl, 1998: 62-96).<sup>146</sup>

In his own attempt to articulate an understanding of this process, Pinnock draws more widely on the New Testament, examining how Jesus and the early church engaged in Spirit-led articulations which did justice to the 'dynamic nature' of their sacred texts, a process he terms 'Spirit-hermeneutics' (Pinnock, 2009: 160-1). While exegesis has value for understanding the text's *horizon*, a Spirit-hermeneutic is, he argues, necessary to grasp its *significance* to the reader. This hermeneutic is characterised by 'a kind of "controlled liberty". A liberty that honors both the original meaning and the text which needs to be opened up. The Spirit fuses the past and present horizons' (164). This process is essential if the text is to produce an appropriate application in the believing readers' lives. And how might we judge if it is 'good'?

A good interpretation energizes disciples and launches them into self-sacrificing behavior. They tell us that something good is happening. They prove themselves. A reading should be able first to account for the text as it stands and ought to be able second to put the truth 'into play' in the form of transformed living. Good interpretation is very often a matter of being moved by love to act (Pinnock, 2009: 168).

For Pinnock, then, the head and heart approaches should be judged by their ability to generate a God- and neighbour-loving 'hands and feet' response. In these articulations, the role of the Spirit would appear to be the generation of meaning or application from the scriptures, within the community, in which the virtues displayed by the interpreter(s) would testify to the validity of their textual articulation.

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<sup>146</sup> Marcus Bockmuehl accepts the polyvalency of the texts but calls for a greater attention to their reception history, suggesting that Fowl 'significantly underplays authorial intention by subordinating it, almost without remainder, to the authority of interpreting communities' (Bockmuehl, 2006: 117, n.20).

***Attempts to further identify the role of the Spirit: the head–heart tension***

When we were doing the hermeneutics thing, ...There was a point where I thought, 'If I keep looking at it historically and culturally, I'm actually going to miss what the Holy Spirit wants to say to me, through reading this'. ... It was because I was actually praying for somebody, and just a scripture came to mind, and I thought, 'Oh, I think I'll just write that on a card and just drop it to this friend'. Then I suddenly thought, 'umm, I'd better just flick up the Bible, see what context that was written in, to make sure it really fits her situation', and I came to the conclusion, well historically, it didn't. It actually put me off sending it to her. Later I thought, 'That was so stupid, because if that's what God was laying on your heart, you should have just done it'. So I'm kind of like this [visual indication of ambivalence] about getting too into the hermeneutic side of it, because that way I think I kind of miss the spontaneity of what the Spirit wants to say (Church A).

With regard to the value of critical understanding, Pentecostal scholar French Arrington suggests that the Spirit has a role in enabling readers to fuse their own horizon with that of the Bible:

The distance between the interpreter and the biblical text has been a hermeneutical problem, and, too, the distance is even greater for a contemporary interpreter in a scientific culture. This distance needs to be respected, but the Holy Spirit overcomes the distance by serving as the common context and bridging the temporal and cultural distance between the original author and the modern interpreter. Put differently, the Spirit establishes a continuum between the written word of the past and the same word in the present, thereby illuminating what the ancient author's words mean to us living in the twentieth century and how they speak to us today. Through the Holy Spirit the Word of God becomes alive and speaks to our present situation with new possibilities for personal and social transformation.

He goes on to show that he views such inspiration as being superior to an understanding resulting from academic examination of the texts:

Unlike those who use the critical-historical approach and are satisfied with *mere cognitive knowledge*, Pentecostals strive, under the illumination of the Holy Spirit, to allow the message of the text to speak to real problems of persons in their daily lives. This method reaches beyond the objective literal meaning of Scripture and understands that a text has spiritual meaning as well as the literal. The deeper spiritual interpretation is given not by mere human reason but by the Holy Spirit and can only be seen through the eyes of faith. Therefore, the fruit of Pentecostal hermeneutics is that the Word of God becomes living and immediate for contemporary men and women and for their faith (Arrington, 1994: 104, my emphasis).

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Arrington goes on to make some 'suggestions' as to 'how the interpreter relies on the illumination by the Holy Spirit to come to the full understanding of the meaning of the text', although rather than describe 'how' he instead proposes a required mind-set:

(1) submission of the mind to God so that the *critical and analytical abilities* are exercised under the guidance of the Holy Spirit; (2) a genuine openness to the witness of the Spirit as the text is examined; (3) the personal experience of faith as part of the entire interpretative process; and, (4) response to the transforming call of God's Word (Arrington, 1994: 105, my emphasis).

The approach outlined by Arrington would appear to recognise the value of the 'critical and analytical abilities' but gives priority and precedence to the role of the Holy Spirit; nevertheless, the manner in which this role is exercised is 'a mystery' (Arrington, 1994: 104) upon which little light is shed by Arrington's 'suggestions'. What does it mean, for instance, to exercise critical abilities under submission to God? Sam Hey, likewise, stresses the same priority within Pentecostalism but also fails to clarify the means by which the Spirit guides interpretation:

Pentecostalism holds to values that lie beyond the possibility of evaluation by the critical method. It holds that revelation and spiritual intuition are superior ways of knowing. It claims that truth can be found in an easily comprehended, single source of revelation in the Bible. It is open to guidance by a contemporary interpreter, the Holy Spirit (Hey, 2001: 214).

It is unsurprising that many Pentecostal scholars give a priority to Spirit over biblical criticism. In its origins, Pentecostalism embraced a pre-critical, largely literal understanding of the Bible, with the emphasis being on seeking – and expecting to find – applications relevant to the readers' contexts and situations; this remains the approach within Pentecostal churches in the majority world, where the movement has been very popular and continues to grow.<sup>147</sup>

However, Pentecostalism in the West, at least among professional Christians, has largely embraced the tools of historical criticism (Anderson, 2014: 222-3), a difference which, it has been suggested, is partly due to contingencies leading Pentecostal academics to train in Evangelical institutions which employed such

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<sup>147</sup> Anderson notes the imprecision inherent in the allocation of the 'Pentecostal' label but acknowledges that most adherents are now found in the Majority World (2014: 1-7, 235, 303).

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approaches to the text (Cargal, 1993: 168-9). So, while writers in this tradition continue to emphasize that the Spirit's guidance is essential they also often feel the need to argue for the value of critical study:

Pentecostals must accept that while rationalism cannot tell us everything about the Bible and its meanings, it can tell us a number of important things—especially about the historical and cultural distance that does in fact separate us from the biblical texts. We must accept that not all the coherences of meaning the Pentecostal interpreter finds within the Bible as speaking to her or his present situation are the result of pneumatic illumination; all people are susceptible to the insidious influences of sexism, racism, and classism. And Pentecostals must be willing to listen for the voice of the Spirit illuminating the interpretations of Scripture informed by the experiences of feminists, liberation theologians, and others whose political and theological agendas Pentecostals may not always support (Cargal, 1993: 186-7).

Likewise, Roger Stronstad (1995) argues for a hermeneutical circle with experiential, pneumatic and rational dimensions; comprising the interpreter coming to the text with their experiences and presuppositions, but with an openness to the Spirit, using the tools of biblical criticism to arrive at a reading which is to be tested experientially:

the Pentecostal needs to be as committed in practice as well as he is in theory. In other words, because his mind is just as important as his experience, the Pentecostal must be committed to serious and sober biblical studies. This is a commitment to diligent and disciplined study, to honing analytical and synthetic skills, to exegesis and theology. Thus, the rational element in Pentecostal hermeneutics is demanded by the nature of man, is the necessary complement to the experiential and the pneumatic elements in hermeneutics, and guards against the excesses of religious enthusiasm (Stronstad, 1995: 77).

However, caution is argued by some writers: 'some Pentecostals .. find a pure historical-critical methodology to be an oppressive, alienating experience to the laity' (Archer, 1996: 76-8).

The danger is that it places the Bible in the laboratory of the expert and takes it out of the hands of the ordinary person who can lay no claim to methodological and theological expertise. Grammatical analysis of the text and historical understanding have significance for sound exegesis, but spiritual understanding does not always wait on the acquisition of these tools. It is God who opens eyes of faith and illuminates his Word to the human heart.' (Arrington, 1994: 103).

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These reflections emerging from within western academic Pentecostalism, then, assume roles for both pneumatic inspiration and the fruits of cognitive understanding in biblical interpretation, while drawing attention to the problems inherent in communicating the latter. Is there a model for the role of the Spirit in interpretation which provides a way to conceptualize the relationship between Word-Spirit, head–heart in a more integrated, less dualistic fashion which might, in turn, make the fruits of scholarship an ally and not a threat to biblical engagement by ordinary Christians in other traditions?

### ***Integrating ‘head’ and ‘heart’***

the only way to look at the Bible is with the hermeneutics and the Holy Spirit, you know, you have to have the balance of the two. I mean, even with just the Holy Spirit, you can still take the thing out of context. ... I think it's down to the leadership, you know, to guide the flock down in that, like, direction, sometimes (Church A).

Reflections in theological hermeneutics from other ecclesial situations offer a number of different approaches to view the relationship between Word and Spirit in biblical interpretation. In his influential *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (evangelical) scholar Kevin Vanhoozer includes, among his suggested interpretive virtues, the need for an understanding of the biblical texts, including their genre and other literary features, together with some self-reflective awareness of our own prejudices and openness to hear from others (1998: 376-8). Noting the ‘justly famous problem’ of articulating the part the Spirit plays in interpretation (1998: 407), Vanhoozer uses speech-act theory to suggest, firstly, that the Spirit has a role in facilitating the reader’s understanding of the text by making her aware of the prejudices and preconceptions she brings to the text and enabling her to overcome them. This may be seen as the Spirit enabling the reader to receive the illocutionary force of what she is reading, to comprehend what the author (divine and human) meant (1998: 427-8). In Vanhoozer’s model, then, it would seem that, while there is a distinct and pressing need for study of critical issues, the Spirit has a role in enabling and promoting the attitude the reader needs in order to read the text as was intended in its setting – historical, contextual and canonical:

it is the Spirit's unique role to bridge distances that impede understanding. Not just any distance—*hard historical and philological effort is still needed*—but moral and spiritual distance in particular. The

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Spirit enables us to avoid falling prey to self-deception, not by working a miracle on our rational faculties, but by shedding grace abroad in our hearts. The Spirit's role in interpretation does not represent a new faculty or capacity in the reader so much as a reorienting of those faculties we already have. The Holy Spirit aids understanding in general, not least by cultivating the interpretive virtues in individuals and in the believing community (Vanhoozer, 1998: 415, my emphasis).

However, since the *telos* of scripture is '[g]rowth in knowledge of God, in wisdom and righteousness' (1998: 406), this creation of right attitude is only part of the Spirit's role in interpretation; Vanhoozer suggests that the Spirit's action can most especially be seen associated with the *perlocutionary* force of the texts under consideration. Arguing against those, such as Fowl, who see the Spirit *creating* meaning for the context of the reader as part of a believing community, as they read their scriptures, Vanhoozer rather sees the Spirit as making the *consequences* of the *original* meaning clear to the readers (1998: 428-9). Rather than the Spirit creatively fusing horizons between reader and text, he sees the creativity being exercised upon and within the reader herself, to enable her to apply the texts to her specific circumstances (Vanhoozer, 1998: 415-16). In this model, the Spirit is not set up as an alternative source of authority to the Word but instead ministers the Word, disclosing its specific application, the desired perlocutionary effects within the community's context.

From the title, one might assume that Amos Yong's *Spirit-Word-Community* (Yong, 2002) was likely to promote rather than overcome a distinction between 'heart' and 'head' in biblical interpretation. However, Yong is putting forward a holistic, Trinitarian approach. Suggesting that the human imagination is the site of engagement with the transcendent, Yong understands the work of the Spirit there as bringing about novel 'readings', 'applications' or 'significations' of the biblical texts. However, as with Vanhoozer, Yong takes care to insist that the Spirit does not create new *meanings* (2002: 222-30) but rather vivifies the text (245, see also Pinnock, 2009: 164). Furthermore, his identification of the Spirit's task as sanctification, as involved in orthopraxy as much as orthodox understanding (237-40), may be seen as paralleling the perlocution of which Vanhoozer speaks. Indeed, Thiselton sees parallels between Yong's and Vanhoozer's work and his own (citing Thiselton, 1992: 558-619). Aside from finding Yong making too much room for pluralism, Thiselton asserts that '*he is*

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*utterly far from the first to argue for a triadic balance between the author (the Spirit of God and his agent), the word (Christ and the text), and the response of the wider community (reader-response theory)* (Thiselton, 2013: 454, emphasis original). However, Yong himself admits his 'triadic, trialecical and trialogical' approach is not novel, seeing it as being closely related to other models of theological hermeneutics; nevertheless, he suggests his work presents a 'consensual hermeneutic' that re-states the features of existing models in new ways which recognize and emphasize 'the thoroughgoing interplay of Spirit, Word and Community' necessary in the interpretive process (Yong, 2002: 315-16). From the point of view of this study, Yong's unpicking of the consequences of an unbalanced hermeneutic, be it *sola scriptura*, *sola spiritus*, or *sola traditus/communitas* (2002: 311-14) reinforces the importance of an integration of these factors in any programme to promote deeper biblical engagement by ordinary Christians:

The absence of the Spirit from the hermeneutical spiral means a lifeless repetition of the Word by tradition. The absence of the Word means the domination of either enthusiasm or anarchy (or both) in the tradition. The absence of tradition means a primitivistic, biblicist, fundamentalistic, and enthusiastic orientation (Yong, 2002: 314).

### **Conclusion to this section**

Given that this study aims to identify factors promoting biblical engagement within churches across the traditions, and given the strong differences of opinion on the topic of the Spirit, this area needs careful handling. The fact that the Holy Spirit has a role in Christian understanding of, and interaction with, the scriptures is generally acknowledged but different Christian traditions have different expectations of how this occurs and, given the inevitably subjective nature of a spiritual interaction, scholars have struggled to articulate how the Spirit's work in this area proceeds.

However, in the churches involved in Pathfinder, despite the variety of traditions involved, there seemed to be an expectation that individual believers were guided by the Spirit as they read the Bible. Indeed, in one case, the perceived tension between 'head' and 'heart' arose because of this sense of hearing God communicate something through the text that was inconsistent with what had been communicated about how the Bible 'should' be read, contextually.

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The reflections of the scholars here lead me to propose that, whichever denomination is concerned, ordinary Christian engagement with the scriptures should acknowledge the Christian consensus on the role of the Spirit and situate it within wider Christian reflection across the centuries; this ongoing reflection has drawn on the biblical texts, experience of life and of God mediated through the Spirit, and how the texts have been understood by Christian forebears. While there would remain differences in emphases across different denominations, hopefully such an approach would enable ordinary believers to see the need for study of the texts to be accompanied by an openness to the Spirit mediated appropriately by their ecclesial community location, in time and space. The promotion of such a holistic, integrated approach would therefore probably need to include some material on features of church history and the ways in which Christians have approached their scriptures, including the triad of Text, Tradition and Reason. I now move on to examine the ways in which 'head–heart' approaches have been articulated and practised at some points in the history of the church.

### **Reflection on the roles of intellectual study and of the Spirit in biblical engagement, historically.**

#### **Parallels in the practice of *lectio divina*?**

In Chapter Three I discussed the monastic practice of *lectio* and noted that, in the celebrated clash between monastic and scholastic approaches to the Bible, there was a difference in overall aim but little practical difference in method (p.121ff.). Drawing especially on the work of Mary Carruthers, I noted the importance of study and memorization, of both biblical and extra biblical texts, in the process of biblical engagement in the ancient and mediaeval worlds. In both that chapter and in Chapter Four, I discussed the degree to which mediaeval Christians, both professional and ordinary, were surrounded by images and involved in rituals which evoked and reinforced their understanding of the biblical accounts of reality. My arguments were that knowledge, study and memorization of the written texts were not an alternative to spirituality but integral elements of its context. Here, I want to re-visit this topic to see what

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light it might shed on the contemporary issue of the relationship between study ('head') and spiritual ('heart') approaches to the Bible.

Can the mediaeval practices of memorization be considered as equivalent to modern study? It might be argued that learning 'by heart' is not the same as critical study and therefore we cannot use these ancient and mediaeval practices as a model for discussing the head–heart tension in contemporary churches. However, memorization in the mediaeval context should not be viewed as merely 'rote learning'; at the very least it enabled the reader to grasp the allusions and intertextuality of the texts they were reading. In her examination of a prayer written by Anselm, and how it may have been read and used by a nun of that time, Rachel Fulton notes that:

Our nun did not need, as I have, to hunt through databases or multivolume sets of liturgical texts to know that the hymn that the canons and canonesses were singing to the Virgin Mother of God on folio 21v of Admont MS 289 was sung for the feast of the Purification. She had learned it as a matter of course along with the other texts that she sang in the choir. Nor did she need to think over much about where she had heard the phrase, 'Sit at my right hand.' These, as every student of the monastic *lectio divina* knows, were the scriptural and liturgical nuggets or *formulae* that the monks and nuns were trained to store in their memories, precisely so as to be able to retrieve them for the purposes of contemplation. What we tend to forget (or find too easy to take for granted) is how very rich these monastic memory stores were indeed. It is even easier to dismiss them as somehow 'mechanical' when we ourselves find them too difficult to follow, never mind construct for ourselves (Fulton, 2006: 731).

Even if it were accepted that memorization might be viewed as in some measure comparable with study, it might then be argued that, in a 'pre-critical' age 'study', at least in the sense of linguistic ability, was needed in order to access the texts but it did not inform their interpretation; readers were open to making unlimited interpretations of their scriptures since they were unconstrained by any concept of the 'plain sense' or any awareness of hermeneutical theory. This might be supported by reference to the practice of allegorical reading, articulating what was viewed as the 'spiritual senses' of the text. However, examination of both ancient and mediaeval writers demonstrates that the relationship between study and Spirit was much more integrated.

### **Spiritual reading – the bases of allegorical reading**

In the preface to his defence of mediaeval interpretive practices, de Lubac acknowledges that many scholars, past and present, find fault with pre-critical approaches towards the text (de Lubac, 1998). Much of the hostility derives from the idea that allegorical reading in particular leads to uncontrolled and uncontrollable flights of fancy in interpretation where a text can come to mean almost anything. De Lubac spends considerable effort in surveying examples of this approach, arguing that there were rules governing interpretations; although allegorical and tropological readings had more freedom, it was understood that interpretation had to have a context in history, and that training was required to understand the principles of interpretation (de Lubac, 1998: 15-17). At the same time, since human minds could not fully grasp the divine, there was a sense in which the possible depths of meaning of a biblical passage could never be exhausted (de Lubac, 1998: 75-82).

De Lubac argues that the Christian process of allegorical reading originated with the apostle Paul and distinguishes it from earlier, non-Christian forms of allegory (2000 [1959]: 1-8). Noting that all interpretation must start with the 'historical' or plain sense of scripture to which allegory was inextricably linked (2000 [1959]: 41-82), de Lubac goes on to survey many examples of spiritual exegesis, concluding: 'These few examples recall to us, contrary to a modern prejudice, a permanent truth: interest in the letter and a taste for the spirit are not perforce meant to be divorced from each other; the sense of history and the mystic urge are in no way incompatible' (de Lubac, 2000 [1959]: 214). This is reinforced later in his study where he draws on mediaeval sources to argue that a critical sense was not rare among writers of that period; they were not undiscerning and gullible regarding, for example, issues of translation, but rather showed critical skills appropriate to their knowledge base and period (de Lubac, 2009 [1961]: 177-210). De Lubac's contention is supported by Franz van Liere's focus on twelfth century exegesis: allegory was not completely free but constrained by the literal historical sense so that 'one needed a good basic comprehension of historical facts through literal exegesis before one could

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apprehend the spiritual dimension of Scripture' (van Liere, 2011: 169).<sup>148</sup> As Susan Woods notes, de Lubac is attempting to bring together theology and spirituality (Wood, 1998: 21):

The spiritual understanding of Scripture requires both faith, the gift of the Spirit, and learning, the fruit of scientific exegesis. The gift of the Spirit gives us discernment which allows us to read the Scriptures in the context of faith, and scientific exegesis establishes the empirical historical meaning. Thus de Lubac argues for the union of faith and scientific knowledge at the same time as he rejects an appeal to one at the expense of the other (Wood, 1998: 48).

This concept, of study informing spiritual discernment of the biblical texts, is supported by examination of some of the Church Fathers, even the 'father' of allegory, Origen. Morwenna Ludlow compares Origen's approach with both Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine. To these late-classical readers, the concept of reading allegorically was suggested by the fact that the biblical text contained apparent theological inconsistencies, logical impossibilities and some texts which appeared immoral. Although they differ in exact strategy, all three writers find canonically-related grounds for guiding and limiting such readings; both Origen and Gregory think there is a unity to the biblical texts and that, since they are to be useful, they must be coherent. Allegory is a means by which the coherence may be perceived (Ludlow, 2002: 60) but, '[t]he fundamental reality of the original historical sense of the text must be preserved in order for the reapplication to a new history to make sense' (62). Although Augustine is often contrasted with Origen, Ludlow argues that their differences have been exaggerated and that both see a need to keep letter and Spirit together (Ludlow, 2013).

### **The turn to scholasticism**

As noted in Chapter Three, although they only differed in aim, not method, and both acknowledged the value of study, the emergence of the Schools alongside the monasteries, and the development of a fresh expression of *lectio divina*, are sometimes seen in adversarial terms.

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<sup>148</sup> Both van Liere (2011: 169-70) and Smalley (1983 [1952]: 5) note instances of the use of the metaphor of a building when ancients and mediaevals are discussing the relationship between the senses. The historical sense is the foundation which determines the shape of the walls (allegory leading to doctrine) and the exterior or roof (moral senses).

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For example, in his examination of exegesis among later mediaeval mendicants Roest notes the challenge posed by the re-emergence of the works of Aristotle with their model of deriving truth logically from first principles:

Since biblical exegesis (based as it was on events and stories from the Bible) seemed to deal with particulars rather than with universal truths from which other subalternated truths could be inferred logically, the scientific status of theology seemed to be in danger.

It was necessary to reformulate the status of the biblical text and its modes of exegetical understanding in response to the Aristotelian challenges. One had either to reposition the *res gesta* (events and occurrences) related in Scripture, as signifiers of universal acts and divine truths that in and of themselves could form the basis of a truly scientific enterprise, or to distinguish theology as a form of wisdom (*sapientia*), not necessarily bound to the strictures of ordinary science (*scientia*) (Roest, 2011: 185-6).

Roest goes on to suggest that Aquinas followed the former strategy and Bonaventure the latter. This separation of the routes from the twelfth century onwards can be seen as an adversarial difference between those who viewed theology as a theoretical science and those who viewed it as a way to learn more of God, although for a time these two co-existed (Farley, 1983: 34-9). Farley's more positive appraisal of the monastic orientation toward study, as a means rather than an end, is also found, unsurprisingly, in the Benedictine writer Leclercq. When discussing the similarities and differences between monastic and scholastic approaches to the biblical texts (Leclercq, 1982 [1961]: 193-228) he compares them thus: 'Scholastic theology ... puts experience aside. ... It seeks in secular learning and philosophy for analogies capable of expressing religious realities. Its purpose is to organize Christian erudition by means of removing any subjective material so as to make it purely scientific', whereas, regarding monks, '[t]heir principal purpose is not to reveal the mysteries of God, to explicate them or derive from them any speculative conclusions, but to impregnate their whole lives with them and to order their entire existence to contemplation' (1982 [1961]: 223).

In a more eirenic vein, noting those aspects of character, such as humility and purity of life, which mediaeval writers saw as important, de Lubac suggests that the Church needs both learned and spiritual people: '[if] the former deliver us from our ignorance, the latter alone have the gift of discernment, which

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preserves us from interpretations that are dangerous to the faith' (1998: 264, 267). Although this promotes the concept of a complementarity, rather than an antipathy, between study and spirituality it still identifies them as two distinct approaches.

At the beginning of his development of *A Theology of Higher Education* Mike Higton examines what he terms the 'myth' of the early years of the University of Paris: how it has been portrayed as a triumph of reason over dogma, of freedom of thought over church control, of learning over ignorance, with Peter Abelard as the hero (Higton, 2012: 16-19). Higton rejects both this construal of the situation, and its counter-narratives lamenting the 'decline of wisdom' but similarly telling a story of breaks with traditions and discontinuity (19-22). He proposes, rather, that the development of the University may be seen as a story characterised by continuity: 'it is possible to see the emergence of the university as, in part, an experiment within an ongoing tradition of devout learning, and as involving the development of at least some practices of reason that were reasonable precisely because they were devout'; citing those involved in these changes, Higton notes that both monks and scholars were viewed as contemplatives who prayed and studied even though the emphases given to each activity differed (22). Although '[s]cholastic *lectio* inculcated and assumed a different relation to the materials of tradition, with a more pronounced historical consciousness, and a more explicit machinery of techniques and technologies available for *lectio* and the accompanying meditation' (32), it was part of a development including the 'nurturing by some university practitioners of what they saw as a new form of spiritual discipline: a contemplative and purificatory *meditatio* outside the monasteries, ordered towards the establishment of well-ordered individual and public life before God' (36). In Higton's construal of the emergence of biblical engagement in the University the process of study was integrally bound up with the development of character within community.

It was assumed that the materials given for study—the texts of the tradition, but also the inner and outer world about which they spoke—were amenable to articulation: they had a God-given harmony or beauty about them, even if it was hidden to the untutored eye. It was assumed that to discover that harmonious ordering was not simply an intellectual game, but one of the means (or part of the means) for discovering the

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good ordering of human life before God, including the good ordering of social life. It was assumed, moreover, that this discovery of good order was possible only through a certain kind of conformity to it: the good ordering of the scholar's life in humility, piety, and peace—and this both as a prerequisite to learning, and as something deepened and established *through* learning.

In this view, learning and virtue belonged together (learning required virtue, and learning taught virtue), and they belonged together in a double sense. In the first place, it was assumed that one could learn the good ordering of the materials at one's disposal only if, in humility and trust, one took the risk of being called to penitence and transformed understanding by them—called to right order before God by the God-given resistances (the *sic-et-nons*) of one's material, as one placed oneself at God's disposal. In the second place, one could learn the good ordering of one's materials only by participation in a certain kind of communal good: a community involved in the friendly exchange of calls to such penitence before God—a community of mutual compunction, if you like; a community of peaceable but serious disputation (Higton, 2012: 40-1, emphasis original).

This positive appraisal of the continuities between the monastic and scholastic practices supports a central role for study and rejects the concept of a necessary divide between study and Spirit. If Higton's construal is correct, the emergence of the Schools, and scholastic *lectio*, provides a positive role model for not just a compatibility between, but an integration of, intellectual study and a spiritual posture. Although both the Monastery and the University are populated only by the professionals in the mediaeval period, given the higher level of education in the current English population, and their enormously greater access to resources, this provides a possible model and encouragement for seeing openness to the Spirit and study as indispensable partners in biblical engagement.<sup>149</sup>

### **Study and Spirit in post-Reformation Protestantism**

Following the Reformation there developed a variety of approaches towards the topic of study and Spirit in Christian biblical engagement and the very notion of 'theology' (Farley, 1983: 50-66). Among the Reformers and their successors there continued an approach which saw theology as a wisdom-knowledge revealed by grace and the work of the Spirit but 'it has an available and continuing deposit, Holy Scripture, and whatever will help uncover and rightly

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<sup>149</sup> Even if one finds Higton's analysis unconvincing, it remains true that study is viewed as playing a key role in one's approach to the text within a 'spiritual' monastic approach.

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interpret this deposit will at the same time extend and deepen the knowledge', therefore study is of value (Farley, 1983: 51). Both prayer and the study of subjects such as sacred history and languages, are needful (Farley, 1983: 52-3).

The Anabaptist strands also emphasized a reliance on both Word and Spirit in their congregational articulations of their scriptures, seeing them as complementary, although some showed tendencies towards literalism and others towards spiritualism. The dependence on the Spirit that they displayed led them to expect everyone, including ordinary uneducated believers, to participate in interpretation: 'relying on the Spirit would result in more faithful application of Scripture than relying on tradition, learning, or human reason. ... approaches that polarized Spirit and reason were unwelcome' (Pietersen, 2011: 57). Moving forward in time, we also find Jonathan Edwards stressing the need for both doctrinal understanding in the head and spiritual passion in the heart (cited in Stibbe, 1998: 190).

In conclusion, a brief historical survey suggests a persistent theme through Christian history on the importance of both the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the study of the scriptures in enabling Christian interpretation of the Bible. At least in the strands followed here, there is little evidence of a perceived binary between 'head' and 'heart' in biblical articulation pursued with the aim of spiritual formation, even though the academic study of theology may be followed with the different aim of studying the scriptures as texts. There have been instances where the role of one in the process of biblical engagement is stressed more than the other, or a tension between the two has become apparent, but generally both are recognised to play a role in understanding the scriptures.

There remain the twin dangers of rejecting the need for study as 'unspiritual', and of making study an end in itself without seeing it as a means to the end of formation into the image of Christ. However, historical examples support the inclusion of resources supporting both these factors in any programme of biblical engagement for ordinary Christians. Resources which help to bridge the gap, or rather the perception of a gap, between 'head' and 'heart' in the minds of ordinary English Christians, are essential for such a project in English

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churches. Might resources presented within a programme such as *lectio divina*, derived as they were in a context where ‘head’ and ‘heart’ approaches to the Bible were not necessarily understood as distinct, provide strategies whereby this binary might be collapsed?

### **The value and role of academic study and the Holy Spirit in contemporary biblical engagement**

#### **Modern expressions of *lectio divina***

Recently there has been a move in some of the churches, and outside them, to recover, albeit in a (post)modern context, ancient practices of the spiritual life. With regard specifically to Christian biblical engagement, these contemporary articulations of ancient practice are often patterned after the model of *lectio divina* either overtly or, as with the Pathfinder resource, lyfe, without explicitly declaring themselves to be thus structured.

Other than lyfe itself, Bible Society have materials to support *lectio divina* centred around the lectionary (Bible Society, 2014). The introductory sections include the comment that *lectio divina* ‘is not a study method. Background knowledge can be helpful but is not essential’. Meanwhile, the ‘*lectio*’ section of each reading often offers a summary of the day’s text, together with some contextual or historical background (for instance, with reference to Matthew 1.18-24, the binding nature of engagement in Jewish society). However, users of the material are urged to complete their careful *lectio* of the biblical text before reading the *lectio* notes and then proceeding to the questions suggested to prompt *meditatio*. Here, although the materials provided under the *lectio* section allow a more thoughtful approach to the text, and the introduction does not devalue study, there is no reflection on how the fruits of study might inform the Spirit-led biblically informed transformation of lives that the material suggests is *lectio divina*’s goal.<sup>150</sup> Elsewhere, Thomas Keating wrote an article on *lectio divina* for Bible Society’s magazine *The Bible in Transmission*. Keating has his own specific understanding of what does and does not constitute *lectio*,

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<sup>150</sup> In a different approach, Scripture Union provide two different routes to ‘Bible study’ as their *WordLive* site offers a ‘classic’ approach complete with notes to help the reader ‘explore the Bible’, and an option for ‘deeper Bible study’, while their ‘lectio’ site proceeds through the traditional four stages with only the text and accompanying music (Scripture Union, 2002-11).

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and how scholastic and monastic versions differ, but he begins by distinguishing it from study of the Bible which is 'very useful at another time and provides a solid conceptual background' for *Iectio* (2009: 13). His focus is firmly on the spiritual aspects of the practice and would seem to perpetuate the concept of a dualistic, 'head' and 'heart' approach to the scriptures.

As noted in Chapter One, Bible Society's *lyfe* was modelled on materials from Renovaré whose workbook on spiritual formation is now available in Britain as *Lifestreams*. The authors of this present their work as the result of surveying examples of the practices of small Christian formation groups throughout history, including Benedictines, Methodists and Alcoholics Anonymous. They repeatedly stress that their approach seeks to be 'balanced' (Smith and Graybeal, 2012 [2010]: 7-8) and it would appear that this balance concerns what they suggest are the 'six dimensions of Christian discipleship - prayer, virtue, empowerment, compassion, proclamation, and wholeness' as seen in Jesus' life (19); these are seen as linked to six different 'movements' in Christian history (26). While 'knowledge' is seen as an ingredient of their programme, along with 'balance' and the mutual encouragement from seeking formation within a small group setting, this is knowledge of the spiritual practices themselves rather than knowledge of or about the Bible texts; in fact 'it is not a Bible study though the Bible is used' (Smith and Graybeal, 2012 [2010]: 11-12, 13). Nevertheless, 'proclaiming the good news and reading the Scriptures' are part of the 'dimension' of proclamation (24) which is seen as linked to the evangelical movement and the work of Luther (26-7).

When it comes to the work of the Spirit, in the 'charismatic tradition' the authors suggest two spiritual exercises, both of which assume a role for the Spirit in finding an application of the text. One is to '[r]ead the Scriptures with the Holy Spirit':

The Holy Spirit opens our minds when we read the Bible, making us receptive to its message. More specifically, the Spirit helps us understand what the text is saying to us personally and applies its message to our particular situation. Select a passage from the Bible to reflect on. As you read, ask the Holy Spirit to highlight a specific verse or word that is specifically meant for you to hear. When you have discovered what God wants you to hear, spend ten to fifteen minutes

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reflecting on why it has impressed you and what lesson you need to learn from it (Smith and Graybeal, 2012 [2010]: 49).

Similarly, another exercise in this tradition suggests that one should ‘[l]isten to the Advocate when making decisions’: ‘Ask God to give you direction, insight, leading. ... In all decisions, test the Spirit by examining the Scriptures. The Spirit of God will never lead you into a decision that is contrary to the principles and commandments found in the Bible’ (Smith and Graybeal, 2012 [2010]: 49).

Moving on to the section on the ‘word-centred’ life, with an Ignatian-style exercise, there is a reminder to ‘[k]eep in mind that we are reading the Bible with an ear to what God is saying to us, not simply studying it like a textbook’ and encouragement to memorize scriptural passages (2012 [2010]: 62). The ‘balance’ is continued in the section on possible further exercises for each strand, in which there are suggestions to explore biblical texts concerning spiritual gifts and the fruit of the Spirit, and to study other passages on the Spirit and other topics, or an entire book within the Bible, using study aids such as a concordance or chain-reference Bible (82ff.). Thus, this precursor to the lyfe materials would appear to make a more explicit attempt to bridge the gap between ‘head’ and ‘heart’ when approaching the Christian scriptures.

Moving on to more detailed presentations of *lectio divina per se*, David Foster provides the traditional four-stage outline of the process and notes the value of cognitive biblical knowledge but distinguishes it from the spiritual practice:

understanding the scripture as God’s word must always respect the fact that it is mediated within a collection of human writing as well, and must take into account the kind of writing it is, whether historical, poetic, prophetic and so on. The way it is expressed, the cultural and intellectual history behind the Bible, offers plenty of scope for theological study, but at the end of the day *lectio divina* is trying to tune in to a divine wavelength and to listen to these texts as God’s way of talking to us (Foster, 2005: 5-6).

However, he goes on to stress how knowledge of the whole Bible enables the reader to better understand any part of it and also recognises the role of the Spirit, who ‘opens our hearts to listen at a deeper level than merely human words. ... inspires the scriptures and fills them with meaning for all who listen to them ... and helps us tune in to the spiritual meaning of the scriptures’ (2005: 8). ‘The Holy Spirit ... is in our hearts helping us to understand and to

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“remember”, to connect our reading at one time with our reading at other times, and the reading of the Church as a whole; to connect our lives with the lives of all the faithful’ (Foster, 2005: 9). Here, it seems, Foster is not only confirming the need for both ‘head’-study and ‘heart’-Spirit but suggesting that the Spirit’s role is specifically to enable believers to ‘join the dots’ between what they have already read or learnt about and within the Bible, including how the church has, historically, read it, and what they are reading now. This will enable readers to hear God’s word for them today, to ‘discover the meaning ... not in the past, but in the present’ (Foster, 2005: 23).

Other writers reiterate the role of study in some form as a necessary background to the spiritual encounter with scripture through *lectio divina*. Louis Bouyer, in his discussion of the ‘Word of God’ and the spiritual life, suggests that immersion in the world of the text is the most valuable accompaniment to *lectio divina*; this is best accomplished by reading longer chunks, at a time, whole books where possible, and a *lectio continua* which covers the whole Bible each year (Bouyer, 1961: 47). The third approach, studious reading, raises the danger of intellectualism and is only of value in the context of the first two ‘by way of embroidering on the basic pattern of these great types of reading’. A more positive attitude towards the value of study is evident in the writings of Eugene Peterson; addressing ordinary Christians rather than professionals, in a volume that strongly advocates spiritual reading, Peterson also emphasizes the need for exegesis, for readers to take the text seriously, as an act of loving and respectful reading (Peterson, 2006: 50-8).

### **Handling head–heart tensions**

It would appear that existing materials promoting contemporary biblical reflection in the tradition of *lectio divina* acknowledge the usefulness of more cognitive approaches while pointing out their limitations. This may be wise but is of limited usefulness in itself since it fails to attempt any integration of ‘head’ and ‘heart’ approaches while simultaneously promoting binary thinking in relation to modes of biblical engagement. The perceived distinction between spiritual and academic or scholarly approaches to the text leads me to propose that any programme attempting to deepen the biblical engagement of ordinary Christians should attempt to debunk or collapse this binary.

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The need to collapse this binary will entail the provision of a real *programme* of resources, not just a portfolio of varied approaches, like a potpourri of biblical ‘texts’ in different formats or a set of Bible studies. There needs to be a real sense of integration whereby the fruits of study may be seen to enrich and nourish a genuinely spiritual encounter with the texts; this would create a confidence in exploring their multivocality without fear of becoming lost in a postmodern free-for-all where the texts mean whatever we wish. Such a programme could do worse than start with a survey of the whole library of biblical texts, both to provide a sense of the narrative of God’s people in which the reader may be encouraged to find their own role, and to begin to convey the symbols and language of faith, the theological motifs which have structured Christian thought and reflection across the centuries. This would be more effective in developing a sense of the ‘big story’ if it were accompanied by an encouragement to develop a regular habit of reading larger chunks of the Bible and whole books all the way through. Further, it should be accompanied by an introduction to the different natures and genre of the biblical texts in order to facilitate a deeper understanding of how they might be read – as exhortation, as worship song, as prayer, as vision, as narrative.

Given this foundation, ordinary readers might then be introduced to the strategies of spiritual reading within a pre-established framework of biblical understanding informed by centuries of reflection. These practices should themselves be introduced in the context of their historical pedigree to counter ‘modern’ fears of postmodern novelty and untrammelled speculation. If the passages being used for meditative encounter were subsequently studied in more detail, critically, both to evaluate meditative readings and to mine the texts further for their input into the readers’ current contexts, this would, I propose, nurture a more holistic approach to cognitive and spiritual aspects of encounters with the Bible, where the whole Reader engages the texts in their completeness and complexity.

### **An aside on individual ‘acontextual’ readings**

I would like, here, to turn aside briefly and re-consider the issue raised by one of the Pathfinders who was discouraged from sending her friend a verse because she thought, on exegetical grounds, that she was taking it out of context (see

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p.224). How do the reflections here answer her dilemma and her desire not to let 'the hermeneutics thing' get in the way of listening to the Spirit speak through the Bible? I would suggest that she is far from the only Christian to experience a scripture 'coming to mind' and impressing itself, sometimes in what appears to be an acontextual manner.

Many within the Pentecostal and charismatic movements would understand some of their Spirit-inspired readings as being not only a product of their experience and open to evaluation by others but also *specific* to them and their situation; in their traditions this concept is sometimes expressed by using the term *rhema* or '*rhema* word'. The very employment of this term has been disputed. Mark McLean claims that it has been used as a means of circumventing the principle of *sola scriptura* and allowing the interpretation thus described to trump the authority of the biblical texts (1984: 35-6). Someone employing this term may, in effect, be claiming that they have heard something directly from God that supersedes the Bible. However, while it may have been used in this way by some Christians in these streams, and it may also be true that 'the distinction between *rhema* and *logos* is a modern charismatic distinction which is anachronistic', McLean also notes that he has 'no quarrel with the notion that the Holy Spirit speaks to us today through the Scripture in a way that may give us personal guidance for a current situation' (McLean, 1984: 52, n.9). A similar position is taken by French Arrington who argues that, for 'classical' Pentecostal and charismatic Christians, any contemporary revelation by the Holy Spirit should be tested against the norm of the Bible: 'The ongoing revelatory work of the Holy Spirit is seen not as a challenge to biblical authority but as a specific application of the biblical message that is *limited both in its subjection to Scripture and in its applicability*' (1988: 381, my emphasis).

In this regard, the example given by Jacqueline Grey may be more illustrative of the more recent use of the term *rhema* by some ordinary Christians. In her study of how ordinary Pentecostals and charismatics read Christologically, she cites a Pentecostal minister, Ron Hoffman on his reading of Isaiah:

Then God spoke to me with a *rhema* word through the Scripture 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?'. I had read those words many times before, now they were charged with a new personal challenge. How would I answer? Here am I, but send someone else! God was

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challenging me to a new adventure, to another step in ministry. Was I willing to be available, to be obedient? To say like Isaiah of old, 'Here am I, SEND ME'.

Grey goes on to comment:

The process of challenge is described by Hoffmann as being a 'rhema' word. This concept is common in Pentecostal preaching and writing, and particularly so in the Charismatic section of the movement. The 'rhema' word refers to a text (Scripture passage, concept, word, song lyric, etc) that 'jumps out' at the person through the presumed action of the Holy Spirit to enliven the text with revelatory impact and personal immediacy. ... he is newly challenged by a familiar text that is suddenly quickened in his heart and mind (Grey, 2011: 69, capitals original).

'Rhema' is

a terminology based on a proposed Greek distinction between a 'logos' (a general or distant word) and a 'rhema' (an immediate or personal word) statement. The 'rhema' word highlights the expectation among the Pentecostal reading community that the text will 'speak' to and transform the reader (Grey, 2011: 116).

Grey cites and notes the 'excesses and extremes' of use raised by Matthew S. Clark in a 1997 dissertation, concerning those in the Pentecostal sub-group, designated 'Word of faith'; this use of *rhema*, he found, eschewed the findings of critical biblical study and created a dualism between reason and spirit.

However, Grey claims that

its general use is far more innocuous. For many Pentecostal readers, the 'rhema' word represents the moment of understanding spiritual truths. It is also often described colloquially as the 'aha' moment of revelation: the Holy Spirit illuminates a truth which is highlighted from the reading or study of the biblical text (Grey, 2011: 117).

Others, she notes, use 'rhema' to denote not only a sudden illumination but a re-shaping of worldview and identity, an 'unveiling of reality' (2011: 117) that expresses the transformative action of scripture.

A few non-Pentecostal scholarly reflections also specifically address this kind of situation: James Dunn notes that Christians through the ages have experienced God addressing them through the Bible and, on occasions, 'the word which is heard is at some remove from the sense originally intended'; in such cases 'we must recognize that a word spoken with one force to a particular historical situation, can still function as word of God with a different force in a different

## CHAPTER 6. Head and heart: cultivating a holistic approach for ordinary hermeneutics

situation' (Dunn, 1987: 130). In order to deal with these instances, we need 'the interaction of a strictly historical exegesis with a prophetic openness to the Spirit now, where each acts as stimulus and check to the other' but sometimes the interaction between text and Word is subtle, so an interpreter needs both to study *and* to 'work in constant dependence on the Spirit who gave the text being studied' (Dunn, 1987: 132-3).

Pinnock makes a similar observation, that individuals sometimes

hear God saying something different, where a text will be given a meaning different from the one intended. At such times, a text written in one context functions as a word of God with a different force in a new one. It seems that a text may be the occasion of an insight without being the cause of it. The method is to allow a historical exegesis to interact with a prophetic openness to the Spirit. Almost any Christian can testify to the pedagogy of the Spirit using the Bible as we connect our own experience with the text (Pinnock, 1993: 22).

He goes on to emphasise the need for study 'to be aware of the historical horizon of the text but to be in close touch with the redemptive realities which the text presents' (Pinnock, 1993: 23).

A final example comes from the charismatic Catholic tradition, where Paul Hinnesbusch suggests that 'we should not be surprised if people sometimes experience God speaking to them in passages in a way which seems to violate the rules of scriptural exegesis'. Cautioning that '[t]he fact that God may have used a passage in this way to speak to us personally does not mean that we must urge our interpretation of this passage upon others' (1979: 71), he argues that 'this sort of experience of the scripture can be authentic, even though it does not seem to correspond to the rules of exegesis or theological reflection'. Any such insight may still, however, be evaluated: 'No passage of the scriptures should ever be interpreted apart from the context of God's complete revelation' (1979: 72).

It is important to stress here that we are not addressing readings which individuals wish to apply to wider ecclesial situations; this is about individuals reading texts and finding applications specific to their personal circumstances. Should all such readings be subjected to rigorous exegetical testing? In agreement with the authors quoted here, I would suggest that, in such cases,

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while the original horizon of the text should not negate a strongly felt sense of the Spirit applying a text to a specific readerly situation, a wider theological narrative, arising from canonical readings, could legitimately be applied as an evaluative framework. In other words, while a text offering, for example, comfort in a particular situation, might be drawn, or even torn, from a passage where it is not intended to offer such comfort, nevertheless, the articulation might be seen as legitimate within a broader biblical narrative and theological understanding of the Spirit of God as Comforter. This in no way affects the conclusions drawn in this study; it only provides a still greater motivation for promoting understanding of the Bible's 'big story'.

### Conclusions

In the introduction to his *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, Thiselton notes that 'Schleiermacher's question of how we hold together what he termed the "feminine" quality of creative, intuitive, immediacy, with what he regarded as the "masculine" quality of comparison and critical distance, remains equally central to multidisciplinary hermeneutics ... and to issues of Christian faith'(1992: 5). The findings from the practical section of this study support the continuing relevance of this issue in a post-modern context even if we would wish, in the twenty-first century, to avoid employing gender to articulate the distinction being made. The tensions between study and analysis of texts and an intuitive, Spirit-led encounter with the 'living Word' are not limited to some denominations nor to a modern or post-modern context but are, I would argue, inherent in a situation where ancient sacred books are believed to have origins both human and divine and where their contemporary readers anticipate encountering the divine author in the very process of articulating the texts.

From the reflections in this chapter, both scholarly and ordinary, I would suggest that any programme designed to promote a greater level of biblical engagement by ordinary Christians would benefit from clarifying, firstly, how Christians understand the nature of this library of texts. Some exploration of how different types of texts are read and the assumptions with which we approach them, would be helpful. Beyond that, an historical perspective would be especially useful in order to show participants the grounds for approaching the Bible in terms of both Word *with* Spirit, study *with* inspiration; the stress would be on the

## CHAPTER 6. Head and heart: cultivating a holistic approach for ordinary hermeneutics

need not for *both* approaches but for one integrated, holistic encounter, seeking to understand the texts, cognitively and emotively, with the aim of spiritual formation. This might include some introductory explanation of the different bases on which Christian thought has proceeded across the centuries, in terms, perhaps, of Scripture, Tradition and Reason and Experience. Without some appreciation for the broader dimensions of the history of Christian thought there is a danger that ordinary Christians might feel themselves being exposed to some dangerous and novel ideas as ancient texts are approached in their own right rather than as products of modernism. At the same time, readers could be made aware that any encounter with the Bible needs what Bockmuehl refers to as 'engaged self-involvement' (2006: 72).

Some approaches to the issues discussed here may prove unpalatable to certain sectors of the church, most especially those with a biblicist understanding of the Christian scriptures and/or a cessationist position leading to a low expectation of the possibility of spiritual inspiration during biblical reading. However, some elements may be acceptable and also create room for readers to engage more holistically with the texts. I would suggest that one such element would be a presentation of the Christian understanding of biblical history as narrative. Such a resource would not overtly challenge a literalistic approach; it might, nonetheless, help readers to find ways to live informed and shaped by the texts without reducing the Bible to a manual for the Christian life. In my closing chapter I shall bring my conclusions together to propose a structure and content for a programme to promote biblical engagement by ordinary Christians in a range of ecclesial situations.

# CONCLUSIONS

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## **The situation and contribution of this study**

This thesis, focussed as it is on the ways in which non-theologically trained Christian believers might be enabled to interact more deeply and fruitfully with their scriptures, is clearly situated within a confessional framework. Together with the framers and conceivers of the individual resources used, and the Pathfinder programme as a whole, and with those churches and academics that have called for greater biblical engagement by the laity, I am assuming that the spiritual growth of Christians will be fostered by a greater familiarity with and understanding of, the library of books that is the Bible; while the nature of the relationship between biblical engagement and spiritual formation cannot be specified for any individual, and there is a good deal of variety in specific teaching across the churches, I am working within the broad tradition that understands the Bible as being, in some sense, inspired by, and revelatory regarding, God, specifically witnessing to Christ through the Spirit. In this respect it is of inestimable value in helping believers to live Christianly.

Assuming this relationship between the Bible and the believer, my thesis contributes to an understanding of the interaction between the two and, at least in the readerly locations examined here, the ways in which this interaction may be supported and developed in the process of discipleship. As outlined at the beginning, I am suggesting that *lectio divina* can provide a framework for this interaction which involves both a deliberate turn towards the text, to encounter it more deeply and intentionally than modern reading is wont to do, and an overall orientation towards the goal of spiritual formation; within this framework a variety of approaches to biblical texts, through different media and incorporating both 'head' and 'heart' resources, can be presented. If conducted in small groups it also provides a safe space within which ordinary Christians can share their interpretations and learn together. These and the other, more detailed proposals within this thesis emerged from analysis of and reflection upon, the responses to the Pathfinder project.

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While there are lots of individual resources available which are designed to encourage the biblical understanding of ordinary Christians, Pathfinder sought to bring a cross-section of different kinds of material together, in a co-ordinated programme dealing with a variety of aspects and modes of biblical engagement, presented across different church types and denominations. As was anticipated at the outset, evaluation of this project generated a rich and diverse collection of responses, both to individual elements and to the whole portfolio. Given the paucity of existing data on the ways in which ordinary believers interact with any materials of this kind, this project contributes a good deal to discussions within the developing topic of 'ordinary theology' as well as being relevant to the wider fields of practical theology and theological education (in the sense of education in theology and biblical studies for Christians). Further reflection on the Pathfinder data has provided a unique opportunity to contribute to theological debate from a previously unexplored angle: what might be learned from the responses of ordinary Christians to material specifically aimed at promoting their biblical understanding and engagement?

Having found what I considered to be theologically pertinent themes within the Pathfinder data I have, in this thesis, brought my findings into a fruitful dialogue with both contemporary reflection and ancient practices of biblical engagement, particularly *lectio divina*; the latter was found fruitful not least because the same themes could be found within its mediaeval practice. This led to some intersections with debates in biblical hermeneutics and biblical studies, across denominations and, to a limited extent, across the ages.

This inter-subdisciplinary conversation has led me to put forward a number of strategies for design of future programmes to promote 'ordinary' biblical engagement. These strategies are driven by the actual responses of ordinary Christians themselves, considered within these wider contexts. I have tried, where possible, to put forward ideas that are appropriate for, or adaptable to, diverse ecclesial settings and traditions and bear in mind the need for the widest accessibility, in every sense. More specific suggestions are made within the last three chapters but, here, I bring together what I feel are the key points that emerged.

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### **The need for a programme and the concept of ‘journey’**

Disquiet regarding the lack of a clear direction and plan for Pathfinder was noted by a number of participants across the churches. I would suggest firstly, that a *programme* of activities and resources, as opposed to a selection of unrelated elements in no particular order, is better placed to promote biblical engagement by ordinary Christians and that the rationale for any such programme needs to be clearly communicated at the outset. There are a number of reasons for this.

Having a programme, rather than a pot-pourri of different resources strung together, provides the opportunity to begin with the most accessible, basic introduction and thus encourage as many as possible to participate from the start. Those more experienced believers who might feel it is too basic for them, may be encouraged to join in either as mentors for others or with a sense of sharing the future journey as a group. Taking care to avoid the use of unnecessarily complex terminology would further encourage wide participation. Structuring a programme would then allow a progressive increase in depth and challenge such that all could make some progress and follow routes most suited to their temperament, ability and starting point.

Designing a programme also allows for some thought to be given to providing opportunities to encounter the Bible in a manner which is both cognitive and emotive, rather than reinforcing the perception that one approaches the biblical texts with *either* one’s head or one’s heart. Finding resources that obviously combine both approaches might be a challenge, but planning a programme at least allows for the inclusion of different elements promoting each. Furthermore, the programme can then be designed, and so integrated into other church activities, that opportunities can be provided for skills and approaches learnt through the programme to subsequently be put into practice.

Such a planned programme may then be communicated to the potential participants in advance which, in itself, has a number of advantages. Perhaps most importantly, a ‘route map’ for such a programme could convey the concept of spiritual formation as an ongoing ‘journey’; this would hopefully communicate the message that it is for *everyone*, not just the intellectually gifted or the dedicated few. With a view to encouragement, it is here that there may be an

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appeal to historical precedence; some practices of spiritual formation they may already be familiar with, such as *lectio divina*, were developed with the assumption that the practitioner was steeped in all the biblical texts and church teaching. A sense of continuing practices established over the centuries within the Christian tradition might further encourage some potential participants.

*Lectio* also provides a model for an attitude towards the Bible which presumes an integration of cognitive and emotive approaches and views it as a means to the end of encountering God and being transformed. A mapped programme could make clearer the nature of such biblical engagement as being aimed at promoting spiritual growth, rather than 'Bible study' for its own sake. Here, care would have to be taken in establishing the role of professional voices; they should, ideally, be situated within the community undertaking the programme, be viewed as participants in, not leaders of, the materials, and should be seen as a resource rather than a source. The emphasis of any such programme would be to further biblical engagement by the body of the church with a view to spiritual transformation, rather than see it as a project of specialists 'informing' the rest.

There are also practical advantages to having a programme of resources; people embarking on such a project would have a clear idea of what they will be doing, in what order, and why. This would facilitate planning by those who cannot commit time and energy without information and it might encourage persistence by those who find some stages challenging. Having a 'map' and 'narrative' for the suggested programme would also help in managing expectations and could demonstrate how the resources each enable the journey, fit together, and develop what has been learnt previously; a plan and its rationale would empower the spiritual sojourners and give a sense of achievement along the way.

Finally, the map should include 'resting places' along the route where participants can pause and reflect, individually and corporately, on their journey up to that point and to what extent the resources they have used have helped them along the way. Experience from Pathfinder suggests that this is best conducted within a small focus group, perhaps with a facilitator to prompt and record feedback. This reflection would both encourage and support the onward

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journey in spiritual formation of the participants and provide valuable guidance for those following the same route at another time.

### **The value of beginning with an overview of the Bible and introduction to the concept of the Bible's 'big story' or 'drama'**

Given the Pathfinder responses to overviews of the Bible, such a resource would seem the most obvious candidate with which to embark on any programme to promote biblical engagement. Such an overview, whatever format it took, should include an indication of the historical periods over which the biblical texts were written and to which they pertain, and of the chronological relationships implied within the different books. Other resources which include encounters with larger portions of the Bible, such as a whole book, and convey something of their historical and cultural background, would be useful supplements to such an overview.

At the same time, any overview should also communicate some sense of the overall biblical narrative, as understood by the church, in a manner which conveys the position of modern readers as ongoing participants in God's 'big story'. In this way, ordinary readers may be helped to situate themselves in God's ongoing 'project' and enabled to see a constructive way in which knowledge of the texts might help them structure a lived response to them (formation, not merely information). An overview of the Bible as the way God has worked with God's people may, additionally, promote the idea of engaging the Bible as part of a community rather than it being an individual pursuit. And a knowledge of the 'big story' and biblical themes would also provide a framework by which ordinary readers can begin to evaluate differing readings of a given text.

### **Textual encounters**

The Pathfinder responses to encountering the biblical texts through various media emphasise the usefulness and power of resources utilising these various articulations of the Bible; they also raise the possibility that use of film in biblical engagement may particularly appeal to younger members of the church. Both audio and video formats of the Bible, be they straight biblical text or adaptations of biblical stories, showed the potential not only to convey general information

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about the texts but also to evoke an emotional engagement with the narratives. Dramatic presentations thus present one possible means to create an expectation of a holistic, cognitive and emotive, approach towards these ancient books. At the same time, reflecting on these responses in conversation with historical practice and contemporary research suggests that, used in the right circumstances, they may be a useful way to encourage a critical and discriminating approach towards all articulations of the texts.

Inclusion of aural and/or imaged reading of stories or passages from the Bible would appear to foster a wider exposure to longer sections of the scriptures than most visual or aural readers usually encounter in church or in personal devotions. Listening to the New Testament allowed some Pathfinders to experience the whole of a biblical book at 'one sitting' for the first time. Watching filmed accounts of biblical events and stories is also a way of becoming aware of otherwise less often encountered biblical passages. Both these activities can support a grasp of the Bible's 'big story'.

When these resources use the text as the script, as in audio Bibles, a variety of them will provide examples of different articulations of the same text, which may open up aural readers to the possible multivocality of the Bible. Hearing readings which provide different possible textual 're-hydrations' may then be a fruitful way to introduce the concept of multivocality within ecclesial settings otherwise expecting only one interpretation of each text.

With regard to film, most, if not all English Christians are exposed to filmed versions of the Bible at some point. Film scripts are necessarily not as close to the 'script' of the Biblical text as those audio presentations discussed above, so some inevitably present articulations which contradict one another and/or the traditional Christian understanding of the parent text(s). If Christians view these as part of a programme during which they come together to discuss them, this would hopefully also foster an environment where they can become aware of the nature of textual articulations. Thus sensitised to ways in which texts may be read, aurally or imaged, they would be better equipped to expect, value and evaluate, different articulations offered in other contexts, such as pulpits or bible study groups. This need not be taken in a purely negative fashion. For instance, viewing four or five different filmed articulations of an incident in the life of Jesus

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might suggest that, while a couple of them contain features at odds with orthodox Christian understanding of the person of Christ, the others present alternate, valid articulations. While it would take time to select appropriate resources in this fashion, the outcome, in the development of critical faculties and thoughtful consideration of the texts, would hopefully reward the effort.

In the age of apps and instant information I would like to suggest a role, also, for memorization as a means of textual encounter. Even if our modern understanding, and use, of memory differs from that of the ancients, it may be worth exploring the potential value, within spiritual formation, of committing to memory longer portions of the scriptures. This would involve modern adaptations of ancient practices of memorization in preference to rote learning of short passages or single verses, since the former may be found to convey a deeper understanding of, and grappling with, the texts, as experienced by some oral performers of the gospels. Any such learning will have more value if embedded within a larger awareness of the context of the passage being memorized and the broad sweep of biblical narrative.

### **Company along the journey: the value of small groups, especially as an arena for exploring multivocality**

Pathfinder was designed for use by small groups, rather than individuals or congregations. Growth in the Christian life is something which requires company. While some elements of a programme to promote biblical engagement could be covered, or supplemented, by teaching at a congregational level (such as exploring the overall narrative or 'big story' which Christianity finds across the Testaments), and some resources (such as YGTT) may be designed with individual use in mind (even if it were to be discussed subsequently in groups), only the small group allows room for individual contributions and sharing while avoiding the greater dangers of self-deception present when one pursues a solitary path of spiritual formation.

The small group format obviously determines the type and format of resource one might include in a programme of biblical engagement but one particular merit emerged in the Pathfinder data: the exposure to the textual articulations and interpretations of other Christians. In some cases this was seen as opening up previously 'unseen' angles on a text; in others, there was a conscious

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decision of whether or not to 'take on board' differing perspectives. The lyfe resource was valued in this respect, and because it was seen as providing opportunities for all to contribute and had an element of application to everyday life (the 'challenges'). Any programme designed to promote biblical engagement should include a resource offering a similar possibility: the creation of a 'safe space' within which all views may be aired and a structure which invites individuals to honestly share their impressions, good and bad (the 'shockers' and the 'blockers'), of the text. While this requires careful facilitation, to prevent any attempts to close down debate, it not only allows an opportunity for individuals to raise their questions but also, as with different media, makes room for exposure to differing articulations of the texts. A number of different possibilities were explored, in Chapter Five, for encouraging an openness to differing readings, and the best strategy will vary with the theological stances of the church setting but the small group remains the best arena within which to explore this important aspect of biblical engagement.

### **The need to integrate cognitive and spiritual approaches to the biblical library**

As discussed in Chapter Six, I understood some comments made by Pathfinders to reflect a dualist approach to the biblical texts: they could be studied, linguistically, historically, culturally, *or* they could be meditated upon in order to hear the voice of the Spirit, directing the ways in which they should apply them. Some Pathfinders affirmed the value in both of these but a contrast, and sometimes a conflict, was perceived, between the two. Academic reflection offers different responses. Some see a need for a cognitive approach to undergird any spiritual understanding, even if it is limited to an appreciation that the biblical world differs in fundamental respects to our own. Alternately, there is the danger than leading people away from a literalist reading may endanger their faith for no good reason.

I have argued that any programme designed to foster biblical engagement, for spiritual formation, among Christians needs to include some resources communicating basic hermeneutical skills. While these skills should be communicated in a manner that respects whichever ecclesial location the resource is designed for, there could, at least, be a communication of aspects of

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historical and cultural background which might prevent a reader otherwise appropriating a text in an anachronistic fashion. Even in a church which espouses a literalist view of the Bible, consideration of the ways in which the Old Testament is read in the New may shed light on different approaches to, and readings of, the texts. There should also be, for any church, some guidance on identifying the position of the reader and the reading community, and being aware of readerly prejudices; in modern Britain, an examination of the changing church positions on slavery or apartheid might provide some relatively uncontroversial examples from history of how the Bible can be mis-used to seek confirmation of existing ideas.<sup>151</sup>

Bearing in mind my aside on acontextuality towards the end of Chapter Six, readers should be encouraged to evaluate their own and other articulations to see if they are congruent with the broader Christian narrative and gospel values.

### **Further work**

While Pathfinder was a relatively small programme operating in only a few churches, reflection on the data it provided has suggested several strategies for any future programmes aimed at promoting biblical engagement among ordinary Christians in English churches. It has also highlighted some areas where more research would shed light on the process of contemporary biblical engagement, particularly in relation to modern media.

The prevalence of audio resources in our culture would suggest that, increasingly, ordinary Christians will encounter their sacred texts through aural reading, not just through public readings in church but privately, through pre-recorded texts read aloud or performed. More research is needed on the impact on hearers of aural encounters with the biblical texts and how these differ from, and interact with, silent visual readings from the printed page. It would be of particular interest to assess how different translations are received through visual and aural reading. Are those, such as CEV, which are designed to facilitate understanding through aural reading, actually easier to listen to? What happens when aural readers of such translations switch to silent reading? Do

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<sup>151</sup> However, any hermeneutical training needs to bear in mind issues of accessibility and should endeavour to avoid the use of technical terms except when absolutely necessary.

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they find other translations more or less accessible? And what effect is there when hearers encounter differing performances of the same text?

Similarly, there is no shortage of films and television programmes simply portraying biblical narratives and/or using them as metaphors for contemporary issues. It is all but inevitable that English Christians will have viewed some of these but little is known of their effects on subsequent encounters with the Bible in other formats. An examination of the ways in which viewing the Bible in film affects understanding of the parent texts (both those previously met through visual reading and those never before encountered), would shed some light on the potential impact of imaged reading of biblical stories.

Further to these specific areas, there is ample scope for more exploration of the ways in which ordinary English Christians encounter the Bible and this can only better inform how such interaction might be made more fulfilling and fruitful for their spiritual formation.

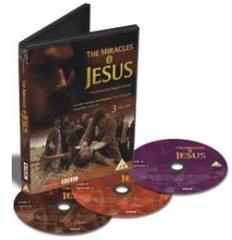


# APPENDIX I: 'Pathfinder' Report for Bible Society 2012

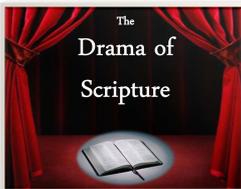
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# PATHFINDER



*Maperio*



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## Abbreviations

BC: The Bible as a Contemplative Resource

BN: The Bible as Narrative

CBS: Community Bible Study

ConBS: Contextual Bible Study

DQ: Diagnostic questionnaire (Appendix V)

DS: Drama of Scripture

ES1: Evaluation Survey 1 (Appendix VI)

ES2: Evaluation Survey 2 (Appendix VII)

Map: Maperio

Meek: The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth

MGSB: Making Good Sense of the Bible

MJ: Miracles of Jesus

Pass: The Passion

PCP: 'Pathfinder Churches Prospectus' (Appendix II)

PCR: 'Pathfinder Church Resources' (Appendix III)

PL: Pathfinder A5 promotional leaflet (Appendix I)

Reel: Reel issues

RRC: Reading Romans in Context

WO: Word in One

YGTT: You've Got The Time

## Executive Summary

The Pathfinder pilot programme in biblical engagement, that ran from the end of 2009 until the beginning of 2012, involved over 170 people from eight churches and seven different types of church. This report considers the responses of participants from Pathfinder and raises a number of issues for consideration in any future iterations of this or any similar programme. It also makes specific suggestions regarding individual resources used.

While both Bible overviews (Word in One, Drama of Scripture pilot) had some merits, there is an apparent tension between the scope and the depth: a balance needs to be struck between providing a framework with the Bible's major themes or 'big story', including something of its historical setting, and including a suitable level of detail within whichever time-frame is chosen for the presentations.

Both the hermeneutics resource, (Making Good Sense [MGS], now revised as *h+*), and the lectio-style materials (lyfe), made a profound impact but MGS also raised issues of accessibility that are pertinent to other resources targeted at ordinary Christians. Between the two, and similar resources in both strands, an unresolved tension emerges: how does the way in which the text 'speaks' within a lectio/contemplative-style format relate to what it is perceived to be communicating when studied using the tools of biblical and theological study?

When considering those resources involving dramatized versions of the texts (You've Got The Time, The Passion, Miracles of Jesus) it became clear that these have the potential to affect the reception of the text profoundly, for good or ill. The placement and timing of deployment of such powerful resources within a larger programme of biblical engagement should be considered carefully.

If planning a future programme, issues of both expectation and accessibility (in terms of learning environment, format of delivery and depth of content) need to be considered in order to maximise the impact and include as many as possible. A plan should allow participants to see what components form the programme

and why; these points, and links between different elements, should be presented at the commencement of each element. The contents should be modular, allowing individuals flexibility in their participation. Longer term programmes may begin with broad and highly accessible Bible overviews and then proceed to explore different approaches or empower Bible-users with new tools for understanding the text, but efforts to be inclusive will be most successful where accessibility, suitably informed by educational theory, is taken seriously.

## Introduction



### § Introduction.1 Background to the project

The Pathfinder project was conceived as one means by which to meet a number of perceived challenges regarding the ways in which the Bible is regarded and used in English churches. One prompt was a ComRes survey in 2007, the executive summary of which included the following observations concerning most churchgoers:

[They] struggle to apply [the Bible's] principles to modern life or explain them to non-Christians in an inclusive and effective manner. We find many churchgoers would appreciate material and guidance from their leaders to help them relate the Bible to modern society so that they can overcome these barriers to making the Bible's teachings more applicable.

Indeed, churchgoers feel there is scope for using the Bible more widely across all church activities and would welcome resources that help them engage with the Bible on a personal level - many feel this is very important to their spiritual growth. ...

... congregation members want a more challenging and open approach to Bible discussion, beyond Biblical exposition as monologue. Ultimately, congregation members believe this kind of engagement with the Bible will give them a much better understanding of the Bible's over-arching themes and lessons.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ComRes, "Taking the Pulse: Is the Bible Active and Well in Church Today?," (Bible Society, 2008). This survey was of 3,468 Christians (1,687 Church leaders and 1,781 non-leaders).

Elsewhere, the survey report noted that congregation members think the church should 'take a more active role in promoting the Bible in society' and that they 'are keen to be supported in *engaging* with and *understanding* the Bible to a greater extent' in order to promote spiritual growth. Their focus group members 'explained how they would like a better understanding of the Bible's over-arching messages and stories' but 'relatively few feel that they have it'. The survey concludes:

people are most in need of guidance on the whole story of the Bible, of its cultural context and the modern application of its principles - something that might best be accomplished by engaging with the Bible in small groups. Indeed, many would like to see resources to help them establish and run their own home groups, or better provision through the churches to do so during formal meetings.

The most important message to take away from this research, though, is that there is a **significant unmet demand for resources that will help both Church leaders and congregation members more effectively engage with the Bible** [emphasis original].

The general impression, that many Christians have difficulties with the Bible, is backed up by the later findings of the 'Apprentice '09 Survey' organised by Spring Harvest and the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity.<sup>2</sup> Out of the 2,859 attendees of Spring Harvest who responded, an average of over 42% (over 40% of those in leadership and nearly 47% of those not, had 'struggled with' reading the Bible in their personal spiritual life within the previous 12 months. Although the under-35s were under-represented in the sample (17% total) it was noted that the figure for this question rose to over 50% for both 18-25 and 26-35 age groups.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.licc.org.uk/uploaded\\_media/1343659529-1257506571-SH%20&%20LICC%20Apprentice%2009%20Survey%20Results.pdf](http://www.licc.org.uk/uploaded_media/1343659529-1257506571-SH%20&%20LICC%20Apprentice%2009%20Survey%20Results.pdf) (accessed 1/11/12)

Bible Society staff brought up related ideas when discussing the problems which Pathfinder was designed to tackle. There was a feeling that, within the church at large, there was a lack both of biblical literacy and of confidence in this ancient text. This was in part related to the perception of negative attitudes towards the Bible within the broader culture; although the ComRes survey had concluded that militant atheists such as Richard Dawkins do 'not appear to have significantly worried active Christians' it did note that 'the more pervasive modern scientific and materialist culture does spark concerns'.<sup>3</sup> Within Bible Society there was also the understanding that church-goers thought they didn't know how to handle scripture and particularly didn't feel confident in applying it to everyday life. Staff expressed the idea that, for some Christians, the Bible's role was reduced to it being a source of comfort and a 'manual' from which to draw short pieces of text to inform personal life; there was often little grasp of the Bible's 'big story' or of the different genres within it. This then was the backdrop, the situation which Pathfinder was designed to work within and to address.

### § Introduction.2 Intended Aims

The concerns expressed above resulted in the design of the Pathfinder project, whose structure and aims were expressed in the promotional materials produced in association with it; these included an introductory A5 promotional leaflet (PL; Appendix I) with a response slip for potential participants, and two other documents apparently aimed at church leaders. The 'Pathfinder Churches Prospectus' (PCP; Appendix II) dealt with the background, structure and aims of the programme in more detail, and gave an idea of the commitment expected of the church, as well as introducing the Pathfinder personnel. 'Pathfinder Church Resources' (PCR; Appendix III) expounded the stages or phases noted in PL, and mentioned some of the possible resources to be used. In talking with

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<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, a more recent ComRes survey of the general public showed a slim majority thinking the Bible is an important book. See <http://www.brin.ac.uk/news/2011/influence-of-the-bible/> (accessed 1/11/12).

respondents it was not always clear which of them had seen any or all of these documents.

In PL and PCR the programme's intended structure is set out under three headings or stages.

- *Diagnostic*. This was described in the PL as a time to '[r]eflect upon your journey with God and his Word so far', although, in the PCR the focus was on the use of 'various assessments to help ... discern ... current practice and relationship to the Bible'.
- *Development*. Both PL and PCR described this stage as featuring resources that tackle four aspects of Bible encounter. The first concerns participants grasping the 'big story' of the Bible. The second aspect is helping them make sense of the text, interpret and apply it. Thirdly, resources in this stage should enable personal spiritual formation and transformation. Fourthly, some resources should encourage participants 'to experience the Bible through new approaches which also link us to our contemporary culture'. The PCR document talked of an 'engaging our communities' phase with 'community facing activity approaches' and linked this to what Bible Society refers to as the 'Key Cultural Drivers'. At the time the document was produced these drivers were seen to include politics, social issues (environment, science), education, and media. Elsewhere, and later in the programme, these had developed into politics, education, media and arts.

Regarding the mix of resources offered, one Bible Society staff member expressed it thus:

*We want to give you something for your heads, where you put your thinking caps on, where you learn more about the Bible; we want to give you something for your hearts, that's your walk with God, the overall spirituality; and third we want to give you something for your hands and*

feet in the latter stages of the Pathfinder Project where you can go out and start applying things.

- *Evaluation.* This featured on the PL more prominently than on PCR but it was made clear that the project would involve some elements of assessment.

The PCP spoke of enriching a relationship with, and deepening understanding of, the Bible, as well as clearly stating the evaluative aspect of the project and mentioning a 'community-facing initiative'.

For the purposes of the evaluation of the programme here, I have drawn together these aims, or 'ambitions' as one staff member preferred to call them, under the following headings, which are used in the final chapter of this report ([§ Conclusion.1](#)).

- How valuable was it to have a diagnostic phase and evaluation?
- Did Pathfinder enable a better understanding of the Bible's 'big story'?
- Were participants better able to interpret, understand and apply the biblical texts?
- Did the programme contribute to their spiritual formation and/or have a positive influence on their relationship with God?
- Did it help them in any way to forge links between the Bible and contemporary society?

The elements of the Pathfinder programme, the individual resources, are each evaluated separately in the intervening chapters, according to their own intended outcomes.

## § Introduction.3 Management of Pathfinder

### § Introduction.3.1 Champions and facilitators

Pathfinder was designed primarily to help 'ordinary Christians'<sup>4</sup> in their biblical engagement, although comments from Bible Society staff suggest that they hoped that those with some prior theological knowledge would also benefit. To this end, each church centre chose a Pathfinder 'champion' who would promote the programme and liaise with Bible Society regarding planning for their group. Clergy or other 'professional Christians'<sup>5</sup> were not excluded but were not expected to have to participate; in practice, most did take part and some acted as the champion themselves. This will have had some impact upon the dynamics of the programme but its effects could not be measured and were outside the control of Bible Society.

This report uses the term 'facilitator' to refer in a more general fashion to some champions and others within the Pathfinder groups (both 'ordinary' and 'professional' Christians) who tended to take leading or facilitating roles where the resources required them.

### § Introduction.3.2 Diagnosis

The first meetings of most Pathfinder groups involved filling in a diagnostic questionnaire (DQ) and this was followed, either that week or another, by the first evaluation survey (ES1; see § Introduction.4.1 for further details). A few participants at some centres completed these at home but, despite reminders, these were not always returned. Consequently, initial group size does not always

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<sup>4</sup> A term to denote 'those who have not been trained in academic biblical scholarship', taken from Andrew Village, *The Bible and Lay People: An Empirical Approach to Ordinary Hermeneutics*, (Aldershot & Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 1.

<sup>5</sup> My term to cover clergy in those church types which have them and those fulfilling similar roles within other types of church. These would mostly (but not always) be those with some theological training at HE level.

equal the number of DQs received, nor are either of these necessarily the same as the number of ES1s collected. Oral feedback, both informally and within focus groups indicated a high degree of impatience or irritation with having to complete these surveys, despite an acknowledgment that the Pathfinder programme was a pilot and that they had been warned that evaluation was a key component of participation. Section Introduction.4.1 includes further discussion of this aspect of Pathfinder.

### § Introduction.3.3 Development

There was the intention to give all participating churches similar resources in the first year of the programme, that most began early in 2010. These included a one session taster of Maperio (Map) and a further three sessions of the same, a resource giving an overview of the Bible (Word in One [WO], or the Drama of Scripture element [DS] which was under development during Pathfinder), and Making Good Sense of the Bible (MGS) which had been developed as a pilot hermeneutics course specifically for Pathfinder. However, due to constraints of staffing and pre-existing church programmes, such as Lent courses, not all churches worked through them in the same order and some did both Bible overviews. (See [§3](#) for details of Bible overviews within specific churches.)

During the second year of Pathfinder there was even more variation between the churches as they, in conjunction with Bible Society staff, chose specific elements for their own contexts. See Appendix IV 'Pathfinder Resource and Visit Timetable' for a table showing which resources were used by the churches and in what order.

## § Introduction.4 Evaluation methods

### § Introduction.4.1 Questionnaires/surveys

#### *§ Introduction.4.1.1 Evaluation of starting point*

Originally, it was suggested by Bible Society that the programme begin with Pathfinder groups and their congregations as a whole completing an adapted version of the 2007 ComRes questionnaire referred to above in § Introduction.1 (the DQ; Appendix V); this would give an idea of where the church was in its use of the Bible and, if the two groups were compared, also of how representative the Pathfinders were of the church as a whole. If the same questionnaire were completed again at the end of the programme, by both congregation and Pathfinders, it would enable a 'before-and-after' assessment of how much individuals had changed over that time against a base-line of how the whole congregation had fared.

In addition, at the first or second meeting with the groups, I asked the Pathfinders alone to do a further 'Evaluation Survey' (ES1; Appendix VI)<sup>6</sup> which focussed more specifically on which parts of the Bible and its stories they were familiar with and what role it played in their lives.

However, all but two churches failed to obtain diagnostic questionnaires from a substantial proportion of their general congregation at the beginning of the programme. Additionally, within a few groups, there was a high degree of resistance to the whole concept of questionnaires. One facilitator reported that some who had begun Pathfinder had found the questionnaire itself was off-putting because they didn't understand the questions. In fact, one participant at this centre came up to me personally and said they didn't understand the word 'diagnostic' so thought the programme would be too hard for them. I had

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<sup>6</sup> I referred to this as a survey rather than questionnaire for reasons of accessibility. See the rest of this section.

already noticed that several people at this centre had not completed all the answers and, during the focus group, it emerged that this had been because they didn't find some of the questions accessible. My records made shortly following the meeting note that:

*Several said they'd never heard of [Richard] Dawkins and had to look him up on the internet ... Most had no idea what 'liberal' biblical scholarship was. ... One said she was so exhausted by the time she reached this question, the sheer number of options made her put it away for another day. Another said she simply couldn't face answering them. I think we have to face up to the fact that the more complex questions are very daunting for some participants.*

One of the other centres also noted that some of the participants had experienced difficulty in understanding some of the questions with which they were presented. At a further two centres there were comments to the effect that the preliminary, evaluative meetings had put people off.

### ***§ Introduction.4.1.2 Adjusting the method to suit the participants***

As a result of the initial responses noted above it was impracticable to assess the degree of representation of the congregations by their Pathfinder groups and the congregations were not evaluated at any later stage in the programme.

Furthermore, rather than repeat both questionnaire and survey in full at the end of Pathfinder to provide a 'before-and-after' snapshot, only selected questions from the diagnostic questionnaire and the evaluation survey were re-presented to the Pathfinders in a single 'Evaluation Survey 2' (ES2; Appendix VII) at the close of the programme. However, the responses even to this single final survey were mixed, with very few returns from some centres and a total of only 32; one champion reported back, informally, that some people had not completed it

because they found it too difficult.<sup>7</sup> It is likely that the responses to this survey were from those who find such instruments accessible and those who feel strongly enough about Pathfinder to complete the form. As a result of this it is not possible to make meaningful comparisons of the responses of the groups, individually or *in toto*, to the same questions before and after. Therefore, the data from these surveys which is cited in this report relates only to those questions concerning participants' self-perceptions of the effects of Pathfinder, and any opinions regarding elements of the programme which did not also emerge in the focus groups.

### **§ Introduction.4.1.3 Reflections on the starting point for the programme**

Given the self-selecting composition of the Pathfinder groups, the relatively small numbers involved (only 138 across the churches completing DQs even partially) and the huge range of possible influences on the results obtained (for example, type of church, gender, age, geography, level of education and socio-economic situation) there seemed little point in close comparison between the ComRes results and those from the initial Pathfinders' DQs, either as church groups or *in toto*.<sup>8</sup> However, a few simple observations may be made using the total Pathfinder figures and the figures for non-leaders in ComRes (since proportionally fewer clergy and other 'professional' Christians were present in Pathfinder groups). Both groups were asked 'How confident would you say you are in your Bible knowledge?' (ComRes S3Q3); despite differences in the distribution, a total of around 68% in both surveys declared themselves either very or fairly confident. 39% non-leaders in ComRes reported using commentaries and the figure was 38% among Pathfinders. 83% of ComRes non-leaders felt it important to know the Bible well (57% 'very') while a total of 96% Pathfinders felt it at least fairly important (72% 'very'). While far from

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<sup>7</sup> For details of returns, see individual church entries in § Introduction.5.

<sup>8</sup> For consideration of the influence of some of these factors on the way in which people respond to the Bible, see Village *Bible and Lay People* 2007.

statistically rigorous, these few snapshot comparisons at least suggest that the Pathfinders as a whole are not totally different in their responses to the ComRes respondents.

Regarding questions specific to the DQ and not found in ComRes, when the Pathfinders were asked if they agreed that more resources or initiatives would help them build their biblical understanding and use, 92% agreed at least to some extent. The responses to a follow-up question, asking which resources would be especially helpful, and offering four options, indicated that 62% would value resources that give 'an overview of the Bible and its core themes', and 81% those that would help 'to make sense of the Bible and to link it to my daily life'. A smaller number, 68%, said they would like things to help them 'make sense of the Bible and to link it to our culture' but most, 90%, would find something to help them 'to grow in my faith and follow Christ' particularly helpful. This indicates that the Pathfinders might be viewed on the whole as a group of people likely to engage with resources designed to help them meet these goals.

### § Introduction.4.2 Focus Groups

Each time I visited a church group there was a meeting of all or most of the Pathfinders together at which I posed a number of questions; some of these were specific to the resources they had studied since my previous visit and some related to their experiences of the programme in general at that point in time. These were designed to promote discussion, in a semi-structured manner, rather than limit the room for responses. (For an example of the format, see Appendix VIII.) Since there was opportunity for interactions and dialogue between members of the group (which in fact often generated interesting comments), and not just between individuals and me, these are referred to as 'focus groups' rather than 'group interviews'.<sup>9</sup> Transcripts of these meetings form a key

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<sup>9</sup> There is no room here to consider the value, but the many limitations, of qualitative research methods including focus groups and interviews but see Alan Bryman, *Quantity and Quality in*

element of the qualitative assessment of the resources in the chapters which follow.

Regarding representation, the Pathfinders were a self-selecting group of church members who were already both interested and motivated enough to commit their time to taking part in the programme and were, in many cases, already active in various areas of church life; as noted above, the lack of many congregational responses in most cases made it impossible to confidently gauge how representative they were of their whole church. However, if resources are found useful by a key set of active church members it might be that this increases the chances of them being disseminated more widely throughout the church. Hence there is value in examining their responses to the resources even if they are not 'typical' church members.

### § Introduction.4.3 Interviews

At some point during the first year of the programme, I carried out some one-to-one interviews (and one with a married couple) from each Pathfinder group. A semi-structured approach was taken towards interviewing. Before asking about the programme specifically, I asked the interviewees a set of questions concerning their current relationship with God, and how they viewed the Bible, in order to gain some ideas for further research in this area and to underline the fact that I was interested in their responses as individuals. I then moved on to a standard set of open questions related to Pathfinder and its possible effects but was open to asking more subsidiary questions if the responses suggested that would be useful. (See Appendix IX for the questions on which each interview script was based.) Often the responses generated during interviews matched those emerging from focus groups but, sometimes, a deeper response, or a more reflective or personal one, was offered when individuals were on their own.

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*Social Research*, (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988). For a review of the use of focus groups as a technique, see David L. Morgan, "Focus Groups," *Annual Review of Sociology* 22 (1996): 129-52.

When considering the interviewees, who were generally a small sub-set of the whole Pathfinder group in any one centre, I have no way of assessing whether or not they were representative of the group as a whole. Since I was dependent on organisation by the local 'champion', and on availability of interviewees for the hours and days I was visiting the area, I had little control over who I could interview and was only able to speak with a handful of participants at each centre. The exception was Church A, where it was arranged for me to speak to three people who had dropped out of the programme as well as a large proportion of the remaining group members. The interview script was modified for the former individuals in order to allow them to explore why they were no longer involved in Pathfinder (see [§ Conclusion.3.2](#)).

### § Introduction.4.4 Thematic Analysis

For each Pathfinder group, the components or elements of the programme varied; while they all did some elements such as the hermeneutics course (MGS), none of them did exactly the same combination and those that were in common were taken in differing orders at the different churches. In addition, the exact numbers of participants varied throughout the project, both within each group and between churches, due to drop-outs. Consequently this study was unable to control variables and there were insufficient participants to generate quantitatively significant data sets for different demographics. Given the fact that Pathfinder was being trialled, and that the outcomes of this pilot were unknown, it seemed most appropriate to adopt an approach that sought to allow patterns to emerge from the data. Accordingly, I chose to employ a broadly inductive thematic analysis of the qualitative data obtained (see the rest of this section for further exploration of this).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The term 'thematic analysis' is sometimes used to indicate an examination of themes within documents, such as texts (e.g. Paul R. Noble, "The Literary Structure of Amos: A Thematic Analysis," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114, no. 2 (1995): 209-26. Here I use it in the more general sense of a methodology employed in psychology and the social sciences, as detailed in

Interview and focus group transcripts, suitably anonymized, were made by a commercial company, TakeNote, but these were read through at least once while listening to the original recordings, in order to ensure their accuracy, to note where emphases were made and to gain an overview of the material. Transcripts from recordings of focus groups and interviews were then analysed thematically employing NVIVO software to code them as I examined them for patterns emerging from the data. Since data were collected over a period of nearly two years, it proved impracticable to read through all the transcripts before embarking on coding. Accordingly, coding was often modified in the light of subsequent data.

The thematic analysis was conducted assuming an essentialist epistemology (as opposed to a constructivist approach), where the participants' language was assumed to reflect their experiences in a straightforward manner. Semantic themes were identified within the explicit, apparent meanings of the data.<sup>11</sup> In some cases these 'themes' were pre-determined by the structure of the Bible Society project, so some responses were grouped together because they related to a particular element such as *Maperio*. Some themes appeared to relate directly (positively or negatively) to the apparent aims of the Pathfinder programme as a whole or its individual resources, or elements, and needed consideration when attempting to assess the degree to which those intentions had been achieved.

However, other themes and sub-themes were detected in the context of the researcher's interests and situation or were noted due to their prevalence within the data corpus. Some emergent themes were found to shed light on the programme, either by suggesting other, perhaps unintended, outcomes of the resources or by raising other pertinent issues such as accessibility. Some of these themes will be dealt with in the following chapters as we consider the responses to the different resources and possible implications arising from them.

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Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2006): 77-101.

<sup>11</sup> See Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," 84.

## § Introduction.5 Churches involved

This project only involved seven churches throughout the whole study although for a period of a few months there was an eighth and, during this time, it included representatives of seven different church 'types': Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, Roman Catholic, United Reformed, a free Evangelical fellowship and a large charismatic church of several hundred. Most churches were situated in urban areas of differing socio-economic backgrounds but one of the two Anglican parishes was rural; the geographical spread was from the north-west down to the south-west and across to the Home Counties, but three churches were in or near the same city in the Midlands. The number and spread of different churches, limitations of time, and geography, rendered in-depth congregational studies of the sort conducted in the USA<sup>12</sup> and the UK<sup>13</sup> impossible within the scope of this project, although an outline of each congregational setting is included here. Information given in these brief outlines is sometimes partly based on information given in answer to a 'criteria grid' supplied by Bible Society (Appendix X). Unfortunately, not all churches completed this grid so, for some, the information is limited to that available from websites, comments by church leaders and congregation members, and personal observations.<sup>14</sup>

### § Introduction.5.1 Church A

This is a Baptist church situated in an urban area close to a city in the Midlands, which has a congregation of around 120-150. Of these, approximately 25% are under sixteen, about 40% over 60 and most of the rest are over 30. No report was given concerning ethnicity but the gender ratio is about 55% female and

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<sup>12</sup> James F. Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> Mathew Guest, *Evangelical Identity and Contemporary Culture: A Congregational Study in Innovation*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007); Linda Woodhead, Mathew Guest, and Karin Tusting, "Congregational Studies: Taking Stock," in *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context*, ed. Mathew Guest, Karin Tusting, and Linda Woodhead, (Aldershot & Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Grids were received from the following: churches C, E, F and G.

45% male. There is an all age service once a month, and a Sunday school; there is also a variety of church-related or associated groups engaging with the community and involving both older and younger people and children, such as an over-60s group, rambling group, and Boys' and Girls' Brigades.

The Pathfinder group size began at around 20 including the minister, and had reduced to ten by the completion of the programme. Several of them were involved with community-facing activities such as youth mentoring or practical support. Short interviews were conducted with 11 people including three who had dropped out; eight completed final evaluation surveys.

### **§ Introduction.5.2 Church B**

Church B is an urban Anglican church in the Midlands which, in addition to regular services, home groups and the provision of religious ceremonies for its local community, also runs church groups for younger children and youth, and a hobby group for adults. There is a good mix of ages and a gender ratio of approximately 60:40, females:males, among its congregation of about 100 people; these are predominantly white with around 10% from various ethnic minorities.

The Pathfinder group began in the Spring of 2010 with over 30 participants but had shrunk to half that number by the summer and was fewer than a dozen by the end, including two clergy facilitators. Two focus groups and five interviews were conducted but it was not possible to conduct a final group session and only two closing evaluation surveys were completed, both by the facilitators.

### **§ Introduction.5.3 Church C**

Church C is a Methodist Church situated in the suburbs of a town in the Midlands, in an area which is mainly middle-class but with cases of deprivation. As one participant noted, 'there are lots of problems that people don't see, but on the surface it's a lovely village'. There are around 70 people attending one or both of the Sunday services although it is estimated that the church makes

contact with about 300 folk in the course of a month's activities which include parents-and-toddlers, Sunday club (for under 18s), Timeout (craft group for adults with some spiritual elements) and monthly 'Trailblazers' (5-11s). The church acts as host to Guides, Brownies and Cubs, and a Day Centre for the elderly (run by social services but supported by the church in that the use of their building is provided free of charge), and it is also rented out to slimming groups. There are four house groups meeting weekly or monthly. Church members range in age from 16 to 94, with a ratio of approximately 70:30 females to males, almost all of whom are white British. The church is described as 'traditional with some modern elements', evangelical, with use of the Bible in both readings and sermons in Sunday services, and Bible study being carried out in house-groups. When asked about the role of the Bible in evangelism and mission the response was: 'what mission we do does not specifically use the Bible, but those engaged in it are people of faith whose lives are based on the Bible'.

The Pathfinder group began as a group of 25 people, 19 women and 6 men, aged 40-85, although 90% were over 50 years of age. Not all members completed all the feedback or were able to attend all the sessions but around 14 remained in the group to the end of the programme. Four were interviewed and five completed the closing survey. All had some degree of involvement with a diverse range of church activities: being a circuit minister, church steward, or member of the church council; helping run children's work; arranging flowers; transporting people around; leading or being involved in various groups including 'Time Out', fellowship or one focussing on bereavement.

### **§ Introduction.5.4 Church D**

The Anglican parish of Church D comprises three congregations. The first typically has a congregation of 58 adults and 13 children, while the second has 47 adults and 18 children; both have a female:male ratio of around 65:35. The third, meeting at a 'Church Centre', is smaller, with around 30 adults and five children, and has a gender ratio of 82:18. All congregants are ethnically white British. The churches, which came together to form this parish in 2009,

represent different traditions within the Church of England (middle of the road and evangelical), and serve a rural community located within the outskirts of a large city in the north-east.

The Pathfinder group, originally around 15 was about half that by the end of the programme. The eleven who stayed long enough to complete the first evaluation survey were all already involved in various church activities including PCC and other administrative roles, music, youth and holiday clubs, Christian counselling, small groups and social support groups. Four interviews were conducted but only three closing surveys were completed.

### § Introduction.5.5 Church E

Church E is an Evangelical Church situated in the suburbs of a Midlands town. It is not far from a University campus, on an estate of post-war, former council housing, although many members come from outside the estate. The mainly white, middle and working class congregation of around 50 people has an approximately 75:25 ratio of women to men. The services vary: each month there are usually two 'celebratory praise' services, a family communion service, and a 'community centred service ... using crafts, food, coffee tables & a bouncy castle'.<sup>15</sup> There are also specific activities or groups for older people, parents with young children, and those with learning disabilities. The church only has one young family and a small Sunday school but it also aims to welcome and involve students; some of the congregation are former students who remained in the area and there are two current students in the regular congregation. There are several other churches in the locality and some events have been organised across the churches.

Among the Pathfinders, some noted their involvement not only in a Day Care Centre and parents with children group but also in taking services at a local residential home. The Church E group began with around 30 members including

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<sup>15</sup> Church Criteria Grid

some from ethnic minorities; some of the group were professionals and some had learning difficulties or disabilities including visual impairment and Down's. Six of the group were interviewed. By the end of the programme there were around a dozen regulars and ten completed the final evaluation survey.

### § Introduction.5.6 Church F

Church F is a United Reformed congregation with around 200 members and a further 50 attendees located in what has been termed a 'suburban village' near London. Around 120 attend congregational meetings the style of which is described as a mix of traditional and contemporary. The church usually has a Minister; major policy is decided by four-times yearly Church Meetings although many decisions are delegated to a group of 17 elders who lead the church. Congregants span a wide age range, from zero to over 100, of which around two thirds are female. Most are white although a small number of Ugandan or Ghanaian families also attend. Sunday morning worship is the central devotional meeting but there are also occasional Sunday evening meetings and six mid-week house groups of between five and 12 people. In addition to these activities, the church runs and hosts parent and toddler and pre-school groups and uniformed organisations. Other groups use the premises for different types of activities: physical activities such as keep fit, children's groups including Kumon maths, and various hobby groups. Although the Bible is read in every service, preached from, and used in small groups, the Criteria Grid does not record it being used overtly in mission and evangelism, except in as much as Sunday worship is used in this effort. The church has a history with Strong Scottish/Presbyterian Roots and its members have varied denominational backgrounds including Anglican, Baptist, and Roman Catholic. The minister, who saw the congregation as spanning '[a] spectrum from conservative evangelical

approach through to more liberal outlook', described himself as 'Evangelical, but not conservative'.<sup>16</sup>

The Pathfinder group began with around 25-28 people, over three-quarters of whom were over 50, with a 3:2 ratio of women to men. Some led house-groups and around half-a-dozen led or preached at meetings in church or at a local nursing home which has connections with the church. (Church members founded and are involved with two local residential homes). There seemed to be around a dozen regular Pathfinders by the close of the project but only three returned the closing evaluation survey.

### § Introduction.5.7 Church G

Church G is a charismatic church that is part of a network of churches in Britain, USA and Australia. The congregation meets in its own building on a trading estate some distance from the centre of a town in the Home Counties.<sup>17</sup> The regular attendees include around 100 children and youth, and 450 adults, some 200 or so being over 40. The church estimates itself to be around 10% non-white, (mainly African) with a gender distribution of around 55% women to 45% men. It holds three meetings each Sunday which are characterised by 'contemporary music and modern songs, very loud!!'. In addition to these there are other, less frequent Sunday meetings: a signing congregation, café church, meetings for youth, and others for older folk, the latter having more traditional music and some hymns. The church runs a number of community projects including football training, dance, street team,<sup>18</sup> single mums, counselling on

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<sup>16</sup> Data for attendance and activities the church runs are derived from reports by the church's Pathfinder Champion who was also the minister (July 2010). There followed an interregnum which was still operating when the programme ended.

<sup>17</sup> Data in this section are derived from a report by the church's Pathfinder Champion and from their web sites.

<sup>18</sup> Their Street Team was inspired by the Street Pastors model but is not so wide-ranging. It operates only on a Friday evening, on the local housing estate, focussing mainly on the young people who might be of the right age group to be encouraged towards the church youth night, Raw Café, which meets on Friday evenings. They do also engage with younger children and with

reproductive issues, and a toddler group, while it lends its premises for an AA group.

The church is a member of the EA, affirming its statement of faith, and 'we hold a high view of the integrity and sufficiency of scripture as the final authority in all matters of belief and behaviour'. In the week, small 'Life Groups' (home groups) meet; some of these include Bible study among their regular activities. There is generally one Bible passage read at each congregational meeting, although many other verses and passages may be referred to, and it is also regularly used in meetings for leaders (but not those for finance or directors). They use the Bible in evangelistic activities and discipleship (including Alpha) and those engaged in pastoral care are trained with material from the Association of Christian Counsellors which, they note, 'promotes the use of biblical references "sparingly and sensitively"'. On the criteria grid the counselling at the church is described as using 'a secular model overlaid with a readiness to challenge with biblical principles when appropriate'. This church also uses 'specific models of ministry, including Theophostic Prayer'; this ministry is described on its own web site as 'spiritual in nature and biblical in principle'.<sup>19</sup>

Fifteen out of 17 Pathfinder group members completed the core group questionnaire but only nine were present by the time of the evaluation in Summer 2010 and only five or six attended regularly by the end of the programme; only one completed the final evaluation survey and that was someone who had joined the group part way through the programme. The original group comprised 10 men and 5 women, two thirds of whom were over 40, so the group did not represent the same profile as the whole church (noted above). The level of involvement in regular church-based activities varied from none (one was a recent believer) up to a high degree of voluntary activity; one

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parents to identify general needs to which the church may be able to respond. There are no pubs or clubs on the estate but there is a parade of shops which includes a take-away and an off-licence, so this tends to be the area where people congregate, especially during the warmer months.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.theophostic.com/page12414933.aspx> (accessed 7/11/12).

participant was part of the wider leadership, led a Life Group, did voluntary work both in the church office, and as a driver and a money advisor, and also participated in the church's prayer ministry.

### § Introduction.5.8 Church H

This Roman Catholic group was drawn from two congregations based fairly close to the centre of a city in the south-west of England. Both of them have a wide range of church groups covering both spiritual practices and social activities. Beginning with about 18 interested individuals, the group shrank to around half that size following DS and MGS, after which they left the programme. Only one focus group was conducted with this group. Due to the short involvement of this group no interviews or closing surveys were carried out.

Aside then from the Church H group, which joined later for a short period of time, Pathfinder began around the end of 2009 and beginning of 2010 with approximately 165 participants. Based on the 138 completed diagnostic questionnaires, over 75% Pathfinders were aged 50 or over and nearly 60% were women. The programme ended about two years later with around 70 participants, only 31 of whom completed the final survey.<sup>20</sup> The feedback on the resources used in the programme is covered in the following sections.

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<sup>20</sup> In processing these, I did not include the one from Church G by someone who joined the programme when it was over half-way through.



## §1 Making Good Sense of the Bible

Making Good Sense of the Bible (MGS) was a pilot hermeneutics course, aimed at ordinary Christians, that all eight centres worked through during the first year of the Pathfinder programme; its actual form was being revised during the course of presentation and, consequently, not every centre had identical experiences. In response to early feedback it has since been revised and re-launched as *h+*<sup>21</sup>, so those features of the participants' responses which have already been taken into account in the development of *h+* will only be touched on here. There will be more focus on responses which may inform future development of biblical engagement materials generally or that enable an evaluation of this type of resource.

Briefly, MGS (in its various incarnations) comprised a number of sessions which asked how we read the Bible and introduced some basic hermeneutical skills to the Pathfinder groups. During MGS the participants examined the assumptions and preconceptions with which any reader approaches the text and also considered specific approaches, such as feminism. They discussed the role of the Holy Spirit and the ways in which the Bible might be authoritative, looked at how knowing about the author and about their historical context helps one read their text, and were also introduced to the concepts of genre and literary context. There was an opportunity to think about problem passages, such as the Canaanite conquest, and the groups also considered how to apply what they'd learnt: by using the hermeneutical skills, by passing on what they'd learnt to others, and by thinking through issues into which the Bible speaks. The topic of poverty and homelessness was used as a case study for the latter. Throughout the course and key to it, there is a framework introducing, and trying to develop, the desired qualities of a 'virtuous' reader, such as humility and faithfulness.

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.hplus.org.uk/> (accessed 28/8/12).

## §1.1 Intended Aims

Both a revised version of MGS and the current *h+* handbook express the aims of this course thus: '[t]o enable participants to make good sense of the Bible for themselves, in the church, and in the world, through learning, practicing, and mediating key virtues and skills'. However, the hoped-for outcomes of the resource have also been articulated in other ways.<sup>22</sup> Broadly speaking, the aims seem to have been:

- to develop participants' knowledge of the Bible and their confidence in it
- to give them the tools with which to interpret it
- to enable them to see which virtues will help them become virtuous readers
- to help them to think about how to apply it to their lives and to see that they have a contribution to make in understanding it within their communities
- to promote growth in Christian discipleship, or spiritual formation

It is not easy to assess the level of achievement of these aims and I can only judge it here through the responses of the participants using the MGS pilot, under headings which I hope capture the essence of the resource's goals.

### §1.1.1 Encountering the Bible in a new way

Across the centres, and even for some of those who found it academically challenging, this resource seems to have made an impact on the ways in which Pathfinders interact with the Bible. For instance there was this exchange at Church C:

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<sup>22</sup> See the text and the audio file at <http://www.hplus.org.uk/why-hplus/> (accessed 28/8/12) for a recent presentation of these ideas.

**Respondent 1:** I mean, even though that [hermeneutics] was very difficult, to me, it's the one we talk about the most and probably we learnt the most ... that's peculiar, isn't it, [Respondent 2]?

**Respondent 2:** Because we said, 'why on earth use that word?'. And yet, the funny thing is that we use that word now, with a laugh, but ... it's made an impression on us, I guess.

An interviewee at Church C, who was, overall, more negative than positive about MGS, finding it too 'academic' and feeling that it wasn't relevant to her, nevertheless noted that she had, as a result of the session on feminism, asked that their small groups might do more studies on women of the Bible. And another noted that:

I've been encouraged to buy myself a different set of Bible reading notes. The ones I'd been using were just two or three verses, but I've bought a book which is a larger chunk of the Bible; it's more of a chunk of the Bible and less of a commentary, and so I'm actually studying the Bible rather than what Selwyn Hughes wants to say, or whoever.

Sometimes, the effects of MGS were noted, along with other Pathfinder elements, when looking back over the programme as a whole. In response to a question concerning the effect of Pathfinder on their relationship with God, a dialogue at Church A spoke of lyfe and MGS:

**Respondent 1:** I think [Respondent 2] touched on it earlier whereby instead of reading a piece of scripture and thinking it's just flat words on a page ...

**Respondent 2:** It's almost 3-D!

**Respondent 1:** ...the hermeneutics has made the text alive and the applications of it has made the text alive, therefore, your relationship with God is stronger through that.

This was supported by a couple of the interviewees at Church A who noted that MGS had changed the way they read the Bible; one felt it had brought a 'deepness' to their encounter with the text. Someone at Church H felt that they had 'found it very valuable in giving me a sort of more diligent approach to reading the Bible' and, similarly, a Church F Pathfinder found that 'the more you go and dig deeper you get to see God's message and maybe even see that there's so much more to God that we can't even begin to fathom'. Meanwhile, another at Church F reflected that:

Going back to your question about reading the Bible differently, I felt hermeneutics was so liberating. It really made a huge difference, and for me it's been the absolute key thing in the whole course. ... I know it's different things for different people, but you asked that question, yes, it has to. It makes the experience of reading it quite different and quite extraordinary if you're able to read it that broadly and fully and deeply.

The majority of the Church D group were also positive about MGS; one person expressed how it had:

made you so aware of how often, we have taken scripture and just pulled it out of the page and applied it, when perhaps it wouldn't have been appropriate really to apply that scripture, that it wasn't particularly in that context that it was written. So that was really helpful, to be able to get into the habit of looking at what was behind that particular piece of writing.

When asked which MGS sessions had made an impression, the Church E group mentioned a number of different topics which they had found stimulating. One of their number had felt encouraged to buy different translations of the Bible and another noted that '[j]ust reading the familiar words in some other format is quite good because, when it's passages that we know so well, you don't actually read it, you skim it because you know it'.

Therefore, despite some negative responses, and while the exact effects may differ from church to church and among individuals, MGS would seem to have made an impression on the interactions between many participants and the Bible. This is unpacked in more specific detail in sections below.

### §1.1.2 Confidence in the Bible

For some participants, the material covered in MGS developed their confidence in the biblical texts. In a discussion of the effects of Pathfinder, at Church F, this interchange took place:

**Respondent 1:** One thing that I think that Pathfinder has helped with engaging and looking outward is that, for me, the more familiar I am with the Bible, the more confident I am to just talk about it. When I'm at work, or whatever, I'm not struggling for detail quite so much, I'm more confident for it to be a part of my conversation and, for me, that's the outward-facing bit that comes out of a deeper knowledge; it's just that confidence.

**Respondent 2:** There's a big picture, do you think, is that what I'm interpreting?

**Respondent 1:** It's more detail as well, the hermeneutics is also important, it's not just the big picture, it's just the confidence to know it well enough to talk easily about it.

Similarly, when considering the effects of WO and MGS on the way in which she read the Bible, an interviewee at Church A responded that:

I'll definitely consider what was the context that it was written in, who was it for, what was the historical context, what's the social context, who was it being presented to, how do I relate to that person, how does it relate to me? Yes, so definitely thinking through those sorts of things, and feeling a bit more confident then, in some of the things that Paul [the Apostle] says. ... I think his letters can present some of the most challenging things, but when you view them in the context that they were written for, it becomes easier.

Similarly, a female interviewee at Church C (not the same as mentioned in §1.1.1), said she'd found MGS helpful to consider the role of women informed by historical understanding: 'what was written was revolutionary for its time and you have to see it in that context '. It had also affected the way she understood and read the Old Testament because:

it's made me look a bit deeper than just reading. ... I'm not a lover of the Old Testament. I love the Psalms, but ... I know it sounds awful, but I much prefer when it's the New Testament. It's really made me think about how it all links back really, doesn't it, lots of the things that Jesus said, particularly when he was in the Temple and that. We looked at that one week. It all relates to the Old Testament really, doesn't it?

However, when reflecting back on Pathfinder's aim to increase Christians' confidence in the text, a Church E participant noted that:

I think what would have helped me would be a module for four weeks or whatever which dealt with big issues. I felt throughout, whether it was the hermeneutics or what have you, there was no time to discuss the big

issues, like genocide, or what is literal and what is parable. You know, we sort of skated around them a little bit. We made [in MGS] a whole list of terror texts but there was no time to discuss them, so you were left thinking, 'Hmm, there's more problems here than I realised'.

It would seem that, while many found the background information about biblical texts and situations helped them understand apparently confusing passages, MGS may have left some feeling ill-equipped to deal adequately with the 'texts of terror' with which it engaged.

### §1.1.3 Tools for handling the Bible

A number of the positive responses towards MGS involved expressions of appreciation for some or all of the tools introduced in the material. At Church G, one participant reflected that:

The one big thing that I learned was not to take a verse in isolation and not to just read that, ... and be diligent, not just randomly pick up the Bible and think, 'Right. I've got ten minutes to spare. I'll read these ten verses and then ponder on those'. You're liable to come to all sorts of conclusions and feel something without-, so, the examples given of where that's dangerous were very good. It has given me a greater desire to actually look behind and, well, look before it, and look after it, and not just run away with a little bit and draw some conclusions. I guess, it's about being more analytical and more discerning.

Similarly, at Church F, one of the group felt that

[t]he whole course really shows how much more you can get out of what looks on the face to be a story, when you know about the culture of the person who's written it but also the style of writing - the stuff about the

envelopes and the meaning being in the middle of the story when we expect it at the end for instance, I found fascinating. When you start looking, at particularly some of those Old Testament stories, it completely changes the emphasis and the focus of the whole writing ...the intellectual context is a very important part of it.

And, at Church B, an interviewee said that:

some of it rubs off, you know, if you're looking at passages more critically, and saying, 'Well, I sort of sense what this really means'. You might get the wrong idea sometimes, but, yes, I think you do try a bit more, because just to read it, as it's written, you'll probably realise that that doesn't actually teach you anything, just reading the words as they're printed. So I think it's taught us a lot, yes.

Other responses, dealt with below (§§1.1.3.1 – 1.1.3.3), focussed on one particular aspect of the hermeneutical training that had 'rubbed off' on them.

### **§1.1.3.1 'Context. Context!'<sup>23</sup>**

There were several mentions of the importance of reading verses within their context in the book or letter of which they are a part. One of the Church D group noted that MGS:

just made you so aware of how often, we have taken scripture and just pulled it out of the page and applied it, when perhaps it wouldn't have been appropriate really to apply that scripture, that it wasn't particularly in that context that it was written. So that was really helpful, to be able

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<sup>23</sup> A comment from one of the Church E group.

to get into the habit of looking at what was behind that particular piece of writing.

The Church C group noted that they now talked about issues like context amongst themselves and, at Church E, it was noted that lessons learned in MGS were used when preparing to teach others and were deepening group studies. They were also applied to other Pathfinder resources, as people at three different centres, noted. For instance:

*Something I've noticed, just observing the group, which you might not have realised you're doing, but people have been more critical or more reflective of the passages we've been reading in terms of [WO]. Because, they've gone through the hermeneutics bit and said, 'Ah, should we really be using the Bible in the way that it's being used?'. And I've heard that conversation coming out once or twice, and thinking, 'That's putting into practice what you've been through in the first section'. ... So that's the example of just using small one verse to prove a point, for instance. It gets away from the bigger picture of the context, which was what we were driven back to again and again, wasn't it, really?*

### **§1.1.3.2 Historical background**

The Church E group also agreed that they had come to realise how useful and relevant it was to know the historical background to a passage and this was echoed at other centres. The exploration of Jesus teaching in the Sermon on the Mount had brought new ideas to the Church B Pathfinders: 'When you hear about the traditions and things in society, and various other things like that, you see it completely differently. As I say, some of it is stuff you've been reading since you were a child, and all of a sudden it has got a whole new meaning'.

Meanwhile, at Church F, it was the exploration of the Genesis creation account which fascinated one participant: 'I found it fascinating and I liked the early session where we did the comparison between the Babylonian history and the biblical history [creation accounts] ... I found the whole series very helpful in that respect'.

### **§1.1.3.3 Literary stylistic features**

In feedback, a few particularly remembered parts of sessions on literary structure: a focus group question asking if any sessions, ideas or concepts had made a particular impact on them, or stuck in their minds, sometimes elicited mention of chiasms and sandwiches. However, not everyone that remembered felt it had much if any relevance to their reading of the Bible. At Church H, one lady felt that '[t]he most interesting thing we did was that one on Mark, when we looked at the sandwich structure' but wished they'd had more time to look at them. When asked specifically how this knowledge might affect her reading of the Bible she responded:

It will give us more in-depth I suppose really, won't it? I mean the point is that one reflects on the other, doesn't it? One illuminates the other ... It's difficult, isn't it? ... You think, 'Yes, this is an interesting structure', and start to look for patterns, because I tend to do that, but whether it will actually change my view of the parable and whether I should sort of-, whether it will apply to my life in any way, I can't-, I'm not sure, no. ... I don't think it makes a lot of difference to me whether Mark has sandwiches or not!

Similarly, an interviewee at Church C remembered about sandwiches but reflected that 'I'd never noticed that before. It wouldn't affect me. If I was a local preacher it might do', while another at the same centre wondered 'why ... I need to know that that's a sandwich and that's this?'

Regarding genre, at Church H a different group member made the same point – he found it interesting but was unsure how it should affect his understanding:

Again it's something that we all kind of knew about, but perhaps it's brought it much more to the fore in group thinking and trying to establish which is which genre and where things fit, and that's quite interesting. Don't ask me if it's affected my own views, you know my own faith, because I don't think it has, you know. I think it's a head thing with me. I get into sort of looking at it and say, 'Yes, it's a really interesting study', but I'm not sure it's going to change the way I view the world.

At Church B, also, there was mention of chiasms and other stylistic features, which the group had found interesting. One participant remembered that:

We mentioned where they say 'they killed them all'. Then you say, 'Well hang on a minute, because a bit later on they reappear', and you think, 'Well obviously they didn't kill them all', so how truthful is that? How much has been added to it just for the bravado bit. ... So it makes you think about what you're reading as well, rather than, 'That's the end of that lot then'. You know? It's nice that you start to question. Instead of just reading it you start to question each line, and you think, 'Hang on a minute, what actually is he saying there?'

This person had found that 'appreciating [literary features] I think would be this idea of adding weight or depth, meaning, understanding to what was being read', and another reported that they 'enjoy it more as well actually ... It's made me want to read more'.

Taken together, these comments suggest that the relevance and applicability of an understanding of literary features needs to be further explored.

### §1.1.4 Virtues

The virtues that were introduced by MGS were not brought up in feedback at every centre and only briefly at others. At Church F, one person said they weren't sure they understood the virtues while the Church H centre, which had the version of MGS adapted for use in the Roman Catholic Church, sometimes found it difficult to see 'any connection with the virtues and what we were studying'; they were felt to be 'quite arbitrary' in some sessions. Another participant there felt that 'one of the messages that seemed to come across was that we shouldn't take things out of context, we've got to look at the whole context, but that's exactly what we did do', because 'we got this little short passage and we're looking, "Is there a virtue sort of hidden in there somewhere?"', but it wasn't related to the context it was in, which obviously would have taken much longer to do and would have been a much more in-depth study'.

In contrast, the Church D group found the stress on the virtues to be a valuable aspect of MGS. Following a discussion between two ladies on the academic challenge of MGS and the value of study to understanding the Bible (see Church D dialogue in §1.3.1), it was generally agreed that the virtues brought balance to the material.

### §1.1.5 Applying the Bible to life

#### §1.1.5.1 Homelessness

There were mixed reactions to the MS session on homelessness. Some found it thought-provoking and challenging. At Church C, in response to a question as to how Pathfinder might be affecting the way they view society, one responded:

*One of the most interesting things for me was the night we talked about homelessness and so many people were visibly moved as they reflected that the scripture talked about homelessness and we discussed the*

homelessness in England and gave me an idea of what homelessness meant. It wasn't the, sort of, 'tramp', in inverted commas, sleeping rough in a hedgerow, it was somebody sleeping on somebody's settee. ... for those few days, my wife and I certainly talked an awful lot about it and, I mean, I had several conversations with people. So, certainly, that one sticks in my mind.

Similarly, when asked which parts of MGS made an impact on them, someone at Church E replied:

It's just the Poverty Bible, I think. Because it's such a big issue, how people view God and his non-reaction, supposedly, and to see how much references there are to it. I think it's, you know, the entire Bible. When you think about that, it makes you realise that. It's a way, maybe, to make people think about it in a different light.

In contrast, one Church B participant noted that 'I looked in the concordance for homelessness and it didn't have it in. It wasn't there', and another noted that the topic was a 'bit more nebulous' than other topics that were more obviously covered in the Bible. Consequently, there was some uncertainty as to whether they'd found the session helpful, summed up by this comment: 'Interesting topic, but I'm not sure how much it added to what we were doing, because it was like, a vast topic, no answer and all the rest of it, and actually did it help us look at the Bible particularly? Personally I don't think so'.

At Church H, they felt that 'that session on homelessness ... might have been the beginning of starting to sort of see how we relate to the world at large', and that 'that was just an example of ways in which you could interpret the use of the Bible'. However, two people there felt that it 'was terribly narrow ... in the way it which it picked its scriptural bits' and 'other scriptural pieces ... could have been brought in to support that'.

This suggests that, while the topic is suitable, some participants did not appreciate the value of the exercise; perhaps the ways in which the texts are being used needs to be articulated more clearly?

### **§1.1.5.2 General applications**

One application which arose during feedback was the effect of MGS on church leaders and on teaching and preaching within the churches. One minister communicated privately how personally encouraged he had been by working through MGS and another reported that:

I think what this course has done for me, with my preaching, is it's given me more confidence to actually do some of the things that we've been doing over the past few weeks. I thought that that was inappropriate for a Sunday morning but because of some of people's reactions here I've begun to do a bit of that.

Other teachers and readers - and their hearers - noted that their preparation had developed as a result of doing MGS. One group told me how one of their number doing a Sunday reading had prefaced the passage with an explanation of an odd phrase which affected the understanding of it. The flip-side of this was perhaps that some felt they couldn't use what they'd learnt because they *weren't* in a teaching role (see §1.1.3.2 and reference to not being a local preacher).

A number of people at different centres expressed appreciation of the MGS session dealing with the theological content of worship songs and hymns. For example, an interviewee at Church F said that they now asked, 'This is a nice sentiment, but is it biblical?', as they prepared to lead worship sessions.

Taking the focus outside the church, a Church F participant said that '[t]he hermeneutics course was very good in trying to encourage us to take the Bible and use the theology behind it and bring out examples in everyday society life, to bring theology into that' and another, at Church E, felt that '[i]t's not just for the sake of just knowing the bible. It makes sense with the link with society and

ourselves, and how we fit in'. Someone at Church C felt that they were better equipped to explain the Bible to non-believers 'because you can now dissect it, you can probably explain in more- what shall I say?- "ordinary" words for an ordinary person, off the street, as it were. Rather than saying something ... highfaluting theology, which just leaves them stone cold'.

Taken overall, these responses suggest that, for some Pathfinders, MGS better enabled them not only to make good sense of the texts but to begin to apply that understanding inside and outside the church.

### §1.1.6 Relevance to discipleship

It is hard to see how one might 'measure' growth in discipleship. A few Pathfinders mentioned MGS when discussing the effect of the programme on their relationship with God. As noted above (§1.1.1) in dialogue within the group at Church A, there was the suggestion that MGS had the effect of strengthening a relationship with God. At Church G, one interviewee expressed the effect as being one of greater challenge arising from a deeper understanding of the text. However, a number pointed out that it is difficult to isolate one thing as having an effect on Christian growth when most believers are constantly affected by a range of different factors.

## §1.2 Accessibility

### §1.2.1 Expectations

One issue that arose in connection with MGS and some other Pathfinder elements is that of managing expectations, and this was taken into consideration in development of *h+*. Briefly, some people came to Pathfinder expecting Bible Society to be providing a type of 'Bible study' of a given passage, albeit possibly a deeper one than they might be used to. MGS was, therefore, a surprise to many, as encapsulated in this interview exchange:

**Interviewee:** ... during this lot we haven't read the Bible much. That's why one person came, because she thought she was going to learn more about the Bible because she loves history and what have you. To me, we've hardly picked up the Bible during these weeks.

**Me: Really?**

**Interviewee:** Yes.

**Me: Right, that's interesting.**

**Interviewee:** That's how I feel, now if that's true or not, but I just think that I've not really learned anything from the Bible.

**Me: So, it hasn't given you any tools with which to read the Bible, you don't think?**

**Interviewee:** Only, just don't read a paragraph; you read before and afterwards, if you're looking into something.

Another, at Church F, said that 'it was interesting ... but I had a great problem in trying to relate it to how I thought you would do Bible study'. The wrong expectations seem to have led some participants to find MGS disappointing and thus indirectly affected their ability to access it adequately.

### §1.2.2 Perceived intellectual challenge - How Many Ticks?<sup>24</sup>

Another issue that was raised in preliminary feedback on MGS, and resulted in changes to the material during the development of *h+*, was the intellectual level

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<sup>24</sup> 'How many ticks?' was one of the transcriber's attempts to record the (to them) unfamiliar word 'hermeneutics', from the recording of a group discussion.

of the terminology employed and the material in general. I mention it here for the sake of completeness and because the principles are worth taking into consideration during development of any church training resources.

Briefly, although a few participants at Church H and Church G found MGS insufficiently 'deep', or 'a bit slow and a bit easy', a larger number of people across the churches found the material challenging because it was too 'academic' or 'up there', sometimes employing vocabulary with which they were unfamiliar. Comments were made at several churches about the use of the word 'hermeneutics'. Some objected that although the teaching was valuable, the language was unnecessary and tended to make people feel excluded: 'I mean, why use that word "hermeneutics"; why not just put "interpretation"? ... It puts people off'. Another church reported that 'people were really stressed at the beginning about the word ... because people didn't know it. ... I think some people have been put off a bit because it mentioned it every time ... people have got a bit anxious about that'. The perceived exclusion was related not only to the words and concepts used but, for some, extended to the learning environment. One respondent sums up several of these issues which arose when the group moved from doing another resource to starting MGS:

The following week we were into the hermeneutics and it was, bang, what a different style. I found it quite difficult because suddenly it became back to the academic style and [the presenters] ... started off by standing behind the lectern and actually people were worried about it because the word 'hermeneutics', not everybody knew what it meant and they thought, 'Oh gosh, is this going to be really hard?'. In some ways it added to the anxiety and just some terms that were used. For the first time, tables were put out and we sat around the tables and there were pens on there and papers and you think-, it's fascinating how it impacts on you. I'm sort of used to those sorts of things at work, and it still had an effect on me, so those that aren't used to it, I think they found it a bit-,

they were a bit anxious ... and then we were to do the group discussion and then the person said, 'Now can you nominate a spokesperson?' and everybody went (respondent gasps), and yet previously, only two weeks before, we'd all been sitting and chatting and what have you. After two or three weeks, people got used to it, and I think it softened anyway because we got to know the people delivering it, but it was such a stark contrast.

### §1.2.3 Delivery format

Aside from the comments regarding presentation in the previous section, three of the centres made positive comments regarding the presenters and/or the format. The delivery speed and overheads were found suitable and some people expressed appreciation of the mix of activities and modes, for example, 'the video clips to break up the things'. This helped alleviate what some people felt were overly long and tiring sessions (see §1.3.2). In response to this, *h+* has been developed as a resource to be delivered by trained local facilitators, using a similar mix of media, and retaining the dynamic personal aspects of the resource format. Interestingly, as one Pathfinder noted, training *local* facilitators might also help the issue of accessibility. While acknowledging how very good the Bible Society MGS presenters were, he suggested that if 'people know the people to whom they are speaking ... [they] possibly might have been able to deliver it in a way that we would know the local people are more likely to take on board'.

## §1.3 Other issues

### §1.3.1 The relationship between intellectual interests and spiritual formation or spiritual reading

While the importance of understanding things such as historical context was appreciated by many Pathfinders a caution was raised by one Church A

interviewee. When asked, about half-way through Pathfinder, if the way they read the Bible had changed during the programme, they replied:

When we were doing the hermeneutics thing, I actually did find that I was probably looking at it a little differently. There was a point where I thought, 'If I keep looking at it historically and culturally, I'm actually going to miss what the Holy Spirit wants to say to me, through reading this'. ...

When asked why she felt this, she responded:

It was because I was actually praying for somebody, and just a scripture came to mind, and I thought, 'Oh, I think I'll just write that on a card and just drop it to this friend'. Then I suddenly thought, 'umm, I'd better just flick up the Bible, see what context that was written in, to make sure it really fits her situation', and I came to the conclusion, well historically, it didn't. It actually put me off sending it to her. Later I thought, 'That was so stupid, because if that's what God was laying on your heart, you should have just done it'. So I'm kind of like this about getting too into the hermeneutic side of it, because that way I think I kind of miss the spontaneity of what the Spirit wants to say.

In contrast, another interviewee at the same church mentioned that she 'tended to come from a more contemplative style just because of the type of things we've been involved in, so to have a bit more of an academic, historical-, the historical side and then the hermeneutics sides have become a bit more analytical; it's been helpful'. When this issue then arose during the Church A group discussion, a third Church A Pathfinder commented that:

the only way to look at the Bible is with the hermeneutics and the Holy Spirit, you know, you have to have the balance of the two. I mean, even

with just the Holy Spirit, you can still take the thing out of context. ... I think it's down to the leadership, you know, to guide the flock down in that, like, direction, sometimes.

Part of the dialogue at Church D reflected similar concerns and opinions among a group which, again, was broadly favourably disposed towards MGS:

**Respondent 1:** It didn't appeal to me as much. It seemed to be too much mind, and reasoning in small doses is fine, you know, on any topic, but when it comes to God's Word, I think it could, to some people, be a stumbling block. I think the fact is that, it's when the Bible becomes the living Word to you, that it has significance, and I think for some people, who maybe aren't intelligent enough or you know, their vocabulary is not so good, it wouldn't apply to everyone. It's to, you know, the more educated, et cetera, people that it applies. It reminded me of education, and these words that come along, they love these great long words, and to me, what's the point of it? Language is to communicate, and what's the point of a great long word when you can put it in simple terms so that everyone can understand?

**Respondent 2:** But if you take the big, great, long word out, you're still left with the fact that there is a need to understand the context in which the Bible was written. I think you can drop the big word, because ... it's the big word that's the afterthought, whereas if-, you could package the thing, and present it, because in a way, the bit that kind of always drives me potty, when attitudes to the Bible become so heavenly-minded that there's absolutely no way of being ... but there are two sides to that coin. ... and it's all to do with how you're wired up anyway. Some people

respond and get it, it's a gut feeling and they get it. Other people need it expanded, explaining, and context and everything is part and parcel of that. It's basically, knowing your audience or knowing which bit appeals to you.

An apparently related comment came up in Church C when an interviewee who had struggled with MGS was telling me how they were missing their usual weekly fellowship meeting, which had been replaced with Pathfinder sessions: 'Someone said that this [MGS] is more your head. The Wednesday morning Fellowship, which is the prayer and Bible study, is more the heart'.

These comments raise the important question of how the tools of hermeneutics interact with everyday Bible use and spiritual formation amongst believers. Both the MGS materials and *h+* include, in the session entitled 'What We Bring to the Bible', some consideration of different Christian positions on the role of the Holy Spirit and the need (or not) for a hermeneutical understanding of the scriptures. Both effectively conclude that 'the Holy Spirit and hermeneutics work together'.<sup>25</sup> However, the questions of what to do if these two sources appear to differ, and whether or not hermeneutical considerations apply in all circumstances, are not dealt with in the support materials, although they may emerge in group discussions.

### §1.3.2 Session length

The feedback from four of the centres included comments to the effect that the MGS sessions, at two hours each, were too long for a weekday evening. People reported being too tired to follow the material even though it was well presented. When it was reduced to an hour and a half for the Church H presentation, some people there said that it would have been better to have the material spread over a longer period of weeks as they would sometimes have

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<sup>25</sup> *h+* Facilitator's Guide, p.26.

appreciated more time for discussion. However, a participant at Church D did suggest that 'ten weeks, ... is perhaps too long a period for a lot of people, particularly if they're still working, to commit to every week'. It will be interesting to see how those using *h+* (with ten, 90 minute sessions) feel about the time given to work through the materials.

### §1.3.3 Support materials: examples and applications

Five of the centres expressed a wish for more support materials, 'some sort of study book or note book so that those who come can read ahead, and prepare, and understand'; this was usually associated with wanting to see where the course was going and to prepare ahead, with a desire to have further examples of texts to work through using the tools covered, with a wish for suggested further reading, and/or with a wish to think through possible applications of the material.<sup>26</sup> This point was taken up in development of *h+* which has its own A4-sized handbooks, for participants and for facilitators, supported, to a limited extent at present, by the web site.

## §1.4 Taking the resource further

Overall, despite the challenges, there was a good deal of appreciation expressed for MGS across the churches. In addition, all the ES2 respondents had completed MGS and nearly 87% of them said they would include it within a future version of Pathfinder (Q19). A couple of specific points were raised in consideration of the future of such a hermeneutical resource.

### §1.4.1 Taking hermeneutics into the church

One Pathfinder raised the specific question of where the group was supposed to go having worked through MGS:

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<sup>26</sup> The Church H group, which had a revised version of MGS, expressed appreciation of the further reading given in the 'Digging deeper' section.

How are we going to know that we're not deviating from that which we've been learning about this last several weeks. Are we going to get someone coming to make sure we're still doing the right thing, if such a thing can be done? We're not slipping back into maybe some ways we've developed over the months and years. ... I'm not quite clear how we're going to carry that which we've been learning about and trying to understand and taking that forward into ... our groups.

In a comment related to this question, and also to the relationship between intellectual study and spiritual formation raised in §1.3.1, someone else at the same centre said:

what we have been doing is both experiential and theological and if we simply share the theology and the interest and the intellectual buzz that is, I'm afraid, a blind alley. And so what we have to do is to share the experience and the new insights, not in a way which takes people simply down an intellectual joyride - or an intellectual horror ride if they don't like thinking. ... We [URC] have a theology which says our Christian faith is based on the word of God, as discerned by the Holy Spirit, and what this course ought to be doing for us ... is linking this greater understanding with how to pray our way into a reading and discern, through the Spirit of God, what the word of God is saying to us.

At a different centre, someone expressed appreciation for MGS but then asked:

when you go on from here with Pathfinders, is there a sense of seeking God with it? Sometimes to me it was quite academic and I suppose I probably verge on the less academic when I come to reading the Bible, and therefore there's a sense of, I would hope or like to see that the

next step is, this is all this. Now we need to get to know this God of the Bible, to seek him for what he's actually saying to us, you know, personal relationship, which to me was sometimes a bit absent. Or not as evident.

Given the concerns expressed here about taking hermeneutics further, and comments elsewhere (see §1.1.1 and §1.1.3.3) concerning the relevance of hermeneutics, *h+* has a specific final section dealing with the ways in which the valuable lessons of this resource can be used and disseminated through the wider church and beyond.

### §1.4.2 Position within a larger programme

There were different ideas as to the best position for a hermeneutics course within a broader programme of biblical engagement such as Pathfinder. Some of these differences were related to how experienced the Christian participants were expected to be and/or how intellectually difficult MGS was perceived to be. So, for instance, a Church A participant thought that a Bible overview would be best 'right at the beginning of the course, so that if there are any, sort of, new Christians within Pathfinder, they get an introduction onto it before the hermeneutics' and this idea was echoed by others at Church F, Church E and Church B. However, this was not unanimous; someone else at Church E (where they had MGS before WO) disagreed, because they felt that they'd have been put off if they'd done WO first. At Church B, (where they had WO, Map, then MGS), one participant who was a relatively new believer noted that it:

*depends on where you are on your journey, doesn't it? Certainly, from my point of view it has been a great course from start to finish, because of where I started. Now, other people might have thought it was boring and monotonous in the early stages, because they were further up the road than I am. So I think it really depends on where you start, and what sort of condition you're in when you start.*

It was also interesting that one facilitator told the group that he thought that 'what you learnt with the hermeneutics, you actually used those tools as we've gone on, and I think it was an important session to do early on. And I know you struggled with it, but because you struggled with it I think you benefited a lot more from the sessions that followed'.

Without having taken a vote it is difficult to be sure but, on balance, my impression was that more people thought that a hermeneutics course needed to be based on, or presume knowledge of, some kind of Bible overview but otherwise was best placed early on in a programme promoting biblical involvement.

### §1.5 Conclusions

Some of these points are specific to this resource and some have already been taken up in development of *h+*. However, they are worth keeping in mind in regard to design of any tools for biblical engagement focusing on interpretive skills.

1. **Preparation:** During the introduction to Pathfinder, and MGS specifically, there was an explanation of the rationale behind the different elements of the programme. However, the negative responses from some, and the apparent expectation of a 'Bible study' suggest that this explanation needs to be repeatedly reiterated and backed-up within support materials.
2. This type of resource (hermeneutics) needs to be placed in context so that participants know what to expect and why they are doing it. This will help the material to make an impact on reading habits and discipleship rather than risk a user finding it interesting but apparently irrelevant. An underlining of the differences that hermeneutics makes to our understanding and application of a text would help users of material appreciate the value of this kind of resource.
3. **Format:** This type of material is probably best delivered by a 'live' and trained facilitator (as opposed to a recording of some kind, or written materials presented by an untrained interpreter). This allows room for

questions and discussion. It is also probably best supported by some printed or online materials both to reinforce learning possibilities and to enable further independent study.

4. The role of the virtues has been developed within *h+* but it may be that this important element of the resource needs further amplification and stressing, since it does not seem to have struck a chord with the Pathfinders who used MGS.
5. **Intended audience:** Care needs to be taken when considering potential users. Is the material assuming an existing degree of biblical knowledge and, if so, should it be preceded by a bible overview? Does the resource employ language, concepts, or pedagogical strategies which might effectively exclude some users, especially those with unhappy past educational experiences? If so, can steps be taken to minimise possible impediments to participation by as many of the church as possible?
6. **Taking it further:** Given concerns about taking things further, and comments made by some church professionals about the impact on their preaching, it might be worthwhile exploring how churches now using *h+* are affected by it in the long term. Does it change the content of their teaching or their worship songs? Does it affect the types of discussions that are carried on in small groups? It might even be worth running before-and-after groups using the tools developed by Andrew Village for assessing the type of interpretation that goes on among Anglican church-goers.<sup>27</sup>

## **Reflections**

*For me, the most interesting comments that arose regarding MGS were those pertaining to the relevance, and integration, of hermeneutical skills within wider Bible reading and interpretation and their role in the process of discipleship. This is raised most sharply by the comment in §1.1.3.1 on the tension between*

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<sup>27</sup> Village *Bible and Lay People* 2007.

*feeling a text would convey God's heart to someone, but then noting that its original context may not support this use. It is right to be concerned about misuses of the Bible, whether that be misunderstandings due to ignorance of historical situations and the significance of concepts in ancient biblical cultures or inappropriate application of ancient stories to contemporary situations. However, is it right to control pastoral use of scriptures according to the tenets of historical criticism? An earlier study supported by Bible Society suggests that professional Christians recognise limits to the applicability of exegetical constraints within pastoral situations.<sup>28</sup> How do – and how should - historio-critical and 'Spirit-led' or pastorally determined readings interact?*

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<sup>28</sup> J. N. Ian Dickson, "The Bible in Pastoral Ministry: The Quest for Best Practice," *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 4 (2007): 103-121, especially 108.

## §2 Lyfe

Lyfe is a resource developed by Bible Society and designed to promote spiritual formation. Based upon material developed by Renovaré,<sup>29</sup> but seeking to present 'an entry-level version of what they were doing',<sup>30</sup> it consists of six 'zones' each covering one aspect of a spiritual life which can be seen exemplified in Jesus:

- withdrawing and praying (Still lyfe)
- living a holy life (Real lyfe)
- empowered and filled with the Spirit (Spirit lyfe)
- memorising, quoting and teaching Scripture (Word lyfe)
- working for justice, peace and wholeness (Just lyfe)
- integrating faith and everyday life (Whole lyfe).<sup>31</sup>

Each of these zones is comprised of an introductory session followed by four or five others, with a total of 32 in all; it is suggested that the six introductory sessions, one from each zone, are worked through first.<sup>32</sup> To support each zone there are a number of materials available on the web site: a short video-clip of a 'talking head' for each session plus a number of downloadable documents. For example, for Spirit lyfe, there are five articles on different themes related to 'our interaction with the Holy Spirit', (including worship and healing), a couple of short, one-page biographies of Christians that illustrate the work of the Spirit, (in this case Jackie Pullinger and John Wimber), and a hand-out for participants in each session.

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<sup>29</sup> See <http://www.renovarelife.org> and <http://www.renovare.us> (accessed 26/7/12).

<sup>30</sup> Personal communication from Rob Hare.

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.lyfe.org.uk/lyfe-sessions/> (accessed 26/7/12).

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.lyfe.org.uk/faq/> (accessed 26/7/12).

It is suggested that lyfe groups should comprise four or five people and should try meeting, at least some of the time, in a public place such as a pub or coffee shop, in order to 'strengthen the connection with everyday life'. It is also intended that users start with the introductory session within 'Still lyfe', which sets the scene for how the group should read the given biblical text each time:

Read the passage several times through, read it slowly, use your imagination to picture the scene and soak it up. As you read, look out for one or two points that really impact you. We call these 'shockers' and 'blockers'. Shockers - something from the text that stands out or surprises you. Blockers - something that raises questions or you find hard to understand.<sup>33</sup>

For all other sessions, except the introductory Still lyfe, the hand-out begins with a 'Review' section, inviting groups to reflect on the success and usefulness of the challenge, if undertaken, from the previous session. Alternatively, they may consider the question set each time: 'Where and how did you experience God last week?'

Each session's hand-out then follows a pattern of sections. Firstly there is 'Read', where one finds the biblical text for consideration in that session, taken from the Contemporary English Version (CEV)<sup>34</sup> and printed in full.

Secondly, there is a 'Reflect' section. Again, the introductory sessions in each zone, at this point, all explain what this section is about: the readers are asked

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<sup>33</sup> [http://www.lyfe.org.uk/pdfs/introduction\\_still\\_lyfe.pdf](http://www.lyfe.org.uk/pdfs/introduction_still_lyfe.pdf) (accessed 26/7/12). These words are also found in the 'Read' section of the introductory sessions for all other zones, except Real lyfe.

<sup>34</sup> The Contemporary English Version Bible was first published in 1995 by American Bible Society who describe it thus: The CEV is a meaning-based (or functional equivalent) translation done in a contemporary style using common language. It was designed to be understood when read and heard out loud, not just when it is read silently. It is one of the best Bibles for children and youth, as well as for new Bible readers who are not familiar with traditional Bible and church words. <http://bibleresources.americanbible.org/bible-resources/bible-resource-center/about-the-bible/about-bible-translation/brief-description-popular-bible-translations> (accessed 1/6/12).

to '[t]ake time to discuss what you've read and particularly the points that impacted you. Share your thoughts and listen carefully to one another. Use the questions to help you reflect'. To aid them there are a few bullet points 'setting the scene', sometimes offering some background information or context to the passage. There are also a few questions to encourage reflection; the first of these is always 'What are the "shockers" and "blockers" for you in this passage?' but the others are specific to the text.

Next there is a 'Respond' section, where the group is encouraged to formulate some response(s) to the passage they've been considering and their reflection upon it. They are asked to 'create a challenge' or to take up one or more of those suggested in this section, which are specific for the text.

The rest of each session's hand-out may include a relevant quotation, a suggested prayer focus, and/or a section on 'going deeper' that in some cases includes a list of other resources in that zone which relate to that session. They are also asked to make a note of any challenge agreed upon and to consider contributing to the lyfe Facebook site.

Lyfe was worked through by all the Pathfinder centres, except Church H, using the six introductory sessions for each zone. Of these churches, three went on to use the introductory sessions with other groups within their churches and/or to explore some of the remaining 26 lyfe sessions. To the best of my knowledge, all the groups met on church premises or in homes, not in public spaces. Group size varied from centre to centre with larger centres splitting into smaller groups.

## §2.1 Intended Aims

This resource has a number of stated or implied aims, found on the web site. While it clearly encourages, and contributes to a programme of, biblical engagement this is a means to the end of deeper engagement with *God*. On the 'faq' page, its answer to the question 'What is lyfe?' states that:

Lyfe is about helping people to explore and discover a richer, deeper relationship with God through the Bible and experiencing spiritual challenges. Lyfe introduces a wealth of material developed by Renovaré and others around spiritual practices to help us discover a life with God, a sustainable spirituality and a faith integrated with everyday life.<sup>35</sup>

The same question is answered in a slightly different form elsewhere on the web site:

- lyfe is about hearing God, through the Bible, in the company of others.
- Connecting God, us and everyday life.
- lyfe is a conversation between friends seeking a richer relationship with God. Making discoveries together through hearing and reflecting on the Bible.
- lyfe will introduce you to tried and tested challenges. Six challenge zones, which have helped people go deeper with God.
- lyfe is about you experiencing those challenges and applying them in everyday life.
- Exploring day-to-day what it means to live as a disciple of Jesus now<sup>36</sup>

I will explore the feedback to lyfe below, under some broad headings that seek to capture the essence of these aims and assess the level of their achievement.

### **§2.1.1 Developing a 'relationship with God'**

At Church A, the group as a whole reported feeling that lyfe had affected their relationship with God positively, in practical ways. Regarding the work place, one

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<sup>35</sup> <http://www.lyfe.org.uk/faq/> (accessed 30/7/12).

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.lyfe.org.uk/what-is-lyfe/> (accessed 30/7/12).

noted particularly that it had changed the way she dealt with stressful situations and another had found that setting her mobile to ring at noon had helped her stop and think about God. A third said that 'it's made me more proactive in being consistent about carving out time for just me and God, and the dishes can wait, and the vacuuming can just wait', while a fourth (as already cited above under §1.1.1) attributed the effect on his walk with God to both MGS and lyfe together as 'the hermeneutics has made the text alive and the applications of it has made the text alive, therefore, your relationship with God is stronger through that'. Interestingly, another member of this group thought that having done hermeneutics before lyfe helped 'in ... looking beyond, and the background, and trying to put yourself there'.

Someone at Church E felt that the ongoing daily challenges were key to the effect of lyfe on one's relationship with God:

*that was something that, day by day, you were kind of reminded to be thinking about. So yes, it did affect the relationship with God, in that way. I think it's made me more familiar with the Bible, and it's got me sort of back into reading it and digging into it more.*

Similarly, at Church F, someone suggested that, in the Still lyfe section, 'people were really impacted, thinking about their life and how much time they actually stopped and spent with God. I think that particular section was useful, thinking about how they spend their days'.

Despite the impossibility of attributing growth in personal relationship with God to one factor alone amongst the many influences in life, it seems that there is evidence of this resource having a positive effect.

### **§2.1.2 '... in the company of others ... Making discoveries together'**

Most of the centres raised the point that lyfe was something that involved everyone in the group. At Church F one participant thought that lyfe was designed in such a way that Christians at different points of maturity could all

participate; 'it has been very much a sharing situation'. Similarly, a facilitator at Church C, noted that 'we were sharing the thoughts ... it wasn't somebody lecturing to us, but ... we pooled our ideas. Although we're at different levels of our Christian path, I'm sure we all got something out of it, very positive'. This group went on to reflect on the *value* of seeing different points of view and learning from one another, and similar thoughts were expressed at Church B:

**Respondent 1:** I think that's quite good, because there's always somebody that will come out with something that you just completely haven't seen before. Tipped it completely on its head and looked at it, 'Oh yes, I haven't seen that or thought about that'. Especially, as X said, when it's quite a diverse group of people as well. It's actually quite valuable, I think. You learn a lot, just from each other really.

**Respondent 2:** I think it was one of those where everybody in the groups, that I was in certainly, did take part in some way.

A number of participants in the Church E group similarly expressed appreciation of this process of mutual learning. For example, one said:

I think listening to what other people get out of the passages, makes you think of a passage afresh. Even though you've heard it before, you can think of it differently when you hear other people's, and know whether you want to take that on board, or not take it on board. So I do like listening to other people's explanation.

And another commented:

I like the way that we, sort of, have fed, maybe, off of each other. I mean, you're in a group, and you listen to what other people are saying, and then they'll come up with something and you think, 'I never thought of

it that way'. I mean, ... X said 'I've been thinking about what things did Jesus do or didn't do, on the Sabbath' And I looked at him, and went, 'That has never occurred to me'. But it made me think, and it's things like that. I find it hard just reading the Bible and learning from it, but other people are great teachers.

Some noted that there was also value in simply getting to know one another better through the contributions each was encouraged to make. The following exchange came from Church A:

**Respondent 1:** I don't want to embarrass you, [Respondent 2], but just to see your face and how much you said you got out of Psalm One, just really, really touched me and it was lovely to see that.

**Respondent 2:** That was because I've always skipped over psalms and one of the challenges was to read psalms. I started on [Psalm] One and I couldn't get past One. I kept reading it over and over again because the way it flowed, I thought it was lovely.

In summary, then, the aspects of lyfe's aims which relate to it being a process of discovery conducted in company with others, would appear to have been realised with most of the Pathfinder groups.

### §2.1.3 'experiencing spiritual challenges ... applying them in everyday life'

Appreciation of the value of the challenges, and the applicability of what they were learning, was expressed by at least some participants from every group. For example, from Church B:

I like the fact you took something away. ... And were supposed to-, well, you know, do something with it during the week. I must admit, this

morning I pulled up behind a learner at this junction, and he'd got loads of time to go and he didn't; I was like, 'Grrh'. Then I thought, 'This is like the supermarket queue. I'll just sit here and listen to my whatever and enjoy this moment'. It's funny how things do suddenly stick in your mind and come back to you.

And from Church E:

I think the challenges were very helpful ways ... of doing it differently, really. We all have our well-worn ways of thinking about how to use the Bible. Last week I think we discussed the Sabbath for about twenty minutes of our discussion time, when it was talking about whole life Christianity. So we focused on one day, when we were supposed to be thinking about the six days. So we've got this ability for trammelled thinking and I think the exercises, or the challenges, could help us get out of us just trammelling ourselves. I think the one big advantage of that has been the exercises. A good catalogue of exercises, not always appropriate, but a very good catalogue, which can be gone back to again and again.

The Church G group reported some of their number having had conversations with people outside the church as a direct result of the lyfe challenges and the Church D group also noted their effectiveness; the challenges were good 'because, so often I've been in Bible Study groups; you just go away' but with lyfe 'you've got something to work on, and they were very practical as well'.

Specifically regarding spiritual disciplines there were a number of concrete testimonies to the effects of lyfe's challenges. A Church A Pathfinder reported that 'I do a fair amount of driving. They've made me turn the radio off and pray or listen. On a week by week basis, it's made me focus on work relationships and trying to be a positive influence'. Another from the same group also

reported an effect on her prayer life: 'We had one of the challenges about prayer life where I said, "This week, every time I boil the kettle I'll pray for somebody". That reinforced the fact that I need to be praying at other times'. At Church F, a participant said, 'one of the things I have started doing is Bible readings every day, which I wasn't doing before. I've thrown away the business pages of the paper in place of Bible readings', and another felt that Still lyfe made people think about 'how much time they actually stopped and spent with God'. The leader of a small group that meet regularly in her home, at Church C, noted that:

*whether it's a change within myself or a change within the group but somehow it's taken on a new meaning and I feel that we're moving forward in the way we look at the Bible study. ... bearing in mind that there's something to challenge we've sort of been looking at, 'Well, where do we go from here? This is what the Bible says but what does it mean for us?'*

When reflecting back on Pathfinder as a whole, one participant at Church E noted that lyfe had 'got me learning scripture again' while another felt that 'the lyfe series, ... I'm sure has an impact on our lives by actually going away and *doing* something about it, so the practical emphasis on that was good'.

Despite a wide range of positive responses in this area there were one or two critical comments regarding the challenges. One Church E Pathfinder suggested that asking a friend over for a drink was a somewhat inadequate response to the call in Matthew 25:31-46 to feed the hungry, visit the prisoner, and clothe the naked.<sup>37</sup> At Church F, someone commented that, for their group 'the challenges didn't ring any bells with anybody, I'm afraid' and suggested that their success 'depends on the people involved'; another there thought that 'some of them were very appropriate, and then others perhaps not quite so much. But they at least get you thinking and perhaps give you a focus for the week before you meet again'.

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<sup>37</sup> Just lyfe Introduction

Despite widespread recognition of the value of the challenges, a few participants did report finding it difficult to achieve some of them:

*I tackled all three challenges one week, and was really blessed, but the- it was difficult, it's this discipline, you see. It's one of those things, it's there, but if you don't choose to do it, you don't benefit from it.*

However, value was found in having to report back to the group. One person at Church F felt the challenges 'went down very well. The feedback on what we were asked to do for the next week was particularly interesting, and I think we got a lot out of hearing individuals speaking about that'.

Indeed, some found the feedback valuable in encouraging them to persevere, knowing they would be accountable to, and supported by, the group the following week. For example, these were comments from Church C:

*I think, what I found was really good was the challenge, the fact that there was a challenge at the end, so, you were actually focused to say, 'Right, this week, this is what I will do', and you weren't just promising it to yourself or to God, who we sometimes think has a bad memory, but he doesn't. We were promising it in front of other people. So, that when you came back next week, I suppose, we could have sat quietly and not said anything; polite people wouldn't have asked us, but nevertheless there was that, sort of, sense in which you were committed once you, actually, say it in front of other people. So, I think that was excellent.*

The accountability built in to this resource (see §2.3.2) seems to have been integral to its perceived value. One group even used texting to remind themselves of the current challenge!

Most participants reported using the challenges suggested in the notes of the sessions; only a couple of groups mentioned devising their own challenges.

In conclusion, despite a few reservations, the challenge element of lyfe seems to have been very successful in stimulating participants to apply the biblical texts to their everyday life, whether that related to their development of spiritual disciplines *per se* or to their personal transformation expressed through their interactions with other people.

## §2.2 Accessibility

### §2.2.1 Accessibility to Christians of differing experience and type

Many participants agreed that lyfe was accessible to a broad range of Christians, some expressing it in relation to other elements of Pathfinder. At Church A, one said that she found it 'really straightforward ... which helped me because I found a lot of the hermeneutics very complex' and another, at Church B, observed that 'people seemed to engage with this one in a way that, maybe, struggled ... with others'. One of the Church D group suggested that lyfe could appeal to people with different stances towards the texts: 'It was very good at giving people something to say, whether they have a particularly, sort of, intellectual approach to things or not, or emotional response; whatever your response and whatever you felt from it, that there was opportunity to use that'. A fellow Pathfinder there felt that the format and the challenge contributed towards this accessibility:

That was a very good way of doing Bible study, in the sense that it was, you know, the shockers and blockers and that it actually was your reaction. It might not have been the academic reaction, but it was 'What ... struck you about what you've read?', and I think that was a very worthwhile way to do it. ... a lot of Bible study can become the academic dissection of something, and yet, kind of, how it impacted you, I think that's where the challenge at the end came in. It was more to do with 'What's your response to it?'

Others felt that lyfe was accessible at different points in one's faith. A dialogue at Church F brought this up:

**Respondent 1:** I think you can delve into it as much as you like, really. I think you can look at it quite simply, or you can go into it a bit further. Our group is quite a mixed group in terms of their Bible knowledge, so it's been great, to see people who haven't really known some of the stories that have been in the sessions, just really come alive to them. ... The comments after the Bible section, I think they're useful as well, to learn a bit more about the context and things. That's helpful as well.

**Respondent 2:** I'm in the same group. I think we have really found it a useful resource. I think it has led us through some deeper thinking about issues that have been raised and things that have been relevant to our own lives as well. I think it has helped us to grow enormously as a group, and be supportive of each other. So I would agree. You can really see it on a lighter level or a deeper level. I think [Respondent 1] is right, depending upon people's background and experience, that has been the case, if we know more then we can share that with the group. It has been very much a sharing situation.

At Church C, one group member attributed this accessibility to the presentation style of lyfe:

Just, by the mere factor of the way it was set out, I feel that it encouraged each and every one of us to look at it from a slightly different angle, so, we were all encouraged but it wasn't, what was I going to say? Heavy. We ... [are] able to understand it and get something out of

it by the mere fact of it being, we'll say, easy reading, if you want. You know, the way it was put over, it wasn't too highbrow or too theological.

However, there were some differing opinions on how useful lyfe might be to more mature Christians; a Church E participant felt that 'it was quite basic for Christians of-, you know, all of us have been Christians for a long time, and so what we've looked at has been what we already know'. Although they admitted the challenges were a new feature they felt that 'when you know the stories, then you sort of know them, and it's difficult to look at them in different ways'.

Someone at Church F agreed, although they saw a role for those who were more familiar with the texts:

I think for people who have had a faith for a long time and have done an awful lot of Bible study, it probably wouldn't go that deep, and might not be deep enough. But I think for those who are beginning their journey ... I would say on the first half of a journey, it's a very helpful resource and it might need to go into more depth biblically for people who've had a greater faith. But actually, as a leader, I think you can take it deeper if you're in that place yourself. So I think it's a good basis on how to build sessions, and with what you've got, you can cater for those at different stages, I would say.

Another member of the same group felt that:

I think even if you have good knowledge of The Bible and you know a lot of the stories and passages, actually explaining or helping somebody else to understand can actually help you to revisit things that you perhaps hadn't thought about for some time. Sometimes also, people that maybe have got some knowledge or understanding can raise questions that ...

means there' s discussion, and you explore some other facets of what you have read.

Indeed, later in the pilot, having used lyfe more, one noted that they'd been able to get a wider range of people from the group to participate and to facilitate.

On the other hand, it was pointed out that lyfe did not offer continuity through the Bible and that different approaches, such a working through a whole book or letter, also had value. In connection with this, there was some uncertainty as to how accessible lyfe was for less experienced Christians:

I wonder how easy it is for people who haven't got much background. Each week you're dipping into something, just those verses. They perhaps have no idea what went before and what went after, is this a letter, is this a gospel? ... It helps if you've got a lot of background, when you keep doing different things each week, to be able to contribute more and think about it more. But if you're fairly new to the faith ...to do something completely different each week, is interesting, but seeing the progression is more difficult.

Overall, then, although reservations were expressed by some at Church F, the broad response across the churches was that lyfe was something which was usable by people with differing Christian experience and, possibly (see §2.4), by those with none. It was also broadly agreed that lyfe was accessible to people with a wider range of intellectual abilities than, for example, MGS.

It is possible that some of the reservations expressed at Church F and elsewhere were based on an understanding that lyfe was a 'Bible study' of a certain form, which led them to expect it to be supported by more material of a historical and/or theological nature. Indeed, one participant at Church A suggested that the reason why some people found lyfe more accessible than, for example, MGS, was due in part to its similarity to 'some common daily bible reading notes'. The

topic of the format, and concomitant expectations, of lyfe is dealt with in more detail in §2.3.1 below.

### **§2.2.2 Web site**

Two centres (Church A and Church D) pointed out that the lyfe materials can only be accessed easily by those connected to, and familiar with, the internet. One of these groups suggested having some of the materials available in a booklet.

Some at Church F reported having difficulties navigating their way round the web site but nothing was said elsewhere. One of their number compiled a word file with a list of all the resources available in each zone, for which some of them expressed appreciation. It would seem that most people across the churches found the web site accessible.

Only one group mentioned the video clips from the web site and they reported finding them of differing value. Some groups met in locations where, for whatever reason, it was difficult to view them.

## **§2.3 Other issues**

### **§2.3.1 Format – Different from a 'usual' bible study?**

All the groups that worked through lyfe did so either immediately, or some time, after MGS. This accounts for the fact that, in responses, lyfe is sometimes evaluated in comparison with MGS. Some participants found MGS itself surprising, because it covered approaches to reading the Bible rather than studying specific passages as in a 'traditional' Bible study; in comparison, lyfe seemed more familiar territory, with a given passage and some notes and questions to discuss. The relative familiarity of the lyfe format, noted in the last quotation in §2.2.1 was also raised by a facilitator at Church C reflecting on why lyfe was valuable:

I think, people could understand it, it could take it on board: the answer, the questions and the, sort of, things because we're studying a Bible passage, aren't we? I suppose, it's because that's what we're used to. Although it was different because normally I'd have lots of questions ready and I would have prepared it, but this I didn't prepare because I thought it was silly me preparing it because the point was, read it through. ... I think it was because it was Bible based, if I'm honest, but I'm not sure, but I think that might have been it, it was truly Bible based.

Here lyfe is seen as a 'Bible study', but it is viewed as a 'different' one and the key difference - the need for participants to read the passage carefully and contribute - was appreciated by this facilitator. Two others at the same centre also showed an understanding that lyfe was structured to allow participants to share what the passage said to them, rather than, primarily, to teach them something (theological or historical) about it:

**Me: What did lyfe bring you that you haven't had, to the same degree, with other Bible studies?**

**Respondent 1:** I think it was less structured which may sound, to me at first, a bad thing, because I like structure but it wasn't really because again it is sharing ideas, wasn't it? We didn't start off with loads of questions, I mean, [X] normally does that. I would have done that, that's the way I normally lead Bible study. Some people will, just, pick on something and sometimes they're very surprised on what some people might pick on. So, in a sense there was that, sort of, openness about it.

**Respondent 2:** A richness as well because people were sharing their particular thoughts rather than answering the question within its limited confines.

However, an understanding of lyfe as a Bible study seems to have led some to the expectation of support materials similar to those provided in other Bible study aids and guides, and also to the assumption that it would be 'led', despite lyfe being intended to be a group activity requiring only facilitation.<sup>38</sup> For example, at Church F, one felt lyfe was 'a little bit weak' as 'a Bible study resource', but better if viewed 'in terms of what I would call a cell group format which is looking more at life than just studying the Bible'. Another suggested they:

felt that it was good material, but it put a great deal of demand on the leader. It needs a lot of work for the leader to be able to make the session a success, which has its good sides, and it has its bad sides. ... I think probably our group is used to being given more material, if you like, in the sense of more detailed material. I think we found it quite difficult without that.

However, another Church F facilitator reported that she could:

prepare better by reading round some of the other articles. I personally liked it. I felt it left quite a lot for us to be able to decide ourselves. It wasn't didactic. ... I found that I could really roam and have a wider brief, and at the same time focus on the main theme.

And a non-facilitator there found that:

One thing that I enjoyed very much was the stories about individuals. That meant a lot to me. ... I was experiencing the materials as a user rather than a leader, but I would have liked more links, perhaps, to more detailed material ... so that I could dig deeper on my own. ... although I

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<sup>38</sup> <http://www.lyfe.org.uk/faq/> (accessed 30/7/12).

could find some of those things myself, I think it would be much better to find what was exactly right, so appropriate links to go deeper would be great.

So some at Church F seemed to have expected more material with background to prepare for what was seen as leading the session but others found the openness of the resource to be a strength, although they would also have appreciated some suggested links to enable further depth in study. A similar dialogue concerning the depth of the resources and their aim occurred at Church E:

I did feel that... where it talks about seeking justice and peace locally and globally, when we read 'Matthew 25, The Final Judgement', that there was a bit of a vacuum as to how this passage should be interpreted, about the goats and the so on. Clearly, if you read this, 'The Final Judgement', from Matthew, you would assume that if you ministered to the sick, and those in jail, and hungry and thirsty, that would bring you into eternal life. So, the passage is difficult to interpret, and obviously it needs interpretation with other passages of scripture, but I don't know that there was really much explanation of that. And the responses, I'm not sure reflected the passage that we discussed very adequately. That was just one week, but generally speaking ... I found the discussions and the questions very thought provoking and helpful.

A little later that evening another Pathfinder there commented:

I just looked again at that 'Matthew' passage, and I understand where [earlier respondent] is coming from, and ... it could be giving us that impression, but I think, the challenge of that, was to discover ways to help you see people as Jesus does, ... So it was quite effective, that one,

because I know that it said 'surprise someone this week, with a real encouragement. Send a text, email, or make a call'. That's one of the few things I did, and it bore fruit, so I remember that one. But not that... I found difficulty with the theology of the passage, or things like that. I think we really haven't been looking at the Bible passages in that light. The practical outworking of that is in our daily lives, and our relationships, so that's helpful.

A similar point was made later in the programme at Church E, contrasting the practical challenges of lyfe with other elements of Pathfinder, where 'some of the sessions have been quite academic, and we haven't really gone away and thought about them'. A Church D participant also saw links between lyfe and the cultural drivers, seeing the relevance of the biblical text to their lives.

Here again, it seems there was an expectation, by some, that theological issues arising from the text should be explored, while for others the application to life was the main aim. Interestingly, at Church A, one participant commented that:

whilst I was quite familiar with the *lectio divina*, it was obvious that other people weren't, and to be able to see people using that approach for the first time was really good. And to help them not to come at it from an analytical way actually, although there was the sort of context there as well, but to try and think of it in terms of how it's impacting on them as individuals.

It would seem there are two separate issues here. The comments made regarding lyfe not having more material for leaders to prepare may reflect a misunderstanding of the role of facilitator and the nature of the reflection that is being called for.

However, the contrast this last quotation draws, between an 'analytical' approach and *lectio divina*, expresses another issue: the difference between

'Bible study' as traditionally engaged in by the Pathfinder churches, and the kind of exploration promoted by lyfe. It may also be expressing the tension, above, between the two respondents at Church E. Others quoted elsewhere in this chapter have possibly used 'intellectual' or 'academic' in the same sense as 'analytical' here. This raises the question: if lyfe is *not* 'intellectual' etc., what is it? One term that is used is 'practical'. Another term that is not employed, or only indirectly, is 'spiritual'. Interestingly, one member of one group said that, at the close of their time together, when doing lyfe, he felt 'a little bit of move of the Spirit ... More so than the other times have been, when we had come to the end of the night and just prayed together'. Perhaps this aspect of lyfe, its distinctiveness from general expectations of 'Bible study' needs to be articulated more clearly both within the materials and in its promotional descriptions?

### §2.3.2 Mutual accountability and support within the group

The contribution of mutual accountability and support towards the success of the challenges has already been noted above (see §2.1.3). However, it is worth highlighting in this section that some groups seemed to find this aspect of lyfe contributed a great deal not only to their experience of the resource but also, and perhaps more importantly, to their formation and growth as a group. This was perhaps most notable in the feedback from Church A:

**Respondent 1:** That was part of the challenge, the wider challenge, though ... because we opened up and we discussed some of the difficulties that we faced in doing it, which again opens up the opportunity to pray for each other. That, to me, was really powerful. Like [another group member] says, the accountability and that feeling of support when you said, 'I didn't do it this week' or 'I missed this, this and this', that happened. That was really powerful.

**Respondent 2:** Yes, we were able to come and say, 'You know, I really haven't done anything because I haven't felt close to God this week. You

*know, a whole lot of mess going on in my life at the moment' ... but you were able to come, knowing that we would minister to one another.*

This effect was not detected in feedback from all groups. This may be due to accidents of circumstance – some groups are likely to already have had good supportive relationships in place and may not notice any additional effect from using lyfe. Alternatively, some groups or individuals may not have opened up as trustingly during feedback. However, when it has occurred, it seems to have been something valued by the participants.

### **§2.3.3 Group composition**

Some centres, where the Pathfinder core group was large enough, split into smaller sub-groups for lyfe. Where these small groups did not have a consistent membership (Church E), participants reported that the lack of continuity made it harder to relate to the challenges as different groups had set different targets. Church C, where the usual group that met was larger, introduced the passage together, split into groups of six or seven people just for the meditation and immediate feedback discussion, then reassembled to share their findings. They found this helped retain the sense of larger group identity yet gave space (in the smaller groupings) for more people to participate. However, Church F found groups of nine or ten worked well and Church A stayed as one group (usually around ten); it was suggested that less than five didn't work well, especially if one person might miss the session.

### **§2.3.4 Use of CEV**

Three of the centres mentioned the use, by lyfe, of the CEV; in two the comments were negative. This was sometimes simply expressed as a dislike (Church A), or preference for the NIV (Church F). However, others at Church F had the opinion that the CEV was 'poor and in a few cases positively misleading', or suggested that it would be better for people to be encouraged to use their own Bibles. At Church D, the group reported also looking up the passage in

other translations when 'we didn't think things sounded right' or 'because we didn't like the translations that were offered'. However, it was acknowledged that the CEV might be more accessible for younger people and would work well in the types of context suggested on the web site: 'a pub or favourite coffee shop'. Moreover, some others expressed a liking for the CEV, one saying 'it was down to earth for me'.<sup>39</sup>

### §2.3.5 Terminology

A couple of centres complained about some of the 'gimmicky' terminology employed. The use of the phrase 'blockers and shockers' was objected to by participants at Church A and Church B while some participants at Church A and Church F were irritated by the 'wrong' spelling of lyfe, which was seen as a 'bit of a silly title'.

## §2.4 Taking the resource further

All the seven centres that used lyfe were happy to recommend it to other churches. One Church F participant suggested that it would be best to work all the way through each zone:

*it's very helpful to have four or five different sessions on one thing. Even if the challenges change week by week, there's still some similarity in that [zone] taking you back to where you were challenged the week before and the week before that. I think we've seen growth because of that, because the challenges have been so similar.*

Altogether, five Pathfinder centres did more of the lyfe sessions themselves and/or said they would or could be using it with other groups within their congregations. One facilitator at Church A felt that lyfe would be 'quite an easy

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<sup>39</sup> See §8 for further discussion of the CEV, especially [§8.1.3.2](#).

drop in to a home group. It's all prepared and it's a very easy thing to take on, for anyone'.

However, there was a mixed response from both small groups at Church F and some non-Pathfinder groups at Church A. One at Church A reported that her small group had enjoyed it but another responded that 'what was frustrating for [us] is we tried to take it to our house group, and it just fell completely flat. ... and yet in your group, you had a positive response. ... whether it was just the makeup of the two groups or not, I don't know'.

One participant at Church A felt lyfe would be suitable for people who were 'searching' and could be an 'excellent evangelistic tool'. Similar suggestions came from Church G where the group agreed it could be useful as a discipleship tool to take Christians into greater maturity, and a Church D Pathfinder, who suggested it would:

have quite a bit of mileage for people outside of church as well, the fact that there was something there ... and you weren't, sort of, giving them the line that was supposed to be taken, but to kind of say 'What struck you about this?'. It just felt that could be an opening, that the people who don't regularly come to church perhaps.

Given the perceived value of the challenges, one participant suggested that more of these could be added to the web site. Another asked if the hand-outs could be provided as Word files to enable cropping and save printing costs.

## §2.5 Conclusions

Lyfe seems to have had a profound impact on some of the groups with regard to their relationships with God, including their spiritual formation and practice of spiritual disciplines, particularly those relating to the biblical texts. It also affected, positively, their relationships with one another. Moreover, it was perceived as being accessible to people of different personalities, experiences

and intellectual capacities. Of the 27 respondents to the closing survey (ES2) who answered Q19 to say they'd used Lyfe, all but one (96%) said they would include it in a future version of Pathfinder.

However, there was a mixed response from Pathfinders at Church F and it did not seem to have been as popular with some non-Pathfinder groups at Church A. From the feedback surveyed above, it would seem there are a number of points arising which may allow this resource to be even more fruitful.

1. The main hindrance to lyfe achieving its aims seems to be an inability for participants to perceive those aims and/or its *modus operandi*. It seems important, especially for a resource dependent on being taken and used 'off the peg' from the web, to make these things very clear at the outset. Although the aims can be seen (see introductory paragraph to this chapter) the lectio divina 'method' is not spelt out. It might also be worth stressing more, in the web materials, the group-centred nature of the activity and the (limited) role of the facilitator.
2. As a corollary to (1), it would be helpful if the materials more prominently made clear what lyfe is *not*, i.e. that it does not include all the sort of background material that one might find in 'Bible study' resources, although there is enough for its purposes.
3. It is good to see that more resources have been added to the web site since its use by the Pathfinder pilot groups (and that these are flagged up on the 'lyfe wall').<sup>40</sup> The resources are, however, mostly in support of the topic of the session/zone, rather than giving further information on the biblical text in question. In response to those Pathfinders who would have appreciated more links to enable study 'going deeper', perhaps it would not compromise lyfe's identity if it suggested further reading/web links relating to the more 'analytical' approaches discussed above in §2.3.1? These could be flagged up as something to do *after* the reflection upon the

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<sup>40</sup> <http://www.lyfe.org.uk/lyfe-wall/> (accessed 30/7/12).

text. This might also help dismantle a false (?) dichotomy between two different approaches (lectio and historical) to the same text.

4. The CEV was presumably chosen to optimise the accessibility of the biblical texts but perhaps the existence of different translations could be acknowledged and made into a strength; users could be encouraged to compare translations as part of their taking their reflection further.
5. With regard to the concern that lyfe's approach does not allow newer Christians to locate themselves within the Bible's bigger story, it might be worthwhile having further resources that explore the genre of any given passage and its situation within the Bible. An alternative strategy might be to have a lyfe series which is based on one specific genre, such as gospel, or even one particular book, such as Psalms or a letter.
6. Judging from the comments from many Pathfinders, regarding the lyfe challenges, perhaps it would be worth responding to the suggestion of having more of them on the web site. Indeed, it seems likely that more *sessions* would be appreciated by many participants.
7. Despite there being few problems raised concerning the lyfe web site, perhaps a document mapping out the site might facilitate access for those with less experience of the internet?

### **Reflections**

*I wonder if the impact, or applicability, of lyfe lies in the fact that its focus is on the role of the biblical text, that is to enable the development of a relationship with God, rather than the text in and of itself. It perhaps views the texts as means to an end more explicitly than the other resources in Pathfinder - with the possible exception of Map?*

*It seems to me that there are similarities between lyfe, as a small group adaptation of lectio divina, and Contextual Bible Study as developed by Gerald*

*West and John Riches among others.<sup>41</sup> Both 'methods' or 'instruments' involve exposure to the biblical text within a group setting, where people have a chance to find things for themselves, rather than be told by an 'expert'; in both they are then able to share their insight with, and learn from, a peer group. Both stress the applicability of the text to everyday life. Neither rely on, although they may draw upon, insights into the text from the academy.*

*Interestingly, in the feedback to lyfe, it seems there is a tension being expressed between 'analytical', 'intellectual' or 'academic' study and the imaginative, experiential, and spiritual 'method' characterised by lectio divina. While the two approaches both have a long history it is probably true that many Pathfinders were not as familiar, if at all, with the latter. Since this is true of many Christians in the U.K. today it may be helpful to stress its 'credentials' to new users.*

*This would still, however, leave us with the question of the relationship between the two. This question also arose in reflection on MGS. How does, or should, the understanding of the text brought by the techniques of historical criticism, including context and historical background, contribute to a 'spiritual' reading – and vice versa. Dale Martin finds, in many American institutions of ministerial training, that historical criticism acts as a 'gate-keeper', approving or rejecting readings from other spheres of study.<sup>42</sup> Does it also act as such to the fruit of contemplative reading? Or should its role be seen more positively, as marking some borders, within the safety of which contemplative reflection can feel free to wander? Anthony Thiselton discusses the relationship between the work of two mediaeval theologians, Anselm and Rupert of Deutz thus: 'Anselm is one of those who helps to shape the framework of tradition within the boundaries of which Rupert can engage in contemplation'.<sup>43</sup> We might ask, in contrast, how the*

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<sup>41</sup> See, for example, John Riches, *What is Contextual Bible Study? A Practical Guide with Group Studies for Advent and Lent*, (London: SPCK, 2010).

<sup>42</sup> Dale B. Martin, *Pedagogy of the Bible: An Analysis and Proposal*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 14-17.

<sup>43</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, (London: HarperCollins, 1992), 144-45.

*fruit of contemplation may serve to condition any historio-critical study or indeed a reading from any other perspective, employing any lens whatsoever?*

## §3 Bible Overviews

### §3a Word in One

The Word in One (WO) is a seminar by Rev. Andy Twilley, recorded and available on DVD; it is an hour and a half long and split into 16 sections, accompanied by a 16 session Small Group study booklet.<sup>44</sup> The Pathfinder groups at Churches A, B, D, E, and F each had Andy come and present the first two sessions 'live' (in one evening) and then followed the other sessions via the DVD. Most groups used it by watching two sessions per week. All these groups except Church F went on, later, to use DS (which is evaluated in §3b) allowing some comparisons and enabling conclusions to be drawn which might apply to Bible overviews in general.

#### §3a.1 Intended Aims

On the Nationwide Christian Trust web site<sup>52</sup> the aims of WO are listed as follows:

First of all it seeks to raise people's level of understanding. The seminar is a well-structured, and easy to follow presentation which helps the viewer to appreciate the Bible's big picture:

- which characters fit into which period of history
- how the Bible books relate to each other
- what is the historic and geographic setting for each stage
- it highlights the fact that God has a plan of Salvation running from Genesis through to Revelation.

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<sup>44</sup> Nationwide Christian Trust, 2008:

<http://www.nationwidechristiantrust.com/pages/data.asp?layout=page.htm&Type=&Heading.like=Word+in+One> (accessed 21/6/12).

Secondly, it seeks to enthuse the listener to read the Bible for themselves, and so discover more and more of God, and experience the transformational difference it can make.

The hope that those who hear the seminar will engage with the Bible 'in a more regular, more systematic basis', hopefully leading to a transformational encounter with the texts, is expressed by Rev. Twilley on the DVD. On his web site, the resource's aims are expressed in a slightly different way:

Word in One presents an overview of the Bible helping the viewer to understand how the books connect with the characters, and how it all links in with its historical context. It also traces the Messianic line from Genesis 3 and helps the viewer understand that God has a plan of Salvation running throughout history.<sup>45</sup>

The overview nature of the resource is also encapsulated in its sub-title: 'understanding the Bible's big picture'. For the purposes of this evaluation I have grouped the aims mentioned above under three main headings and note the responses from the Pathfinders under these three. The 'transformational difference' is noted where respondents brought it up in connection with other, distinct features of the resource.

### **§3a.1.1 Overview/'big picture' of the Bible**

All five church groups expressed appreciation of the usefulness of a Bible overview and/or a better grasp of the 'big story'. Despite various suggestions for improvement or reservations about this specific resource, the basic concept was thought to be worthwhile and some participants said that WO had helped them engage with parts of the Bible they did not usually read, or prompted them to study further. Two Pathfinders at Church D compared their responses:

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<sup>45</sup> <http://uk.linkedin.com/pub/andy-twilley/14/9b4/545> (accessed 21/6/12).

**Respondent 1:** It highlighted the bits that I wasn't familiar with and then encouraged me to perhaps look at that a bit more closely, again. Perhaps do a bit more reading around that, the bits I didn't understand or bypassed me in the past were-, it was an encouragement to do a bit more research into that.

**Respondent 2:** It was like that for me. I mean I've done reading the Bible in a year for a few years. Again, I don't study what I read, I don't connect it. I just read it so that I'm familiar with it. If there's something that's caught my eye, I do, but I just read it and it was like that with me. It kind of inspired me to maybe see that I need to read the Bible regularly, to study.

The group at Church A also felt that WO helped them move forward in their understanding of the Bible as a whole and one interviewee said that:

the thing that amazed me was the one final [covenant] that included us and I found that quite amazing ... you know we're reading all about the Israelites and God's chosen people all through Old Testament and then suddenly, through Jesus, ...that final covenant. Wow! That's me! It's no longer just Jews. You know it but it hits you in a different way because the covenant's become real and you are suddenly part of it ... and to be honest I'd never really looked at it like that before.

One individual at Church F reflected on how MGS and WO, together with some travel in Greece, had made the 'big picture' clearer, at least for the New Testament which had 'certainly come more alive than it had in the past'. The group at Church F noted that the process of doing an overview would be most valuable at the beginning of a course of study, as it could be more introductory, (they did it second, following MGS), but, in this context, they also raised the

issue of how much existing Bible knowledge the materials assumed (see §3a.2.2 below).

### §3a.1.2 Historical and geographical context

The value of learning the historical background to some of the biblical books was a feature mentioned by a number of participants across all the centres. One participant at Church F said that doing WO had encouraged her to start reading the introductory sections in her Study Bible while another said:

I thought it was very good and I learnt a lot about biblical history. I did find that very interesting; I think it does help knowing about Jeremiah and all that ... I was interested to know that Cyrus had actually allowed them all to go back to their own country ... and to worship whatever way they worshipped ... I didn't know and I thought that was very interesting ... It'll put more things into context.

A participant at Church A commented that 'it reawakened certain things within you and it clarified dates and historical things that you'd probably missed so I found it really interesting' while another felt that 'it was revealing things to me about the historical background, which I had never grasped'. A Pathfinder at Church B felt that the way they read the Bible had changed since embarking on Pathfinder: 'I think now it's more ... a source of inspiration and perhaps, as I say, a challenge in how I'm actually living my life and whether I'm actually living out what I profess to be my faith'. When asked if this was due to any particular features of Pathfinder, they responded:

I think the bit we did that actually put the whole Bible in context, when we went actually right the way through the Old Testament and put it all in historical context, I think that changed it a bit because it made it less disjointed. It seemed to flow more because I think you automatically

expect that it comes in some sort of chronological order and it doesn't necessarily, so I think that sort of helped.

Similarly, a Pathfinder from Church D who found that 'it's made me realise the importance of the Bible to individual Christians, that it is important to study God's word regularly', attributed this in part to:

... Andy doing these big chunks of the Bible. I felt they were really well done. The fact that he placed them geographically and time wise and the important people, I thought that was good, because we often forget that, you know, when you're reading-, you're studying something you're not always certain just where they are.

These comments were echoed by other participants at the centres, including one who said they'd hated history at school. Taken together, they suggest that WO's aim in regard to communicating historical context was not only achieved but found valuable in enhancing biblical engagement.

### **§3a.1.3 Chronology - how the books fit together**

Related to historical context, but distinct from it, is the topic of 'how the Bible books relate to each other', and this was raised by a number of participants at four of the centres. In each case, this feature of WO seems to have been valued because of the way it enabled participants to make more sense of the individual books of the Bible. For example, at Church B, one said:

all this is new to me, and it made a great deal of sense because, having seen the timelines, you can actually then put things into perspective and to actually find out that two books were written at the same time you think, 'Ah right, okay, it doesn't follow, you know, it's not a sequential book'. That does tend to make a bit more sense because you can read through one book then ... you think, 'Hang on a minute. Is that happening

afterwards or before?', because you haven't got the background to it. So, the timeline was good for me, I loved the timeline.

Similarly, at Church A, one Pathfinder said:

Chronological order itself is something because a lot of people know stories but they don't whether it's in *this* bit, that bit or the other bit or even if it's Old Testament or New Testament ... certain things begin to make a bit more sense if you realise that what they're talking about here is after the exile whereas what someone else was talking about was pre-exile ... just being able to place things is very helpful.

The group at Church E expressed broad agreement with one participant there, who liked:

the way they put into perspective where the Minor Prophets came in, together with the different histories of what was going on at the time, and what prophets went where ... You can read a book, you can read Nahum or whatever and think, 'Oh, well that's just a book', you know, or 'just a prophecy', but it's actually knowing where they fit in to the actual events of what was happening. You know, what God was saying through them at different periods of the history. That was interesting.

The benefit was expressed in a different way by a group member at Church D, who found that:

it was helpful to actually-, perhaps the word is-, tidy it all up ... There's been a sense in which I think possibly myself and others have ... little bits of knowledge but kind of tidying that up and seeing where it all fitted in was very helpful. Looking at the Bible chronologically, seeing which bits

overlap with others and things that are going on simultaneously that ...  
that kind of thing was very helpful.

It would seem then, that the interrelationships between biblical books and the fact that the books are not presented in a chronological order within the Bible, was something that particularly struck a number of participants and gave them a new perspective on the texts.

## §3a.2 Accessibility

A number of issues were raised in connection with the accessibility of this resource and the related but distinct question of whom it was designed for.

### §3a.2.1 Speed of delivery

The most common negative comment made with regard to WO was in relation to its speed of delivery, which was perceived to be far too fast, with too much talking. This topic was raised by every group which used it. The material was found interesting but people felt they had missed the opportunity to note things down, or digest them properly, because it all went by too quickly. For instance, one at Church A felt:

it just went over my head ... all the way through the Bible, it was like a route march. I thought, 'Flipping-heck, slow down, I can't keep up with you', and I found I was having to watch the video two or three times before I even came to the evening session.

Another, at Church E, said:

The way that was done put me off within about two, three weeks. It just went so quickly. I'm a note-taker, because that's how I remember and learn things. I gave up on that because it was too quick. It would say,

'Here we have another name for your name-line' two seconds, gone. I threw my pencil away.

Another group had invited the whole church to the WO session as part of a Lenten course and a non-Pathfinder reportedly 'didn't feel at all rewarded by it. It's the pace'.

Some groups dealt with the 'speed' problem by going through the sessions again, within their wider church groups. This enabled them to work more slowly, covering one session per evening meeting instead of fitting in two, and to stop the DVD regularly to allow people to catch up with what was being said. However, one such reported that:

*It wasn't detailed enough. We skipped over it. I mean, as a matter of fact, ... we've actually done each chapter again in the house group, with people that are not in Pathfinder. It's been a smaller fragment, and we've been able to get a bit more out of it than we ever did in this group, here, because we've looked at some of the minutiae of the passage. But it's still very hurried, particularly the last one. 'The Last Days' and 'The Final Judgment', that was, the whole of 'Revelations', and all it did was the letters to the churches.*

While there seems to be some appreciation, then, for the concept of an overview, there would appear to a tension between people wanting sufficient depth of coverage, and more detail of the books being covered, but not wishing to rush through at such a pace that they feel unable to take it in properly.

### **§3a.2.2 Assumed audience**

Related to the speed of delivery is the question of how much existing knowledge of the Bible is assumed by the WO presentation, in terms both of what it chooses to cover or omit, and its depth of content. Obviously, the greater the presumed

existing knowledge base, the more a presenter can just refer to characters or events without elaboration. This in turn affects the rate at which a presenter might feel free to deliver material with which he/she assumes familiarity amongst the audience, such as some knowledge of biblical names and stories.

As noted above, in §3a.1.1, the Church F group raised the question of assumed knowledge in their discussion together:

**Respondent 1:** *We're such a wide range of people - for some people it was a bit basic and for some it wasn't!*

**Respondent 1:** *But who do you target? There's like me, who know nothing and people who know the Bible from back to front, so how do you cater for all that? If it is supposed to be Bible study what's the point of people who know their Bible backwards and forwards, coming in the first place?*

Another commented that 'we're all at various stages of our faith and we're all at various stages of our knowledge and really I think you've almost got to design the course for the lowest common denominator'. Meanwhile, a respondent who was leading the WO discussions in his small group added that he had had to watch the DVD three or four times to note down everything he wanted to and 'feel in control' to lead the group.

When discussing the same issue at Church E, one Pathfinder wondered if 'we're supposed to know what he's talking about already? ... Or is it dedicated also to people who don't know anything about the Bible?'. The Church D group suggested that it should be made clear what 'minimum' level of biblical knowledge was assumed, because 'it presupposed such a lot of knowledge of the Bible' and the speed of delivery had put people off. And an interviewee at Church A thought that:

young Christians would seriously struggle with that, but because we were a fairly mature group, we were able to look at an entire book and quickly flick through it in a few minutes and pick up some points and run with it.

Similarly, at Church B one said:

I'm thinking, 'Golly, if I struggled with that...,' but I'm thinking that probably quite a lot of the congregation did, and maybe spoke with their feet I suppose. So I felt sometimes it was too complex.

In contrast, at Church A, one of those interviewed because they'd decided to drop out of the programme, found WO 'far too basic' and one participant who had stayed reported that people they knew had left Pathfinder because WO 'wasn't doing anything for them'. In summary then, many participants found WO proceeded at too fast a rate of delivery but responses to the depth of material varied, with some finding it too 'basic' and others feeling they may not have the presumed existing familiarity with the text.

When viewing the DVD it is certainly true that the presenter of WO discusses the stories of some biblical characters with an apparent assumption that the audience are at least familiar with the outlines of their stories already, and many other characters may be alluded to without going into detail. It seems that WO would not make much sense to someone with little or no pre-existing acquaintance with the texts.

### §3a.2.3 Desired depth

Another issue to consider in the development and presentation of a Bible overview is what depth one would like the resource to *convey*; in other words, not only where are the recipients in their knowledge of the Bible's 'big story', but also where does the resource aim to get them?

With regard to historical detail, as seen above, the timeline was found valuable by a number of respondents. However, one noted that 'I think you don't need

exact 24 AD etc. You need to have a chronological idea, like, you know, 2,000 years, so you know, these things were happening'. One other proviso to the usefulness of a timeline would be the need for caution considering the passages with creation accounts and pre-flood. Someone with a scientific background at Church F found it difficult that WO skirted round the issue of how old the earth is and one at Church E also noted that:

*They did duck out of some controversial areas, like the timeline, you know?... when did it start? What date would you put on it? You know, was it 4,000 BC? ... what's the consensus, what is the fact? Nobody is prepared to say. Where did the dinosaurs fit in?*

On the topic of more general, biblical knowledge, a participant at Church D suggested that some preparatory work to do in between sessions would help people have more understanding of the material being presented; another commented that:

*although I think it is excellent, it does go through at quite a breakneck speed, really. It's wonderful, it's good, but it does assume, (a), you've got a fair bit of prior knowledge and (b), you're going to go away and do some homework to be up to speed for the next time.*

The provisions of some pre-reading might enable such a resource as this to 'level out the playing field' between participants at different stages in their knowledge of the Bible. However, it would also seem wise to give some indication of what existing knowledge is assumed and what sort of depth the material will go into. An overview with less ambitious scope in detail might, in the long run, be more accessible, and valuable, to a wider range of church members.

## §3a.3 Other issues

### §3a.3.1 Presentation format

One issue which was raised by participants at four of the churches, was relevant to the usefulness of this resource and pertinent to future development of a Bible overview: WO's presentation style and format. Firstly, there were comments on the DVD. The format of a recorded lecture, or 'seminar', did not suit everyone. A participant at Church B found there was 'a lot of talking', while one at Church A found it odd for the camera to have focused on the speaker for a great deal of the time while much of the information was being communicated through PowerPoint slides at the seminar being recorded. The information available on the PowerPoint was valued but Church E and Church A groups both remarked that these slides were usually only visible for a very brief period, had too much on them and were too small to see clearly, particularly the maps; this made it difficult to copy up notes from the screen before the information disappeared. Several participants across the churches commented on how useful the timeline had been – but, again, the issue of speed came up, with one noting that 'he didn't give us chance to see it because I can't see it on the screen. I could if it stood still for a minute or two'.

There were two or three other comments regarding the general style of presentation, from typographical errors in the booklet to the sound effects employed with the PowerPoint. One small group at Church A employed terms such as 'old fashioned', 'irritating' and 'patronising' with regard to the PowerPoint style, even though they expressed appreciation for the material itself. There was a minor comment regarding the pronunciation of the more complicated biblical names.

One of the Church D group commented that, 'a group of teenagers, I couldn't have used it with them', an opinion endorsed by the rest of the group; a younger participant (in his twenties) agreed that 'the design wasn't particularly younger-friendly'.

### §3a.3.2 Support materials

A suggestion related to speed of delivery (§3a.2.1), and raised by several individuals, was that some further support material, in the form of a booklet with key facts, names and dates, and perhaps a timeline, would have saved them trying to note everything down in a rush; this would also have facilitated their understanding of the scope of the history in the Bible and of the chronological relationship between some of the prophets and kings.

Regarding the existing booklet, one small group leader at Church F felt that they needed more help with suggested passages to support discussion and that some topics were too big or too difficult to tackle. The example given for the latter was the striking dead of Uzzah in 1 Chronicles 13. There were contrasting comments made on the questions given for discussion. Some said they were 'long-winded' and 'vague', 'you weren't quite sure where they were going with the question', and yet also found them challenging and worthwhile discussing. This small group suggested that having the questions written down would have helped them understand them properly and also be a good resource:

*each evening I remember coming away thinking 'Gosh I need God so much, I need God's grace so much', and in some ways that was a really powerful feeling for me but I can't now remember what triggered it and that's why I've thought if we had the questions then I could go back and think 'yeah, that was it' and then therefore think 'so how am I going to take this further'.*

The group at Church F similarly found that WO promoted 'quite deep discussions'. However, at Church D one commented that:

*there wasn't enough time to assimilate enough knowledge to be able to do fair justice to the questions that were asked. They were either too simplistic that you knew the answer you were supposed to be giving, or*

they were too deep and you've not got enough background to be able to delve.

### §3a.3.3 Application

A final issue is the absence of any explicit application of the material being covered. Interestingly, this issue was raised twice by different participants within the Church E group, but one suggested that there *were* applications relevant to the small groups and another suggested WO did *not* particularly seek to apply its content. In the discussion on the different levels of experience at Church F, one member suggested that there could be a simple overview presentation via DVD with questions taking participants deeper into the material.

## §3a.4 Taking the resource further

Despite the material within WO being found very valuable to a good number of the Pathfinders, its mode of presentation was found lacking in a number of respects and this seems to have limited its usefulness to some within the pilot groups. If WO wishes to be of use to a wider range of Christians, at different stages in their knowledge of the Bible, then the following changes might be suggested.

Firstly, the provision of back-up written material, with names, dates, timelines etc. would greatly enhance the value of the resource. This could be provided via the web or in hard copy. The inclusion of questions for discussion, suggestions for reading between sessions, and for further reading would add to its value.

Secondly, it might be possible to provide two 'tracks' of questions, or reading, to cater for groups with different pre-existing knowledge of the Bible.

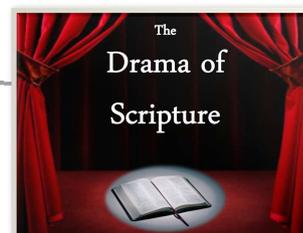
Thirdly, the presentation could be changed: the audio track of the seminar could then become a voice-over to a visual component consisting solely of the PowerPoint slides interspersed with other illustrations used during the seminar. The division into 16 sessions could be retained but it might be better to only

work through one in each two hour meeting, using the time to work more thoroughly through the books discussed.

Fourthly, the appearance of the visual components could perhaps be changed, employing a more sophisticated style to appeal to a younger audience.

### §3a.5 Conclusions

General conclusions drawn from this feedback and relating to development of biblical overviews in general will be found discussed together with DS in [§3b.5](#).



## §3b Drama of Scripture

Drama of Scripture (DS), a resource currently under development, was run as a two week 'taster' during the course of the Pathfinder pilot. Each week consisted of a talk, led from the front with a PowerPoint presentation, broken up by group activities supported by handouts. Drawing on ideas in works by N. T. Wright,<sup>46</sup> and developed by Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen,<sup>47</sup> the resource introduces the concept of the Bible as a 'story' or 'drama' in six acts. This allows Christians to see themselves as 'improvising' the second part of the fifth act, 'The Church', the first part of which is found in the pages of the New Testament. Since Christians know something of the sixth act and end of this drama – that seen in the eschatological strands of the Bible – they are then enabled to 'improvise' their own role within the constraints of the biblical plot.

The contents of the resource as it stood during the Pathfinder project, both the many illustrations (often presented visually by PowerPoint slide), and the worksheets with questions and exercises, presented a number of related ideas:

- The concept of 'metaphors', how they act and are used, their impact upon the way we think about things, and their limitations. Metaphors of and from the Bible were considered.
- This allowed the introduction of 'story' and 'drama' as metaphors and some exploration of their usefulness. The general structure of a story was illustrated with reference to the story of the Good Samaritan.
- The second session, after reiterating some key points from the previous presentation, further developed the concept of Bible as drama, and its features, including the sense of shared action and improvisation, and the way in which some parts could then be more important than others.

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<sup>46</sup> See, for example, N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 139-143.

<sup>47</sup> C. Bartholomew and M. Goheen, *Drama of Scripture*, (London: SPCK, 2006).

- The biblical story was presented as six acts and the advantages of viewing scripture in this way were outlined, including the way it was then accessible to all (not just scholars), the avoidance of literalism, and the stress on relationality.

Seven churches (all except Church F) had this resource as part of Pathfinder, at some point in the programme; its position differed in relation to other resources. Some churches (A, B, E, D) had had 'Word in One' (WO) earlier in the programme and were able to compare these two 'Bible-overview' resources. Church A, the only group to work with the BN resource, gave feedback to, and compared, both that and DS at the same session.

The feedback to this resource was generally positive across the centres. However, this appreciation was expressed in different terms and, sometimes, with various caveats and suggestions for improvement. Here we will first examine the comments made in the light of the stated aims before going on to look at other points that arose.

### §3b.1 Intended aims

The aims of this resource are presented to the participants early in the first session. It is hoped they will develop in three areas:

- *Confidence* – to be able to use and live the Bible with more confidence
- *Concept* – to see how a dynamic overview of the whole Bible integrates with your Christian faith, and the world around them
- *Content* – to develop an ever increasing way to organize and appreciate the knowledge of the whole Bible

### §3b.1.1 Confidence

There was only one comment made about this resource which related specifically to confidence in the Bible, and that was negative. When reflecting back on the whole Pathfinder experience one participant asked a rhetorical question:

*Does the five-act Drama of Scripture help resolve for me ... God's choice and calling and his judgement and some of these big issues? Which is probably what makes me lack in confidence in talking about ... the Bible to a taxi driver or what have you.*

The 'live the Bible' part of this aim overlaps to some extent with the second aim which is dealt with below.

### §3b.1.2 Concept

The concept of Scripture as a dynamic drama, integrating faith and world, appealed to a number of participants across the churches. For example, at Church H one participant noted that it 'was interesting insofar as it encourages one to sort of get absorbed into the story' and one at Church E said 'the idea of seeing the Bible in five acts, ... creation, redemption and that, I think that is quite helpful, you know, to get an overview of it'. Similarly, a Pathfinder at Church D:

*found that really helpful, because to me it gave a very good overview of the Bible, and the story of the Bible as it unfolded, and the whole thread that was running all the way through. I found that particularly exciting, the fact that we were actually in the unfinished, final act of this, and that we know the ultimate end, and we know what's gone before. We are somewhere in the middle, working it out and trying to make sense of it, and make it relevant and in keeping with what's gone before and what's gone afterwards. So I thought that was, really, quite a personally exciting*

and challenging thing really, that somehow, we are working this out in some way, so I thought that was good, I enjoyed those two sessions.

This same person contrasted DS with WO specifically because of the integration with 'life' found in DS:

To me, it kind of, made relevant what we'd done ... in the Word in One, but this, to me, it sort of bridged that gap between, just looking at scripture academically and what happened, and then ... the relevancy in our lives. So, it came in the right place, I think, in the whole scheme of things, for me, but I found that really interesting.

And at a fourth church (Church A) there was a further link made with Bible as Narrative, leading to an interesting exchange:

**Respondent 1:** It's almost like a condensed version of the item we did right at the very beginning, Word in One and then, since we've done that Drama in Scripture, that's almost like an introduction to this last one we've just done, the Bible Narrative, whereby you can see the drama through the Bible narrative then.

**Respondent 2:** I agree with that and also, I think, ... the thing that I felt, I am part of this story. You, know, we are part of this story.

Yes (general agreement).

**Respondent 3:** I think that came more in the last one we did, didn't it? Just, sort of, gelled together.

**Me:** That's in The Bible as Narrative?

**Respondent 3:** Yes. Our part in the story became really important.

**Respondent 2:** But I think in that one [DS], because we went beyond didn't we? Right up to Revelation, yes? So that was the impact it had on me. We're still in this story, it's not finished yet, and what was to come, so I think, I felt more, to be part of that story than this, you're saying?

**Respondent 3:** Well I felt the same anyway. I can only vaguely remember the other one.

**Me:** So both of you are saying you felt a realisation that your story was part of the Biblical story, but *you* found it came over more strongly in The Bible as Narrative and *you* felt it came over more strongly in Drama as Scripture?

**Respondents 2&3:** Yes

In addition to these specific comments, occasionally, at other times in different contexts (groups or interviews), a few people mentioned remembering, or being influenced by, the idea of the 'drama' or the five or six 'acts' . It would seem that this concept, of being a part of God's own story as we live our lives, is a powerful one that captures some people's imaginations and was effectively communicated by considering the texts as a drama or narrative.

One participant did reflect that this concept had its limitations and would not appeal in the same way to everyone:

The drama of scripture, for instance, is quite a new way of thinking for many evangelicals in terms of the narrative view of scripture, but one of the things that the book doesn't do very well, and for that reason, probably, Pathfinder itself didn't do, is to look at how-, well, if we are in the story of God, in what sense, or how, are we in the story of God? That's led me to keep thinking about that, so ... the 'how' is quite a key

thing. So, in that sense Pathfinder has been a very helpful stirring pot ... For some people the idea of the story doesn't help at all. But for some other people, in a post-modern context it does help a great deal. For those who are more doctrinally-orientated, like believers in truth, rather than living in a relativist context, it doesn't really help.

It is interesting that the question of 'how' we are in the story is raised and that 'story' is seen, by this person, as relevant to a post-modern context but not 'helpful' to thinkers in a modernist framework.

However, for another participant, when summing up at the end of the Pathfinder pilot, during reflection on links between the other resources and the cultural drivers, there was a clear connection between this concept and the way life was to be lived:

...Drama of Scripture, where the idea of us living in the pre act five, or whatever, we know what the story is so far, and we know what the end will be, but we're in that middle bit, and ... this is part of working out that middle bit, the bit that we're in somehow, how we can impact on our own culture and our own time.

### §3b.1.3 Content

We had different sections, we had to write down, sort of, main points of it. It was just amazing to get round the group so quick and yet you've covered all the major points. It was just a brilliant way of doing it. I thought it was really good. ... I think it was more [than] just an interesting exercise to do, because it was just so condensed you had all your major points.

This comment highlights the value of one of the DS exercises and one way in which the material was designed to achieve its aim of enhancing knowledge of the whole Bible. At another centre (Church H) one Pathfinder mentioned how useful it had been to introduce the idea of genre and one of their colleagues suggested the idea had similarities with Ignatian spirituality. They liked that aspect and found it helped towards understanding. At a third church (Church D) where the whole congregation had been working with the E100 readings<sup>48</sup> someone noted that *they* had made more sense in light of DS. Given the limited length and scope of the two sessions, it would seem to have achieved its aim with regard to content, at least for some Pathfinders.

### §3b.2 Accessibility

The accessibility of this resource was brought up by a number of participants. However, it is important to remember that, as used during Pathfinder, DS was a two-part presentation written with a view to expanding it to cover more weeks. Moreover, Church G had an earlier version that that used by other churches

#### §3b.2.1 Speed of coverage of material

There were some contrasting comments made regarding the speed of coverage, of material on DS. Two participants with prior HE theological training, who were in different churches, suggested the material 'shouldn't have taken two weeks' and 'there was quite a bit of repetition'. One of their fellow members agreed it 'probably could have been shorter'. However, one of these groups had an earlier version of the material and these comments differed from those of other individuals in the same groups, such as 'I am the kind of learner that likes to have a bit of processing time in between the main points, so I think that, for me, that was the kind of speed that worked reasonably well' and 'Drama of Scripture

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<sup>48</sup> <http://www.e100challenge.org.uk/> (accessed 21/6/12).

... went far too quickly. There was a lot more could have been got out of that ... we really did skim over the surface of it'.

Pathfinder groups elsewhere also commented that the material could have done with more time. One commented 'we could have done with spending, perhaps, a little longer on it, to get the sense of what it was about, because ... it was very tightly packed' while someone at a fourth centre felt their group had struggled with the material and suggested 'there was a lot of material there. ... there wasn't enough time, in two sessions anyway, to begin to realise, the penny dropping what we were on about, I think ... in two sessions I'm not sure we could grasp the full intent'.

Overall, it would seem that, for most non-professional learners (i.e. those without theological training) the material was delivered at an appropriate rate or could be worked through more slowly, over more time, to widen the sphere of potential learners and increase the depth of the material.

### **§3b.2.2 Level and format of material**

The whole thing about the Drama is very good for me, because I suppose it appeals to different people. You're either a book person or a play person and you can decipher things a little bit easier.

Although this comment offers the suggestion that different resources may appeal to people with differing learning styles, the others at this church, which was in a challenging socio-economic area, were generally agreed that the presentation of DS was clear and they were able to follow it. Another group agreed that '[i]t was easy to understand'. However, at the church group mentioned above, where a struggle with the material had been intimated (§3b.2.1: 'I'm not sure we could grasp the full intent'), some reservations were expressed about recommending DS: 'some churches may well think, "That's wonderful!" but I would think that a lot of the other churches would think, "I'm not quite sure what we're on about here"'. It was suggested that more activities would help clarify the topic: 'there was a lot of just sitting and listening'.

### §3b.3 Other issues

#### §3b.3.1 Memorability and format

The kitten that became a lion, or was it the lion that became a kitten?

That's a visual image I remember quite strongly.

The central role of metaphor in these presentations, and the concept of story itself, seem to have been ably communicated by both the visuals employed and by the group work exercises. One participant commented that the presentation 'was quite engaging and captivating and interesting' and another at the same church vividly remembered trying to complete the story set 'on the bus'.

#### §3b.3.2 Dissatisfaction with the concept of Drama as Scripture

There were some other, negative comments regarding DS. One Pathfinder found it interesting but didn't like the idea of being:

in between times. The Bible was sort of written 2,000 years ago and we were still kind of waiting for something, so we're at this point. I found that very difficult, because that's not how I see it. I see it as rather timeless. You know, that it doesn't matter that it was written 2,000 years ago, it could still apply to me today. That's just my sort of feeling about the way the Bible is, ... It somehow seemed a bit forced that we're trying to fit it into these categories, and the acts and the scenes and everything else were not *even*, and it just seemed that they tried to organise it to theoretically make you feel that was the way it went across when really it was artificial. I didn't find that particularly helpful.

At another centre one felt that they:

didn't understand why it had to put it into scenes. What was the reason for that? I couldn't quite work out why we needed to, what we're supposed to learn from it.

These comments were not typical of responses to DS but they do suggest that some participants do not find the metaphor helpful, or need some repetition of the concept, or some emphasis of its role as metaphor, in order for it to be fully appreciated.

### §3b.4 Taking the resource further

Of the 24 respondents to the DS part of the final survey (Q19, ES2), 58% said they would include it in a future presentation of Pathfinder. One group noted that they would recommend DS to other churches, that they felt it was much better than WO and that it would certainly have been beneficial to have it before MGS. Another group suggested that DS would be most useful at or near the beginning of a programme of biblical engagement such as Pathfinder.

Although speed of delivery was not mentioned as a problem with the DS 'taster' sessions, it is something to be borne in mind for a more extended presentation over more weeks. One participant, who had *not* had the opportunity to work through DS, actually suggested that a briefer overview of scripture would have made a better starting point, and suggested – the 'Bible in 60 minutes' as an option. The point was also made that it is important to know where the audience are starting from and make clear if you are assuming any previous biblical knowledge (cf. [§3a.2.2](#)).

### §3b.5 Conclusions

In consideration of both these Bible overview resources a number of issues have been raised by the Pathfinder groups. Some of these points could apply to any

learning tool and they might all feed in to consideration of how to further develop any such overview, including DS.

1. The importance of presentation style and format, cannot be over-emphasised. This can affect the ways in which users of different ages and varying levels of biblical knowledge interact with the material. This includes the 'rate of encounter', i.e. the speed at which material is presented and the density of material there is to read or view. An engaging presentation style not only allows users to take in the material without feeling left behind but also facilitates retention of information
2. If the presentation makes use of visuals and illustrative examples from real life this help to maintain or enhance accessibility although these should be chosen carefully to enable the target audience to identify with them.
3. Use of memorable and thought-provoking exercises may aid in retention of learning, as it seemed to do with the concept of the drama of scripture. Perhaps the existing group-work could be supplemented by ideas for incorporating the concept within preaching/small group work subsequent to the course itself? This could also build up the confidence in the text which was an apparently unachieved aim of the taster DS pilot.
4. Supporting material (in hard copy or available as downloads) for an overview might include notes of biblical books and characters, a rough timeline, and other historical background to give an idea of interconnections between texts. Although not easy to see in the time available, the timeline was a strength of WO.
5. Consideration should also be given to the provision of suggested reading between 'acts' (i.e. preparatory work to help users to gain the most from the group times).
6. Any Bible overview needs to consider carefully, and make explicit, its starting point; how much existing knowledge does it assume? This will enable facilitators to judge whether or not it is suitable for the intended audience and make it clear if any preparation is necessary.

7. Another point which needs to be clear to intending users is the 'density' of biblical knowledge the Bible overview is seeking to convey. Presuming that any fully developed version of DS will unpack more detail of each act, it would help if the scope of the complete resource is made clear. This might include a list books of the Bible included in each 'act' or 'chapter' of the drama/story, a note of any parts which will not be covered for whatever reason, and a list of keywords with which participants would be expected to be familiar.
8. Finally, users expressed appreciation of the intrinsic value of knowing the 'big story' but also valued questions which provoked discussion and challenged them to consider applications for life. This is a particular strength of DS.

### **Reflections**

*There was broad appreciation here for the value of having an overview of the Bible but one wonders how such an overview affects the way in which the Bible is both perceived and used. One Pathfinder, when speaking about WO, came out with this comment: 'the Bible is the textbook and we have to live by it'. Does this suggest that overviews of scripture which follow a trajectory or model other than 'scripture as drama' might, despite their goal of giving a grasp of the big story, nevertheless support a less holistic, more atomised approach to reading – and applying – parts of the Bible? Indeed, since it was suggested (see 3b.1.2) that DS 'bridged the gap' between WO and how to apply the Bible to life, it might be that simply having a fuller grasp of the Bible as a whole, and being aware of the sweep of its story, is insufficient in itself to change the ways in which it is read and applied to life.*

*The Drama of Scripture approach has been seen as providing a perspective on how the Bible is to be authoritative for Christians which avoids the temptation to use it as proof text or rule book. N. T. Wright argues that the authority of the Bible may be seen to consist:*

in the fact of an as yet unfinished drama, which contained its own impetus, its own forward movement, which demanded to be concluded in the proper manner but which required of the actors a responsible entering in to the story as it stood, in order first to understand how the threads could appropriately be drawn together, and then to put that understanding into effect by speaking and acting with both innovation and consistency.<sup>49</sup>

*The challenge for DS, as it is further developed, will be to encourage not only a deeper appreciation of the 'big story' but also to foster creativity in reading and in improvising biblically faithful living.*

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<sup>49</sup> N. T. Wright, "How Can The Bible Be Authoritative?," *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991): 7-32, p.19.

## §4 Maperio

The Maperio programme was designed by Creative Metier,<sup>50</sup> a remote coaching consultancy that provides a variety of services for businesses in the public and private sectors; the Maperio programme available directly, through their web site, is described as being 'inspired from the work of Creative Metier ... working with leaders and individuals as they navigate and work through change, helping people'.<sup>51</sup> The version of Maperio specifically put together for Bible Society was presented in person by trained facilitators. Each of the seven Pathfinder groups who experienced this (all except Church H) had a 'taster' session, 'The Art of Listening – the Voice of God', to introduce the practice of 'Profound Listening'.<sup>52</sup> This was the very first week, before the first full element of Pathfinder. Following this, at some point early in Pathfinder, they had a second part, comprising a further three sessions. Church G had this immediately following the taster session; others had it second, after WO (Church A, Church B and Church D), or MGS (Church C). Church E and Church F had it third, following both MGS and WO. These three sessions, supported by not only the facilitator but also a workbook, each present a perspective from which participants can reflect on their lives as Christians:

- *The River of Life* - My life journey and the events and happenings that have shaped me into the person I am today and when and how God has been alongside me.
- *The Wheel of Life* - What are ALL the areas of my life that are important to me and where I want (God wants me) to make an impact

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<sup>50</sup> <http://www.creativemetier.com/> (accessed 14/8/12).

<sup>51</sup> <http://www.maperio.org/> (accessed 14/8/12).

<sup>52</sup> Workbook to accompany Maperio Pathfinder Course Part 2 With Biblical Reflections, p.3.

- *Values House* - What are my deepest held values and where and how do they show up. Where am I living and not living these values. How does that connect with my being a Christian?

In the workbook the Pathfinders had space and resources with which to complete the exercises, including a Biblical Reflection section related to each exercise that was especially written for this Maperio Pathfinder Programme in order 'to deepen the reflection process'.<sup>53</sup> These sections varied with the topic and included a number of different verses or passages that might be helpful when reflecting on one's responses to the exercise concerned. For example, with the river session, Bible verses that involved rivers or waters were presented under headings that might encapsulate possible responses: Isaiah 43.2 if the reflection had been painful, Genesis 32.23-24 for those who found themselves in a time of struggle. As part of the values house, there was a suggested reflection on the degree of integrity shown in the responses of Jesus and Peter on the night before the crucifixion.<sup>54</sup>

I would like to note here that there were some very strong reactions towards Maperio, both positive and negative, across the centres. Most centres had group members expressing a range of different reactions but some groups were mostly positive (Church D and Church A) and one (Church G, where all four sessions were run in one block as the first element of Pathfinder) more negative. Although it should be said that participants often leave any programme in its early stages, when the required commitments become clearer, most centres reported some participants leaving the Pathfinder programme because of their experience of Maperio. This chapter is based, as are the others, on comments made, or reported from others not present (some of whom had left the programme), during group feedback and one-to-one interviews. It also reflects the contents of Maperio paper feedback forms completed following the Taster

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<sup>53</sup> Workbook, p.3 & 4.

<sup>54</sup> Workbook, pp.13 & 30.

session (four centres) and at the final Maperio session of the three (all seven centres).

### §4.1 Intended Aims

While a complete Maperio programme is something people choose to do at particular points in their lives, usually times of transition,<sup>55</sup> the programme as used within Pathfinder is designed to 'enable the Pathfinder pilot groups to discern more clearly who they are, and the way in which God wants them to live his purpose in the whole of their lives'. The hope is expressed that Pathfinders will 'experience the bible as transformatory [*sic*] within the bigger context of Maperio's approach'.<sup>56</sup>

More specifically, following the introduction of profound listening, the aim of the larger three-session part is to help people 'review their lives from 3 different perspectives with the support of peer and group listening'<sup>4</sup>, offering 'a profound opportunity to reflect and explore, enriched by encounter with the Bible in a supportive space'.<sup>57</sup> 'The hope is that this whole experience will help us gain a clearer sense of our purpose and identity as disciples of Jesus Christ.'<sup>58</sup>

Thus, although the manner in which the biblical texts are used in Maperio is not the same as in lyfe, both may be seen as using the Bible as a means to an end rather than being resources to develop biblical engagement *per se*.

The aims of Maperio are somewhat difficult to evaluate but I have grouped assessment of their achievement under three broad headings.

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<sup>55</sup> Facilitator Guide, Maperio Pathfinder Part 2, February 2010, p. 7

<sup>56</sup> Facilitator Guide, p.3.

<sup>57</sup> Facilitator Guide, p.7.

<sup>58</sup> Workbook, p.4.

### §4.1.1 Profound listening

A number of participants, across the centres, expressed appreciation of the taster session and of the listening exercises in general; when asked to score the taster listening session between 1 (low) and 5 (high), the feedback forms gave average scores per centre of between 3.8 and 4.4, averaging 4.1 across the four centres for which figures were available, a total of 75 Pathfinders.

For one Church D Pathfinder, the value of the listening exercises lay in the fact that, in their experience, listening did not occur in other church situations:

*I especially appreciated the sharing and the listening. I really valued it because what tends to happen in church is we come, the service is there, and we don't really have time to share. You can go to Bible classes and it's really instruction, or it's personal meditation or, you know, study of it, and so on, with questions. But just to, actually listen to how God's word affects us, which it really was, in the areas of our lives was really good, I thought it was excellent.*

The same person suggested, in an interview, that 'listening and reflecting somebody, what somebody was saying, ... for a lot of the people that were there, I don't they'd ever, ever done that in their lives before'.

Listening to God did not arise specifically elsewhere in focus group and interview responses, except in a comment by one Pathfinder at Church G; in interview, he expressed appreciation of Maperio but noted that he 'struggled a bit with applying listening to someone talking to me for five minutes, taking that and doing the same thing, listening to God. The connection I found very difficult'.

However, listening to, and hearing God was mentioned on feedback sheets to the three main sessions. During the process of delivering and evaluating Maperio, a specific question was added to the feedback form and answered by three of the centres (a total of 38 Pathfinders): 'Did Maperio help you to listen to God in a fresh way? If so, how?'. While the percentage of positive responses

varied across the three centres (from 38% at Church F to 71% at Church C) others said they'd heard from God although it hadn't been a new way for them. Several positive responses to this question were made across the centres: 'to not want to rush through a Bible passage but to reflect more', 'makes it more possible to hear God and to receive answers to prayer' (Church F); helped me to think about *how* I should listen to God and that I need to do this more' (Church C); 'reminded me of how accessible God is in all areas of our lives', 'helping me see and hear more in depth' (echoed by another there), 'listening for God's voice in my own thoughts' (Church D). At another centre, one participant included the comment that they were 'encouraged ... to *listen* to God in a *fresh* way – not singing, not praying, not even reading His word – just being silent and waiting'. Several people across four of the centres mentioned, somewhere on their feedback form, hearing God through others.

Aside from learning to listen to God, a couple of groups, in discussion, mentioned that the listening exercise had benefitted the relationships within the Pathfinder group (see §4.3 1), with one person, at Church E, being 'struck by the intimacy and depth of what people shared ... How quickly two people could talk about issues that were very meaningful to them'.

Another, at Church F, valued the training in profound listening for its usefulness in situations outside the church, because 'I'm in a situation with my young adult son at the moment where I need to use my listening skills to the very full, so that was very useful practice'.

The Church E group, which was broadly positive in their feedback on Maperio, noted that the listening exercises built up gradually over the weeks, to be longer, and thought this was a very good way to approach it for beginners. However, the Church F group mentioned that a number had found it 'difficult to listen because it seemed unnatural' and Church C that 'some people had found that very threatening and wouldn't come again if they'd got to do it in twos'. This reaction will be explored further in §4.3.

In summary, it would seem that, of those who found the exercises accessible, many found them of great value in listening to God and/or worthwhile in

interpersonal relationship situations. However, some did not seem able to access profound listening through these exercises.

#### §4.1.2 Stimulating reflection on life with God

Several people across a number of the centres found the Maperio exercises, particularly the river, valuable in helping them reflect on their life with God. At Church F, one interviewee thought that it:

will be quite helpful because I'm at a period in my life where I need to think about my spiritual journey and think about where it's going next and so that will be probably, perhaps not dramatically life-changing, but certainly thought provoking and will probably help to steer me in the direction I want.

Another reflected that '[y]ou can see where God has had a hand in what happened' and a third found Maperio:

very illuminating. Difficult to share necessarily in the group, ... but doing the life thing, I thought it did bring to me that the most important thing in life was relationships and people, and even career. Looking back it didn't stick out, but also things like my independence, it's obviously been a big thing to me over the years, ... being independent was important. ... That actually came because looking back over your whole life, you just pick on the biggest things that happen, and independence seemed to be quite big in the heart of them.

There was similar evidence, from other groups, of Maperio achieving its aims in this area. At Church B, one commented concerning:

the drawing of the river, I thought that was great ... you draw it out and then you look at it and, you think 'Whoa'. You know, I'll remember that, I'll put some more rocks in there and ... I only went back, well, a couple of years and you see how your life has fluctuated from nice quiet periods to raging torrents and rocks and it actually focuses your head.

When the Church D group were asked if Pathfinder as a whole had affected their relationship with God, one lady responded that:

Maperio certainly did. The accepting that it's the non-spiritual things and the whole of life, that everything's spiritual in your life and, yes, it's walking with God in everything and seeing how he's been at work in the past, and actually, those years of young children and not reading the bible, God's still been there. That ... it hasn't been a wasted time. I think probably yes, finding God, I'm grasping the moment where I can.

Another Church D participant reported an experience of God's leading through the exercise:

We were looking at our river of life and I was feeling in a particular stuck place and three Bible passages were offered and all of them really sort of nailed the situation completely. ... that's a great encouragement because it sort of says, 'God is on the case,' kind of thing and he does care and he is at work in this particular situation.

However, one of the Church E interviewees, while also expressing appreciation for the value of Maperio in this area, acknowledged that the process was not easy:

The first one when we're doing the river thing surprised me because it upset me. I wasn't the only one. It didn't upset me until I turned it and

looked at it. I suddenly said, 'Why did I do that? Why did I pick that part of my life, which was actually the lousiest bit of my life?'. I hadn't really intended to do that, but that's what happened. I was a little bit upset at doing that, but I think it was useful to do.

Another Church E participant suggested that these difficulties were also experienced by others but to a greater degree: '[a] lot of people said to me that they didn't like that at all, because it was getting too close ... there was quite a few people that found that intensely threatening and upsetting'.

Overall, while a number of participants found Maperio prompted them to look at their lives with God in a fresh way, some found it a challenging and/or painful process.

#### **§4.1.3 Gaining a 'clearer sense of identity and purpose'**

A number of participants reported finding Maperio exercises helpful in this area. At Church D, where there was general appreciation for Maperio and the three perspectives, one lady said that:

*it made me more sure of my faith and how ... my values are and various things like that, and so made me a stronger person and the fact that God could use me in a more knowledgeable way perhaps, for me anyway, to speak to others about the faith. ... it really made me think about what I am.*

Appreciation of the usefulness of the values house was also expressed by participants at churches B, G and A. One feedback form from the latter noted that 'some of my public/work/social values weren't showing up in my private place ... challenging'.

The wheel exercise was mentioned, by Pathfinders at Church A and Church F, as helping participants think through issues. One member of the Church F group felt that, while listening skills were valuable:

*its more important context for me was the context of looking at one's own life and Christian journey ... we do need to know, through our lives, how our faith has impacted on our lives and those of the people we're closest to ... If going to reach out to other people, we need a firm grip on where we are and how we integrate faith into our lives.*

Both this person and another there valued the inclusion of work in consideration of the wheel of life. The second person said that, as they were not involved in church ministry, they wanted to see their work-place as their mission field and Maperio 'really affirmed what I was wanting to do'.

It seems then, that Maperio did enable some participants to 'gain a clearer sense of our purpose and identity as disciples of Jesus Christ'.

### §4.2 Accessibility

The accessibility issues with this resource did not fall into the more common areas such as intellectual level, or format. In fact, at Church C, some said it was 'refreshing' after MGS and 'worked with any level' while another described it as 'easy' and 'very accessible'. Problems raised by those who completed all or part of Maperio, sometimes on behalf of those who had dropped out, had more to do with the foundations and purpose of the materials. However, since these issues, it seems, were a problem for a substantial number of Pathfinders, preventing many of them from engaging with the resource, and since the issues raised may be relevant to other resources in future, I am considering these responses under the heading of accessibility.

### §4.2.1 Communicating the concept and aims

As noted elsewhere in this report, some participants expressed impatience with the use of terminology they didn't know and names that didn't make clear what they represented. While this may appear to be a minor point, the fact is that the name 'Maperio' is not explanatory and a good number of Pathfinders did not apparently know what to expect when they did the taster session or the three-part Maperio. (It should be noted that this does not mean that they were not told by Bible Society staff.) In some cases, this lack of understanding extended into the Maperio sessions themselves. Despite a number of positive and appreciative comments made regarding the facilitators, especially Katherine, some people, at a centre which generally responded positively to Maperio (Church A), reported that they 'didn't really understand the concept' or 'struggled' with knowing how best to tackle the exercises. One reflected that:

*when we started I couldn't see the point of it, but having continued through the course, looking back I can see the importance of it now, and I could go back and probably understand, but it was just not understanding what it was about ... some people did, but for me, the concept of it just didn't register at all.*

At Church B, following the very different format and style of WO, 'there wasn't a lot of introduction to prepare people'. The group there expressed appreciation of the sessions but 'maybe the explanation, of that might help - why we do this when we look at the Bible'. And, at Church E, one reflected that 'Maperio, ... although quite challenging and interesting, in making you self-analyse, I'm not really sure what they've got to do with understanding the Bible, which, if that was what the overall Pathfinders was about, they don't seem to have been connected with that'.

In many cases this probably reflects what people heard rather than what they were told. In considering Maperio as a whole, one facilitator at Church G said

that 'I don't think that the purpose was ever quite clarified to us'. However, the same person then went on to explain it rather well:

As far as I understood it, Pathfinder was talking about the fact that we are on a journey to discover something about our relationship with God. So, it seemed to me that part of what Maperio was doing was allowing us to see, in perhaps a more visual form than we would normally do, the way we've come on that journey already and where our journey might yet take us. The whole thing about the listening I understood it to be a kind of metaphor for the fact that ultimately we're learning to listen to God in relation to what He's speaking to us in the bigger picture. ... I felt, I suppose, looking back on it that it was an area of spiritual awareness that, for our church particularly, we don't often have time for in our busy programme to stop and think about and it probably wasn't a bad discipline for us to do occasionally, but the tools we were given to do it were not the best.

With regard to personal problems arising from specific sessions one Church B participant acknowledged that:

with the river thing ...Katherine did actually make it very clear that you didn't have to do your whole life; you could just pick sort of, five years or whatever. So, I mean, in some ways the scope was there for people to sort of, not opt out, but just pick a bit that they could deal with, but I don't think that that sort of, quite got through somehow.

It would seem, then, that lack of appreciation of the purposes of Maperio hindered its usefulness to some participants. Despite explanations, by presenting staff, of why the skill of listening, and the other exercises, might be useful, it seems there was wide-spread lack of understanding of this point.

### §4.2.2 Relevance to discipleship

Even among some of those Pathfinders who gave positive responses to Maperio there was uncertainty as to its relevance and or its place within the Pathfinder programme. At Church C, one facilitator who enjoyed it felt that, while 'it was very interesting' and 'some things, helped us to look at things in a new way', nevertheless 'the question I asked at the end is, "What, actually, have I learnt from this?", and I didn't find that too easy to answer'. Later that evening they said that they 'didn't quite fully grasp [Maperio's] sort of, place, within the whole course'. At Church F, following one participant who had made positive comments about the value of Maperio, another responded:

Well, I found it quite the opposite ... because I thought this is about Bible Study and I couldn't see the point of it, about talking about myself ... and we all know a lot about each other ... that's why I didn't come for the last two weeks . I just found it very stifling actually, and I didn't see the relevance of it at all.

This was echoed by a couple of others at Church F and elsewhere: one felt it 'irrelevant to my needs' while another 'thought it was very interesting ... but in the context of my perception of Bible study, I don't know'. Reflecting back, at the end of Pathfinder, someone at Church E felt that:

the case for stating, 'What has this got to do with spiritual formation?' has to be more clearly stated, ... 'We're doing this. The reason we're doing this is not so you can analyse yourself primarily, or listen to yourself, ... but what has it got to do with your spiritual growth?'

### §4.2.3 Biblical content and basis

As pointed out above, Maperio did not have biblical engagement as one of its primary goals although it sought to use biblical texts in achieving those aims.

During feedback, some of the concerns about the relevance of Maperio were related to its biblical content although they differed in detail. Some felt that, while Maperio included biblical reflection, the main focus was on the participants themselves. For example, at Church F someone suggested '[p]erhaps it was a bit too "me" focused? ... Not to say it's not valuable but it could have been a bit more God-focused, Bible-focused'. Also at Church F, another participant felt that '[i]t was about your own life, and I think that's what upset people'. When reflecting generally on Pathfinder and its effect on how they engaged with the Bible, one Church B group member felt that there were times when they did not interact with the Bible, 'when we were doing drawings of houses and garages and rivers. ... I couldn't see what that had got to do with the Bible whatsoever. ...that to me, that was nothing to do with the Bible'. One reason for this perception of Maperio may be the position of the biblical reflection: 'It was at the end, every time, wasn't it? By the time we'd gotten quite tired, I seem to remember. We did everything else, and then there was a bit of scripture at the end'.

Others felt that the bases of Maperio were not clearly biblical. At Church E, one felt that Maperio 'was in a sense, all a bit humanistic really. Where is the spiritual input and leading and inspiration for it really?'. Similarly, one Church D taster feedback form referred to its 'touchy-feely existential approach' while, at Church G, one interviewee was 'seriously disturbed' about Maperio because they felt it was 'very close' to New Age thinking.

A third group of comments acknowledge the presence of the biblical reflections but question their relevance. One felt that 'the Bible readings from the course and the course itself did not join very easily; there was random Bible readings' and another, elsewhere, said 'the scriptural references were a little bit, kind of, tacked on and not terribly conclusive to making the point that was being made'. A few of the three-session feedback forms, across several centres, echoed this impression.

Despite these comments, a number of participants responded positively to the three-session feedback form question asking them how Maperio had affected

their engagement with the Bible. Across the seven centres, between 33 and 63% agreed that Maperio had involved them working with the biblical texts in ways that were new to them, and between 38 and 75% said that it had led them to have a fresh encounter with the Bible. One respondent at Church E felt that '[i]t was good to read the key verses three times emphasising different aspects of the truth within these verses. This is a practice I would wish to use in meditating on biblical verses in the future'. This aspect was also highlighted by a Pathfinder at Church A who added that this practice 'made it *much* more personal and real'.

### §4.3 Other issues

#### §4.3.1 Development of relationships within the group

A number of comments suggest that one outcome of Maperio, which did not map explicitly to the Workbook aims, was the development of more open communications between members of the Pathfinder groups. Obviously, the effects varied from group to group, and the members of some groups knew each other much better before Pathfinder began, but a number of participants expressed similar developments. This was noted, for example, by members of the Church E group. One said that people got to know one another better through Maperio while a second said they 'found it helpful to be able to share at a deeper level, and we quickly got onto quite personal and sensitive issues, really. So that was quite refreshing'. A third said 'it did open up, I felt, some real sharing between people'. Similar comments were made at Church B and Church A, while at Church C someone reported that:

You have the experience of being able to talk to each other on a one-to-one ... and say things that perhaps were very personal to us. I remember at one point, I got quite upset talking to somebody about things that I wouldn't normally speak to people about, but you brought out your ability to, you know, you felt able to do that to somebody that, perhaps, you

wouldn't go to and say, 'I have a problem with this' or 'I don't want to do that'.

### §4.3.2 Too close for comfort?

The flip side of the development of greater intimacy between group members was that some participants did *not* find such sharing at all easy. One person at Church F found the listening exercise in the taster session 'very very difficult because it was too personal for a first session ...talking about personal things to someone you didn't know very well. I nearly didn't come back after that!'. Even a few of those who completed Maperio felt this:

it seemed to me a bit personal, you were talking about that, whereas to me, I just thought it didn't seem relevant to what I wanted to know and to get from Pathfinder. You're asking me to go through my life and the river. I can understand the ups and downs and all this thing, then the wheel and then the house with the garage, and I'm thinking-, I filled it in but I just didn't think it was what I wanted from Pathfinder, really. Too much personal stuff.

Although some of the Church E group found the three Maperio sessions useful, they also reported that:

feedback from one or two people was that they found it rather intimidating and not easy to actually open your heart in that way. So, it isn't an easy thing to do. And it's not everyone that can do it in a relaxed way, so one or two people were a bit off-put by it, found it a bit too much like navel-gazing.

One person at Church B, also noting different responses, suggested the exercises might appeal to different types of people: 'the drawing of the river, I

thought that was great. That suited me, and yet I know that, for example, [a fellow Pathfinder], she doesn't like pictures, she's a word person so for word people, not quite so good. For people who have got that sort of pictorial head then it was interesting'. They went on to reflect that focussing on a 'traumatic event' such as bereavement, for the River exercise, might be easier for some than others; 'that's when you're sort of thrown in without the rubber ring. Now, a lot of people couldn't handle that, whereas I found that helpful to actually put it down on paper. So again, we're back to, what's good for one isn't good for another'. During the same discussion, another Church B Pathfinder spoke of how people may not realise they are making themselves vulnerable:

*we set our own barriers where we want to go, but actually by doing something like that, people let their barriers down without knowing they're doing it ... Then that's too late then. I felt that's what kind of, that's what was happening. In the right circumstances maybe it would have been right for people to talk about things, but they weren't the right circumstances.*

This evoked agreement around the group and the observation that, for people familiar with 'that sort of thing' it would be possible to decide 'Well, this is how far I'm going to go with this or engage with this'.

### **§4.3.3 Vulnerability and relationship to counselling**

Participants at a number of centres raised the issue of counselling or other support, usually in connection with the difficulties experienced by some within their groups. At Church A, one reflected of Maperio that 'it can, and I think it did for some people, unearth some things, and they just got left untouched. Whereas, maybe some prayer support and other support could have really helped'. They noted that 'some people struggled with it' and suggested that 'they needed support to be able to get into it and come out the other side ... some people, I thought, "Gosh, I'm not even sure if they're going to come next

week". It was very hard'. Another Pathfinder at Church A said that it 'felt like something you would do in a secular counselling session, and I was kind of thinking, "Well how is this going to fit in with what we're doing?"".

Similarly, at Church B, one participant suggested that it:

hit people very deeply in terms of bringing up things, and what concerned me was, there we were doing it, and actually it seemed we didn't have with us somebody who was a skilled counsellor ... There were counselling techniques being used and all the rest of it, exposing things and yet the safety net wasn't in there. So in terms of the group, it was dangerous stuff.

Someone else in the group noted that a 'lot of people dropped out' at that stage, and the original speaker went on:

Indeed. Yes, because they couldn't handle it and there was no one around to support them in going through that. Now, some of that might be the dynamics of how we've done it ... in a big group rather than in small groups where maybe people would have been ... maybe relationships between individuals would have been stronger and all the rest of it so maybe that's the dynamics of here, but that really was significant because it cut in so deeply for some.

Comments were also made at other centres: at Church G, someone 'felt like I was in a therapy session'. At Church E one said 'it seemed more like counselling', although a facilitator there did point out that the Maperio presenter 'did mention that it isn't meant to be counselling and he mentioned that a couple of times'. Another there commented:

It raises so many pastoral issues, that that needs to be handled carefully, I think. I don't think we should shy away from it. I think we should jolly

well be, ... analysing ourselves and each other, and learning from it. ... we were not prepared for what that would bring out and how to handle it, you know, people in tears, when we were doing those life maps and things. Because ... it didn't kind of come to a resolution. We had all these issues raised: 'all these years of my life that I've got nothing to put on my map; what was I doing with my life?'. We never kind of got to the next bit, which is perhaps how to look at them in a different way.

Another member of the same group reported that

I was probably not convinced, really, with looking back and trying to understand what experiences I've gone through as to where I am now, how it actually helps me. Now, maybe I'm just not seeing it, but I'm not quite sure there was enough help to understand how you either dealt with pain or disappointment in the past, how that would help and move you on. I think, when you did think back to very painful experiences, you then had an emotion of the experience at that time, but how do you use that and move on from it? So it was hard to draw out the positives from it. So in terms of how they do it again, I think there needs to be a better understanding, or a better theory, about why reliving the past through memory, helps you in the future. I'm not sure the case is made for that.

Given the comments here, and other discussions with two different participants who had suffered bereavement, it would seem that some care should be taken when using Maperio-type techniques to promote reflection. They can be extremely valuable to some but, for others, issues may be raised which require much longer-term pastoral support or even professional counselling.

#### §4.3.4 Secular and Christian parallels

A number of participants in a couple of centres had taken part in programmes similar to Maperio, or covering some similar areas, either in secular or church settings. While one, at Church F, did not find this resource helpful, and 'couldn't see the point of it', others compared Maperio favourably with other courses. A number of the Church D group had prior experience and all gave positive feedback on Maperio; one felt that 'the Christian content and the aims of it brought it alive to me, and that's why it was so valuable', while another felt 'it compared favourably. It was certainly on a level with other things that I've done', with 'a few new things and fresh ideas'.

Interestingly, one Pathfinder described it as 'a bit like an extended Myers-Brigg course'.

#### §4.4 Taking the resource further

Despite reservations being expressed at some centres, (and only 18% ES2 respondents suggested using Map in future Pathfinder presentations), a number of participants enjoyed Maperio so much that they hoped to be able to do a full ten session version at some point. One of these, at Church D, also suggested that it:

had mileage for people outside the church as well, because it's sort of engaging in where people are. They may not recognise that God's in their life but it gives a starting point to be engaging with them, if you are sharing with them. If they're telling you about their life, that's a way of breaking in and as we've said it's opened our eyes to the fact that God's in everything. He isn't just in what we would regard as spiritual, or things that happen in church. God is there, so it's a vehicle for pointing up or maybe encouraging them to think about, 'Even though I've not been aware of God, maybe he has been there'. So, it's a good way, I think, of ...

getting to know where they are in life and what makes them tick and what their values are.

Interestingly, a Church G Pathfinder made a similar suggestion that 'a diluted course' would prove useful to those outside the church.

A number of other suggestions were made, which fell broadly into three categories.

#### **§4.4.1 Best situation – group composition and dynamics**

There were conflicting suggestions about whether Maperio and similar exercises were best done with a group of people whom you already knew well or with those you didn't know. The church at Church G was large (several hundred) and some in the Pathfinder group mentioned that those who'd dropped out at an early stage, during Maperio, may have done so because it was hard to work through it with people you didn't know. At Church A, the Pathfinders knew each other to varying degrees before the programme started but 'not in that deep way'; here too, one participant reflected that it might have been more successful once the group knew each other better, 'because we know each other as a group more, we can be more open to each other' and this met with agreement from some others present. Similarly, at Church B where 'most people know each other on the surface but not always deeply', one suggested that the reason some found it difficult was that, in this situation, 'when people are forced into pairs some people put their barriers up ... if you try and impose on those barriers, you'll get a reaction'. In Church F, one Pathfinder noted in her interview that 'I was conscious of thinking "Well, I shan't say *this* because I'm with somebody, or I *will* say it because I'm with so-and-so' and another similarly reflected that 'I share those exercises with people whom I know well and I trust'.

However, a third Church F Pathfinder thought that, while 'it would be better with people that knew each other, on the other hand, occasionally it's quite refreshing to do it with someone that doesn't know you and you can be a bit more anonymous because they don't know you. ... But I think you've got the option, you know, if you're with someone you don't feel comfortable with, then you only share a bit of what you're thinking'.

Of course, as noted in §4.3.1, it was also true that a group could grow together through doing Maperio. At Church A, one reflected that:

*in the first session it was quite hard when we came back together as a group, because it's very personal stuff that we're touching, but by the end of the third session we were all so much more open and confident to speak about personal issues. To the point that I thought, 'It's disappointing that it's ending now', because, you know, it was just lovely to see us get to that point.*

Overall, the feeling seemed to be that people would only make the most of this resource if they knew they were in a 'safe place' with others they knew well enough to trust.

### **§4.4.2 Position within a larger programme**

All groups reported getting to know one another better through doing Pathfinder. This then raises the question of whether a resource of this nature is best worked through earlier within a larger programme of biblical engagement, or later when people have had a chance to get to know one another. At Church A, someone described its position at the beginning as 'almost getting to know each other's deep personal sides before we've really got to know each other on the surface'.

This also relates to the issue of expectations and communication, raised above (§4.2.1). At Church G, one individual who did find it valuable suggested that some of the negative comments from others might have been due to the fact

that it was the first Pathfinder element they used and it was not what people were expecting. Similarly, the taster evening at Church E caused one to comment that '[t]he whole course started off in a strange way', another noting that it 'was a real turnoff for a lot of people' and some 'didn't come back'. A third explained that people 'thought we would have an evening of introducing the whole programme to us, so that people could be aware of what they were letting themselves in for' but their reaction was 'if it's like that next week, I'm not coming'.

### §4.4.3 Time

There are two issues here: the spacing and order of the sessions and the time available to achieve its aims properly. The Church D group, which reacted positively towards this resource, noted that they had had two weeks between each session, which gave them more time to reflect on it, and at Church F, where they were weekly, two participants independently suggested they would rather have had two weeks or even more between sessions. Another Church D person had found it helpful that, with the taster before WO, they had had Maperio 'topping and tailing' WO.

At Church B, there was a feeling that the session *order* could have been different:

it was almost like the one that we did at the beginning, that was the one that went deeper actually ... it was almost like you were really chucked in the deep end first of all. ... I wonder if it were to be done in a big group as we had at that moment in time, whether it might be possible if people paired up or got into triplets from like the first section and stuck with those three triplets, but then sort of built up to the river exercise through the spokes one and the house one, in order that, you know, there's some sort of familiarity there.

This was echoed by a facilitator at Church E who wondered if 'the way we could do it better next time ... was to start with "values", and work towards the "inner life" at the end'.

Regarding the time spent on these processes, one Church A participant reflected that Maperio was good but:

I think it needed a lot more time. To be doing it in an hour, an hour and a half was quite a challenge, really. It's almost like you could have spent a day on each subject, starting it, reflecting on it, coming back to it. I suppose, to me, it was like retreat material, and if you had that amount of time, that amount of support as well, maybe prayer support, to take you through that and to reflect on it, I think it would be really, really great.

Similar feelings were expressed by a Pathfinder at Church E:

The great value of what it was seeking to do was to, I guess, to reflect on what is our own spiritual journey, and the personality we are within that journey? That's quite a helpful, therapeutic tool, to reflect on thinking about spirituality as a whole. From our background, we don't really do that particularly at all, let alone well, and so to have that kind of tool to work through that, is very good. I think you'd probably need to do three or four or five weeks to get a sense of that.

## §4.5 Conclusions

When the Church E group were reflecting back on Pathfinder as a whole, one responded '[w]e lost quite a few of our group early on, the first time we did Maperio, (a) because they weren't expecting it, (b) because it was not at all what they thought Pathfinders was about, and then (c) because it was emotional'. This comment sums up in brief some of the key issues raised here,

issues that are not just pertinent to this resource but to any materials seeking to promote greater reflection and intimacy within Christian discipleship. Several suggestions may be made that might contribute to the greater effectiveness of any such resource.

1. One point with very broad applicability is that people do not always remember very much of what they are told, verbally, and that it is worth reiterating key points of aim and means throughout a programme even if these are also included in any written materials. This is probably more necessary with resources employing less familiar 'techniques' to approach the texts.
2. A more specific point is that, to avoid disappointing or confounding 'expectations', it would be good practice, when planning biblical engagement programmes, to repeatedly remind people why they are working through any given resource and its place in the larger programme. This could be reinforced by providing a printed 'route map' for them to refer to.<sup>59</sup> In this case, the aims of Maperio, its relevance to spiritual practice (especially the listening skills) and the usefulness of tools from outside the church, needing stressing.
3. However, it then remains necessary to try to make participants aware of why they are being taken by that route, especially when the reasons may not be obvious. In the case of Maperio, having the biblical reflection first in each session may have alleviated concerns about the focus of the material. The relevance of the exercises would still need to be made clear but this may have helped participants see the horse being put before the cart.
4. Difficulties are likely to be faced by many people due to the personal and, for some, emotional features of any spiritually challenging discipleship material such as Maperio. It is not easy to suggest remedies for the

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<sup>59</sup> See [§ Conclusion.3.1](#) for further discussion of the need for participants to know what the programme and its elements entail.

challenges. Indeed, facing and working through them may be the very thing necessary in order to proceed in one's Christian walk. However, it would only be wise to flag up in advance the nature and location of these challenges, so that participants may be fore-warned and take steps to secure extra support where necessary. It may also be possible to take incremental steps in advancing towards greater intimacy with one's dialogue partner(s) where these are not already well known to one another. Another possible strategy would be to incorporate alternative routes through materials so that participants who do not feel ready to face the challenge may nevertheless continue with another, optional exercise.

You can take a horse to water but you can't make it drink. In the end, only the participants themselves can make use of such resources as Maperio. However, taking these points into consideration may help smooth the path to the river and awaken a thirst in the horse.

### **Reflections**

*There seems to have been little experience, within these churches, of the process of personal reflection supported by these materials. This unfamiliarity, as much as the perceived irrelevance, seems to have hindered the usefulness of this resource. That said, materials drawing more directly on Christian sources, and perhaps more overtly adopting practices long found within the Christian tradition, might have found more receptivity among the church groups.*



## §5 Community Bible Studies

This resource, used by six of the Pathfinder groups,<sup>60</sup> consisted of a set of notes for participants, and a corresponding set for facilitators, designed to enable four small-group Bible studies. Both sets briefly introduced the process and transformational intentions of Contextual Bible Study (ConBS) and stressed that background knowledge of the Bible was not necessary. The accessibility of the material was further emphasised: ‘There are no “right” or “wrong” answers – every person’s contributions and insights are important’. There was, understandably, somewhat more detail for the facilitator, who was also told that exploration of ‘[t]he nature of your community and how you could contribute to its flourishing’ was ‘a natural outflow’ from ConBS.

The four Bible studies focussed on one text each: Luke 4.16–30, Acts 2.1–18, Proverbs 17.14–26 and 1 Corinthians 1.26–31; 6.9–11. Both sets of notes, participants’ and facilitators’, included an ice-breaker activity, in addition to several ConBS questions, four or five ‘Community questions’, and an action point, for each of the Bible studies. Both sets of questions varied with the passage although each included ‘Is there anything that is not clear to you in this passage?’ within the ConBS questions. The ‘Community questions’ were related to the passage and asked participants to think about the area where they lived and its inhabitants; for example, Luke’s account of Jesus at Nazareth asked about notable locals while the Pentecost passage questions focussed on local ethnic and religious diversity. It was suggested, at specific points, that the small group split into threes and came together for subsequent feedback. Other materials were to be worked through by the whole group, in ‘plenary’ mode.

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<sup>60</sup> Churches A, B, C, D, E, and G.

## §5.1 Intended aims

Participants were told that ConBS 'requires us to read the Bible text slowly ... to engage it not only with our minds but also with our imaginations and feelings'. The ConBS questions were 'to help us feel comfortable and familiar with the Bible passage' while the Community questions were 'to help us think about our community in the light of the Bible passage'. Following the 'conversations' generated by these questions 'you may even decide that you want to do something as a result of your time together'. In addition, the facilitators were told that, for users of ConBS, 'the main aim was not simply learning but how the Bible could transform them and help them transform their communities for good'; the Community questions were set to 'encourage links with the local community' with the hope that 'sharing in these experiences together will help you see your own community with fresh eyes and with God's compassion. In turn we hope this will prepare and sustain you as you start to think about advocating for the Bible in your community'. The responses have been grouped under three headings relating to these aims.

### §5.1.1 Contextual Bible Study - engaging the text imaginatively

Regarding ConBS enabling participants to engage with the text itself, aside from the way it related to issues concerning the community, there was little specific comment from groups. When participants referred to 'the questions' it nearly always seemed to pertain to the 'community questions' and the ConBS questions were not mentioned at all.

It may be significant that all these groups had previously worked with lyfe, which has some similarities with this resource. For instance, lyfe asks participants to '[r]ead the passage several times through, read it slowly, use your imagination to picture the scene and soak it up' whereas ConBS suggests they 'read the Bible text slowly and with deep attention. As we read it we seek to engage it not only with our minds but also with our imaginations and feelings'. Another similarity can be seen in the way lyfe asks readers to 'look out for one or two points that really impact you. ... Shockers – something from the text that

stands out or surprises you. Blockers – something that raises questions or you find hard to understand’. Paralleling this, three of the four studies in ConBS asked ‘What jumps off the page at you/what strikes you about this passage?’ and, as already noted, they all asked ‘Is there anything that is not clear to you in this passage?’.

In fact one centre’s champion noted that ‘there were quite a lot of similarities with the lyfe format ... We've said some good things about lyfe, I think. Let's say the same good things would apply to these’. One of the same group said that they ‘found it helpful, just to bring it more out to you, if you like. ...for want of a better word, bring the Bible more alive’. It may be, therefore, that the resource did achieve the aim of getting participants to engage imaginatively with the text but it did not arise in discussion because it was a process with which the Pathfinders were already familiar.

### **§5.1.2 Community Bible Study – thinking about your community**

When I met with the groups, one of them commented that the links between the given texts and their communities were not obvious. One facilitator felt the passages chosen were:

*very randomly selected, I felt. I know the common theme was that we were trying to bring particular application to the community and I'm sure, you know, there are all sorts of other passages that we could have picked, that would have done the same thing. I never quite understood why these passages and not others were picked.*

He later went on:

*The week that we were picking verses out of Proverbs was quite interesting, because I think for a number of us, Proverbs wasn't a particularly familiar book. I think, Proverbs seems to me to lend itself quite well to this sort of community application in general ... So, that was*

one of the things why I thought, 'Why are we looking just at this sort of handful of verses out of one particular chapter?' ... Without really thinking about it too deeply, you'd have to think, 'Why didn't they do a passage out of James?'. James is all about prayer and action.

However, he felt the community link, relating it to the history of parts of their town, worked better in the first two studies: 'that was quite helpful to think about some of those kinds of things and relate them to, "Okay, so how does that fit in with what the church is doing in this particular area?"'. Another participant at the same centre agreed that they 'had some great discussion around the various topics'.

At other churches some Pathfinders noted, even if the relevance of the passage to community issues were not obvious at first reading, that the questions led them to make the connections and often resulted in interesting discussions. A facilitator at Church B commented that 'I think the Bible passages were very good by way of opening the door for us to get into talking about the community ... I thought that the way that the questions were phrased, from what I remember, is that they did lead into focusing on a particular area', and another participant there agreed, with some qualification:

I think it promoted quite a bit of local discussion, didn't it? About the way the pit village has actually grown up and the cross section of migrants into the area, I suppose. Indeed, some of the barriers that still exist because of that, that sort of insular community. Not quite sure what it did, as far as Bible was concerned, but it certainly gave me a bit more background on where I live and what's around me. ... It's something that, as I say, in part of the discussion it came up, and it was of interest, but some of the things that we're trying to relate to, you read in the Bible passage, then trying to see what you could do within the community in response to the text, that got quite difficult at times, didn't it? ... if you

were trying to start it as a pre meeting to thinking what you can do in a parish, you might have to pick the Bible passage a bit more carefully to specifically point in certain directions. I think they sort of led us along a route of general discussion around, but without any specifics.

Others in the same group agreed on the value of the good discussions on community generated by the questions. As one commented:

I think it was useful in the sense of, possibly, making the situations in the Bible more relevant for now. I'm not quite sure how to explain, but ... seeing yourself in a similar sort of situation to them. I must admit, to begin with, some of the passages that were actually used, my first thing I read in the passage is, 'Well, what's this got to with what we're doing?'. But I think the way the questions then were linked in to it, was quite good.

In contrast, in Church C, while they could see links between text and context they didn't all feel that it necessarily applied to *their* context. One commented that:

there were things to do with being inclusive in society and some of them we found, not perhaps as relevant to us here as they would be to some other situations, because we said that here in our own community we haven't got a lot of people from other cultures and other countries.

However, another from the same church saw more relevance:

We all knew what the gist of the study were leading us to if we were set in a multicultural area and multiethnic area, so we all felt, all knew what we were aiming for. But then when we looked at our own community as has been suggested, we thought, 'Oh we don't have those sort of groups'. So it

would be easy for churches in those sort of areas, like ours, to sort of just finish there, 'Oh, we haven't got the groups'. But especially the 1 Corinthians, when we talked about the build up of the Corinthian church and the different layers and stratas [*sic*] of the different groups, we started digging around in our own community and we realised that the layers and different groupings *were* there. Possibly not quite in as they may have visualised when they actually wrote the notes but, so I, we, found them very helpful when we began to think of the different groupings and the different people who were excluded and the different people who were at this level or that level or etc. so think we found it very useful.

And a participant at Church D said:

it did seem to, sort of, really spark off this idea that what is in scripture is still relevant and you can adapt it and apply it to what's going on in your own culture and area. So not to just think of it as, 'That was there and then, and we're here and now' but there are those overlaps that can be applied.

It is notable that the good discussions reported at several of the centres were not necessarily prompted by the same passages. Church G reported that the fourth study did not work so well as the other three while it was that one which sparked the discussion noted above at Church C.

Interestingly, when asked how CBS differed from 'regular' Bible study, one lady said:

It didn't feel a lot different to me except that I wasn't particularly relating the passages to how, you know, *my Christian life*. It was to do with how my Christian life affected the people in my community. So it was

looking beyond myself, which normally we do look at ourselves and how it helps as a passage, but we were looking beyond that so I found that helpful, different.

### §5.1.3 Encouragement to engage community

Aside from some reflection at one church on what society- and culture-facing initiatives were already going on, there was no specific mention of church activities regarding their contexts. In fact, one participant reflected that 'I found it difficult. I thought the desired outcome was to prompt you to a, kind of, community action. I might have misunderstood that but if that was the outcome, it didn't do that for me at all'.

On balance then, upon initial reflection participants did not see obvious connections between the biblical texts chosen and their own specific situation; the 'community questions' provided were needed in order to lead to reflection in the desired direction. Although some found the resulting discussions thought-provoking nothing appears to have been translated into action at the time of the questioning. If there were links between this resource and the culture-facing initiatives which some churches later pursued, they were not articulated at any time.

## §5.2 Accessibility

### §5.2.1 First impressions

Given the importance of not only the substance but the *appearance* of accessibility, it was interesting that two centres found the title given to this resource by initial Bible Society communications, specifically the word 'contextual', was off-putting. One Pathfinder, whose response was endorsed by others in the group, put it this way:

It's fine, but not everyone-, 'Ooh, er, I'm not going to be able to understand this.' ... I think it's one of the threatening words. Perhaps a title that sort of explained that this is not to be feared but where we were leading to, would be better than just the straight buzzwords. Fine in an educational establishment but a little more difficult in say, a general church setting.

Similarly, at another centre, when asked about Contextual Bible studies, the following comments were made:

**Respondent 1:** We call that Connecting Scripture to Community, rather than Contextual Bible Study.

**Respondent 2:** That wouldn't bring the crowds in!

**Respondent 1:** It wasn't a seller!

Although not noted at other churches, these comments highlight the need (also raised elsewhere in Pathfinder) to be aware of the impact of the names of resources on the perceived accessibility of materials.

### §5.2.2 Intellectual challenge

When considering the *actual* difficulty of CBS, it is notable that one group brought up the subject of level and accessibility of their own accord. While responding to a general first question about CBS, one responded that:

no matter how limited or whether you were well versed with the Bible, you were able to join in. ...that's why I liked it because, whereas I struggled to be able to quote verses.., with that you can join in and it doesn't matter what your level of knowledge is.

Another in the same group agreed that '[i]t could certainly be done without Bible knowledge' while a third actually found that 'it did seem a bit odd, sort of, being asked to list how many Proverbs you know; there was a sense of immaturity to it, I think, and we'd progressed so far'. The last went on to suggest that this resource might have been more suitable earlier in the programme, which was agreed by the rest of the group. A response in a similar vein came from the facilitator at another centre, who commented that CBS was 'perhaps a little bit more lightweight than lyfe'.

### §5.2.3 Group-work

Two groups made adverse comments on the instructions to work in twos or threes, with one commenting that some people find very small groups 'threatening'. In fact, the facilitators' notes do indicate that some activities should be done in smaller groups but suggest that arrangements should be agreed by the group as a whole. Perhaps this flexibility needs to be stressed to facilitators in future presentations of the material.

## §5.3 Other issues

### §5.3.1 'I wouldn't start from here..'

One facilitator questioned whether biblical reflection is in fact the usual prompt for community action:

I don't know whether it would be the starting point for parishes in terms of if they were thinking of engaging with the community. I just think that when we started something new in this parish, we haven't necessarily started from-, well, we haven't if I'm honest with the things that I can think of, we haven't started from the point of, 'This is what the Bible says. Let's go and do'.

This takes us back to the intended aims of this resource and raises the question of how best to stimulate churches to 'transform their communities for good'. This goal is presumably subsequent to getting them 'to ... think about our community in the light of the Bible passage'. This resource seeks to get churches to reflect, with the hope that that process may generate transformative action. Perhaps the facilitator here was assuming a short-cut between text and action?

### §5.3.2 Format and flexibility

There were a number of suggestions made by different groups regarding how this resource might be modified. One centre suggested that there should be the possibility of more focus on one topic before being 'moved on quickly' to the next. Another centre came up with the suggestion that having a choice of passages and topics to use might have helped groups work in more depth with one that was particularly suited to their locality.

## §5.4 Taking the resource further

It was suggested by one centre that this resource would work well with a larger group and could work well with young people. Another church suggested using this:

*within our home groups, perhaps, in terms of it being one session in the middle of whatever else they were studying, to be able to pick up on this as-, to give an emphasis to say, 'Okay. As well as all our other things, one of the areas is to get involved in the community.' ... I don't think it would be helpful to do much more than the four-week session, if that. Maybe not even the four weeks, if I'm honest.*

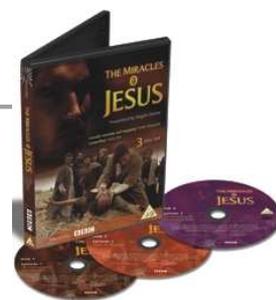
## §5.5 Conclusions

It is clear that this resource stimulated discussion within the Pathfinder groups which participants found interesting and thought-provoking. However, its potential to lead them on into transformative action within their communities has not been realised. With this in mind I would like to make the following suggestions:

1. Given the similarities between this resource and lyfe, and the potential of the latter to stimulate action through its challenges, it might be worthwhile considering setting this resource up in a similar format, or as another, slightly different, 'zone' within lyfe itself.
2. Within this 'zone' one could have several optional sessions using a range of different Bible passages. This would give the flexibility, suggested by some Pathfinders, to help communities to focus on topics relevant to their social context.
3. The initial (ConBS) approach to the passages could be very similar to that used in CBS since it already parallels the lyfe approach in many respects.
4. Some of the facilitator's information could be incorporated into the 'Reflect' section.
5. The 'Community questions' and action points could perhaps be adapted to form the 'challenges', with the modification that the whole group would reflect on the issue chosen and come back to share their thoughts on the issues the next time. This might then lead to some suggestions for local group 'challenges' of a more active nature.

Hopefully, this would, building on the success of lyfe, be a means by which CBS could retain its accessibility and its potential for generating debate while channelling some of that discussion into action. It might also help resolve some of the tension inherent in an approach which seeks to enable groups to encounter texts themselves, with the help of the Holy Spirit, while also

wanting to direct the process to some extent by suggesting some lines of thought to them.



## §6 The Miracles of Jesus

The resource, *Miracles of Jesus (MJ)*, comprises a set of three television programmes produced by the BBC, supported by free downloadable materials for both educational and church settings, produced by Bible Society.<sup>61</sup> The programmes, distributed in their present form by Bible Society, are documentaries presented by Rageh Omaar, which include period dramatizations of incidents from the gospels acted out in Aramaic with English sub-titles. Although Omaar does suggest some prosaic explanations for the miracles he is not really concerned with whether or not they happened as written but with their significance in first-century Jewish thought and what they might show us about contemporary opinions of Jesus. The first episode explores how the miracles might suggest links between Jesus and stories and characters in Jewish history; it features the raising of the widow's son (echoing Elijah), the feeding of the 5000 (Moses with the quail and manna), Jesus walking on water (Joshua crossing the Jordan) and the turning of water into wine (suggesting the time of God's kingdom had come). In the second episode Omaar explores how the miracles might tell us what Jesus (and the disciples) thought about himself, specifically, if he was believed to be divine; it includes the calming of the stormy sea, Jesus' baptism and time in the wilderness (the latter being portrayed as a time when Jesus was 'bewildered and frustrated'), the 'disturbing' account of the exorcism of Legion, the healing of the paralytic and the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter (seen as Jesus exercising God's role in deciding who is included in the chosen people). The episode concludes with the significance of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, his possible self-identification as Isaiah's suffering servant, the crucifixion and how he might have seen his death as fulfilment of that. The last episode covers the 'miracles' of the resurrection, conversion of Paul, and the growth of the early church.

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<sup>61</sup> <http://www.miraclesofjesus.co.uk> (accessed 2/7/12).

On the website entitled 'Church Resources',<sup>62</sup> there is an 'Introduction' billed as a 'Churches study guide' that included suggested general questions for each episode, and there are also nine sets of notes for 'youth'. The 'Introduction' points out that:

[t]here is plenty of material for groups to spend up to four sessions on each programme/DVD. Equally you could use the Introduction and any one section, or pick out issues which you think are important from all three sections, if you only wish to have three group sessions.

However, the other three episode-linked resources listed on this page appear to be identical to those on the educational resources page,<sup>63</sup> including sections entitled 'background information for teachers', and thus do *not* appear to be tailored to church groups despite their position on this page.

Churches A, B, C, E and F all used this resource; the Church B group did not have an opportunity to feedback on it, as they used it following my last meeting with them, but two facilitators returned final questionnaires which mentioned it. Most Pathfinders worked with this for only three weeks but some sub-groups took more time.

## §6.1 Intended Aims

No specific aims were indicated for this resource but the 'Churches study guide' suggests that:

through the images of the *Miracles of Jesus series*, and in tandem with our Bibles, we can gain fresh insight about the miracles and enter into something of their depth and reality. Watching the programmes and

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<sup>62</sup> <http://www.miraclesofjesus.co.uk/church-resources.php> (accessed 2/7/12).

<sup>63</sup> <http://www.miraclesofjesus.co.uk/education-resources.php> (accessed 2/7/12).

discussing them together can strengthen our faith, develop our spirituality and enable our Christian witness to be more effective.

Furthermore, the Bible Society website<sup>64</sup> indicates that three topics are examined by the episodes (and therefore might be expected to be areas where people felt the resource had made an impact):

- *Episode 1*: Four famous miracles reveal what Jesus' contemporaries believed about him.
- *Episode 2*: In a world where claiming to be divine was the worst crime possible, could Jesus really have believed he was the Son of God?
- *Episode 3*: What did the resurrection mean to Jesus' followers and how did it affect the growth of this new movement?

In practice, the effects of this resource, as raised in discussion with the Pathfinder groups, seem to fall into two main areas. The first relates to miracles (no specific mention was made of divinity or the resurrection) but the second is the more general area of how people view everyday life in Bible times and how an understanding of that affects their reading of the texts.

### §6.1.1 '... fresh insight about the miracles'

In three of the Pathfinder centres comments were made referring to the impact of learning about Jesus' miracles in the context of Jewish thought. For instance, at Church E one said:

that was quite different, looking back and saying, 'Well, Jesus did this miracle because there were precedents in the Old Testament. There was a whole theology of water, or whatever it was, and actually there was a

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<sup>64</sup> [http://www.biblesociety.org.uk/products/911/49/the\\_miracles\\_of\\_jesus\\_the\\_film/](http://www.biblesociety.org.uk/products/911/49/the_miracles_of_jesus_the_film/) (accessed 2/7/12).

deeper significance to the miracle', and that was something that I hadn't come across before, and that was new for me, which I thought was very interesting. Some seemed more convincing than others, but I thought that was quite interesting.

This was echoed by someone at Church C who noted the importance for readers of the New Testament of:

the subject of what the miracles mean, in its context, to them. I think that's all important, of how they saw the message and the miracles and what it meant to them, because it's on their eyewitness and their reactions and their lives that we base, we see where our evidence is. And I thought that was incredibly good.

And similarly, a participant at Church A felt that:

what was most significant for me about that, was the parallel between the Old Testament miracles and the miracles of Jesus, that the Jews would have identified with, you know. They would have seen, he was, sort of, identifying himself. It would never have occurred to me in that sense. It was absolutely amazing, you know, this parallel between the Old and the New Testament miracles, yes, excellent.

Indeed the facilitator at one centre saw the way that this resource conveyed 'how the miracles related to the Old Testament' as having been a major impetus, along with lyfe, in the growth they had seen within the group during the course of Pathfinder. These comments taken together suggest that, at least for some participants, this resource did indeed have an effect upon the way in which the biblical stories are understood, offering 'fresh insight about the miracles'.

A related effect concerning the understanding of the miracles was noted at Church C and Church E. Although there is some reservation as to the way they are portrayed, an impact is made at an emotional, not just a cognitive level:

What came across to me was that the miracles wasn't touchy touchy, they were brutal, and one of them in particular, very brutal. [This may refer to Legion's exorcism where Jesus was portrayed as grabbing the man and shaking him quite hard, or to the presentation of the healing of the paralytic, where Jesus upturns the mat that is still suspended above the ground and the man falls to the ground.] And the crucifixion was, well, something else again, very vivid, and you were just thinking, 'Well he's been left' but you don't realise what happened. It might be all make-up, or whatever, but it makes you think.

And a dialogue at Church E highlights the same tension between the portrayal and the impact:

**Respondent 1:** I think for this group it worked fine, actually, because it was really good for us to get us really thinking about, 'Actually, what does scripture say about that?' ... that one weird bit where Jesus talks about the dogs and the crumbs under the table ... We were all going, 'That's not in the Bible', but that was almost verbatim what's in the Bible, and that was like, 'Ooh!' ... that was one of the 'shockers'<sup>65</sup> for us! We didn't have an answer for that and neither did the notes.

**Respondent 2:** I suppose one good thing is it did actually get us checking what it says in the Bible.

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<sup>65</sup> 'Shocker' is a term from the Pathfinder resource, 'lyfe', indicating 'something from the text that stands out or surprises you'.

**Respondent 1:** Yes.

**Respondent 2:** I mean the bit that disturbed me a bit was when he raised the boy from the dead, you know, I thought, 'That's a classic sign of CPR gone a bit overboard.' ... That did stay in my head quite a bit as being OTT. The way he did the wine to water, I really thought that was really good, because all they did was focused on his eyes, and he was just like doing that [stares with eyes], and I thought, 'Oh well, that's a novel way of doing it,' you know.

**Respondent 3:** Well, if you were reading the Bible for the first time, you'd think all sorts of things were a bit OTT, wouldn't you?

**Respondent 1:** It just reinforces how out of the normal realm the miracles were though. We're just over-familiar with them, aren't we?

Here we find evidence that the dramatic portrayal of the biblical narrative can challenge expectations, stimulate reflection and may send the viewers back to the text with fresh insight and/or new questions.

### §6.1.2 '**...enter into something of their depth and reality**'

One participant, at Church F, questioned whether or not this resource, indeed any film or television materials in themselves, supported discipleship:

If you just look at it as this is something to do with Jesus, but what are we learning from it? ... there weren't a lot of questions that we talked about afterwards. It's like going to see the Life of Jesus; you go to a film and, it's interesting and makes an impression on you, but how far it actually pushes you forward, I'm not sure.

However, the way in which some users of this resource responded to it suggests that it did make an impact, not only on their understanding of Jesus' miracles but also on how they visualise Bible narratives generally. The group at Church C reflected that it was:

**Respondent 1:** very very good indeed, because it really showed, we felt, what life was like at that time and what Jesus was like and not the pretty Jesus ...

**Respondent 2:** .. not clean, but dirty ...

**Respondent 1:** ... why they wanted the feet washing in other words, and things like that, which in our brains, in a way, we did know, but on a certain level, you don't think about things like that. We do need to think of it, as they thought of it, and see the things like that.

Someone else in the group saw value in the resource's portrayal of life as it really was:

it wasn't a blockbuster, it wasn't a very high up actor playing the part, and so it was much more realistic as how they lived and so on. It wasn't all the razzmatazz of a Hollywood movie, it was more down to earth, and it actually brought it home to you exactly how they lived at that time.

One facilitator had used MJ with another group and, when pressed to clarify why 'most of them just sat with their mouth open', he suggested that:

the image that most people get of Jesus, is fair haired, blue eyed, with a little halo, floating about, doing nice things, and so the starkness ... the reality: dark clothes, you know, sweat, beards, ... very realistic as to when you think about it, how it would have been. It got people thinking and changing the images that are often there, which are all nicey nicey, so you

think of the bad bits but you think, 'Oh it's all nicey nicey'. It sort of floats through, I think, that's how they just said, 'My goodness!'. It had a big impact, so very valuable.

A sub-group at another centre reportedly found it 'very stimulating and created a lot of thought'. It would appear that, for a number of users, this resource did, as the Study Guide suggested, convey something of the 'reality' of the events portrayed in the biblical narratives.

## §6.2 Accessibility

### §6.2.1 Visual

Evidently, this resource had an impact on many users and its format as a visual resource seems key to this effect; as one participant noted of visual resources generally, they were 'very helpful because they kept you interested a bit more and we could actually see what was happening, rather than just having to read it from the Bible and people talk about it'. (See also [§9.1.1](#).) The employment of a visual medium also renders the resource usable in circumstances where some or all of the intended audience cannot read very well, if at all, *or* are hearing-impaired (assuming subtitles are available).

However, the very impact – and memorability – of a visual medium raised a few questions in some of the Pathfinder groups, regarding the dangers of the visual 'account' superseding or over-riding the text upon which it is based (see §6.3.2) and this was linked to the origins of the resource as a television programme produced by a corporation committed to presenting non-biased viewing materials.

### §6.2.2 Using the format of a television programme

As noted above, the programmes used here were produced by the BBC, whose values include being 'independent, impartial and honest'<sup>66</sup> and whose Trust states that '[t]he BBC should give people opportunities to understand the beliefs of others and to examine their own beliefs critically'.<sup>67</sup> This could enable the resource to be used with credibility in contexts where the audience do not share Christian assumptions but, equally, it could raise issues for those who use it from within the Christian tradition.

When discussing the approach and quality of the BBC production, the Church C group were very positive about the value of this resource:

**Me:** So you found the production very high quality?

**Respondent 1:** Yes, he wasn't trying to, you know, I think ... he [the presenter] was brought up a Muslim but that didn't particularly come over; he wasn't trying to get that over to us. It was very even-handed.

**Respondent 2:** In some ways I think it was an advantage that it was not a Christian. Because [nods around the room] ... I think that the fact that he comes to it with no particular sort of desire to push the Christianity side was good because you started looking from all kinds of sides, which is important. So from that point of view I thought it was absolutely brilliant.

Others also found value in having a presentation which was not from a specifically Christian perspective. At Church A, one participant said this resource

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<sup>66</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/howeare/mission\\_and\\_values.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/howeare/mission_and_values.html) (accessed 2/7/12).

<sup>67</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/howeare/publicpurposes/communities.html> (accessed 9/7/12).

was 'challenging, made you think; I didn't always agree but sometimes you think, "Oh yes, okay, maybe"'. And another noted that it 'gave a visual interpretation of what you read'.

The Church F group were asked if they thought MJ would be useful to work with a group exploring, but not committed to, the Christian faith and some responses were positive:

**Respondent 1:** Absolutely, yes, that's what it's all about ... because we're all on the journey aren't we?

**Respondent 2:** It was more relevant to some people just looking in and compiling, shall we say, a beginning of a faith.

In conclusion, some participants found value in considering an examination of Jesus' miracles from outside the faith. However, despite this, and despite the potential accessibility of a BBC programme to those of other faiths and none, reservations were expressed. These caveats, coming from Pathfinders at three of the centres, are dealt with in §6.3.1.

## §6.3 Other issues

### §6.3.1 Making use of materials with a non-Christian basis

Reservations concerning MJ were expressed by some participants at three centres. There was quite a discussion on this at Church E:

**Respondent 1:** ... as someone noted when we were watching these films, for the BBC, and for that sort of secular production, it was, on the whole, fairly true to scripture, although understated in many places, and some key facts may have been omitted, as far as I remember.

**Respondent 2:** The week that showed the temptation of Jesus in the desert, there were some quite violent views on that in the group, because they felt that it was going too far, really, as to Jesus being powerless and sort of overwhelmed by everything, which didn't really match the Bible accounts.

It should be stressed that this reservation was not expressed by the whole Church E group, with some agreeing and suggesting that 'people who are not Christians, or quite new Christians ...would have a lot of questions' while someone else pointed out that the support materials made clear the origins of the production with the BBC. However, a similar conversation occurred at Church A:

**Respondent 1:** it showed Jesus in the desert and he's supposed to be challenged by the devil and it actually looked like he was really fearful and it actually made me feel quite angry, this one, because I was thinking, 'How dare you portray Jesus like that. He was not afraid of the devil'. It looked like he was hallucinating on the film. I found that really weird.

**Respondent 2:** But that was a good outcome in a sense, because it challenged us to think about it, 'Is that right, or is that wrong, to portray it'. So that, so long as it's used in the right context, it's not used as, 'This is actually how it was'. It's about making you think.

**Respondent 1:** But would that-, if people didn't have a strong faith, wouldn't that portray Jesus differently to how we know him?

**Respondent 2:** I hear what you're saying but it's not the Bible Society's material, is it? It's the BBC, and the point of it is, to not just take on

board everything that you see, go and test it for yourself, which is what we did very much on that. And also on The Passion, I think.

Later on someone commented that MJ:

enabled us to see the perspective of non-believers and to think about that, which for us who are fairly new Christians, we can relate to that easily, but if you've always been brought up in a Christian environment that can be a bit more difficult, and so I think it opened that up. We've had quite a lot of discussions about that.

At Church F, where it was acknowledged there were differences of opinion across the group regarding MJ, one participant claimed that 'the major trouble was there were some inaccuracies in it, which caused a lot of problems', and questioned the wisdom of using something that 'was not absolutely perfect'. Another noted that 'as a journalist, there's always an angle'. However, this elicited a response from another Pathfinder, noting that:

It wasn't done for the Bible Society though, so the Bible Society can present it saying 'Look this is correct, not correct', whatever; it wasn't actually presented as something that the Bible Society was saying 'This is what you should know about the Miracles of Jesus', it was a presentation to comment on.

Someone noted that they had 'created a bigger context which was speculative' and another felt that the BBC 'had dramatized events that we only have a text for, which is fine'. This person later reflected that 'it's a little bit risky in a way for the Bible Society to take something that the BBC have prepared and present it within the context of a Bible Society programme because you'd need to be very sure that it did what you wanted it to'.

Overall, the groups that expressed reservations about using material which didn't come from a faith perspective felt that MJ would be valuable for Christians

who have familiarity with the texts but that it would need to be used with caution with others. One possibility would be to have it led by someone with greater biblical knowledge.

### §6.3.2 Visual 'over-ride'?

The reservations about visual interpretations of the biblical text were expounded further by 'Respondent two' in the Church E dialogue above (§6.2.1):

If you're using that material with a group of either people who aren't Christians yet, or new Christians, there's a real risk that they go away with what's on the film, rather than what's in the Bible ... that's the risk, I think, of using a secular material, without really much warning, and making it clear week after week to remind that this is not ... a Christian production.

This respondent also felt that 'you see quite a powerful image on film, and that tends to be what you go away with remembering' and 'the film sticks in your head much more powerfully'. So the concerns were not simply that the visual depiction of the narrative was not faithful enough to the text but that viewers would take away the distorted, visual depiction, *even if they had previously been exposed to the text*. A similar comment arose in discussion by the Church A group: 'the visual images are more powerful than the written word'.

### §6.3.3 Support materials

At all the centres questioned, there was a perception amongst users of MJ that many of the support resources were actually aimed at schools or youth and needed adapting for use with adults in church audiences. As noted in the introductory paragraph to this chapter, there is only one document on the church resources link which seems specifically targeted at this audience.

At one centre there was a further comment that the materials provided were 'a little bit lacking, could have been bit more depth'. However, one participant at another centre reported, with regard to the 'teachers' resources', that 'there was no way, in the sessions, that we could have actually got through the questions'.

#### §6.4 Taking the resource further

The responses to MJ at Church C were overall positive and there was general agreement that they'd be happy to recommend it to other churches. However, it was suggested that doing it in three weeks was too rushed and 'it needed to be done at a slower pace'. One participant there had tried working with the resource over three weeks with another group, watching each session in full. Although that left insufficient time to work through all the suggested questions:

it was so graphic and so good material that actually I just let the impact hit them and that was really good ... we sort of played fifteen, twenty minutes of it and stopped, just to let people talk really, and react to what they'd seen, which I think was good because then, in a sense, people are free to say whatever they want to say in relation to what they'd seen.

The group at Church E were also fairly positive with a couple of caveats. One remarked that MJ is 'a documentary format, rather than an instructional format, so you do have to choose your context. It has to fit in, in one of those contexts, so ... bearing that in mind, ... it's stimulating rather than instructional, in that aspect'. Another suggested that 'there needs to be some care as to what type of group it's being used for, and there needs to be somebody in the group who knows the Bible well enough to be able to draw attention to the differences. It needs to be used with the notes, otherwise it could be confusing'.

A similar point was made at Church A, where it was suggested that a leader should be present when using this resource. The group were divided on whether this resource should be used *before* something like MGS, to illustrate the need for considering interpretation, or *following* it so that users were equipped with

critical tools. 'There is a lesson that comes out of it – don't always believe what you see on the telly.' In contrast to 'The Passion' they had not gone on to use MJ with their youth group: 'there was quite a big difference between what they were portraying and what was in the Bible and I didn't want the children to-, because the visual images are more powerful than the written word'.

Of the two final questionnaires returned from Church B, one said they would include MJ in a revised version of Pathfinder and one said they would not. The latter noted that MJ 'caused offence' but did not elaborate on this statement. Of the total of 26 participants responding to this question nearly 70% would include MJ.

## §6.5 Conclusions

This resource appears to have been of value to individuals across the centres, bringing to life some very familiar Bible stories and causing participants to go back to the texts with fresh understanding and, perhaps, questions. However, some reservations were expressed concerning MJ and it may be that its value could be enhanced by addressing some of these concerns.

1. Production of some church-specific support materials for adults would be most helpful. These could include a number of features that deal with the reservations expressed by the Pathfinder groups.
  - a. It might prove helpful for groups to read the relevant passages in their Bibles first, including parallels in other gospels where appropriate. Working with these passages in a manner similar to 'lyfe', or doing a more conventional 'Bible study' using historical critical instruments, would familiarise the groups with the stories before viewing the DVD. This would equip them to consider the presentation critically yet possibly enhance their understanding of the miracles in their context.
  - b. Background materials would also provide an opportunity to introduce the idea of visual portrayals being *interpretations* of the biblical passages

albeit, in this instance, supported by historical and theological studies. Parallels could be drawn with the depiction of different historical events in film and television – with perhaps ‘The Tudors’ as an example of one extreme!

- c. After watching each episode participants could then discuss together what they had gained and any points at which they took issue with the TV interpretation.
2. Alternatively, some groups might find it better to just read the relevant passages, watch a whole episode and discuss it together with a few questions as prompts. They might then come back together another week to consider other questions arising and go back to the text for further consideration. The provision of alternative viewing strategies would enable group leaders to use the materials in way that suits their group and their existing knowledge base

Given the feeling that visual ‘versions’ of a story ‘stick’ in one’s mind more indelibly than text, it is important to reinforce the participants’ understanding of the texts both before and after viewing. Hopefully, either of these strategies might enable users to re-view the biblical narratives on screen in a critical fashion – allowing them to learn new things and be touched by the stories afresh without going away with any misleading impressions of what the text is communicating.

### **Reflections**

*The point made above, concerning the apparent greater memorability of film over text, is interesting. It has been suggested that, when making film adaptations of novels, ‘[t]he adaptation consumes this memory [of the novel], aiming to efface it with the presence of its own images. The successful adaptation is one that is able to replace the memory of the novel with the*

*process of a filmic or televisual representation'.<sup>68</sup> The aim when adapting biblical narratives may differ, depending on the goals of the producer and director, but the impact of visual productions, and their value in causing viewers to re-visit the text, may need to be balanced with the risk of distorting the Bible story. This risk is inherent in any interpretative exercise - and always raises the question of what constitutes a distortion - but perhaps the impact of film should make those seeking to produce visual representations even more careful. It should perhaps, also, make those viewing such 'adaptations' more critically aware?*

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<sup>68</sup> John Ellis, "The Literary Adaptation," *Screen* 23 (1982): 3-5.



## §7 Reading Romans in Context

This resource comprised two, one-and-a-half hour sessions, a week or two apart, presented by Peter Misselbrook of Bible Society. The format was a mixture of lecture style interspersed with interactive exercises and was supported by PowerPoint presentations and several paper handouts. It was presented at five churches, although Church B and Church E had a joint session as they are both located in the same area. The other three churches were C, D, and G. This report draws both from focus groups at four of the churches (excepting Church B) and from paper feedback forms designed, issued and collected by Peter at the close of each presentation at the four locations;<sup>69</sup> however, since both sources were anonymized, it was impossible to tell if similar comments from the same church group, on paper and in recordings, were from the same people.

The resource opened with an exercise to illustrate the need to know something of a letter's writer and recipient, and the wider context of the document, in order to understand what it was intended to communicate. Groups of participants were asked to examine a real, anonymized letter and come up with some suggestions for its original situation. (This involved a letter from Eleanor Roosevelt to the 'Daughters of the Revolution' pertaining to a situation where they had refused to host an African-American singer.) The session continued, in a PowerPoint-supported lecture format, focussing on Paul as a Pharisee, his likely beliefs and expectations, before introducing Paul the Apostle and his revised understanding. The material then covered the possible history of the church in Rome, including the Claudian expulsion in 49 and the return in 54 CE,<sup>70</sup> reflecting on the interactions of Jewish and Gentile believers, of Christians and Jews, of believers and the imperial authorities. It closed by raising questions as to how the letter reflected these situations and circumstances, and by encouraging participants to

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<sup>69</sup> These had 4 questions: 1. Can you describe in a few words how this course was for you, e.g. difficult / confusing / helpful / stimulating? 2. What do you think worked well? 3. What did not work well for you? 4. What could have been improved? There were 45 responders (Church C, 12; Church D, 8; Church G, 7; Churches B & E, 18).

<sup>70</sup> The presentations employed this notation.

complete two tasks, 'homework',<sup>71</sup> before the next meeting. Firstly, they were asked to read or listen to the whole letter, asking themselves: Why had the letter been written? What were the letter's main themes? How does Romans speak to modern believers? Secondly, they were to look more closely at Romans 1.18-3.20, asking themselves three questions: How does Paul's viewpoint seem to change throughout this section? Who is he speaking about? From what perspective is he speaking about them?

The second session was intended to begin with a period of interaction, as participants 'fed back' what they had learned by doing the 'homework', and then to conclude with a summary from the front. This summary noted some 'enduring themes' of the letter, such as the 'Spirit as the source of the Christian life' and the 'need for unity among the people of God, across divisions of race, class etc.' before looking in more detail at Rom 1.18-3.20. Peter Misselbrook reported, however, that:

[t]his worked well in some groups where people returned with a good deal to say. In other groups this worked less well - sometimes because of lack of continuity (those at the second meeting had not always been at the first). In those circumstances, what I had intended to be concluding summary material occupied more of the meeting than I would have liked.

Both the RRC sessions were further supported by a selection of handouts. Some of these introduced the group work, some were notes outlining the teaching material, and others were annotated and highlighted passages from Romans.

### §7.1 Intended aims

RRC was introduced to participants with a slide outlining its content and aims:

- We need to read letters in context.

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<sup>71</sup> This was Peter Misselbrook's term.

- What elements make up the 'context' of Paul's letter to the Romans?
- Encourage a reading of the entire letter against this [context].
- Look at some key passages in context.
- How does this letter address us?

I have collated the responses relating to each of these points, under four headings, in order to assess how successful the resource was according to its own stated aims, before discussing other important features of the responses.

### §7.1.1 Reading letters in context

The Eleanor Roosevelt exercise, reported to me by three of the four presentation centres, struck some participants quite forcibly and seems to have accomplished its aim very effectively. Four of the B & E shared group, and Church C respondents noted the exercise under 'What worked well' in the paper feedback and it was commented upon favourably in focus groups at both Church D and Church C:

there are lots of things I remember from it, but one in particular was the very first task he gave us to do, which if you remember, he gave us a letter to read and . he asked us to try and say well, 'What is this about and who is it written by?', and in a sense he was introducing the idea that if you know the author, and if you know the situation, then the whole thing becomes alive. But I shall forever remember that.

### §7.1.2 The context of Romans and a key passage therein;

Responses to this can be summed up in quotations from two participants at different centres:

Really loved this deep dive! It really brought the book to live [*sic*] for me!

I think that made it come alive a bit for me, knowing what the real controversies were.

There was a good degree of enthusiasm specifically for the way in which this resource opened up the background to the letter to the Romans.<sup>72</sup> One Church E participant noted that 'it was a slightly different way of approaching the book than we've perhaps been used to ...I think it was very useful'. When the Church C group was asked what made the resource good, two responded that:

I think because of the background that he actually painted for us and, therefore, all the stuff that Paul was talking about, you begin to see *why* he was saying that to this group of Christians. ... he was writing into the particular situation.

We found out more about the background ... of what was going on ... I didn't realise all that until he started saying that. Like you say we've read a little text and not realised exactly what's going on, so yes, it was helpful.

And this was echoed by participants at Church G and Church D:

That particular time and how things were influenced and how the word was brought out, from what was going on in the background. I found it very helpful to know more of what was going on, at that particular time in the Roman Empire and what was happening with the Jews and the Jewish nation.

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<sup>72</sup> 'Background' is a word often employed by participants to denote the historical situation. Some use 'context' to refer to both the historical context and the context of a passage within the larger document.

I think the context was extremely important, and seeing the shift in thinking, and where Paul was coming from before his conversion, and the contrast with afterwards, and the difference that that made. It really was so enlightening, starting to understand where it was coming from, I found that really helpful.

These responses tally with the comments on the paper feedback sheets, both under the general first question (how this course was for you – four positive comments on context or background, across three centres) and in responses to ‘what worked well’ (another six comments spread across all four centres). Only one negative comment specific to this aspect was recorded on the feedback sheets; in response to the question ‘What did not work well for you?’, one responded ‘Introduction on looking at Paul as a Pharisee influencing his writing of Romans’. It is not clear what reason lay behind this.

The role of some of the handouts in facilitating in-depth understanding of a passage was noted by one group: ‘the way of highlighting particular text boxes, we thought that was very helpful’. Handouts were also mentioned in several of the individual paper feedback sheets at the B & E centre and Church C, in response to the feedback question ‘What worked well?’ (although one at B & E gave handouts as something which did not work well and two others noted the size of the print could be improved).

The paper feedback forms brought to light a couple of points that didn’t come up in group discussions. Respondents from three centres noted the value of the in-depth examination of a part of the letter, although this wasn’t raised in group feedback with me.

### **§7.1.3 Reading the entire letter**

Participants were asked to read the whole of Romans in the week or two between the two RRC sessions. There were some very positive responses to this task from individuals within focus groups. One said they found it helpful ‘because

so often with scripture we only read little bits or we hear little bits, and I think we need sometimes to read longer chunks, and it begins to make more sense', while another admitted that 'I did find it quite fascinating. It's the first time I've sort of really read something in a short space of time'. The link between overall reading and deeper study was appreciated by one participant:

The other one about the fact that you've read it all in one, the fact that you could then come and have it explained to you, you know, you kind of, you help that process. That was useful, not just to have read it without actually trying, because I don't think you'd have got everywhere on your own; I think you needed some input to help you unravel it.

However, another in the same group reported that they 'found trying to read the whole of "Romans" in one chunk quite, you know, a task, ... I'm retired now so I mean, I've got more time. If I'd been working, I don't think I'd have managed it in one fell swoop'.

A similar pattern emerged on feedback forms. Positive comments on reading the whole were made from three of the centres: one wrote of seeing Romans 'as a single argument rather than random thoughts'. However, one person noted it as something which did not work well for them.

The different responses to this aspect of the resource may simply be reflections of how much people are used to reading longer texts of whatever sort, or it may depend on how much spare time the participants perceive themselves to have. However, it remains true that those who did it mostly report finding it rewarding.

#### **§7.1.4 How the letter addresses modern readers**

With regard to this stated aim, there was less volume of comment both within the focus groups and on the written feedback sheets. In focus groups, only one participant raised the subject and that was in response to a question about present day relevance arising from their previous comment on contemporary situations:

I think I've learnt to apply-, because all the explanation and the background, it's not just so you can say, 'Oh, wasn't that helpful and didn't that fit together well?'. The whole reason for it is to actually be able to understand the thing and the more you understand it, the more you can apply it. So, I know there is always an application in there somewhere.

The sheets had a total of four positive comments on relevance and/or application with one respondent noting that it was 'stimulating by provoking further thought about how to apply this today', but someone also listed 'more time on how it speaks to us today' as a response to how the resource might be improved.

## §7.2 Accessibility

It was notable that, despite the fact that accessibility has been a key issue with some other elements of Pathfinder, and that some other resources had been found to be too 'wordy', this lecture-style format resource was generally popular with most participants. However, some issues arose which might suggest some ways to make it of use to a wider range of recipients.

### §7.2.1 Intellectual challenge

The first question of the paper feedback form brought up the question of the accessibility of this resource in the terms it employed: 'Can you describe in a few words how this course was for you, e.g. difficult / confusing / helpful / stimulating?'. The format of this question itself having suggested some adjectives, it is unsurprising then that they were heavily employed by the 45 respondents across the churches. So, 22 used 'helpful' and 24 'stimulating'; only two said it was sometimes 'confusing' and/or 'difficult' although 'challenging' was used by two. Other positive adjectives employed by one or more participants were: inspiring (three), thought-provoking (three), enlightening, rewarding, informative (two), and three expressed it as having brought insight into some

aspect of their understanding. One responded that it '[m]ade me look into how I see the Bible – it stimulated my ability to understand', another wrote 'Insights into different ways of studying the word' and a third 'It was inspiring! It gave me a thirst to study more – it's exciting, challenging - not too easy'.

The last two questions, 'What did not work well for you?' and 'What could have been improved?', also evoked responses regarding accessibility. Several, around the centres, commented that spending more time on the material would have helped, while others commented on their lack of understanding, that it was 'very wordy', or noted that Romans is 'not an easy letter to take in at one reading'.

Turning to the focus group feedback, there was general agreement, round the whole of the Church C group, that this resource was pitched at about their level, despite the fact that some of them had struggled with MGS:

Can I just say that I was dreading it, really, to be honest, but it was so interesting to listen to, and at my level, I mean, I just thought it was fascinating, to be honest. Because I'm not very good at listening to people for a long time and I thought with the 'H word' one [MGS] I found that more difficult, and I'm not a student, I'm a mature lady. (Laughter). I just thought it was really good. The lecturer was excellent, excellent.

And another commented:

It wasn't like some, sorry, it wasn't like some of the things we've had. It wasn't actually a lecture. It was pitched at the level for all main people, not students.

When the Church G group were asked about the difficulty of the resource, one summed it up as being 'on a level that you could relate to, or certainly that I could relate to'. One Church D participant did respond on the feedback sheet that it was '[a] good subject but to [sic] much information at once and I don't really know the book Romans even though I read it twice'. This points to the fact

that, despite apparent whole-scale approval in some centres' focus groups, there were problems with learning for some participants.

## §7.2.2 Format

### §7.2.2.1 *Group-work and homework*

Appreciation of the value of the group-work appeared in seven paper feedback responses from three of the centres but there were also a few comments suggesting that some groups did not work so well. Similarly, homework appeared in both positive and negative responses. Comments regarding the balance between group-work and teaching from the front emerges on the feedback sheets completed at Church C, and B & E, immediately following the second sessions; this may be significant since the critique is directed towards the second presentation, suggesting that there were problems with, or not enough of, group work. As PM noted (in the introduction to this section, above) the success of this session varied with the degree to which those attending were prepared to contribute to the discussion. One participant specifically suggested that 'it could be helpful to explain in the first session that the second session will be based on the homework!', but it is also likely that people's willingness to participate fully varies; one of the centres this applies to had combined groups from two churches (B & E) who did not know each other well. The general feeling amongst a number of participants is that having almost all lecture-style with little group-work makes the material less easily 'digested'.

The 'homework' was also the subject of some mixed comment. The work itself, and discussion of it, were praised by individuals at B & E and Church C, while, at Church D, and B & E, it appeared among responses to 'What could have been improved?'. It appears to have made some individuals feel under pressure since one responded 'Homework - got it wrong'. It may be that the term 'homework' elicits memories of school and study that may not be positive for adults.

### **§7.2.2.2 PowerPoint presentation**

There were only two comments specifically on this topic, and those were both on feedback sheets, but they may be significant. One respondent included 'having the powerpoints [*sic*] on screen as the explanations were given' as something that 'worked well'. However, when suggesting things that 'could have been improved', another, at a different centre, answered: 'More, active, tactile learning ... More animated and lively Powerpoint [*sic*]'. This suggests that, while the use of PowerPoint *per se* is not a problem, some learners may respond more positively to a less passive learning environment. However, the latter quotation is another from B & E, where there were some negative comments regarding teaching from the front (see §7.2.2.1) so this comment may be a response to the way the discussion session did not work well there.

## **§7.3 Other issues**

This resource did not generate issues under any other headings.

## **§7.4 Taking the resource further**

All of the focus groups said that they would recommend this resource to others. Interestingly, all four centres had at least one respondent suggesting they'd have liked to spend more time on this, either to 'delve deeper' or to slow down the pace on the existing material. In the ES2, two thirds of the 15 who'd experienced RRC said they'd include this resource in a future version of Pathfinder.

## **§7.5 Conclusions**

This resource was much appreciated by the majority of participants; they found it interesting and stimulating, raising questions of practical relevance for Christian life today. Its popularity suggests that there is an appetite among

different churches for more depth in Bible study. Overall, it also seems to have been fairly accessible, probably not least because (the participants told me) Peter tried it out on his home congregation beforehand. It is likely that this allowed room to correct any aspects of language or content that were not accessible to an ordinary Christian audience. Its impact might still, however, be improved in a number of ways.

1. If the density of the material was somewhat less, and the homework set over a longer period of time (or staggered) fewer participants might feel pressured by the pace of learning. However, the reading through of Romans should be retained as a valuable aspect of this resource.
2. Perhaps the 'homework' could be called something less likely to evoke negative connotations and arouse a sense of being under pressure or inadequate. 'Preparation' or 'Get the most from next week' might be more suitable.
3. Handouts might be available both in hard copy and in soft, so that the latter could be tailored to individual needs e.g. font size, colour etc. or the participants could opt to use soft only, to benefit the environment.
4. There could be more group activities, possibly reiterating points covered in order to consolidate the learning. (Church E's focus group, which met some months after RRC, confessed to having somewhat hazy memories of the resource.) It would also be a good idea to give participants a plan of what will be done and when, so that they appreciate that their input is vital and forms part of the learning process. This relates to comments elsewhere<sup>73</sup> suggesting that participants would appreciate a 'route-map' of what lies ahead in any programme they embark upon.

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<sup>73</sup> These comments relate to Pathfinder as a whole and are discussed in [§ Conclusion.3.1](#).

5. There could be web links to supplementary materials - both reading to inspire those who can tackle a greater intellectual challenge and further small group activities to consolidate learning.
6. Persistence of learning might be improved by somewhat more emphasis being placed on the relevance of the material to contemporary situations.



## §8 You've Got The Time

This free, online resource consists of a set of 40 audio recordings, made by Riding Lights Theatre Company,<sup>74</sup> covering the whole of the New Testament text in the CEV.<sup>75</sup> Therefore, this narration of the New Testament differs from some others available in that a variety of readers and accents are employed. This results not only in there being different voices for each supposed author but also different readers voicing the characters presented in the gospels and different sections of the epistles. It is accompanied on-line by a 40 day listening plan. You've Got The Time (YGTT) was used by individuals within the Pathfinder groups of churches B, E and G but only the latter two made use of the support materials provided by Bible Society and now available on CD ROM.<sup>76</sup>

### §8.1 Intended aims

YGTT is billed as enabling the user to 'fit the Bible into your busy lifestyle', the emphasis in the promotional material being on the idea that one could listen to the Bible at the same time as being 'on a lunch break, at the gym, walking the dog or doing the shopping'. The provision of the New Testament in 40 instalments, and a plan by which one could 'listen to the whole of the New Testament for just 28 minutes a day over 40 days', allowed the programme to fit in with Lenten courses and provided some encouragement to completion. Moreover, the resource was expected to help participants '[d]iscover the Bible in a new and exciting way ...You will be enriched and inspired'.<sup>77</sup>

It was received favourably by each group and a number of features were

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<sup>74</sup> <http://www.ridinglights.org/> (accessed 25/6/12).

<sup>75</sup> This translation was presumably chosen to enhance accessibility since it uses 'common language' and 'was designed to be understood when read and heard out loud'. Further details of the CEV can be found at [n.34](#).

<sup>76</sup> These comprised sermon outlines (not used by any group as far as I'm aware) and small group notes, including ice breakers, for a six week period.

<sup>77</sup> <http://www.biblesociety.org.uk/support-us/yggt-2010/> (accessed 25/9/12).

commented upon. I have collated the responses relating to the intended aims, in order to assess how successful the resource was according to its own intended outcomes, while also raising other important features of the responses.

### §8.1.1 'Fit the Bible into your busy lifestyle ...'

YGTT was used differently by different individuals within the Pathfinder groups. Some in the Church G group (a commuting area), mentioned the flexibility of being able to listen to Scripture while travelling. One or two others, elsewhere, similarly found it helpful to be able to do other things, such as shopping, while listening to the Bible.

### §8.1.2 'Listen to the whole of the New Testament ... over 40 days'

#### §8.1.2.1 'Listen...'

However, some expressed the value they found in being able to listen to the text *at the same time as* reading it, with the act of listening enhancing the time they would normally spend in reading the Bible. Thus, this is not just a resource for the time-poor members of the church. In fact, one participant who did listen in the car reflected that he:

found that I got more out of it ... when I'm listening and looking at a Bible at the same time. I tried it different ways to see what I thought and for me, definitely the listening ... a lot more goes in. If I listen throughout the week, just in a car journey, I'm not sure how much was going in and actually staying in.

For two others, the benefits of *listening* to scripture were expressed in other terms:

I prefer listening really, because I think when you're reading your mind is concentrating on interpreting the words you're reading. Whereas, if you're listening you can switch off from that.

The whole notion of actually hearing the Bible, rather than simply reading it, was a very powerful experience for some of us in the group. The first discussion session was encouraging people to think about the whole notion of the first readers, or the first hearers, being people who would have heard it, rather than read it and we were experiencing that afresh. It did help that it was a dramatic presentation, rather than simply a read translation, and the characterisations were very effective for that reason as well.

Another participant qualified this, saying that having some study around the listening was needed because 'just listening only does not do it for me'.

However, to reiterate the value of listening, when I re-visited one centre, one participant reported that she had 'just discovered now this website where I can listen to the Old Testament as well, and that's great. I'm determined to see it through, you know, to go through all the books'. Also, the group facilitator explained that:

*we have reused some of the Pathfinder material. ... When we were wanting to finish off a section of our studies in Revelation 1-3 and getting us into Revelation 4 we used You've Got The Time ... as a meditation. Rather than reading the text, we wanted to feel the drama ... One or two other groups used that very effectively and that was quite a refreshing experience ... that was much more a kind of imagination, meditation, reflection.*

### §8.1.2.2 '*... to the whole of the New Testament ...*'

The concept of listening to the *whole* Testament was found to be extremely valuable. Someone who couldn't attend the focus group, and who was relatively new to the faith, sent a message saying that he 'really appreciated the fact that he could read the whole of the New Testament in a reasonably compact timeframe and get a sense of the whole overview'.

Other Pathfinders discussed the benefits of encountering *whole chunks* of scripture through YGTT, rather than reading isolated verses or even working through a text in smaller daily passages. This allowed them to compare different books and different accounts of the same event:

... you picked up things when you were listening, especially if you were listening to a whole chunk, that you don't necessarily pick up when you're reading. I mean we were saying that having listened through the Gospels, it became apparent how John, actually, was quite different in some respects. Having heard the same story several times over, how differently it came out. That was good.

Others found themselves listening to parts they hardly ever read, such as Revelation. In fact one church leader noted that:

I was going to say, the only problem is that I had three people come to me all individually saying, 'We've just listened to Revelation; when are you going to do a sermon series on it?!'.

And someone from elsewhere commented that:

I got more out of Revelations than I'd ever got out of Revelations before. ... It still confuses me but little bits started to make a little bit of connection.

### **§8.1.2.3 '...over 40 days'**

However, the 40 separate downloads format of YGTT, while making it suitable for Lenten groups, was found by some to be too proscriptive. One said 'I quite like the discipline of doing it within 40 days, because it did actually make you make time to do it', while others reported that they had extended the period to be more flexible with their timetables. One mentioned the drawback of breaking up shorter books in order to fit the 40 day pattern, for example, Philippians and 1 Timothy are both quite short but are not listened to all in one day, '...which didn't make sense. If you to read or listen to a letter, you listen to the whole letter'.

### **§8.1.3 'Discover the Bible in a new and exciting way ... be enriched and inspired'**

#### **§8.1.3.1 *Voices and dramatization.***

The speed and clarity of the readings were not mentioned and no-one noted any difficulties in following the passages. On the contrary, the dramatized nature of the readings was commented upon favourably, on the whole, one Pathfinder champion reporting that he:

recommended [YGTT] to somebody who wasn't in the group, and who is not associated strongly with the church, and he went off and downloaded it, and he described the effect of listening to dramatized scripture as mainlining scripture into the brain. He thinks, as you read, you edit. He said there wasn't any kind of capacity for kind of editing as you were listening, so he found it a very powerful, transformative experience for him, listening to that.

However, a few Pathfinders found the inclusion of different, sometimes strongly accented voices somewhat distracting:

The epistles, I found they were the most interesting from Acts to Revelations because it was the same voice. It was the voice of Saint Paul and it didn't change.

Others noted that 'some of the accents were a bit dodgy', or even amusing: 'That was hilarious. ... .. Who decided Gabriel would be Irish?'

### **§8.1.3.2 Bible translation**

The CEV was, it seemed, not familiar to the Pathfinder groups; reactions to it varied. One noted that it was a shame not to be able to follow the reading in their own Bible. However, some appreciated hearing an unfamiliar translation; one described CEV as 'more direct and explicit' than the translation he was used to. Whether or not they liked CEV some noted that they found the differences between CEV and the Bible translation they were most familiar with (NIV was mentioned) helpful precisely *because* it presented a fresh perspective on often well known texts. One or two mentioned that, on occasions, the unfamiliarity sent them back to the text with which they were familiar in order to look at it and compare translations. One participant, whose opinion was endorsed by others in the same group, reflected that:

I think that's one of the reasons I enjoyed listening to it so much was because, you know, we're totally unfamiliar with the CEV. ... It meant that, whilst I was listening, I was actually watching out for the phrases that were unfamiliar and thinking, 'Oh, right. Yes. I hadn't thought of it like that,' or, 'No, I don't like that,' in one or two cases, but mostly it was quite stimulating.

## §8.2 Accessibility

### §8.2.1 Format

The use of a contemporary translation and its provision in audio form presumably render it easily accessible to most native speakers of English (except of course those who have hearing impairments), and many for whom English is a second language.

### §8.2.2 Presentation online

The fact that the NT recordings were available free and online was appreciated. The only accessibility issues raised by users of this resource related to internet access; although a few folk found difficulties in downloading recordings, especially relating to the time it took, others reported no problems, so any that were encountered may relate to the user's experience, expectations and equipment. Some participants had to rely on other members of the group to download for them, due to lack of experience or hardware.

## §8.3 Other issues

### §8.3.1 Support materials

Church E and Church G both noted the usefulness and quantity of the support materials supplied by David Spriggs. Some of the Church G group expressed frustration that they did not have the time to go into each week's block of scripture in more detail when they met; they suggested taking more than 40 days to cover the New Testament would help. However, they also appreciated that spreading the exercise out over too long a period might weaken their impact.

Church B reported just listening to the recordings and not making use of any other supplementary materials.

## §8.4 Taking the resource further

It was widely agreed by participants that this resource could be strongly recommended to other churches. One group facilitator reported its use with their wider church (see §8.1.1.1) and another concluded that 'it would work in lots of different contexts, in either small groups or for the whole church'. Eight of the ten who had used YGTT and completed the ES2 (said they would include it in future versions of Pathfinder.

## §8.5 Conclusions

The convenience of being able to listen to the Bible at the same time as pursuing another activity was appreciated by some; there is a discipline in any 'reading plan' and having the text to listen to makes it easier to maintain. However, it seems this resource offers much more.

1. Firstly, there is the benefit found in the process of *listening* to the text, which offers a profoundly different experience to reading it silently, especially in a culture which gives priority to the written word and is less accustomed to being 'read to'. The use of an accessible translation, and its professional presentation by trained actors, has enhanced this effect, perhaps enabling listeners to realise the dramatic impact of the texts. It's possible that the absence of verse numbers allows a more holistic view of the text to emerge, although this was not mentioned and chapters *are* 'announced'.
2. Secondly, the impact of listening has been further strengthened by the use of the CEV. Not only is this a translation 'designed to be understood when read and heard out loud' but it is a less familiar (to these participants) translation. The novelty of hearing the CEV has driven some listeners back to other translations for further study. While this translation aroused both positive and negative reactions, its value might lie in its very strangeness – whether liked or not it forces the participant to become a listener, or an aural reader, rather than just a hearer of the word.

3. Thirdly, there is exposure to the whole text: the aural reader not only comes across passages in their context but also gains an appreciation of the similarities, differences, and links between different parts of the Bible. They also encounter books or passages that they have not come across before.
4. The frustration felt by some at the lack of time to do more in depth study in small groups each week highlights the need for this resource to be used as *part of* a more comprehensive discipline of biblical study, one which allows more in depth exploration of questions and issues arising from the process of aural reading.
5. YGTT thus seems well able to fulfil its aim that users will be 'enriched and inspired'. This feature could be more emphasised when promoting this resource, in addition to the idea that 'you've got the time'. It would also be a good idea to consider how access to the resource could be improved for those who, for whatever reason, do not have access to the internet.

## §9 The Passion



### §9.1 Intended Aims

'The Passion' (Pass), is a DVD-based resource covering the four episodes of what the BBC describe as a 'fresh re-telling of the story of Jesus's [*sic*] final days on Earth, inspired by the Gospels and other contemporary historical sources, and seen from the perspective of all the main figures involved'.<sup>78</sup> Only two church groups, Church A and Church D, used this resource, which Bible Society describes as 'a unique, dramatic and inspiring perspective on the person of Jesus, Holy Week and Easter and the Christian faith' and for which they have developed support materials for churches and schools, on a CD-ROM.<sup>79</sup> The programmes are the work of the BBC, whose mission is to 'enrich people's lives with programmes and services that inform, educate and entertain'.<sup>80</sup> However, in evaluating this resource I will assess the degree to which it lives up to the description given by Bible Society: dramatic and inspiring.

#### §9.1.1 Dramatic

Both the groups who used this certainly found it a dramatic experience. At one centre a participant commented, (regarding both MJ and Pass), that 'the great thing with watching the DVDs, you could really feel the characters, you could feel the atmosphere. It was like you were being, almost like, sucked into it. That was quite remarkable', and another agreed, saying '[i]t's like you were a participant instead of just watching it. You were a part of it'.

These opinions were echoed by the other centre that used Pass. One commented that 'it conveyed the ... setting and all the mayhem around, and all the different

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<sup>78</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b009mgrw> (accessed 11/7/12).

<sup>79</sup> [http://www.biblesociety.org.uk/products/518/49/the\\_passion\\_the\\_film/](http://www.biblesociety.org.uk/products/518/49/the_passion_the_film/) (accessed 11/7/12).

<sup>80</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/howweare/mission\\_and\\_values/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/howweare/mission_and_values/) (accessed 2/7/12).

people, and all the different nationalities, and what was going on at the time. I thought that made it come quite alive' while a fellow Pathfinder said 'I remember thinking at the time it did actually bring alive the stories of the crucifixion, because you hear them in church, you know, time after time and you think, "Oh I know this", but in fact it made it a bit more vivid really'. A third thought that a film format to the story of the Bible 'probably had more emotional impact'.

### §9.1.2 Inspiring

While none of the Pathfinders watching Pass employed the term 'inspiring' it was obvious that the dramatic impact had more than just an emotional aspect. There were comments regarding how some previously overlooked or ignored element of the story became apparent through this resource:

*I think it was the humanity of Jesus, you know, his humanness and the fact, particularly the scenes in Jerusalem when they were coming in for Passover, how he blended in with the crowd, you know, he never stood out.*

Another said:

*... and it hadn't even dawned on me, although I've read the story hundreds of times, that the length of time that Jesus was in the temple it was in that week. Whenever I read that Jesus was in the temple it hadn't dawned on me that it was during the run up to that week. How stupid, you know, but that just brought it home, which made it even more intense then, what he was doing, what he was teaching at that time.*

## §9.2 Accessibility

### §9.2.1 Non-textual presentation of the biblical stories

Use of a visual format rendered this resource accessible to sighted participants irrespective of their level of literacy or any learning difficulties. One participant, reflecting both on her own viewing experience and that of the youth group with whom she had used it, noted 'how powerful a tool of visual image is for learning the Bible. I just wonder whether, because of the learning environment that we're exposed to so much these days, we need to have a Bible in a visual form'. This elicited general indications of approval from the rest of the group. She went on to note that:

...because children of today, that is their learning style that they're used to and particularly with our young people we've got two that have got very serious dyslexia issues and for them to be able to discuss based around a visual image was great.

There was no feedback mentioning use of Pass with sub-titles so no evidence to assess its impact upon those who are hearing-impaired.

## §9.3 Other issues

### §9.3.1 Historical and biblical accuracy

The features of this resource which appeared to have contributed to its success in achieving its 'aims' included its evocation of the historical context of the story and its script's ability to generate dramatic tension:

I think the way it was filmed, as well, you could really feel the tension., It actually made me feel like I was really part of the story, much more involved, than actually just reading it, and I think it was the narrowness

of the alley ways and the walls and stuff and it felt so claustrophobic, you couldn't breathe in that environment. But it really added to the tension of the situation of the time, I thought that was really good.

This very aspect, on at least one occasion, stimulated someone to pursue the topic further: 'it did prompt me to challenge myself, "Was it really like that?", you know, to go and look at it historically thinking had they got the right interpretation of the narrowness of the streets'.

It was noted that, the script had gone 'beyond' the biblical texts in a number of respects. As one Pathfinder astutely observed it is:

... interesting in a way, in that, in these days if you read a book and then see the film, the film seems short because the book has all ... but with the Bible it's actually the other way around; the Bible just has the bare facts. It's the film panning it out, - total reversal.

Another noted that '[t]he dramatization was interesting, as well; it often didn't agree with what the Bible said and I think that came up well in discussions afterwards. It was a dramatization with a bit of dramatic license thrown in'. In some cases this necessary filling in of the 'back-story' had an effect upon how people understood characters within the story; one said it had changed her view of Judas and another commented:

We started looking at all the different people, didn't we, which we'd never done before, well I hadn't. Pilate and Herod and Judas and how they reacted and it actually sank in their part in it, instead of, you know, you read about Herod, Pilate and concentrate on Jesus; it all fitted together.

### §9.3.2 Support materials

The Church A group found that discussion following viewing was an integral part of the value of this resource. It was noted that the Bible Society materials were 'a little bit vague' but provided 'good discussion starters', although the film material itself made so much impact that, once the prompts were employed, discussion 'just started to take off'. The Church D group reported that they had been limited for time so did not make much use of the support materials but followed with a 'shorter ... more focussed' discussion.

## §9.4 Taking the resource further

The Church A group were all positive about recommending Pass to other churches and, as noted above in §9.2, one participant there had been so impressed that they had used Pass with the church youth group. The Church D group also thought it would be a suitable resource, not only for other churches but also with non-church groups. The majority (8 out of 9) of ES2 responses indicated that this should be included in any future versions of Pathfinder.

## §9.5 Conclusions

Although only piloted at two centres, this resource generated some enthusiastic responses. Considering the comments made, both here and in regard to other non-written forms of the biblical text and story (MR and YGTT), and the ways in which Pass made an impact upon participants, a few suggestions regarding its deployment might be made.

1. Pass could be used as an accessory to, or break in the middle of, another more text-based resource. It would particularly enhance understanding of the Bible as story and provide valuable illustrations of the use of historical understanding when reading biblical narratives.

2. As is noted here, it was reported that Pass worked well with a younger group. It would also be suitable in low- or mixed-literacy contexts.
3. This resource, having been designed for public viewing on the BBC, would be very suitable to generate discussion with groups involving non-church goers.

### **Reflections**

*Responses to Pass, YGTT and MJ indicate that these 'dramatic' resources communicate the biblical accounts in a fresh, sometimes provocative way that often caused users to return to the text, and to re-view it with fresh insight and/or new questions. Concerns were sometimes voiced when the dramatization involved some unanticipated interpretive moves with regard to the original text, or employed an unfamiliar translation or unexpected voice. However, the accessibility of these media to those of different ages and abilities suggests that it would be foolish to neglect the potential of such resources when assembling a programme promoting engagement with the Bible.*

*Indeed, speculating on why a dramatic presentation has such effects, it may be that the shock of perceiving the familiar stories in an different format or medium, from a different angle as it were, disables the 'recipient's' ability to filter the content according to their preconceptions. This may a particularly valuable function given the high degree of familiarity some Christians have with at least some portions of scripture, notably the Gospels or the New Testament in general. On the other hand, for those less familiar with the biblical accounts, these media constitute a means for communicating the Bible's 'story'.*

*However, given the limitations of these resources, detailed in the relevant sections above, it would seem wise to employ them as elements within a wider programme of biblical engagement where their weaknesses can be balanced by other resources and their immediacy can provide a change of pace and style amongst other more text-based approaches to biblical study.*

## §10 Other resources

Since the remaining resources were used by only one or two centres, I have chosen to survey the responses to these in one chapter.

### §10.1 Intended Aims

#### §10.1.1 The Meek shall inherit the earth

The Meek shall inherit the earth (Meek) is a series of four studies designed to follow the presentation of the same name by Chris Sunderland, exploring issues of land and dispossession in the Bible and in later human history. The set of study notes 'offers an opportunity for individuals and groups to engage more deeply with the Bible passages that are used in the presentation and consider their relevance to issues faced by today's world'. The series begins with the story of Naboth's vineyard and asks participants to reflect 'Is there a place where you particularly feel at home?', before considering issues such as the relationship between humans and creation, different approaches towards land, and the pattern of dispossession and exploitation through history. Accounts of events are provided together with questions to provoke group discussion. It concludes by considering words of Jesus (parts of the Sermon on the Mount and the parable of the sower and seed) in conjunction with discussion of 'urban agriculture' and 'community-supported agriculture initiatives'.

Meek was presented at both Church E and Church F. For reasons explored below these follow-through studies were used by Church E but only by some small groups from Church F.

At Church E the presentation itself was well received:

*I loved his presentation, you know, the storytelling and the interweaving of passages from the Psalms, in terms of the dialogue, I thought was interesting, and getting us to imagine that scene. I can still see the scene*

in my mind, of the field, and the people who were stood there. It was very stimulating.

Another remarked that, if recommending the course to other groups, the proviso would be that the presentation was included: 'his initial presentation, to start with, was clearly rehearsed and well-practised and involved quite a lot of skill, so that's not something somebody else could just do in a different group'. At Church F, too, there were some positive comments regarding the presentation, which 'came across very well' and was 'interesting'.

Following on from the initial week, at Church E the accompanying studies were seen as providing opportunities to explore the issues raised by the presentation:

The first evening you were simply told a story of the three/four part act, which then the booklet follows quite consistently, and then draws different themes from that. There was a very good basic groundwork to work from, so it was very easy listening, and then to work from the text was very good, but it certainly created a lot more discussion than I thought it would have done, as a potential ecological theme. It resonated very well with the group.

Another commented that '[i]n terms of looking at a modern day issue, and ... challenging yourself about modern issues, I think it's been the most practical thing we've done', while two others reflected:

**Respondent 1:** Historically it was very relevant, right through to us, through colonialism, right up to modern times. We can see all the injustice. I'm not sure how it necessarily led into the sort of smallholding and the self-help farming, but it *was* interesting.

**Respondent 2:** In fact, last week, there's been spin-offs in terms of conversation elements, because the land issue has kept recurring several

times, when you've had your eyes opened to it. You see it re-occurring ... one of our missionaries had returned back from Nigeria, and she was speaking simply about how sections of the Nigerian landmass have been just completely stolen, and it was really a repeat of the pattern there, of that story: Naboth's Vineyard, right through to the Scottish experience, right through to African colonialism, wasn't it, really? ... So it's quite amazing to see that pattern reasserting itself. It had spin-offs in that sense.

Despite these observations, and the fact that the front of the notes made clear the series' intention to make links between the texts and 'issues faced by today's world', one group member did find the aims or goals of the resource unclear and would have appreciated more clarity. Nevertheless, overall, the Church E group seem to have found the resource stimulating and fulfilling of its aims.

The responses at Church F were, however, quite different. While there was acknowledgement that the issues raised were important and required a Christian response, some reported feeling that the presentation and materials were reading a pre-decided issue into the biblical texts. One felt that 'there was a little bit of an agenda on environmental issues. They are important, but I'm not sure that this was the right place for them'. Another said that 'the selection of Bible passages appears to have been made to support and develop the writer's point of view in the mind of the user', beginning with 'a study that invites the reader to believe that the Naboth story is really one about caring for the earth (rather than one warning of the abuse of power and personal will)'. This participant felt that the resource was 'trying to read into the Bible some sort of "agricultural theology"'. A third participant said that the resource 'was pushing his agenda on a few verses and then saying, "This is what The Bible says"'.

Another issue appears to concern relevance. While there was widespread agreement that the issues raised by 'Meek' were both real and important, there was a feeling that the group already knew about the topics raised. Furthermore,

there was concern that 'we are here to learn about The Bible, and it wasn't there. There was nothing in the Bible about this'; another commented 'I don't think it was the sort of thing that you could discuss in a group and help people on in their Christian lives. There might be the odd thing, but there was the danger that we had to read too much and not the Bible, and that whole idea of the Bible Society is that it gets into the Bible'.

The seriousness of the reservations over these materials were illustrated by the fact that some of the Pathfinder small groups at Church F chose not to work with the materials. One participant left their small group 'over distress with the group's decision to continue with the trial of the material' and another felt that 'this series has provoked more disquiet and concern than any other by a very significant margin'.

Interestingly, no-one at Church F made a link between their reservations regarding Meek and the work they had done during MGS concerning different approaches (such as feminist) towards the text. Neither did anyone suggest that the issues on which Meek was centred were not serious and worthy of consideration; there were, for example, no indications of denial of climate change. Those within the group who were concerned, seemed to feel that the focus was on the issues (social justice etc.) *rather than* the biblical text, and/or that there had been a misuse of the text to support a predetermined position, i.e. that it was an example of eisegesis.

### **§10.1.2 The Bible as a Contemplative Resource**

The Bible as a Contemplative Resource (BC) seeks to introduce participants to a number of contemplative approaches to Scripture, including contemplation of short passages, and of single words, and imaginative immersion within a story. BC was only used by the Pathfinder group at Church G. While the group found it 'a little bit different' and 'an interesting discipline', their reactions did not make it clear if they felt the aims of the resource had been met. However, the facilitator reflected that they 'certainly felt it was something that, as a church which is

fairly busy, fairly active, we don't make a lot of time for just being quiet. So in that sense it was quite an interesting discipline'.

### §10.1.3 The Bible as Narrative

The Bible as Narrative (BN) was another resource only used by one church, Church A. It consists of a set of notes to support six core small group sessions of around an hour and a half each. Each session is to be prepared for by reading a substantial chunk of the Bible, such as thirteen chapters of Exodus, and each session's notes are supported by a page of ideas to 'take it further' and a page of resources.

This resource does not explicitly set out any aims but, from pages two and three, they would seem to include getting participants to read longer portions of the Bible than they might be used to, to engage in the chosen narratives with their emotions and imaginations, and to be open to personal transformation. Such engagement should draw them 'into seeing the whole sweep of biblical narrative and the process of God's revelation. And it invites us to reach out and ask God to inspire our hearts and minds with a fresh understanding of the Bible'.

With regard to the first of these, one participant found the amount of reading expected rather heavy but no-one else raised the topic. When it came to entering into the stories and gaining fresh understanding, the Church A group were quite positive about some of the suggested activities associated with this resource:

I think one of the things that we did was when we were looking at one of the Gospels, we were actually counting how many people were in that particular story and we got up to, what was it? About 21, 22 people and it was just amazing because I'd never actually sat and thought about that, so now I when I read something else, it's kind of like, subconsciously looking at who's around, so I thought that actually was quite a revelation to me to read it like that. I thought that was really good.

They also noted the value of re-telling biblical stories, which generated good discussion: 'We could have probably gone on for hours, just discussing, I mean, we were in a house group, in a smaller group and it just went on and on and it was going deeper, and we'd split up in two groups, smaller groups, and discussed various bits like Jonah and Ruth and Jacob'.

The group reflected on what they might have 'taken away' from this resource in terms of an ongoing effect:

**Respondent 1:** I think ... for me personally, is reading God's word in a different way, looking at it, looking at the history, you know, sort of, trying to identify things, rather than just reading the passage.

**Respondent 2:** Looking at it from people's perspective, isn't it? Within the story and realising that we're part of that story too.

**Respondent 1:** Yes.

**Respondent 3:** Yes, I would agree with that and looking beyond and at the background it has helped me look at it in a different way.

There was general agreement from the group that they would, in future, be reading the Bible from these perspectives.

Finally, it is relevant to turn again to an interchange recorded more fully in [§3b.1.2](#), where there was general agreement that BN helped people feel that their stories were part of the Bible's big story. Overall then, with this group, BN would appear to have well accomplished its intention to draw participants into the biblical narrative.

### §10.1.4 Reel Issues<sup>81</sup>

Available in three formats, Reel issues (Reel) consists of free online materials 'to help you discuss links between big-screen themes, everyday life and the Bible in a relaxed setting. ... ideas to help you discuss the latest films in the light of the Bible with friends from in and outside your church'. The 'Scene' format is designed for youth groups and 'Clip' supports discussion with others who have watched a whole film. Used by only one Pathfinder group, at Church B, the third, 'Epic' format aims to help small groups 'dig deeper and connect the Bible with life's big issues'. The notes provided include suggested clips (referring to chapters on the DVD), an outline of the general plot, and notes for larger and small group discussions and activities, including related passages from the Bible, to stimulate reflection on the issues raised. Notes for over 120 different films are online, including drama, science fiction, fantasy, Western and comedy, with certificates mostly 12/12A/15 but including U, PG and 18. The Church B group chose some for which they already had the DVDs: *Amazing Grace*, *Bruce Almighty*, and *Crash*.

The Pathfinders who used this resource were mixed in their approaches towards film. For instance, one was an enthusiast while another said they 'hadn't seen any of the films at all, because I don't go to films. I don't watch them'. For this reason, the group generally agreed that, on reflection, 'it would have been far better to have had a showing one week and a discussion the following week' because, as another expressed it, 'it was quite difficult to translate ... if you hadn't seen the film ... To see a part of it, it's hard then to discuss it when you don't know what the whole story is about'.

Given this situation the group did not feel they had optimised their use of 'Reel' and it is consequently not really possible to assess here if this resource achieved its aims.

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<sup>81</sup> <http://www.biblesociety.org.uk/about-bible-society/what-we-do-in-england-and-wales/reel-issues/> (accessed 13/7/12).

## §10.2 Accessibility

### §10.2.1 The Meek shall inherit the earth

No issues relating to accessibility were raised in discussion of this resource.

### §10.2.2 The Bible as Contemplative Resource

The Church G group found this was a new concept to most of them. Only one had done anything like it before and that person had been able to help them through the material in certain ways. Interestingly, the person who had practised this discipline before felt that the timings allocated to each session led to it feeling rushed.

### §10.2.3 The Bible as Narrative

Apart from the participant who found the volume of reading needed for this resource rather heavy, this does not seem to have raised any problems with regard to accessibility. On the contrary, one commented that BN had 'a less academic style to the presentation; it's been more open and more easier [*sic*] to relate to'.

### §10.2.4 Reel issues

The accessibility issue raised here is whether or not participants need to have seen the whole film before viewing and discussing the clips. It does not seem to be clear, on the 'Reel' website, whether or not the 'Epic' format notes are assuming familiarity with the entire performance. Obviously in some instances it may not be necessary but it might be best if, for each set of support materials, users were advised as to whether or not it would help to have seen the film in its entirety. Obviously there are legal obligations associated with public display but, in some cases, a full showing might enable a group to make much more of the

notes and, if attempting to engage those outside the church community, a group showing might help draw people in.

### **§10.3 Other issues**

All issues raised in connection with these resources are dealt with under other headings.

### **§10.4 Taking the resource further**

Numbers using these resources were so low that the ES2 results pertaining to these are not included.

#### **§10.4.1 The Meek shall inherit the earth**

The Church E group as a whole would be happy to recommend 'Meek', with the proviso noted above in §10.1.1, that the author needed to present the initial week himself. They pointed out that they were picking some of the themes from the book in their services for the next season. Many of the Church F group, including those who had worked through all the studies, did not regard 'Meek' favourably for reasons unpacked in §10.1.1: they felt the focus was more on the issues than the Bible and/or felt the issues were being read into the texts.

#### **§10.4.2 The Bible as Contemplative Resource**

The facilitator felt that it probably wouldn't work very well with other people in his small group, who are older, (some over 80), and, he felt, 'might find it difficult, more challenging'. He went on to reflect that this 'requires quite a bit of personal work at it, doesn't it, to get the best out of it?'. However, he did feel there were places in their church where it could be introduced and also suggested it would be better received in a group with a younger profile.

### §10.4.3 The Bible as Narrative

The only comment regarding further use of BN was the suggestion that 'it has been in the right place [in the Pathfinder programme]; if it had been any earlier it might have been more of a struggle'.

### §10.4.4 Reel issues

The Pathfinder group using this felt that, with a careful choice of film from the range available it might be possible to use this resource with their wider community: with 'possibly a very popular film it might work. I think it would have to be something that had captured people's imaginations beforehand sort of thing'. Another suggested that 'stories which have some Christian input might be more valuable to help people' and suggested *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, or *Lord of the Rings*, both of which are available under Reel issues 'Epic'.

## §10.5 Conclusions

Given the relative paucity of feedback on resources used by only one or two groups, it is difficult to make many suggestions but a few provisional conclusions may be drawn.

1. The wildly divergent receptions given to 'Meek' do not seem to be due to differing attitudes towards the issues it tackles but due, in part, to differing responses to the reading strategy proposed. In future deployment of this resource in conjunction with other Pathfinder materials perhaps it might be possible, during the initial presentation, to make links with the MGS/h+ session looking at feminist readings of scripture. It might then be clearer to users that this is *a* reading of, and meditation upon, the selected passages rather than a claim that this is what the texts are 'really about'.

Despite some sympathy with the issues raised by 'Meek', another cause of

dissatisfaction with it may be due to a failure to perceive clear connections between its key themes and the biblical texts.

2. BC's approach towards Scripture might be something which is of value to those who responded positively to the lyfe materials. Perhaps it could feature as a suggested follow up resource for users of lyfe, most especially the 'Spirit' stream?
3. Given the focus on narrative, BN might be valuable as a follow-on resource to follow DS. It could perhaps be expanded to link with specific sections of a more comprehensive version of DS and provide consolidation of the concept of being part of a larger story, as well as further develop basic, but more detailed, knowledge of selected portions of the Bible's narrative.
4. Some issues arising from other Pathfinder elements may be explored within some of the Reel materials. If there are such links it would be good to highlight them so that Reel could supplement or illustrate topics and perhaps provide a brief change in format within another more text-based resource.

## §11 Engaging with Culture

The Pathfinder programme was designed to culminate with a culture-facing initiative, to be devised and delivered by the local Pathfinders, perhaps in conjunction with their church, and to be supported by relevant advice from Bible Society. To this end, the final sessions of the programme were planned to be a series of four, largely centred on talks led by Bible Society staff and covering the cultural drivers (see [§ Introduction.2](#)). However, due to staff availability and church programmes, media and politics were merged into one session and a few churches missed one or two of the sessions.

### §11.1 Intended Aims

Although no support materials, with stated aims, were provided for this element of Pathfinder, the topics of the cultural drivers themselves may be taken to highlight the areas on which they were intended to focus. They were (presumably) designed to communicate to the Pathfinder groups a range of ideas on how Christians might be and already were involved in projects in which the Bible was presented to our society.

In this respect, they certainly seem to have achieved that aim for some recipients. As one Church E Pathfinder commented:

Two things that struck me from the three sessions, particularly in a media context, are how much on one level is going on, in terms of Christian initiatives in society, but also it made me reflect on how much we've retreated over the past 150, 200 years from influence within society. So, it made me think, there's a lot to do. So, it was a very helpful broad base of reflection. Some of it came across as, kind of, these are resources we want to highlight so you can plug in recommended highlights, so a bit of, kind of, 'show and tell' about it, which is fair enough. I mean, it wasn't just

Bible Society materials, there were a lot of other things in society as well.

Regarding specific sessions, comments are noted below.

### §11.1.1 Education

The focus groups at four of the centres included positive comments on the 'driver' on education and its presenter. One added that it would have been good to have a wider range of educational possibilities other than being a governor as not everyone has this opportunity. A couple of centres mentioned that they had prior experience of involvement with schools – in governing or in distributing Bibles – and a third group worked in this field as their 'culture-facing initiative' (see below §11.3.4)

### §11.1.2 Media and politics

At Church C there was a dialogue regarding the relevance of this material on the media:

**Respondent 1:** ... the arts thing was quite interesting in the sense that it's talking about, I think, the use of, sort of, theatre and film and that kind of thing, to put the gospel across. I think, I mean he was a young man, [the presenter] wasn't he? ... I think sometimes, you know, we, I, don't think in those ways, generally speaking, I think much more in terms of books and words, rather than in terms of pictures and films and songs and that kind of stuff.

**Respondent 2:** But that's the sort of stuff that gets over to the youth these days.

**Respondent 1:** Absolutely, that's right, and I think really, you know, we do need to try and think more in those terms and because, I mean, we are a congregation which is veering towards the elderly [group laughs], well it's true.

One Church F participant also noted the especial relevance of the Media session to working with younger people. They:

found the Media one quite thought provoking because I work with young people and I think there are a lot of possibilities for us to work to show the Bible to people who are not churched, people who are younger and of a different culture. I think that talk opened a few doors that we might think about, so I found that helpful.

Another in the same group felt that:

we could relate to it far more than some of the other topics, because the media is so much in your face these days; you can't get away from it and it made us think more about the connection of the media and with some Christian principles really.

One of the Church A group found the topic quite dry but someone at Church D commented that it was relevant and another Church C participant said that:

What I found interesting about that was the way in which you can ... make the best use of the local press, because we've been having issues with the [local press], that you send them stuff and nothing much happens for a while. She talked about some of the ways to help, the kinds of things you present, the way you present it and that kind of stuff, which was certainly quite useful, I thought.

### §11.1.3 Arts

Someone at Church E noted that they found this session particularly interesting but the most positive response came from Church A. One participant, who described this as an 'eye-opener' and 'an absolute turning point in my viewpoint' related how their first response had been "I don't think our church is a very creative church". And then as soon as I'd said it, I thought, "Hang on a minute, that's not the issue; maybe we're not releasing people in their creativity". After having discovered that different people in the group had various skills, another group member:

was, sort of, sparking off good ideas about how you might use the creative arts in schools. ... And for me, it was such a huge turning point, because I myself am not creative, but to recognise that there was that skill set within the church was great because I was at that point with our young people, where I had recognised, - and actually, again this is down to Pathfinders - Over the Christmas period, I did a survey with young people as to what they thought about the Bible. ... 'How do you use the Bible?', 'We don't,' I thought, 'Aah, we've got a problem here'. And it was then the, sort of creative, cultural stuff, and I thought, 'I've got to look at a way of hooking these young people into the Bible'. So, from that point onwards, I've been thinking, 'How can I do that?' and doing it creatively is probably something we can do. And because I'm not a creative person, I was struggling, but there we have got [another Pathfinder] who can write parables, and we have got [another] who is into dancing and singing, and goodness knows what. And it's just become an absolute turning point in the way in which we teach the Bible on Sunday mornings. So much so, that I think as a group, not just as children, but as leaders and we have then invited some people from the wider Church to come and talk to the

kids, I think we have really moved on to the point, now, that I think I would like to do something similar with adults within the church. I guess, then, the next step is, 'Can we take it outside of the church?'. For me, for somebody who is not creative, I can't believe that I'm suddenly getting into this creative realm.

Overall then, although the Pathfinders were not unanimous in their assessment of the Cultural Drivers, the sessions do seem to have provided stimulus and ideas for a number of participants across the centres.

## §11.2 Accessibility

There were no major issues with accessibility of the cultural driver materials although questions were raised as to their relevance, especially regarding how much people could hope to put into practice because of limited access to those fields. One Church E member felt that the issues were:

the responsibility of professionals or specialists: media, and ...I mean education isn't quite in that category, but, you know, liaising with local newspapers or being a journalist or in some of the arts things, require a degree of specialism, which is often outside the scope of the local church. Maybe a few churches work with people gifted to link in that direction.

At Church F there was a comment to the effect that more interaction and group participation would have improved the sessions and this was echoed by comments at Church G. One there said that 'it just felt that little bit remote ... partly because none of us were particularly champing at the bit to say "that's definitely an area I want to get involved with"; it just seemed a little detached'.

However, at Church C, although there was an admission that 'some people would lean towards one thing and other people would lean towards another, depending on what your individual taste, or likes and dislikes are', the group

discussion indicated general agreement that the drivers were 'a way of trying to make the Bible accessible and relevant to the generation that we live among' and that having a range of them provided a good chance for people to find something with which they could identify. And at Church D, the drivers were seen as 'practical application of scripture'. When asked if they noticed links between the drivers and the rest of the programme, one participant there answered that:

*I think the dilemmas and the situations are in, some ways, they don't change do they? I mean, in Biblical times, there was the, sort of, corruption and leaders who were all power hungry. It struck you how relevant the Bible was, in spite of it being written so long ago. The principles are still there, aren't they?*

It would seem then, that, while some participants did not think the issues covered in these sessions were areas in which they could act, others found them very relevant, both to life situations and to the rest of Pathfinder.

### **§11.3 Culture-facing Initiatives by the Pathfinder groups**

Four of the Pathfinder centres organised one or more culture-facing initiatives. Others had discussed ideas but did not complete one during the time the programme was running.

#### **§11.3 .1 Church A**

The Church A group made two responses to this challenge. Firstly, they organised a 'Reel issues' film night for the men from local churches and their friends. Although this drew in very few non-believers, they had found it a positive experience. Secondly, several members of the group had offered to work as voluntary assistants in a local church school and some had already had

CRB clearance and begun when I met with them for the last time. As one of them expressed it:

I think to start with, you need to gain the confidence of the staff. I think once they trust you, then I believe that God will open up more opportunity. ... I think that opens up an avenue for some really earnest intercession for the kids. There is a lot of Christian influence in that school anyway. So I think at the moment, it's kind of like, preparing the ground for whatever it is that God has ahead of us.

### §11.3 .2 Church B

I didn't meet with Church B but they arranged a photographic competition, linked to the Bible, for their annual church 'Heritage Day'. It was reported to me that the competition 'was not a success, simply did not resonate with people' but that they would be continuing to try and generate some other ideas.

### §11.3 .3 Church C

Church C ran an art competition and exhibition, based on biblical texts, with different categories for children and adults. While they were disappointed with the numbers attending the exhibition, they did manage to run it in the local community centre, 'neutral ground, if you like, where the community comes together for all sorts of purposes, and probably people did come in on that basis who might not have come in had it been [in the church]'. Furthermore, there were submissions from young people who, although they were using the church premises as members of groups (such as Girl Guides), were certainly not all church-goers. There was some discussion that it might be worth doing something similar again at a different time of year and there was general agreement that the group could see why such an initiative was a good idea as part of Pathfinder. 'It was a way of getting people to think about things in the Bible' and 'about taking the Bible into the community'.

### §11.3 .4 Church D

The Pathfinders at Church D had organised two different initiatives. One had been something that was mentioned during the driver on education but they had also heard about through other channels. This was Open the Book: 'basically using Lion Storyteller Bible and reading that out in school, but in a dramatic form, and then giving this to top and tail up an assembly'.<sup>82</sup> This had been well received by the school, generating 'positive feedback and children being very keen to be involved ... one of the children came up and said, "Have you got any acting this morning? Can I do some?"'.

For their second initiative they had organised and invited people to an evening called 'Different ways to Read the Bible'. This comprised five workshops, including 'dramatization of scripture, characterisation which was a bit like putting yourself in the place of the characters, ... Lectio Divina, looking at scripture through art, and a contextual Bible study'. They had attracted some non-Pathfinders from the local churches and had found this worth doing despite not attracting anyone from outside the church. They felt that doing Pathfinder, especially MGS, had encouraged and given them confidence to undertake this evening.

This group were also talking of possibly planning a Reel issues night and/or an art exhibition as other forms of cultural engagement with the Bible.

### §11.3 .5 Church E

At Church E, although no initiative came about, they had discussed some possibilities when I last saw them and these were inspired by the cultural drivers. They included the possibility of the church buying several copies of a 'Bible introduction for journalists ... a very good resource written by journalists

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<sup>82</sup> <http://www.openthebook.net/home.php> (accessed 4/10/12).

for journalists, introducing them to lots of themes within the Bible and the Bible itself. So, the idea was that our church would ... present it to people in radio, people on the local TV, and print media'. The other initiative was to promote, to local schools a web resource 'designed for sixth-form schools, looking at the language of Shakespeare's plays and tracing them through to biblical references'. While there was general agreement that they could understand the point of having such an initiative as the culmination of Pathfinder, one commented that, 'it's a question of having the ability and initiative and skill ... in those areas, to do something. I think probably it would be breaking new ground, and so you need someone with a bit of vision and drive, and energy to launch it'. One of the facilitators there discussed the role of their context in their response to a culture-facing initiative:

It's worth distinguishing the church in its context and also the potential participants of the Pathfinder group. Pathfinder on the whole struck me as being geared or aimed at people of, not necessarily academic, but certainly college and upwards level of education. So, for people from a quasi-professional background, a lot of those things would've had real resonance, particularly if they were interested in politics, working, or interested in the work of Care working in Parliamentary support and things like that. So, I think that kind of thing would have been very supportive to them and if there was a house-group which we had going, running, with people who wanted to run a campaign in that context, then a lot of the Pathfinder material and those focuses would have been very relevant. If we were thinking in our local ... missional context, how to use the Bible, we would tend to be much more direct really, run a starter course, for instance, or run something like Alpha, or maybe just read the Bible with people, or simply that. So, it'd be much more low-level and less

instrumental than the Bible Society's materials. So, we'd have to make that kind of distinction.

However, another participant at Church E wondered if the initiative challenged their usual way of working and thinking:

We're very ... church service-orientated. You know, we've put a lot of effort into services that happen from the church. I don't know whether other churches are different, but maybe that's why we've not, kind of, responded with an initiative, because it's outside of our normal mode of operation. I mean, there is a sense, isn't there, that we try and get people into the church and maybe some of those ideas were getting us out into the community, which is unfamiliar territory for us, but, you know, probably has great merit.

### §11.3.6 Church F

Church F similarly discussed possibilities but had not organised anything when I last visited them. One suggested giving away materials at their Christmas services which might encourage those attending, including the non-usual, seasonal visitors, to engage with the Bible. The group were open to the idea of doing something. One commented that it was 'good for us to use the sort of things that we've got from this programme in order to think of ways of communicating with other people'. Another commented that 'it feels a little bit to me like the exam at the end of the course. It makes me just a little bit uncomfortable, but I'm quite happy to sit the exam!'

### §11.3.7 Church G

The Church G group, very small by the time they had finished, had tried to arrange to have the 'Peoples Bible' be a part of their church's annual

'Community Fun Day' but it had proved impracticable and nothing else had been organised. The group generally felt the idea of an initiative was good: 'We don't want Bible study ever to become *just* an academic exercise so it was good that we were encouraged to look for some kind of practical application'. However, they recognised that organising something out of the ordinary was a lot more work, with 'considerations of timetabling, resources and things' and that 'the practicalities of it really did defeat us at the end of the day'.

#### §11.4 Taking the resource further

Given that the drivers were specific to Pathfinder I did not ask the groups if they would recommend them as stand-alone elements to other churches. One specific suggestion for improvement was made: a Church F member felt that support materials, in the form of notes on the topics covered, web sites etc., would have been helpful.

#### §11.5 Conclusions

Overall, the viewpoints on different aspects of cultural engagement provided by the drivers seem to have been found interesting and, in some cases, inspiring. It might be that making more specific links to existing resources and abilities within the church (including Pathfinder elements if employed in conjunction with them) would enable a higher proportion of church groups to see the relevance of this information to the way they work with their local society, rather than them feeling ill-equipped to tackle such issues .

Regarding the culture-facing initiatives, lack of time is always an issue in congregations full of busy people. It will be noted that, at the commencement of Pathfinder, all the churches involved had a number of activities in place (see [§ Introduction.5](#)), that many Pathfinders were supporting these, and that these activities included some that involved or served people from outside the church itself. Therefore, among Pathfinders, there was obviously already a willingness to

engage in outward-facing projects. However, there seems to have been nothing pre-existing which specifically presented *the Bible* to the surrounding culture.

Perhaps imagination is the key ingredient in stimulating such action. It is difficult to think of any one specific thing that would enable diverse church families to make the imaginative leap and visualise a form in which they could bring the Bible to their local communities. Further development of the cultural drivers may, however, help open up new possibilities in people's thinking.

## Conclusions concerning Pathfinder as a whole

This chapter draws together some observations made by participants regarding Pathfinder as whole in an attempt to examine the degree to which the programme achieved its overall goals. It then goes on to deal with other issues which arose during feedback but were not specific to any one resource.

### § Conclusion.1 Were the aims achieved?

#### § Conclusion.1.1 How valuable was it to have a diagnostic phase and evaluation?

The issues that arose concerning the use of questionnaires and surveys were discussed earlier (see [§ Introduction.4.1](#)). However, in contrast to the negative feedback concerning these text-based instruments, at three of the centres individuals independently introduced the idea that time for feedback during the focus group sessions we had together was, in itself, valuable. When asked if Pathfinder had any effect upon relationships within the group one suggested that, although the group were 'pretty close' already, the feedback discussions had helped. 'We don't often have an opportunity to just mull over things and share things; sometimes we disagree with each other, sometimes we disagree quite vociferously, sometimes we just burst out laughing. It's that sort of interaction and there are not all that many opportunities to do that'. Another agreed, 'because we're too busy trying to keep the Church going at the moment, what with Elders' meetings or all the other things that we're involved with; this is quite a unique opportunity'.

At Church D, a similar sentiment was expressed in terms of time for reflection:

*this part of the process is helpful, because I don't think we reflect well enough on what we do. I think we keep doing, when actually we could do with sitting still and sort of saying, 'Well, how was that; should we have*

done it differently, was it good?'. I think if that process becomes part of how we do things it would be good. ... You know, it's not just about saying, 'This was good'. If it wasn't as good as it could have been, why wasn't it and what do we do to put it right? I think if that sort of approach to things gets incorporated within how we function within the church, it would be valuable.

And an interviewee at Church A found that:

it's interesting to have people like you come and ask us to comment on and analyse it because if this was in a home group setting, you wouldn't sit and reflect upon what you've learned, what you've gained, what you haven't gained and your expectations. So, in some ways, some sort of audit actually has been refreshing.

In conclusion, for churches embarking on some sort of biblical engagement programme, there should be an emphasis on incorporation of times for reflection and challenge; there needs to be a consideration of how individuals and the group have been affected and what room there is for improvement. This mutual accountability has potential to give 'added value' to any programme but especially perhaps in material designed to promote spiritual growth.

### **§ Conclusion.1.2 Did Pathfinder enable a better understanding of the Bible's 'big story'?**

This topic was addressed, during meetings with participants, by simply asking: 'Compared to before Pathfinder, do you feel you now have a greater appreciation of the 'big story' of the Bible? If so, can you give any examples?'. However, since this was only addressed when taking responses to WO and/or DS, the feedback summarised in §3a and §3b addresses this question as fully as possible.

In the final questionnaire, (ES2, Q1) 'an increased understanding of the "big story" of the Bible' was one suggested possible outcome of the programme and 68% responded positively.

### **§ Conclusion.1.3 Were participants better able to interpret and understand the biblical texts?**

In one sense, it would be impossible to answer this question without first defining criteria for judging what is 'better' interpretation and then 'testing' the Pathfinders. When trying to gauge their own assessment of the achievement of this Pathfinder 'ambition' I deliberately chose to phrase the question in a more general way; in the final evaluation survey, 65% ticked 'an increased understanding of the contents of the Bible' in a list of suggested effects of Pathfinder.

Within focus groups, I asked, 'Do you feel Pathfinder has helped you grow in your understanding of the Bible or helped you encounter the scriptures in a new way? If so, how?'.<sup>83</sup> There were a number of people, across the centres, who testified to this programme having had a positive effect upon their understanding of the Bible. Responses which attributed the effect very specifically to a singular resource are dealt with in the relevant chapters. Here I've tried to give a flavour of the responses to the programme as a whole. For example, when the Church A group were asked this question, one responded:

*Absolutely. ... you look at it more in depth, I was thinking particularly, the story of Ruth, and when you start to examine the reasons why Ruth ended up with Boaz, and the fact that there was a famine in this land where they were living, and three men died. Naomi's husband and two sons died,*

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<sup>83</sup> This was a key question I used in all focus group sessions. Sometimes the exact wording varied but the gist of the question was the same. Where possible I am here focussing on responses made towards the end of the Pathfinder experience.

which forced her, then, to go back to her kinsman. You read the story, and miss that bit. That, to me, was the depth. I think that, personally, as I've read other passages, I began to look more in depth into the deeper things that were going on, behind the actual story. Difficult to explain, but it's almost a mindset, really. I'm not a very avid reader, and I find that I can't read for long, because I start to lose interest. ... But I can pick up, particularly, the Old Testament and really begin to think about the background of what I'm actually reading.

Another there commented that 'I find myself asking a lot, "Who is the author actually speaking to, at this point? "'. That seems to be cropping up quite a lot. Truthfully, prior to the Pathfinder Course, I probably hadn't thought about it that much'. And a third said:

it's encouraged me to look at the Bible from the viewpoint of - , I mean ... Am I looking at this from my cultural perspective, or how God would want me to see it? I've become very much more open to think about that, now, than I perhaps was before. Also, from what we're taught within the Church as well-, is that really Gospel based, or is it built around the culture, or the times that we're in, and how we've done that. ... Pathfinders has helped me to think like that.

Although I didn't see the Church B group at the end of the programme, early on, when they'd only worked through WO, Map and MGS, and in response to a similar question, one noted that:

I'm not quite so scared about reading it now, and I say scared in the nicest possible way because not having knowledge makes you wary about reading and I've always been worried about having the background knowledge I need to be able to read the Bible. Whereas I'm fairly

confident now that I could read it and not grasp the whole meaning of the text, but certainly a lot more of it than I would have before.

Although the Church G group had shrunk a good deal by the end, those remaining were very positive in their responses. One said that:

it helped me personally to look at things in a different dimension. It's been very helpful and stuff that I didn't know before in respect of background because I think it's very, very important. Now obviously the Word of God stands on its own but it's good to understand what's going on especially relating to other people ... helpful to learn more and help you to move on.

This was endorsed by the others, one of whom added 'I've learnt a lot, and that was part of my expectation at the outset, ... an opportunity to learn more about the scripture and to be inspired to take it on to some personal study as well. In that sense the whole concept has been very positive'.

At their last focus group of the first year of Pathfinder, the Church C group as a whole generally agreed on a positive response to this question, with three of them making the following comments:

**Respondent 1:** Yes, by really putting the emphasis on that, and perhaps also coming to read scripture in bigger chunks at a time. Doesn't mean to say you have to read more, full stop. But that you don't just read a verse here, a verse there, because it makes a lot more sense when you read a chunk together, a whole letter, a whole gospel, or a whole section. Pick out the similarities and the points that the writer's making, that sort of thing.

**Respondent 2:** [Someone] ... said if you read a little bit more before it and after it, it just enhances what you're trying to pick up in the middle which is maybe a one-liner. You know, the point that you're trying to make but as you say, if you read the whole thing it gives you a little bit more of the story, the point that you're trying to make.

**Respondent 3:** To me, though the first one was difficult. I did look around at the passages and look behind them and try and fit it into some kind of picture at the time. I do make an effort to do that more than I did, so that's good.

At the end of the first year or so, a few of the Church E group gave negative replies to this question; when asked to clarify their responses, one said 'I don't know if I've learnt anything from it. Well, maybe that's a bit strong, but, you know, I think it's not what I expected ... I thought it was something that would get you reading the Bible more, and it hasn't done that for me'. Another put it differently: 'I don't think it's been connected enough, each series that we've done. For me, it doesn't feel as though it's been connected enough to remember what you'd learnt in the last one, so that you could link it to the last one that you've done'. However, others present were more positive. It's impossible to be sure if the negative respondents were also at the last focus group of the programme the following year but, when the question was repeated then, several there testified to the effects of Pathfinder and this time there was no dissent:

**Respondent 1:** Yes, it's been very useful in, kind of, looking at the Bible in context, and all that. That's been really useful.

**Respondent 2:** We've looked at using the Bible in a different way to what we normally do, which is looking at passages and finding out what it means. So, we've had a more overall picture.

**Respondent 3:** Yes, it did a whole sweep of the Bible, didn't it? It's been thinking about the Bible as a story and our part in that story. So, certainly the overview has been significant, I think, and we've looked at that overview through different lenses, I think, so that's been helpful.

When asked to clarify if this had affected the way they looked the Bible when on their own or in meetings, the response, from a fourth participant, was positive: 'in our house-group we don't just talk about the verses, but we think about why it was written, what the situation was at that time, etc.'. At the same time, Respondent 3 above added that:

I think also an awareness of what we bring to that interpretation, what we bring to the text, really. So, greater sensitivity to understanding your own bias, maybe, or background in looking at it, which means you might otherwise jump to conclusions about the interpretation when actually there could be a different way of looking at it.

Finally, at Church F's last meeting, there was again a positive group response to this question with one member expressing it this way:

For me, the context, in the broader sense of the word, has been brought to me more fully, partly from the Hermeneutics course and partly also from the Word in One, although I disliked it intensely, I find there was an attempt to show how things progressed and I think that that's essential when you are reading anything in the Bible to know where it is, and why it's there, and so on. It just gives it a dimension which is essential, so, for me, that's been really, really important.

Overall then, and certainly among those who completed the programme, there was an agreement that Pathfinder had effected a positive change in their understanding of the Bible and in the way with which they engaged it. Reading

or hearing larger portions of scripture, both with a view to gaining an idea of context or background and to think about the 'big story' of the Bible, would seem to be features of this new way of engagement which recur in the comments made across the centres. For some, at least, there has also been an awareness of the effects of personal and cultural 'lenses' upon one's reading.

### **§ Conclusion.1.4 Did the programme contribute to their spiritual formation and/or have a positive influence on their relationship with God?**

It may be that Pathfinder was less successful with respect to this ambition than with others since only 35% respondents to the final (ES2) survey ticked 'a deeper relationship with God' in answer to a question regarding possible effects of the programme (Q1).

This aim was also addressed in meetings with participants by asking the open question: 'Has Pathfinder affected your relationship with God in any way?' or something very similar. Several people across the centres commented that it was difficult to answer this question since many things in life, both individually and in concert, have an effect upon one's spiritual growth. And, for some, as expressed by an individual at Church F, Pathfinder 'helped me along the road' even if they couldn't be more specific about it.

Nevertheless, with this caveat, several felt able to answer this affirmatively and positively; although some felt unable to say the programme had made a *specific* impact, no-one expressed the feeling that Pathfinder affected their relationship with God negatively.

For example, one at Church A said that:

whenever you read God's word you intend to engage with him at some point, that's the whole point, but I must admit there is a deeper sense of seeking God through revelation, through the word. You know, for me, it's

actually reading the word and saying, 'Lord just take me deeper into this word, I really want to know more about that'.

At Church D one participant responded 'I feel closer, because I'm listening more. I feel I'm listening, that's the word I want really, I'm listening more, and I had a lot of problems in the last year really, so it has helped with that, yes'; another said:

for me, because it's meant spending more time doing it; it's like any other relationship, the more time you spend with a person, the better you feel you're getting to know them, and the deeper the relationship is. So, kind of, in that respect, yes. Also, that personal sense of 'What is this particular passage saying to me, at this particular time?' which is like the communication with God, so yes, for me it's encouraged me quite a bit.

Again, after the first year, at Church B, one Pathfinder responded to this question:

Definitely, I'm not really sure I had a relationship at all before. If it was a relationship it was more of a casual friend's relationship where we'd meet up every now and again and say, 'Hi', never fall out really, but never keep in constant touch. That's the best way of describing it I think but, yes, I mean since then it's been all, I wouldn't say full throttle, but the throttle has gradually been depressed.

Some Pathfinders identified specific elements of the programme that had helped them in this area. For one at Church D it was Maperio that had shown her that 'everything's spiritual in your life and, yes, it's walking with God in everything'; for several others it was lyfe. As with the previous question (§ Conclusion.1.3) there are comments supporting the role of specific elements within the relevant chapters.

### **§ Conclusion.1.5 Did it help them in any way to forge links between the Bible and contemporary society?**

Some of the material pertinent to this question may be found in §11, relating to the cultural drivers and culture-facing initiative. However, there were also some direct responses to one of the focus group questions: 'Has Pathfinder affected the way you think about the Church in relation to the society in which we live?'. While some felt that they had already been outward-focussed, before starting the Pathfinder programme, others responded positively, if not always specifically. At Church B, after the first year or so, one said they thought to themselves "Okay, so this faith is, life I say I'm living and where does it fit? How do I do it?" I think it has probably changed how I look at other people as well'. Another said they felt more confident to speak about their faith and a third noted that they had 'been made aware of the relationship of Christians within the wider community' many of whom were of another faith or none. Other groups mentioned being encouraged to do more, or being provided with new ideas, but felt that they had already been involved in society-facing activities and did not indicate that they saw Pathfinder as having been hugely significant in this area.

Turning to those questions in ES2 relating to Pathfinder's possible effects on their involvement in 'social or political action, caring/community activities' (Q16-17), eight out of the 31 respondents indicated increased involvement in church-based initiatives and three in non-faith-based groups.

Regarding the related factor of confidence in the text, little was said in spoken responses beyond the comments regarding individual resources in specific sections of this report, which were mixed (see [§1.1.2](#) and [§3b.1.1](#)). There were some pertinent questions covering this aspect in the ES2. Although only 31 were received and these all came from those who had stayed with Pathfinder, if we take together the questions relating to their confidence in their ability to explain the Bible to others (Q11-13) between 40 and 60% ticked 'more' or 'same'. Turning to questions regarding 'all the blood and killing in the Old Testament' and 'seeming inconsistencies in the Bible itself' (ES2, Q7), for both issues only four (13% total respondents) said their confidence had increased in the course

of Pathfinder. Taken together, responses to Pathfinder's aim to increase confidence in the text seem to have varied, perhaps due to there being different measures of 'confidence' and possibly also due to the different starting points of the participants.

### § Conclusion.2 Other achievements of the programme as a whole

#### § Conclusion.2.1 Inter-relationships and peer learning

One of the focus group questions was 'Do you feel as a group that Pathfinder has affected your relationship with one another in any way?'. All eight centres had at least some positive responses and in several it was unanimous. Moreover, 65% ticked 'deeper relationships with those in the Pathfinder group' as an outcome of the programme in ES2, Q1.

The degree to which participants in any group knew each other before Pathfinder varied to a large extent. However, working together as a group had been found to deepen even those relationships which had existed previously. Obviously, it is likely that this was an effect of small group dynamics in general as much as, or more than, the specifics of Pathfinder but, nevertheless, it is a positive consequence of the programme.

Along with the deepened relationships, participants at six of the centres commented on the value of peer learning; this was sometimes expressed as the value of learning from others who have read more but at other times the variety of the range of different perspectives brought by a group was highlighted. There is more on this in the section on lyfe ([§2.1.2](#)).

### § Conclusion.3 Other issues

Issues such as accessibility varied with different programme elements and are dealt with under specific resources. Issues here are those which pertain to the whole idea of a *programme* of resources to promote biblical engagement.

### **§ Conclusion.3.1 Managing expectations: coherence, integration and direction**

At some places, and at different times, a number of Pathfinders mentioned the expectations of the programme, both their own and others. I don't wish to go into the variety of these expectations but do wish to note some general points.

Firstly, it is important to note that people would prefer to be given a clear idea of what a programme is going to include, in what order, and what its aims are.

Obviously, this was a pilot where some resources were undergoing development as the course progressed and church leaders were choosing resources as they went along so it would have been impossible to produce a detailed list of

'contents'. The promotional materials (PL, PCP and PCR; see [§ Introduction.2](#)) did contain some ideas but it is unclear how well distributed these were among the 'ordinary' participants. Nevertheless, this emerges as a key factor in the success of such projects. Disappointed expectations were one reason given for people leaving the programme: 'some of those that came at the beginning, were expecting, because it was a Bible course, they were expecting to come and read something from their Bibles right at the beginning. Then they just drifted'.<sup>84</sup>

Even a number of those who didn't drop out, across several of the centres, commented that they hadn't been clear on what they were doing and why: 'we were always a bit in the dark as to what our next modules were going to be like' (Church B); 'I just wish that what was planned for us to do was up front and we knew' (Church D); 'We didn't have that advance knowledge of that. We were sort of, every week, just jumping ahead to try and catch up with what we're doing next week' (Church E). Consequently, the suggestion was that they would have appreciated having an overall plan, or 'route map', in advance: 'a clearer definition of the course itself prior to people actually signing up for it so ... they know' (Church G); 'a plan of what's happening at each stage in advance so that you know how long it's going to take and where you're going to be' (Church A). Church D went further, putting forward the idea of:

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<sup>84</sup> See § Conclusion.3.2 for other reasons for leaving.

some, sort of, course book, so an outline that ... I suppose you could do it with a ring binder and start off with the first eight pages, 'This is the outline, this is what we're going to do. This is where it's going to go,' and, 'Now here's section one,' and, 'Okay, we're going to get on.' So without having to give out everything at the beginning ... but in terms of that idea of, sort of, structure and the direction, then to be able to see how this bit which you're doing slots into that greater whole ... rather than just an individual standalone unit, and some of the rationale behind why different things are in there.

It was further suggested that having such a folder, and a certificate or some other acknowledgement that the programme had been completed, would give participants a 'sense of identity and ownership' of the programme.

An issue related to expectation is the degree of coherence anticipated by the use of the term 'programme'. Comments were made across the centres concerning a perceived lack of linkage between the different resources – both their content and their methodologies. When asked in groups if they thought the different elements of Pathfinder complemented each other, hung together, or went together well, someone at Church A said they didn't 'think the sessions followed on; they were very individual and gave very different insights ... you could juggle them around in any order, without missing a point. It didn't, sort of follow on'. Similarly, at Church B, one felt that '[e]ach session had not much connection with the last one' and a Church C Pathfinder said 'I don't see any connection between them. If I'm supposed to do, then I haven't seen it'. These comments were echoed at Church E, Church F and Church G. While there were positive comments concerning the variety of format and delivery between the resources, and the modular nature of the programme, some people found the changes in style between each resource more challenging. And one Church E participant, suggested that 'if we were supposed to put into practice something from the previous one, we've moved onto something else, so any chance of

learning and embracing a change in our life and behaviour and belief from the previous ones have got submerged by the next one’.

This leads us to the third point: progress in intellectual challenge and accessibility. One Pathfinder drew an analogy with learning at school: ‘When you’re in primary school, ... you play in the sand and you just go where the sand falls, you know. You do your O-Levels, and you discover gravity; you do your A-Levels and you learn about electrons’. In contrast, his experience of Pathfinder’s early stages was ‘almost that ... you’re sort of jumping ... up to O and A-Levels if you like, with all those concepts’. He suggested that a programme such as Pathfinder should begin with an element at ‘foundation’ level and work up, so that as many as possible could get an overview and then build upon it.

Lastly, there was a deal of dissatisfaction at one or two centres because they had expected the programme to be integrated into their existing church activities; instead they found that they had extra meetings or were denied the opportunity to participate in other church groups, sometimes resulting in a perceived loss of pastoral support. Some individuals also reported a degree of antipathy towards the programme from those not involved.

### **§ Conclusion.3.2 Staying the course**

There were a number of different reasons put forward to explain why, at most centres, the numbers of participants dropped so much over the duration of the course. Most of these were suggestions proffered by those who stayed with the programme and they varied with the point in Pathfinder at which numbers seemed to have dropped: with regard to MGS, some said others found it too intellectually challenging, or ‘an intellectual exercise ... and felt that they wanted a more of a balance of, sort of, the inspirational, emotional aspects as well ... it was obviously aimed at an intellectual level rather than anything else at that stage, and I think that did put one or two people off’. If people disappeared during Map, the reason given might be that it was too personal. More general reasons included not having enough time within each week, the individual sessions (often two hours) being too long, or two years being too long a

commitment to a programme. One suggested that there were too many introductory sessions and 'if you start at another group, to make sure they all come back, don't do the form-filling'.

When interviewing three from Church A who had actually left the programme, two cited lack of time among other church activities, one adding that they found WO too easy and the other that they couldn't see the relevance of Map. The third differed in that they said they:

found that it was perhaps a little too much interaction, a little bit too liberal for me, in so much that because the aims and objectives were not stated, or if they were, they were not quite clear as to where we were going. I found that it was really good at getting people talking, getting them interested in a particular aspect, but I thought it was far too wide-ranging, and there was no conclusion. So therefore, I felt that the results of that were that it was almost like an 'anything goes'. ... I never really knew, 'Well is this what the Bible Society agree? Are we on the path, are we off the path, are we way off here? Are we alright, or is it, don't care?' ... I'm fairly fundamental in my approach, so I'm a bit more black and white. I want to know, 'am I right or am I wrong?'

In summary then, it would seem there was a variety of different reasons given for leaving the programme and for many it may have been more than one factor. Although some of these issues may be addressed in the design of future biblical engagement programmes it is likely that such courses will always initially attract a proportion of people who find the materials or the arrangements do not suit them.

### **§ Conclusion.3.3 Location, Location!**

Five of the church centres brought up the subject of location when discussing different aspects of Pathfinder. Some had begun by meeting in the church or in a

larger room but moved when the group grew smaller or, in the case of Church E, because the materials (in this case lyfe) suggested an informal setting. People at several centres noted that the experience of meeting in a home was better; it was described as 'intimate', 'relaxed', and 'more at ease'. This was contrasted, by one Church C participant, with it being a 'bit daunting coming to church'. The Church D group, which had also moved location, noted it was 'important to get the venue right' to help people feel comfortable.

Additionally, as noted in [§1.2.2](#), something as simple as the arrangement of furniture can affect the degree to which participants feel drawn into, or excluded from, activities, particularly if the arrangements evoke possibly negative educational experiences.

It is impossible to gauge how much of the positive effect of moving was due to the location making people feel more relaxed and how much was due to the smaller group size. However, the comments made emphasise the importance of finding somewhere suitable to facilitate full participation in any resources designed to promote biblical engagement and spiritual growth.

### **§ Conclusion.3.4 Further involvement with Bible Society**

Responses to the final question on the closing survey (ES2 Q20) suggested that around half favoured furthering their relationship with Bible Society, although it needs to be appreciated that several of the churches already have a degree of involvement. There was some uncertainty as to what 'Bible a Month' was, but most of those responding positively favoured handing out 'Word in Action' to church attendees. Around 16% of all ES2 respondents would support the appointment of a Bible Society representative from within the congregation and nearly 20% an annual donation. One suggested having an occasional speaker.

## **§ Conclusion.4 Taking Pathfinder Further**

### **§ Conclusion.4.1 Preparing the ground**

Given the comments above (§ Conclusion 3.1), concerning people's expectations, it is important to point out that what people expected often seemed to bear little relationship to what they'd been told by those involved in presentation and delivery; previously formed expectations, drawn from unformed ideas of what Bible Society is, or from prior experience of 'Bible study', sometimes seemed impervious to hand-outs and talks about the aims and structure of Pathfinder. However, the number of responses on this topic suggests it is an important issue on which to communicate clearly when organising any programme of biblical engagement for churches. Promotional material should be carefully designed to include clear rationales for each element and explicit routes through different resources. Although the parameters of a pilot programme put limitations on this run of Pathfinder, in future, care should be taken to articulate clearly the expected knowledge or experience base for participants in each element, its intended learning outcomes or aims, and the means by which they will be achieved.

### **§ Conclusion.4.2 Planning and communicating the programme**

Drawing on § Conclusion 3.1, and also on comments made in response to specific Pathfinder elements, it seems clear that both the publicity and the content for the programme needs to be tailored to make them as accessible as possible to encourage participation. Furthermore, if the elements of the programme build up in level of complexity it may be possible to take more church members further. Therefore, the level of accessibility of resources should be maximised at the beginning of the programme, which means that thought needs to be given as to the running order of different resources; suggestions were made by participants regarding specific elements and these are noted in the relevant sections of this

report.<sup>85</sup> Overall, it would seem wise to have an introductory biblical overview, not assuming too much prior knowledge, before introducing lectio-type materials or hermeneutic techniques. There also needs to be some consideration of how these very different modes of biblical engagement interact in practice within the church.

A programme of biblical engagement, such as Pathfinder, should not only incorporate different learning styles in order to help different styles of learner engage with the material but should also display some degree of progression from one 'element' or resource to the next, ideally with subsequent elements providing opportunities to put into practice skills or disciplines introduced in earlier resources. Furthermore, all this should be explained clearly to participants *at each stage* so that they may appreciate the 'why' of each part of the programme, and not only the 'what'.

It may be that this progression could be enhanced by designing resources that focus on a common text or genre; for example, lyfe-style meditations on Romans could be used in conjunction with RRC or some on the gospels could complement MJ. Indeed, lyfe may be suitable to be used in conjunction with a number of other resources, such as was suggested above in specific sections regarding CBS, MJ and BC.

When considering the time-tabling of such a programme, the limited responses to the ES2 suggest that most people (75%) would prefer a 90 minute session rather than longer or shorter. The responses to the question of how long each element of Pathfinder should be (Q19b), were more mixed with most (44%) preferring four week blocks while the next most popular (27%) opted for six week blocks. There should also be provision within the timetable for sessions where participants are asked to reflect on their perceptions of the materials and what they may have gained from taking part.

Finally, planning should include consideration of the geography of the course by the church concerned; the environment should be chosen carefully to match the

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<sup>85</sup> For example, see [§1.4.2](#), [§3b.4](#), [§4.4.2](#), [§6.4](#).

learning style but also to minimise any features which might make the programme seem intimidating to those for whom past educational experiences have not been positive.

### **§ Conclusion.4.3 Empowering the whole church**

The comments made regarding these issues should be raised with church leaders to ensure that any biblical engagement programme is well presented and integrated to avoid such handicaps from arising. If it is not designed for the participation of all active church members then steps should be taken to manage the process such that the learning taking place can be seen to enrich the life of the whole congregation. Where interruption of other church activities is inevitable then the continuation of pastoral care should be ensured and those inside the programme should be encouraged to incorporate the fruits of their learning within their ministries both inside and outside the congregation. In this way, the church may, as a body, grow in its understanding of, and love for, the God whom it worships, through deepened engagement with the Bible.

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# APPENDIX II: Pathfinder Promotional Leaflet (PPL)

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## Why Pathfinder?

In the words of TV arts pundit Tony Parsons, to most people the Bible is 'as relevant as the ration book'. The role of the church is reduced to 'matches, hatches and dispatches'. Faith has become a matter of personal preference.

The current cultural climate is a challenge to Christians. How can we get our message across? How can we embrace it ourselves? Recent research suggests that the Church struggles with its own text like never before. But then, how do you trust the Bible when most people around you don't? How do you relate the ancient Scriptures to modern-day life? Questions that a growing number of Christians struggle to answer!

So, how does Bible Society's Pathfinder initiative fit in? It is certainly not meant to be yet another church activity to clutter your diary. Pathfinder is a unique venture – designed to help you explore the nature, purpose and goal of your faith. As you go through the process, you'll find that you are renewing your relationship with the Bible; and you'll discover new ways of confidently taking its message out into your community.

Pathfinder is no quick fix; it's about sustainable spiritual growth. In short, the Pathfinder experience could change your life.

## What is Pathfinder?

The two-year project will, on average, keep you and those in your church who sign up engaged for a couple of hours a week, during term time.

### 1. DIAGNOSTIC STAGE

Reflect upon your journey with God and his Word so far – your highlights, struggles, disappointments and successes.

### 2. DEVELOPMENT STAGE

- Get a firm grasp of the main themes and characters in God's great narrative, how all the parts in the Bible hang together, and how we fit into it.
- How do we make sense of the Bible today? How do we interpret it? How do we draw appropriate conclusions? How do we make the right applications?
- Who am I? What does God want for me? How can I grow spiritually?
- 'Contextual' Bible reading: see the Bible in a different light.
- Try and test new children's resources for your church.

- Apply your new skills and insights into your faith, the Bible and the surrounding culture, as you engage with your community in a new way. Get people outside your church seriously to begin to consider the Bible and to perceive its message as surprisingly good.

### EVALUATION

Share with our skilled researcher how Pathfinder has changed your relationship with the Bible and enhanced – and perhaps even transformed – your faith.

## Pathfinder – a Bible Society initiative

If you've been longing for a deeper engagement with the Bible, Pathfinder is for you. Pathfinder is a pioneering project, designed to help you find your own path of spiritual growth. It's not yet another programme, let alone programme fodder; Pathfinder is about enabling you to relate to the Word as well as the world.

Take your engagement with your community to a new level, using the Bible

Review your priorities and goals using the Bible

Refresh your relationship with the Bible



# APPENDIX III: Pathfinder Churches Prospectus (PCP)

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## Pathfinder Churches – Prospectus

***This Prospectus is for all those who are considering involvement with the Pathfinder project and who want their churches to develop a stronger and more fruitful relationship with the Bible. We hope it provides a clear explanation of what is on offer. But do contact us if you have further comments or questions.***

Good things are happening in and through churches around the country. Sunday service congregations still outnumber the Saturday football crowds, Christian festivals draw people in their thousands every year, youth ministries and countless local fellowships play their part in nurturing the next generation; the call to proclaim Christ through word and deed is heeded via Alpha courses, evangelistic events, social action, movements such as HOPE 08, and the numerous ways in which believers care for those on the margins of society.

And yet there is no denying that all this is taking place against the backdrop of a secularised, post-Christian Britain which is pushing the Church to the margins and has become much more hostile towards overt expressions of allegiance to Christ and his Word. Times of pressure and challenge, however, are also times of opportunity – last but not least the chance for Christians to stand together and support one another across denominations and organisations.

The **Pathfinder** project is such an opportunity. At Bible Society we believe that the Bible has a crucial role to play in turning the tide of secularism and energizing the churches. The Pathfinder project is about your church exploring this with us. This short prospectus will show you how you and your church could become part of a strategic process of synergy, spiritual growth and gradual reclaiming of the nation for God.

### 1. BACKGROUND

A qualitative survey into Bible perceptions among the wider culture commissioned by Bible Society (KsBR, 2006) showed, overall, a rather unenthusiastic attitude among the public not only towards the Bible, but also those who are attempting to do the work of proclaiming and interpreting its message to the outside world. Sadly, to the average person, Church and Bible are essentially for 'geeks', 'losers' and 'no-hopers' (verbatim quotes from our research). More recent research into Bible and media, as well as Bible 'branding', confirms the huge obstacles identified back in 2006.

Bible Society's large-scale survey *Taking the Pulse – is the Bible alive and well in the Church today?* (ComRes, 2008) is another wake-up call; this time to anyone who, so far, might have thought that the estrangement from the Bible was limited to the post-Christian society at large. Churches across the denominations, the survey strongly suggests, are seriously struggling with their own text.



Earlier research (Brierley, 2005) had revealed that Bible reading was in sharp decline even among those Christians who would describe themselves as 'biblical'. But why? *Taking the Pulse* located the problem primarily in the gap between the ancient text and the modern world. Many churchgoers struggle to see the connection between Sunday theory and weekday practice. They have yet to get to the point of fully appreciating, understanding, applying and engaging with Scripture in its parts as well as a whole.

The research into Church and culture highlights two key challenges – to help the Church regain confidence in its own text and to engage with the Scriptures in a mature and imaginative way; and to help the wider culture rediscover the value of the Bible. Both goals can be achieved through the Church, with Bible Society offering strategies, expertise and support.

## 2. PURPOSE AND GOALS

This year we start **Pathfinder** as a two-year pilot project, which will allow us to establish the best possible ways of supporting churches in their engagement with the Bible and the wider public.

**Pathfinder** will test new ways of churches and Bible Society working together – a journey of mutual learning and discovery.

Churches will be able to renew and enrich their relationship with the Bible.

Christians will deepen their understanding of the Bible and see how better to relate it to their personal and public lives.

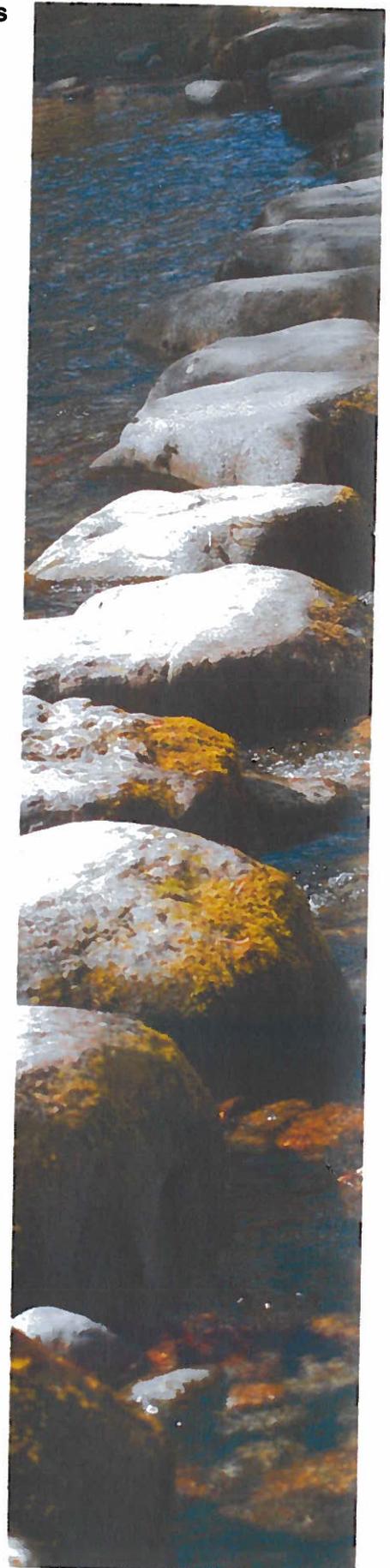
Bible Society, with the help of churches, will evaluate a growing range of resources.

## 3. CORE ELEMENTS

**Pathfinder** is a two-year project that is likely to involve a minimum of 15 churches. These churches will be representative with respect to denomination, size, social and geographical contexts and ethnicity. We don't necessarily expect the leader, let alone all members of a congregation, to join in. Instead, we will be focussing on those within a local church who are already aware of, and concerned about, the issues outlined above and who are trying to do something about them. Nevertheless, we hope that church leaders will support the project and we will work to help non-participating members to be in favour of it as well.

### **Telling the story that changes the world**

This project will also enable us to identify critical hermeneutical issues (i.e. those relating to Bible interpretation and understanding) for ordinary members of congregations and propose solutions which will increase their confidence in the cohesion and credibility of the text. This will enhance and change their own relationship with the Bible by helping to remove anxieties and barriers, as new approaches are provided to open the text to them and their lives to the text.



## **Spirituality – churches of a new humanity**

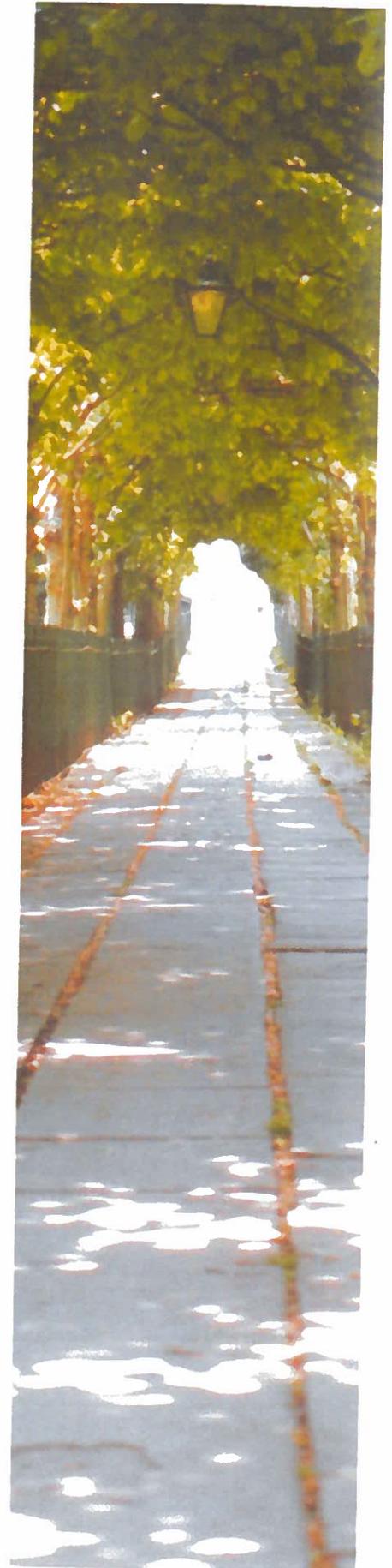
**Pathfinder** will include the exploration of a type of whole-life spirituality that emphasises spiritual formation and discipleship and that values fellowship and life together over programmes and individualism.

### **3.1. DISTINCTIVE FEATURES**

- We will be helping people learn to 'fish' rather than simply 'feeding them fish'; **Pathfinder** will equip people themselves rather than provide proscriptive solutions.
- The churches that take part will find that **Pathfinder** is a fundamental challenge, not 'another programme'; a reorienting with respect to the Bible.
- Church groups will gain a deeper understanding of their Bible-related needs. **Pathfinder** will help each church to discover what its own strengths and weaknesses are with respect to the Bible and support people in development.
- **Pathfinder** will be a 'resource rich' opportunity which includes a dynamic relationship with Bible Society's dedicated project team.
- The emphasis will be on improving churchgoers' confidence in the Scriptures through Bible literacy, hermeneutics and engagement with Scripture and culture.
- **Pathfinder** will not just be about knowledge and techniques but a deepening spirituality and engagement with the Bible (and the One who speaks through it), on four levels: intimate, private, social and public. The aim is to enhance people's relationship with the Bible.
- The churches will have access to consulting and expertise on their journey.
- Progress will be carefully evaluated and feedback provided.

### **3.2. DISTINCTIVE PROCESS**

- **Pathfinder** is a pilot project. Therefore, Bible Society will be undertaking evaluation and research throughout, to gain vital information regarding the eventual nationwide roll-out of the **Pathfinder** programme.
- The process will start with Bible Society presenting its research into Bible, Church and culture, which will help churches gain a better understanding of the issues.
- The churches will then work with our resources (people and knowledge, as well as products) and those we source from other agencies.



- The churches will gain a deeper understanding for Bible Society's work – as well as their own – in the 'four cultural drivers': arts, education, media and politics.
- The churches will engage in a community-facing initiative, either during or, more likely, at the end of the two-year process, demonstrating their ability to do Bible 'advocacy' in the culture with confidence and skill.
- Finally, we will assess how effective the two-year process has been. It is anticipated that this assessment will be carried out as a PhD research degree under the supervision of Exeter University.

#### 4. PROJECT STAGES

- Preliminary Stage: recruitment and team preparation
- 2-year project (2009–11)
- Stage 1: needs analysis
- Stage 2: core group training
- Stage 3: initial use of resources and planning of Bible engagement initiative
- Stage 4: rolling programme, navigation process; resources used
- Stage 5: Bible engagement activity/event in the community
- Stage 6: Celebration and evaluation

#### 5. RESOURCES

##### 5.1. MATERIALS

- Information pack for pilot churches
- Presentation material (Bible Society research into Church and culture)
- Resources on offer (these will include appropriate resources from other agencies; churches will choose different ones; some will need to be purchased)
- Hermeneutics tools

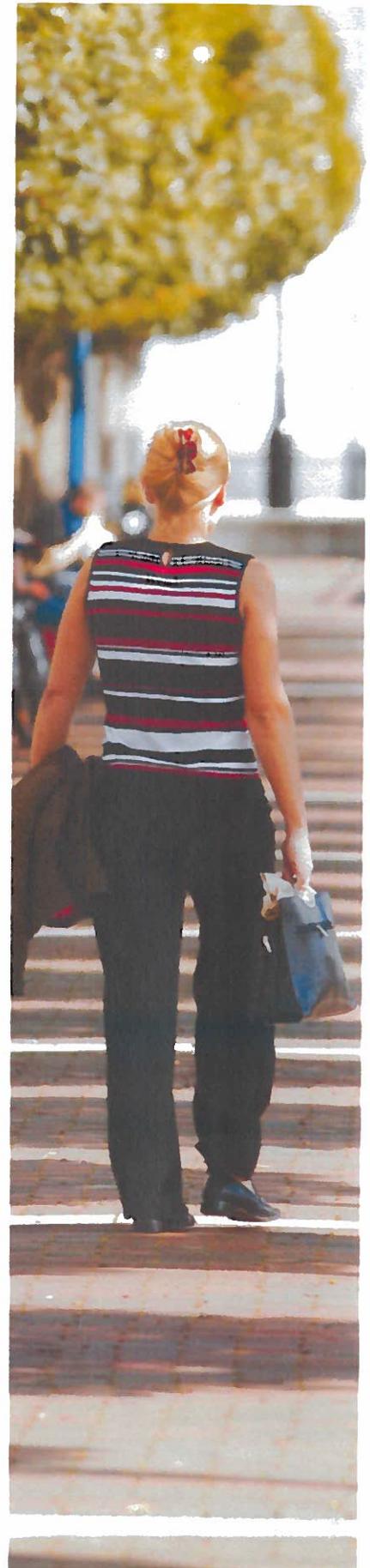
##### 5.2. MEET THE TEAM

Over the course of the two-year project you will meet various members of Bible Society as well as external consultants, who will provide presentations, workshops, training and support.

Team members:

##### **Bible Society staff**

Ann Holt  
 David Landrum  
 David Spriggs  
 James Catford  
 Jamie Hill  
 Lindsay Shaw



Luke Walton  
Michael Pfundner  
Nick Spencer  
Paul Woolley  
Peter Misselbrook  
Rob Cotton  
Rob Hare  
Sandra Tebbutt

#### **External key consultants**

Andrew Rogers  
Cherryl Hunt  
Chris Sunderland  
Glynis and Andy Rankin  
Louise Lawrence  
Matt Summerfield  
Paula Gibson  
Shirley Gowland

## **6. SUITABILITY CRITERIA**

A minimum of 10 and a maximum of 50 members of your church will need to sign up for **Pathfinder**.

The project as such is free of charge. Bible Society hopes that churches will make voluntary donations. Resource materials will be priced at production cost. Participating churches will be invited to celebrate Bible Sunday and pass the collection on to the work of Bible Society.

Further criteria:

### **6.1. A SUPPORTIVE LEADERSHIP WHO ...**

Understand the project – both substantively and methodologically – and promote it.

Encourage prayer for the project.

Encourage their church to become Bible Society supporters (appeals, financial commitment, Bible Sunday celebration, etc.).

Appoint a church champion.

### **6.2. A CHURCH CHAMPION ...**

Who liaises with Bible Society for communications and organisation of events.

Roles: liaison with leadership, motivator, story gatherer, orders and distributes materials, catering/hospitality, finance ...

### **6.3. KEY AUDIENCE**

A core of people (10–50 congregants) who will commit to the



2-year project. We will review this 6 months into the project.

The core group will experience a transformation in their relationship with the Bible and be willing/wanting to deepen, enrich and change that relationship.

They will want the Bible to make more impact in their 'public' life.

They will commit around two hours a week over 40 weeks a year.

They will agree to share their learning with the church (e.g. small group leaders, children's workers, etc.).

They will engage in a culture-facing initiative.

#### **6.4. EXTERNAL CRITERIA**

The churches need to be as different as is feasible, including: size, geographical context, denomination, ethnicity, age, social demographics.



# APPENDIX IV: Pathfinder Church Resources (PCR)

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## Pathfinder Church Resources

We envisage our working relationship with you will have three main, but in terms of time, unequal phases.

Below is the outline of our offer to you. This includes a brief explanation as to how each section contributes to the whole Pathfinder experience and then an indication of some of the key resources we intend to use or recommend.

All Pathfinder resources will help those of your congregants that take part to understand their current relationship with the Bible and discover ways of deepening that understanding. And we hope that they will experience the Bible in a new way, as a path towards spiritual growth and cultural engagement.

### 1. DIAGNOSTIC PHASE

We will use various assessments to help people in the church discern their current practice and relationship to the Bible. We will compare this with the national results (Bible Society survey, 2008), and the Pathfinder pilot group with the whole church. This is vital for two reasons:

- It will provide us with a way of measuring change over the two years
- It will be the basis for consultations about the package of resources which are likely to be most helpful to your Pathfinder pilot group

### 2. DEVELOPMENT PHASE

Churches will normally work with one resource from each section. Your choice of resources will reflect the results of the diagnostic stage. Although normally we would recommend that you begin with Bible Content, after that the order in which sections are used is worked out through the consultation process. A larger group may split and each smaller group use a different resource.

#### 2.1 BIBLE CONTENT (BIBLE AS BIG STORY)

Most Christians will benefit by knowing more about the content of the Bible, but for many having a grasp of how all the parts they know (and some they might not!) fit together is also important.

*The Drama of Scripture* by Craig Bartholomew and Mike Goheen – a short book published by SPCK which includes questions for groups or individuals; there is also an on-line resource.

Or: *The Word in One* (DVD and small groups) by Andy Twilley of Living Light



Or: *You've Got the Time* – Bible Society's audio NT (listen through the NT in 40 days) with sermon outlines and discussion questions for groups

Or: *Explorer's Guide to the Bible* – book and DVD by John Grayston, Scripture Union

Depending on the outcome of the diagnostic stage, we may suggest additional material for your group.

## 2.2 BIBLE INTERPRETATION AND UNDERSTANDING ('TELLING THE STORY THAT CHANGES THE WORLD')

We are working on several aspects of this crucial area. Without helpful and appropriate support, Christians can find it hard to interpret and apply the Bible to today's world and defend its credibility. We intend to produce a new resource to provide support in this area. Pathfinder pilot groups will also learn to appreciate the fact that readers of the Bible will at times interpret it differently.

We will be offering a short course, developed by our own researcher in this field, Dr Andrew Rogers, in collaboration with other scholars, including Richard Briggs of Durham University. Andrew is making a list of other suitable resources.

Also *The Workbook, Using the Bible in Christian Ministry*, units 1-7 (a selection of elements); a book with lots of creative ideas and exercises developed by Bible Society with Cardiff University.

*Reading the Bible* (SCM) – an introduction to a variety of approaches to understanding the Bible.

Depending on the outcome of the diagnostic stage, we may suggest additional material for your group.

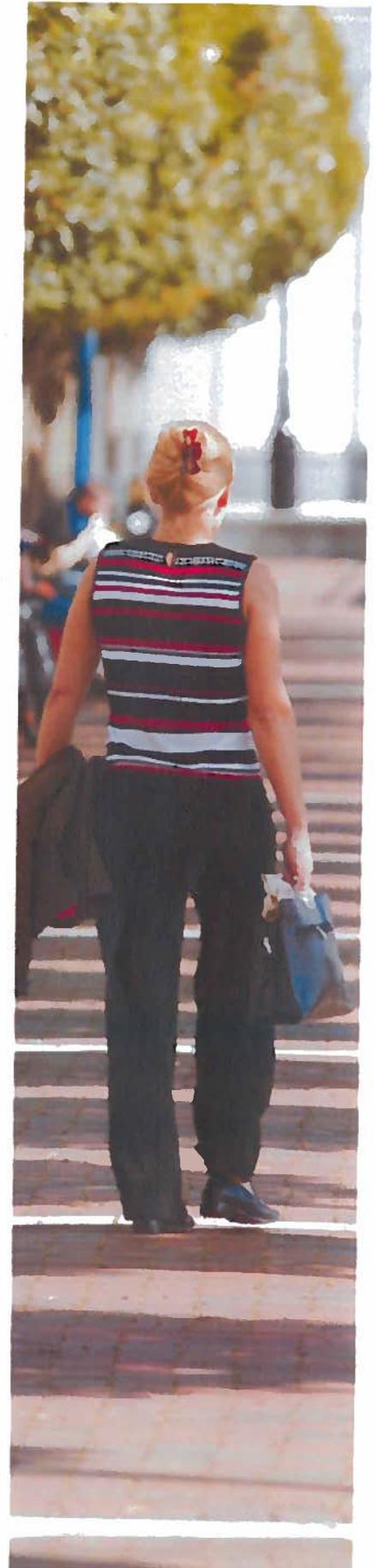
## 2.3 PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION

Bible Society believes that the Bible is not only to provide us with *information* and knowledge, but is intended by God to be a resource for our *transformation*.

### Spiritual formation

*lyfe* – a Bible Society, informal, group-based Bible experience, relating to Lectio Divina, deeper spirituality and every-day discipleship. *lyfe* seeks to affirm the reader as the interpreter and then to sustain people as they apply the Bible and so experience its transformative power.

*Deep lyfe* – a new, expanded version of *lyfe* that emphasises the practice of spiritual disciplines.



## **Bible and personal development**

We believe the Bible can significantly and positively contribute to shaping our whole life development. A course based on the concept and materials of Creative Metier's *Maperio* programme will enable your Pathfinder pilot group to discern more clearly who they are, and what God wants them to do with the whole of their lives.

*Lectio divina* – learn to 'pray' the Bible, reflecting on it on a deeper level; resource to be confirmed.

Depending on the outcome of the diagnostic stage, we may suggest additional material for your group.

### **2.4 NEW ENCOUNTERS WITH THE BIBLE**

Bible Society wishes to encourage people to experience the Bible through new approaches which also link us to our contemporary culture.

*Reel Issues* – a monthly electronic issue from Bible Society where contemporary film and the Bible are brought together in a small group context.

**World-view** – we believe that the Bible is meant to shape the way we view the world and live our lives. One way to develop this capacity is through 'world-view' approaches. In these we seek to understand what living biblically looks like, which includes critically appreciating our own culture (so we can grow in discernment between what is from God and what is really 'our culture', as well as what we can see is alien to God's best).

*Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview* by Michael Goheen and Craig Bartholomew

*On-line materials* were developed by Paul Woolley, Director of Theos, the public theology think tank

**Contextual Bible study** – appreciating the reality and value of interpreting Scripture in a specific cultural/social/ political context. Resource(s): to be confirmed.

To further enhance your Pathfinder pilot group's 'New Encounter' experience see also Rob Bells' *Nooma* series, and BRF's *Foundations 21* project.

Depending on the outcome of the diagnostic stage, we may suggest additional material for your group.

## **3. 'ENGAGING OUR COMMUNITIES' PHASE**

Bible Society is committed to engaging our culture with the Bible – campaigning for the Bible in the public domain. We want all Pathfinder churches to have the opportunity to appreciate this and apply it in their own context.



We will provide an introduction to making the Bible heard using the cultural 'drivers' of Arts, Education, Media and Politics to bring about cultural engagement and community facing activity approaches.

We anticipate making our own 'Key Cultural Drivers' Team available to explain the concept, coach and support people as they experiment for themselves with 'campaigning for the Bible in the culture'.

Possible areas for exploration are:

**Politics:** a brand new resource on faith, Bible and political engagement is being developed by Bible Society

**Social Issues:**

**Environment:** *The Dream That Inspired the Bible* by C Sunderland and/or *Bible and Ecology* project (Exeter University)

**Bible and Science:** *Test of Faith* by The Faraday Institute for Science and Religion

**Education:** Youth and children

Key Stage 1&2 materials for church use: *The Bible in Literacy* and/or *Step into the Bible*

Youth materials (tbc in consultation with Bible Society's Youth Development Officer)

**Media:** *The Bible Style Guide* (Bible Society)

*The Workbook, Using the Bible in Christian Ministry, Unit 14*

Depending on the outcome of the diagnostic stage, we may suggest additional material for your group.

## CONCLUSION

Pathfinder is about enabling people to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Bible, to grow in their faith, and to take their cultural engagement to a new level.

Throughout this relationship, Bible Society will be offering support and advice.

Bespoke projects will be developed, in part, with your group and we will advise along the way.

We will also be seeking to discover from you what really helps and what doesn't. We believe you have much to teach us to enable us to serve many more churches in the future.



# Appendix V: Criteria grid for Pathfinder Churches

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## 1. The Church

Church name

Address

POST CODE

PHONE

Leader(s)

Denomination

Location (e.g urban/suburban)

Style (e.g traditional, contemporary, church plant, fresh expression, cell)

Size (provide one or more numbers plus a description as to what this relates to;  
e.g. 30 – morning congregation; 150 different people (including children) who  
attend our services in a month; 450 people we have contact with in a month)

Leadership structure (including how decisions are taken)

Members (or committed congregation)

Age range

Ethnicity

Gender ratio

Groups Do you run mid-week groups of any sort? Men's/Women's meetings? Prayer groups etc

Worship : style and/or times of worship meetings

Existing activities (church/culture)

Run mainly by the church e.g. soup kitchens, youth clubs for un-churched, mothers and toddlers

Run mainly by others but using the church's premises e.g. loan premises for other groups such as AA, or any of the above

Distinctive feature(s) i.e. anything unusual about the church e.g. some meet in a pub!

Role of the Bible in preaching & worship

How many bible readings/congregational meeting (remember this is for more liturgical churches as well)

Role of the Bible in groups & activities Do you have e.g. Bible studies within mid-week groups, theological training for church member ?

Would you engage with the Bible at elders' meetings or when the finance team meet etc if so which and how would you use it?

Role of the Bible in evangelism and mission

Does your evangelism include evangelistic preaching, do you follow Alpha (and how does the Bible function there)?; Do you provide evangelism training and if so do you use the Bible a) to explain the Christians' commitment to preach the Gospel, b) to explain what the Gospel is, c) to provide models for different styles of evangelism etc. Do you use the Bible (parts of it) in your evangelistic literature and follow up materials etc.

Role of Bible in pastoral care/counselling

Do you intentionally use it in pastoral sessions, hospital visiting and counselling – and a whole lot more. Are you approved Counselling models, in your view, derived directly from Scripture, or do they presuppose a biblically derived understanding of human nature and the human predicament etc. Do you 'invite the Holy Spirit' to minister to people and do you consider this is biblical? Etc.

Doctrinal stance on the Bible

Churches differ in what teaching, if any, they give (or presuppose because it is in their constitution or founding documents) on the status of the Bible, its authority in relation to other sources of wisdom from God etc

Sometimes this might not be the same for the minister as it is for the denomination as a whole.

a) the Church

b) the minister/leader

## 2. the project

**Anticipated commitment regarding giving with regard to Bible Society or using Bible Sunday materials**

Prayer

Weekly commitment

2-year programme (2x40 weeks)

### **Champion: who?**

Name

Post Code

Phone

Email

Other roles in the church and community

### **PF group size and make-up**

Estimated start date

# APPENDIX VI: Pathfinder Diagnostic Questionnaire (DQ)

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# PATHFINDER DIAGNOSTIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Church \_\_\_\_\_

Name (only if you are part of a Pathfinder group or intend to join)

\_\_\_\_\_

Age    20 and under     21 - 30     31 - 40     41 - 50     51 - 60   
           61 - 70                 70 +

Male  Female

Pathfinder member    Yes  No                       Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Please fill in this questionnaire as honestly as you can. It often helps to respond instinctively rather than to think too carefully.**

**Q1** In practice, how important do you consider each of the following to be in promoting your own spiritual growth? [tick one per issue]

	very	fairly	not much	not at all
Private prayer	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Praying with others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reading the Bible alone	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Bible meditation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Personal reflection/meditation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reading and engaging with the Bible	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Discussion with others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sermons or talks given at my local church	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Collective worship	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Home or smaller church groups	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Christian conferences and festivals	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Friendships with other Christians	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Service in the community	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Giving financially	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Fasting	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Retreats	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The internet	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Attending other churches	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reading (Christian magazines/books)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Music/songs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Academic study	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Q2** How confident would you say you are in your Bible knowledge? [tick one]

very                 fairly                 shaky                 not confident at all

**Q3** How often do you use the Bible in ...? [tick one for each topic]

	<b>frequently</b>	<b>sometimes</b>	<b>seldom</b>	<b>never</b>
Private devotions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
To shape your decisions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
To shape your behaviour and attitudes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
To help and counsel others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
To share your faith with others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
To help you understand our world	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Q4** Which of the following do you use to help you engage with the Bible? [tick as many or as few as you wish]

Daily Bible reading notes <input type="checkbox"/>	Bible dictionary <input type="checkbox"/>	Concordance <input type="checkbox"/>
Commentaries <input type="checkbox"/>	Online resources <input type="checkbox"/>	Recorded or radio talks <input type="checkbox"/>
Live sermons <input type="checkbox"/>	Collective worship songs <input type="checkbox"/>	Small group study <input type="checkbox"/>
Study Bible <input type="checkbox"/>	Other <input type="checkbox"/> - please indicate _____	

**Q5** How important is it to you personally that you know the Bible well? [tick one]

very                   fairly                   not very                   not at all

**Q6** How often do you normally read (or listen to) passages from the Bible yourself? [tick one]

at least once a day                   several times a week                   about once a week   
 at least once a month                   less than once a month                   almost never

**Q7** To what extent do you think that the Bible should shape your daily life? [tick one]

always                   normally                   occasionally                   when I agree with the Bible

**Q8** Which of the following do you think apply to the Bible? [tick up to 3 you agree with most and tick up to 3 you disagree with most]

	<b>agree</b>	<b>disagree</b>
It is outdated and has little relevance for today	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It sets out God's rescue plan for all time	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It provides the basic framework for our relationship with God	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It provides direct moral guidance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It's a manual for life	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It suggests questions and critical ideas	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It is a bit of a muddle	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It shows us who God is, what he has done and what he is like	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It is largely irrelevant	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It provides a vision to aim for	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It provides first moral principles which we have to apply	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It shows us God's view of a good society	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It shows us God's priorities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It shows us how God's people should live, individually and as a community	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Q9** Which of the following statements best sums up the extent to which the Bible is taught or referred to in your own church services? [tick one]

- The Bible is never referred to, taught or explained
- The Bible is sometimes referred to but not taught or explained
- The Bible is sometimes taught or explained
- The Bible is regularly taught or explained at all or most services

**Q10a** Do you believe the Bible to be divinely inspired? [tick one]

- strongly agree       agree to some extent       disagree to some extent       disagree strongly

**Q10b** Do you believe the Bible (as originally given) is free from error? [tick no more than 2]

- Free from any kinds of error       Free from errors about God and salvation
- Free from errors about how to live morally       I don't believe it is free from error

**Q11** Over the past few months, when you read or heard the Bible being read, how did it usually make you feel? [tick as many as you agree with]

- Motivated       Confused       Challenged       Encouraged
- Discouraged       Enlightened       Fearful       Excited
- Other  (please state) \_\_\_\_\_

**Q12** To what extent is your confidence in the Bible undermined or enhanced by [tick one per issue]

	<b>undermined a lot</b>	<b>undermined a little</b>	<b>neither undermined nor enhanced</b>	<b>enhanced a little</b>	<b>enhanced a lot</b>
Aggressive secularists such as Richard Dawkins	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
All the blood and killing in the Old Testament	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Conflicts between the Bible and today's lifestyles	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Divisions in the church	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
What the Bible says about hell	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
'Liberal' biblical scholarship	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Moral goodness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Natural beauty and order	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The miracles of Jesus	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Natural disasters	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Parts are boring	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Seeming inconsistencies in the Bible itself	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Terrorism or human evil	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The way in which the Old Testament foretells of Christ	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other factors (please specify) _____					

**Q13** Do you agree or disagree with these statements about the Bible's influence over you? [tick one per issue]

	agree a lot	agree a little	disagree a little	disagree a lot
The Bible actively challenges me to live in a way which runs counter to the present culture in Britain	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The Bible actively guides the way I vote in elections	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The Bible is essentially a guide to my private rather than public behaviour (e.g. at home versus at work)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Q14** Upon reflection, how recently were you conscious of the Bible affecting or influencing a decision you made? [tick one]

- within a week                       within the last month   
 within the last six months                       I don't recall an instance

**Q15** Do you agree or disagree with these statements about the Church (fellowship of believers)?

	agree	disagree
The Church should work towards a society that takes the Bible more seriously	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The Church should work harder to promote biblical principles across society	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The Church should take more initiative in the development of a more biblical public policy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The Church should try to exert more influence via, for instance, the presence in the House of Lords of the most senior bishops	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Q16a** Do you agree that more resources or initiatives would help you build your biblical understanding and use? [Tick one]

- agree strongly                       agree to some extent                       disagree a little                       disagree strongly

**Q16b** What would you find particularly helpful? Resources that ... [tick one per issue]

	a little	a lot
Give an overview of the Bible and its core themes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Help to make sense of the Bible and to link it to my daily life	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Help to make sense of the Bible and to link it to our culture	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Help me to grow in my faith and follow Christ	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Thank you for completing this questionnaire and so helping with the Pathfinder project of which this church is a part.**

**Please ensure that you hand the questionnaire to the appropriate person before leaving church or return it to your church leader within 7 days.**

## Appendix VII

### PATHFINDER EVALUATION SURVEY 1

**Data Protection:** As stated on the information and consent form that you signed, your data will be held in accordance with the Data Protection Act.

#### **ABOUT YOU AND YOUR TIME COMMITMENTS:**

**Name:**

**Church:**

**Age:**            20 and under             21 – 30             31 – 40             41 – 50   
                         51 – 60             61 – 70             70 +

Male             Female

**work/commitments** (this refers to any kind of paid employment or voluntary or home-based commitments [e.g. parent of small children, other dependents]) :

DELETE THOSE WHICH DO NOT APPLY

*full-time/part-time/unemployed or retired*

Any roles you fill or regular activities you are involved in, within the church?:

Q1 Which of these books do you ever remember having read or heard all/part of? Tick  
as many as apply:

OLD TESTAMENT

<i>Genesis</i>	
<i>Exodus and wilderness books (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers Deuteronomy)</i>	
<i>'History' books (Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1&amp;2 Samuel, 1&amp;2 Kings, 1&amp;2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther)</i>	
<i>'Wisdom' books (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes)</i>	
<i>Psalms</i>	
<i>Song of Songs</i>	
<i>'Major' prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel)</i>	
<i>Daniel and the 'Minor' prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)</i>	

NEW TESTAMENT

<i>Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) which tell of the teachings/miracles/death and resurrection of Jesus</i>	
<i>Acts of the Apostles</i>	
<i>Romans, 1&amp;2 Corinthians, Galatians</i>	
<i>Paul's other letters (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1&amp;2 Thessalonians, 1&amp;2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon)</i>	
<i>Hebrews</i>	
<i>Other NT letters (James, 1&amp;2 Peter, 1,2 &amp;3 John, Jude)</i>	
<i>Revelation</i>	

Q2 Which of these books do you read/hear most frequently? [tick up to **3** boxes for OT and **3** for NT]

OLD TESTAMENT

<i>Genesis</i>	
----------------	--

<i>Exodus and wilderness books (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers Deuteronomy)</i>	
<i>'History' books (Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1&amp;2 Samuel, 1&amp;2 Kings, 1&amp;2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther)</i>	
<i>'Wisdom' books (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes)</i>	
<i>Psalms</i>	
<i>Song of Songs</i>	
<i>'Major' prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel)</i>	
<i>Daniel and the 'Minor' prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)</i>	

### NEW TESTAMENT

<i>Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) which tell of the teachings/miracles/death and resurrection of Jesus</i>	
<i>Acts of the Apostles</i>	
<i>Romans, 1&amp;2 Corinthians, Galatians</i>	
<i>Paul's other letters (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1&amp;2 Thessalonians, 1&amp;2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon)</i>	
<i>Hebrews</i>	
<i>Other NT letters (James, 1&amp;2 Peter, 1,2 &amp;3 John, Jude)</i>	
<i>Revelation</i>	

Q3 Which of these books do you remember hearing referred to in church gatherings (e.g. worship services, small/home groups, prayer meetings etc?)

### OLD TESTAMENT

<i>Genesis</i>	
<i>Exodus and wilderness books (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers Deuteronomy)</i>	
<i>'History' books (Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1&amp;2 Samuel, 1&amp;2 Kings, 1&amp;2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther)</i>	
<i>'Wisdom' books (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes)</i>	
<i>Psalms</i>	
<i>Song of Songs</i>	

<i>'Major' prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel)</i>	
<i>Daniel and the 'Minor' prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)</i>	

NEW TESTAMENT

<i>Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) which tell of the teachings/miracles/death and resurrection of Jesus</i>	
<i>Acts of the Apostles</i>	
<i>Romans, 1&amp;2 Corinthians, Galatians</i>	
<i>Paul's other letters (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1&amp;2 Thessalonians, 1&amp;2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon)</i>	
<i>Hebrews</i>	
<i>Other NT letters (James, 1&amp;2 Peter, 1,2 &amp;3 John, Jude)</i>	
<i>Revelation</i>	

Q4 Which, if any, parts, stories or characters in the Bible do you find most helpful/inspiring in your personal time with God?

Q5 Which, if any, parts, stories or characters in the Bible do you think affect the way you behave in your family life?

Q 6 Which, if any, parts, stories or characters in the Bible do you think affect the way your church functions?

Q7 Which, if any, parts, stories or characters in the Bible affect how you behave in everyday life and circumstances.

Q8 Have you ever listened to/read the whole Bible (OT and NT) all the way through, either in book order or chronologically?

Yes/No

Q9 Have you ever tried to memorise Bible verses?

Yes/No

Q10 Do you feel that you could outline any of the following to a friend who'd never been to church ? (tick to indicate yes)

<i>Noah's ark</i>	
<i>David and Bathsheba</i>	
<i>Daniel in the lions' den</i>	
<i>Israel's exile from the land and later return</i>	
<i>The parable of the Good Samaritan</i>	
<i>The feeding of the five thousand</i>	
<i>Jesus' death and resurrection</i>	
<i>The story of Saul/Paul's calling on the road to Damascus</i>	
<i>God's overall purposes</i>	

Q11 When finding out about something do you prefer to [tick as many as apply]:

<i>read a book</i>	
<i>watch a film or documentary</i>	
<i>search the internet for information</i>	
<i>talk to people who know about it</i>	
<i>other (please specify)</i>	

Q12 If a new believer asked you what the Old Testament was about, would you feel confident in briefly explaining what it's about.

Yes/No

Q13 If someone who'd never been to church asked you about the New Testament, would you feel confident in briefly explaining the different parts of it?

Yes/No

**B BIBLE INTERPRETATION AND UNDERSTANDING ('TELLING THE STORY THAT CHANGES THE WORLD')**

Q14 Which, if any, sections of the Bible do you find *easiest* to read/listen to and understand? [tick as many as apply]

**OLD TESTAMENT**

<i>Genesis</i>	
<i>Exodus and wilderness books (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers Deuteronomy)</i>	
<i>'History' books (Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1&amp;2 Samuel, 1&amp;2 Kings, 1&amp;2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther)</i>	
<i>'Wisdom' books (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes)</i>	
<i>Psalms</i>	
<i>Song of Songs</i>	
<i>'Major' prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel)</i>	
<i>Daniel and the 'Minor' prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)</i>	

**NEW TESTAMENT**

<i>Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) which tell of the teachings/miracles/death and resurrection of Jesus</i>	
<i>Acts of the Apostles</i>	
<i>Romans, 1&amp;2 Corinthians, Galatians</i>	
<i>Paul's other letters (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1&amp;2 Thessalonians, 1&amp;2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon)</i>	

<i>Hebrews</i>	
<i>Other NT letters (James, 1&amp;2 Peter, 1,2 &amp;3 John, Jude</i>	
<i>Revelation</i>	

Q 15 Which, if any, sections of the Bible do you find *hardest* to listen to/read and understand? [tick as many as apply]

OLD TESTAMENT

<i>Genesis</i>	
<i>Exodus and wilderness books (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers Deuteronomy)</i>	
<i>'History' books (Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1&amp;2 Samuel, 1&amp;2 Kings, 1&amp;2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther)</i>	
<i>'Wisdom' books (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes)</i>	
<i>Psalms</i>	
<i>Song of Songs</i>	
<i>'Major' prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel)</i>	
<i>Daniel and the 'Minor' prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)</i>	

NEW TESTAMENT

<i>Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) which tell of the teachings/miracles/death and resurrection of Jesus</i>	
<i>Acts of the Apostles</i>	
<i>Romans, 1&amp;2 Corinthians, Galatians</i>	
<i>Paul's other letters (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1&amp;2 Thessalonians, 1&amp;2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon)</i>	
<i>Hebrews</i>	
<i>Other NT letters (James, 1&amp;2 Peter, 1,2 &amp;3 John, Jude</i>	
<i>Revelation</i>	

Q16 Where, in your church's worship services, are you aware of some regular reference to, or quotation from, the Bible? [tick however many apply]

<i>Sermon/homily/teaching slot</i>	
<i>In the words of hymns, anthems or other worship songs</i>	
<i>In public prayer</i>	

Q17 On average, how many public readings of passages of scripture are there, usually, when the whole church meets together (including any responsive liturgies)?

Q18 Regarding the biblical accounts of creation and the scientific account of the formation of the universe and evolution of life, do you think that: [tick as many as apply]

<i>Science is right and the biblical accounts are wrong.</i>	
<i>The biblical accounts are right and Science is wrong.</i>	
<i>The biblical accounts are true but the 'days' refer to much longer time periods.</i>	
<i>The two accounts are different ways of speaking of the same event - both may be true but Science explains 'how' and the Bible explains 'why'.</i>	
<i>Something else (please specify)</i>	

Q19 When Christians disagree on how to interpret the Bible regarding a topic (such as stem cell research, homosexuality, or slavery) do you think that [tick more than one if appropriate]

<i>There is one right answer in all cases and we must keep interpreting the texts until we agree what that is.</i>	
<i>Different things may be right for different people/times/situations.</i>	
<i>On some issues Christians may never agree but they should respect one another and each other's positions.</i>	
<i>Something else (please specify)</i>	

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**C PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION**

Q 20 Has reading the Bible ever directly inspired you to get involved more with activities within church (leading worship, helping with youth etc)?

Yes/No

Q 21 Do you see your major life role (work or home-related) as being a vocation from God?

Yes/No

---

**D NEW ENCOUNTERS WITH THE BIBLE**

Q 22 When thinking through contemporary issues from a Christian position, what resources do you draw on ? (tick as many as apply):

<i>the Bible</i>	
<i>Newspapers</i>	
<i>Christian books on the topic</i>	
<i>Discussion with Christian friends/small groups</i>	
<i>Christian preachers at church or in the media</i>	
<i>Other (specify)</i>	

**E 'ENGAGING OUR COMMUNITIES'**

Q 23 Has reading the Bible ever directly inspired you in any way to get involved more with social or political action, caring/community activities etc within church-based action groups?

Yes/No

If 'yes' please give brief details if possible

Q 24 Has reading the Bible ever directly inspired you in any way to get involved more with social or political action, caring/community activities etc within secular (non-faith-based) action groups?

Yes/No

If 'yes' please give brief details if possible

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**CONCLUSION Pathfinder is about enabling people to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Bible, to grow in their faith, and to take their cultural engagement to a new level.**

Q26 What do you hope to gain from participation in this project?

## Appendix VIII

### PATHFINDER EVALUATION SURVEY 2

**Data Protection:** As stated on the information and consent form that you signed, your data will be held in accordance with the Data Protection Act.

#### ABOUT YOU:

**Name:**

**Church:**

**Age:**      20 and under       21 – 30       31 – 40       41 – 50   
                 51 – 60       61 – 70       70 +   
**Male**       **Female**

Which newspaper do you read?

Highest level of educational qualification awarded?

- 'O'-level/CSE/GCSE
- 'A'-level/NVQ
- bachelor's degree or HND
- Masters/PhD

If you have studied theology or religion past school level please give details.

What church history have you had: i.e. have you always been in the same denomination/type of church?

## ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCE OF *PATHFINDER*

Q1)Below is a list of effects which some people have reported after doing *Pathfinder*. For you, did *Pathfinder* achieve any of the following: [TICK AS MANY AS APPLY]

- an increased understanding of the 'big story' of the Bible
- an increased understanding of the contents of the Bible
- a deeper relationship with God
- deeper relationships with those in the Pathfinder group

Q2)What do you think Pathfinder was trying to achieve?

Q3a)How has your church tradition and experience shaped the way that you encounter the Bible?

3b)What, if anything, did Pathfinder teach you about how to encounter the Bible?

QUESTIONS FOLLOWING UP YOUR RESPONSES TO THE DIAGNOSTIC Q'AIRE

Q4a As a result of doing *Pathfinder* do you feel that any of the following activities are now more important to you in your spiritual growth? [tick as many as apply]

- reading or studying the Bible alone
- meditating on the Bible
- reading or studying the Bible with a small group
- reading or studying the Bible through hearing a sermon

Q5 How confident would you say you are in your Bible knowledge? [tick one]

- very                       fairly                       shaky                       not confident at all

Q3 How often do you use the Bible in ...? [tick one for each topic]

	frequently	sometimes	seldom	never
Private devotions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
To shape your decisions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
To shape your behaviour and attitudes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
To help and counsel others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
To share your faith with others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
To help you understand our world	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q4a As a result of doing *Pathfinder* do you use the following more or less often, to help you engage with the Bible? [tick as many or as few as apply]

	MORE	LESS
Daily Bible reading notes		
Bible dictionary		
Concordance		
Commentaries		
Online resources		
Recorded or radio talks		
Live sermons		
Collective worship songs		
Small group study		
Study Bible		
Other – please indicate		

Q4b Has your attitude towards any of these resources changed as a result of doing Pathfinder and, if so, how?

Q4c Who do you listen to, view on TV, or read, for inspiration in the Christian life e.g. CS Lewis

Q5 How often do you normally read (or listen to) passages from the Bible yourself?  
[tick one]

at least once a day                       several times a week       about once a week   
at least once a month                       less than once a month                       almost never

Q6 Which **three** of the following best describe the way you view the Bible?

- It sets out God's rescue plan for all time
- It provides the basic framework for our relationship with God
- It provides direct moral guidance
- It's a manual for life
- It suggests questions and critical ideas
- It shows us who God is, what he has done and what he is like
- It provides a vision to aim for
- It provides first moral principles which we have to apply
- It shows us God's view of a good society
- It shows us God's priorities
- It shows us how God's people should live, individually and as a community
- It is an important way that God communicates with us to-day
- It ... (please add your own sentence)

Q 7 Please tick if any of these issues mentioned in the diagnostic questionnaire were raised in the course of *Pathfinder* or if doing *Pathfinder* increased your confidence regarding any of them.[Tick as many as apply.]

Subject mentioned	Confidence increased	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Aggressive secularists such as Richard Dawkins
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	All the blood and killing in the Old Testament
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Conflicts between the Bible and today's lifestyles
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Divisions in the church
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	What the Bible says about hell
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Parts are boring
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Seeming inconsistencies in the Bible itself
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	The way in which the Old Testament foretells of Christ

Q8 Do you agree or disagree with these statements about the Bible's influence over you? [tick one per issue]

	Agree strongly	Agree a little	Disagree a little	Disagree strongly
The Bible actively challenges me to live in a way which runs counter to the present culture in Britain	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The Bible actively guides the way I vote in elections	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The Bible is essentially a guide to my private rather than public behaviour (e.g. at home versus at work)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q9 Upon reflection, how recently were you conscious of the Bible affecting or influencing a decision you made? [tick one]

- within a week
  within the last month  
 within the last six months
  I don't recall an instance

QUESTIONS FOLLOWING UP YOUR RESPONSES TO THE CORE GP Q'AIRES

Q10 [Tick whichever apply] During the course of *Pathfinder* have you:

- read or listened to parts of the Bible you hadn't encountered before?
- memorised any parts of the Bible?

Q 11 As a result of working through Pathfinder do you feel more/less able to outline God's overall purposes to a friend who'd never been to church ?

- more
- same
- less

Q12 As a result of working through Pathfinder do you feel more/less able to briefly explain what the Old Testament was about to a new believer?.

- more
- same
- less

Q13 As a result of working through Pathfinder do you feel more/less able to briefly explain the different parts of the New Testament to someone who'd never been to church ?

- more
- same
- less

Q14 Do you feel that there are any parts or aspects of the Bible that you understand more fully, as a result of having worked through *Pathfinder* ?

If so, which?

Q15 Has *Pathfinder* inspired you to get involved more with activities within church (leading worship, helping with youth etc) ?

Yes/No

Q16 Has *Pathfinder* inspired you to get involved more with social or political action, caring/community activities etc within church-based action groups?

Yes/No

If 'yes' please give brief details if possible

Q17 Has *Pathfinder* inspired you to get involved more with social or political action, caring/community activities etc within secular (non-faith-based) action groups?

Yes/No

If 'yes' please give brief details if possible

Q18

a) What expectations did you have at the beginning of *Pathfinder*? What did you hope to gain from it?

b) Where your expectations met? What did you gain from *Pathfinder*?

#### THINKING AHEAD:

Q19 If you were planning the revised version of *Pathfinder*, with 'blocks' of materials such as *Lyfe* or *Making Good Sense* etc:

a) Which existing 'blocks' did your church work through and which would you include? [tick as many as apply]

	Our church did this	I would include this in future
Word in One	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Drama of Scripture	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Making Good Sense of the Bible	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Maperio	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lyfe	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
You've got the Time (recordings of NT)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reading Romans in Context	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Miracles of Jesus (BBC programmes)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The Passion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Meek shall inherit the Earth (Naboth)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Bible as Contemplative Resource	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reel issues	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Contextual Bible Study	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please feel free to make comments here to explain your choices above.

b) How many weeks should each 'block' run for (assuming once/week)?

3      4      5      6      8      10

c) How long should each session be?

1 hour

1½ hours

2 hours

longer

d) What other features of church life are worth 'putting on hold' temporarily in order to make time in the week for Pathfinder?

e) What other topics/activities, if any, should form a block of Pathfinder? i.e. what has been missing this time round?

Q20 Regarding your church and *Bible Society*:

a) Do you think it would be a good idea for your church to develop further its relationship with *Bible Society*? yes/no

b) If yes, would you support any of the following? [tick has many as apply]

a. Handing out 'Word in Action' to church attendees

b. Appointing a BS rep. From within the congregation?

c. Promoting 'Bible a Month'?

d. Committing to an annual donation from the church?

e. Celebrating Bible Sunday?

f. Other (please specify)?

g. (FOR LEADERS) Becoming a 'B the Word' church:

<http://www.biblesociety.org.uk/about-bible-society/what-we-do-in-england-and-wales/be-the-word/>

## Appendix IX

### Example of focus group questions

#### Church E, MAY 2011

This group were first questioned following their completion of MGS and Word in One. Then they were questioned following Maperio and Lyfe. Since then they have done *You've got the Time*, *Miracles of Jesus*, *Drama of Scripture* and *The Meek Shall Inherit*.

#### Remind of history and will start with most recent:

- 1) Firstly, the most recent *The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth*
  - a. Were there any particular aspects, or ideas or concepts that made a particular impact on you, or stick in your mind?
  - b. Would you recommend it to other churches?
- 2) Can I ask you now to reflect on your experiences with *Drama of Scripture*?
  - a. Were there any particular sessions, or ideas or concepts that made a particular impact on you, or stick in your mind?
  - b. Would you recommend *DoS* to other churches?
- 3) Next can I ask you to think about *The Miracles of Jesus*?
  - a. Were there any particular aspects, or ideas or concepts that made a particular impact on you, or stick in your mind?
  - b. Would you recommend *MoJ* to other churches?

- 4)** Can I ask you now to reflect on your experiences with *You've got the Time*?
- a. Were there any aspects of working through the text this way which made a particular impact on you, or that you found helpful?
  - b. Would you recommend it to other churches?
- 5)** Did these elements of Pathfinder, and the Bible overview you did earlier, complement one another? i.e. do all the different parts of Pathfinder hang together well?
- 6)** What are your thoughts about Pathfinder as a whole so far, do you have any general points to make?
- 7)** Do you feel Pathfinder has helped you grow in your understanding of the Bible or helped you encounter the scriptures in a new way? If so, how?
- If didn't think it was a new encounter with the Bible why? Was it because a) they didn't think they encountered the Bible or b)because the 'method' was not new or c) a.n.other?
- 8)** Has it affected your relationship with God in any way?
- 9)** Has it affected your relationship with one another in any way?
- 10)** Has Pathfinder so far affected the way you think about the Church in relation to the society in which we live?

# Appendix X

## Basic interview question set

Suggested interview questions for selected Pathfinder participants at different stages in the project (firstly to be used over the summer, following *Bible overview*, *Mapiero* and *Making Sense*)

1. Why first made you interested in the Pathfinder project?
2. What role do you think the Bible has in your life?
3. Can you give an example of a time when you found the Bible life changing?
  - a. *Was this before or since you started Pathfinder?*
4. What do you do when you find difficult texts in the Bible?
  - a. Obscure ? morally difficult?
5. How often do you find your self struggling or disagreeing with something in the Bible? Can you give an example?
6. In what ways do you feel God communicates with you?
7. Would you say that your relationship with God has changed over the course of the Pathfinder project (so far)<sup>1</sup>?
  - a. If so, in what ways?
8. Would you say that the way you read the Bible has changed over the course of the Pathfinder project (so far)<sup>2</sup>?
  - a. If so, in what ways?
9. Do you think that *you* have changed at all as a result of taking part in Pathfinder? If so, how?
10. If someone asked you if their church should consider working through Pathfinder, what would you say?

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<sup>1</sup> bracketed part to be deleted if interview at end of Pathfinder

<sup>2</sup> bracketed part to be deleted if interview at end of Pathfinder

# APPENDIX XI: Community Bible Studies Facilitator's Guide

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## PATHFINDER CHURCHES PILOT PROJECT

### COMMUNITY BIBLE STUDIES

#### THE FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

##### Introduction to Pathfinder Churches Community Bible Study (PCBS)

These four 'studies' will help you and your group explore two things – in addition to the Bible of course.

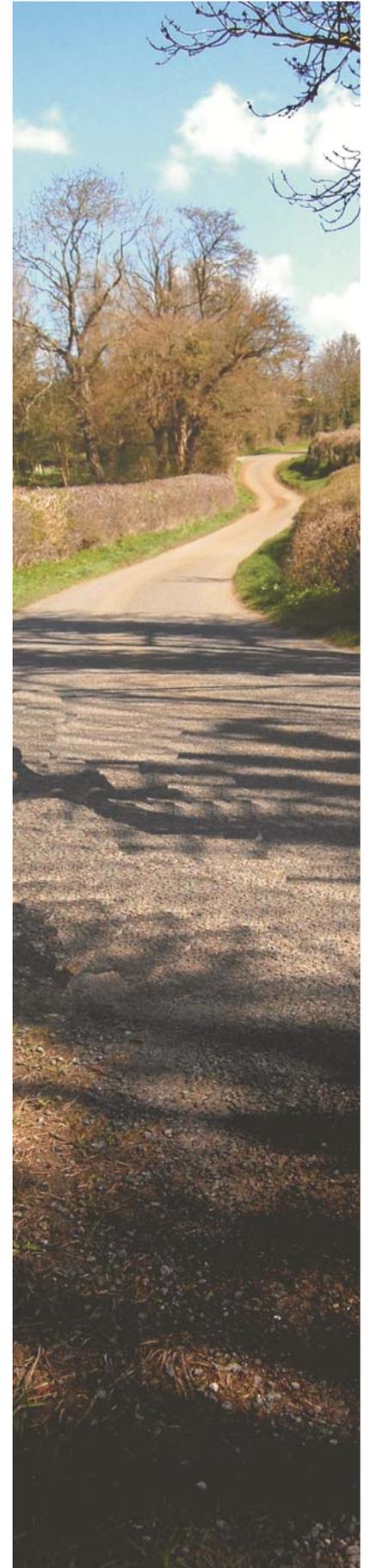
**1) An approach to Bible Engagement called Contextual Bible Study.** This has been largely developed out of the South American 'Base Communities' context. Here groups of ordinary lay people, concerned to bring God's goodness into their own often struggling and oppressed communities, found new ways to approach Scripture which enabled them to explore the Bible and contribute together to its understanding. It has then been developed in Scotland and elsewhere with other marginalised groups – including the churches! However, the main aim was not simply learning but how the Bible could transform them and help them transform their communities for good.

The primary effect of CBS is to stimulate a rich, open, Bible-related conversation but one which engages the everyday issues of the participants. It releases ordinary people's skills, experiences and understanding of life to enliven and illuminate the text. It has been described as 'an exciting way of reading the Bible that both established Christians and those new to the Bible will find insightful and empowering – even life-changing'. Sometimes the change is not only within the group but through the group to change things for the better around them.

**2) The nature of your community and how you could contribute to its flourishing.** This is a natural outflow from Contextual Bible Study (CBS) anyway but the passages we have chosen have taken this into account. Particularly the second set of questions encourage links with the local community. We hope that sharing in these experiences together will help you see your own community with fresh eyes and with God's compassion. In turn we hope this will prepare and sustain you as you start to think about advocating for the Bible in your community.

##### Introduction to the practice of PCBS (Pathfinder Community Bible Study) and (CBS) Contextual Bible Studies

PCBS is an extension or application of CBS. Both involve small group experience in which everyone has significant and valuable insights. This is true even if you know very little about the Bible. Each passage will be introduced and then it is how **you** respond to it that matters. Those who



have background biblical knowledge are welcome to share this, but the focus is on how the text speaks to each of us in our own context. This approach does not value scholarly insights for their own sake, but where they are helpful to the groups' understanding they are to be welcomed.

Each group does, however, have a facilitator to help ensure that everyone can make a contribution, as well as provide the introduction and background information if this is helpful and steer the group through the process. The facilitator's role is very important.

## The Facilitator

Each group needs a facilitator. (Some groups prefer to have two so that the facilitators can model the freedom to converse and disagree respectfully, thus setting the tone for everyone!)

The facilitator's role is quite different to that of a normal Bible study or house group leader's role. In both contexts the facilitator or leader is there to encourage everyone to share their thoughts and feelings, to help quieten those who want to dominate and to value everyone's contribution, even those we may not agree with.

But the nature of CBS means that appearing to be 'the expert' and to have lots of background knowledge is **not** a requirement. The focus is on what's in the text itself and especially on what it says to each person present, rather than what might lie behind the text. That kind of historical background can be useful but if there are people with this kind of knowledge it is important that it is shared in the context of the conversation to support and **serve** the conversations the group are having. So we have provided a brief introduction to the passage – but use this as and when it helps the conversation, rather than necessarily giving it all at the beginning. If others have this kind of knowledge, encourage them to share it, but again ensure that this does not detract from the main purpose.

The main purpose of the facilitator is to enable everyone to participate, sense their contributions are valued by the group and to create a context where everyone can allow themselves to be changed, even challenged by the Bible text and the conversation that develops. There are no right/wrong answers. The facilitator may need to remind group members of this. Some want to give the right answer and some look for the security that definitive answers provide. But that is not how CBS works.

## The two modes

There are two main ways or modes in which the group operates.

**1) As a plenary group i.e. involving the whole group listening and talking together.**

**2) In small groups with no more than 3 people, when feedback for the whole group is often asked for.** In the questions sections these are marked as '3s' and 'FB' for feedback. Those questions which are unmarked are for plenary comment.

If you sense that your group would work better in the 3s or plenary (when the notes indicate otherwise) then you are free to change; but try to ensure this is a group decision. However, always ensure there is a good mixture of both modes.

## Engaging with the text.

CBS requires us to read the Bible text slowly and with deep attention. As we read it we seek to engage it not only with our minds but also with our imaginations and feelings. The facilitator can help this. If there are people who find reading difficult, then encourage a good reader to read the passage out loud – but to do it slowly. From time to time it may help to ask the group to re-read the text or a part of it relevant to the questions.

## Helping the group converse

Some groups will find that using the *Opening activity* not only breaks the ice but stimulates the conversations – this may be particularly helpful for those who are more reserved. Try not to allow this to take more than 10 minutes. It might be appropriate to use this once through the series, each time or not at all. If you use this *Opening activity* it can be used before the Scripture passage is read and introduced or after this and before the questions.

*Some helpful phrases* to use are

Thank you for sharing that/raising that...

What do others think?

What do you know about...? What do you think...? What do you feel...? How do you imagine this...?

*Be aware of people's body language* – are they hurt, withdrawing, getting angry, bored, etc. Try and keep the emotional temperature level, sustaining and positive!

*Always seek for the group's involvement* e.g. by asking them are they ready to move on. It is however the facilitator's role to be the time keeper. It is important to start and end as near to the agreed time as possible. You don't have to cover all the questions but please ensure you use them from both sections, i.e. Contextual and Communal.

Please wherever possible use a *flip chart to record* the main points from each person's contribution – even if only by one word. Whenever possible ask someone else to be the 'scribe'! (Flip chart sheets can be used in the 3's as well as the Plenary Groups). This enables the group to return to topics and explore some issues later. However, it will not normally be appropriate to record personal stories in any way. If you think it would be, always ask permission of the person.

## The CBS process

- We meet together in a relaxed environment.
- We will ensure everyone knows everyone else.
- The facilitator will **read** (or ask someone to read) **the set passage from the Bible**. It is helpful if everyone can have a Bible an easy to understand version (recent research has shown clearly that the Good News Bible is easier for ordinary people to understand than the NIV – but the

choice is yours). It might be better for some people if the passage is photocopied, rather than read from Bibles.

- People will then be given **time to read it again** themselves.
- The facilitator may **explain some background** to help understand how this passage fits into the Bible context. Anyone can ask for this kind of clarification. But the primary purpose of this is to help us understand the passage better, not to cram us with information.
- It is good to read the passage out again – quite slowly.
- The facilitator may then ask people either to call out (and write down on a flip chart for all to see) ideas, words or pictures that attract each person's attention. These can be discussed within the group.
- Then people will be asked to raise issues about any parts of the passage (including individual words) that they don't understand.
- It might be helpful to invite people to read the passage again themselves.
- NOW it is time to look at the questions which relate to each week's passage.

## SESSION 1 – Luke 4.16–30 Jesus in his home town

### Facilitator's introduction (to be used as and when it helps the group)

This passage only occurs in Luke's Gospel. It is set at the outset of Jesus' public preaching ministry, following his baptism and temptations, and yet it presupposes a considerable amount of activity already.

It provides the 'mission statement' for Jesus' ministry and so is very important for us in understanding what he believed he was to do and who he saw himself to be.

Nazareth is the town where Jesus grew up (see Matthew 2.19–23, Luke 4.16).

The Synagogue was the place where the Jewish community gathered for discussions and worship.

It was normal for a respected man to be invited to read from one of the scrolls.

The passage Jesus reads is taken from Isaiah 60.1–2; The Book of Isaiah is one of the 'Great Prophets'. The others are Jeremiah and Ezekiel. There is also 'The Book of the twelve' i.e. the so called 'Minor Prophets'.

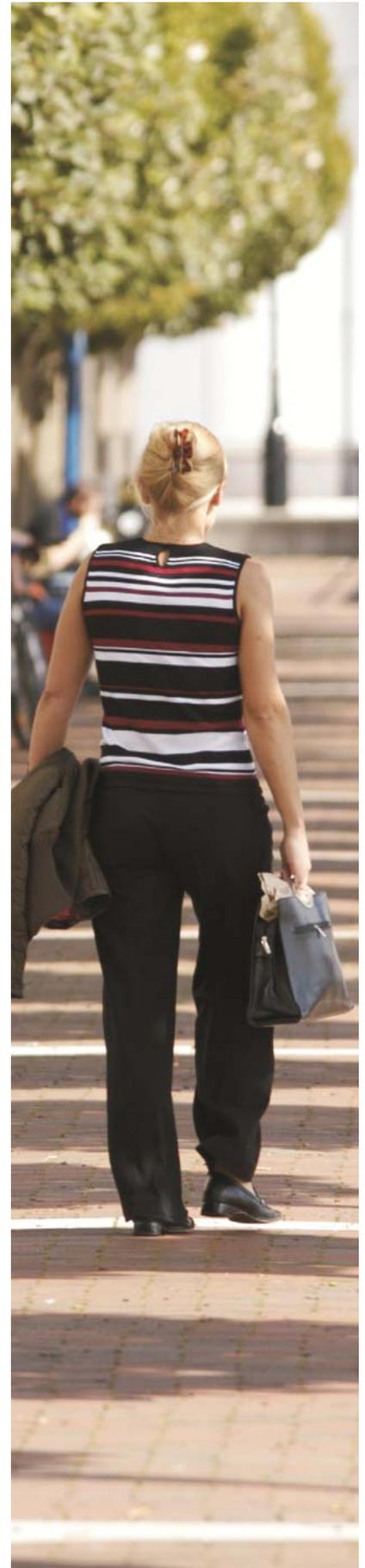
Elijah was a prophet whom God used to challenge his people, Israel, to return to full commitment to him. He announced a drought, which lasted over three years and then there was a contest on Mount Carmel between the four hundred prophets of Baal – the foreign deity of the ruling monarch – and Elijah. Jesus is referring to the events during the drought. You can read about all of this in 1 Kings 17.1–24.

Elisha was Elijah's successor. He was involved in many incidents with the Syrians who were the surrounding nation who oppressed Israel. You can read this story in 2 Kings 5.1–14. Naaman was a Syrian army captain.

The key point here is that both the widow and Naaman were non-Jews. That was what really upset Jesus' hearers! But there are many other factors, which will emerge as people grapple with the text from their perspectives.

### Opening activity (optional)

Invite the group to list on A4 sheets all the ways they can think of to 'get the message out' to their community – rural area, town, city. Invite them to imagine that their church (maybe along with others) was going to open a food bank, or start a support event for carers, or set up a credit union or offer a night shelter for the homeless. What communications 'vehicles' could they use? These might range from getting on the regional TV news programme, or a leaflet drop to use of viral electronic media. Try and come up with ten different approaches between you. What would the group's top two be?



**Connection** – Jesus was getting the message out when he went to the synagogue and preached.

### Contextual Bible Study questions

- What jumps off the page at you/what strikes you about this passage? (3s FB)
- Identify the different stages in this story and the different 'voices' in this story
- Is there anything that is not clear to you in this passage?
- What might have changed the people's response from amazement and affirmation to wanting to get rid of Jesus? (3s FB)
- Does it help or hinder that Jesus was a 'local lad'?
- How does this passage make you feel? (3s FB)

### Community questions

**1) This event was likely to be remembered in Nazareth for many years (perhaps this is how Luke heard about it).** What are the 'remarkable' stories that our town/community remembers? Do we have famous people that originate in, grew up in, or became associated with our town/community? (3s FB)

**2) How do we (in our group/church) view these people?** How much do we know about them? Do we need to find out more?

How have we (as a civic community) commemorated them - e.g. in a rural community this could be because of a historic family line and an estate associated with it, in more urban ones through blue plaques, statues, streets named after them? Should we be doing anything else?

**3) Jesus announced that he would bring several different kinds of help (see 4.18–19).** What help might our community really value today? How might we explain the help that Jesus offers in language that makes sense in our community? Is there anything we could do to bring Jesus' help to our community? (3s)

**4) Jesus clearly offended people by his later conversation (4.23–29).** Is there anything that our heroes might challenge us (church and wider community) about? What from our Christian story might offend people in our area? Who, in particular, would be offended?

### Action point

Decide what offer of service or help you, as a group *would recommend* that your church undertakes to continue the mission of Jesus. (This means you don't actually have to make the recommendation – but you can if you want!)

## SESSION 2 – Acts 2.1–18

### Facilitator's introduction

This passage is the famous account of how the Holy Spirit first came to the early Christians. Jesus promised them that they would receive the Holy Spirit (whom Jesus calls 'The other helper' – i.e. like Jesus was) after he ascended. This event takes place during the Pentecost feast – a key Jewish festival for which thousands of Jews from all around the world made the journey back to Jerusalem.

'All the believers' – we know there were around 120 of them (see Acts 1.15)

Galilee was where most of the disciples came from. They were recognisable because of their accent – it was a 'northern' one.

'Our own native languages' – most people would have understood Greek and or Latin – but that is not the point here – it is their own local languages that they can hear.

A Bible map might be helpful if people want to look at where all the countries of origin were.

Peter was one of the twelve disciples chosen by Jesus to continue his mission for him after his death, resurrection and ascension. Jesus selected Peter to be their leader.

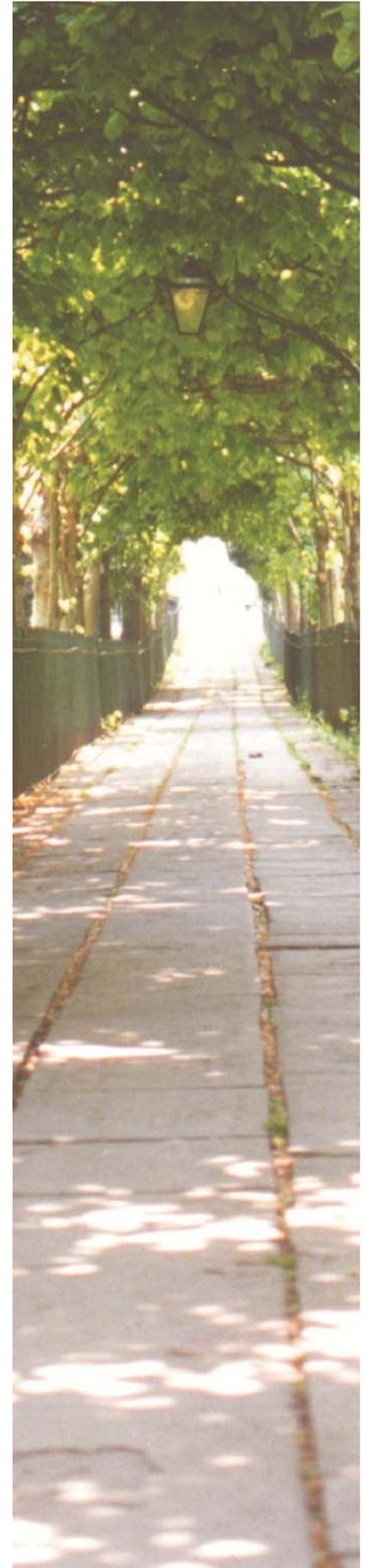
### Opening activity (optional)

Prepare a large sheet of paper with a small circle in the middle (put the name of your area, town or city in it). Around this draw a large circle. Invite the group to consider – say over the last 100 years – the different people groups that have come to your place. What prompted them to leave their 'homelands' (e.g. poverty, war, natural disaster), what drew them to your area (e.g. particular types of job opportunities, the amenities)? Put the headlines for each group on post-it notes. Then place the post-it notes within the larger circles – using it as a compass – to indicate where the different groups might mainly live.

**Connection** – Jerusalem drew people to it because of the temple and the religious life it offered. Pentecost deepened and 'recycled' their ethnic diversity.

### Contextual Bible Study questions

- What jumps off the page at you/what strikes you about this passage? (3s FB)



- Is there anything that is not clear to you in this passage?
- How are the people in the crowd described, e.g. who are they, where are they from, what reactions do they experience etc?
- What unites and what divides the people in the crowd? (3s FB)
- The people hear, each in their own language, the disciples speaking about 'the great things God has done!' (GNB) or 'God's deeds of power'. What does your Bible say at verse 11? What do you think they would have learnt about?

### Community questions

1) **This story mentions lots of different types of people were living in Jerusalem.** (There is no need to re-write the list in verses 9 – 11! However it is worth thinking about the different ethnic and religious backgrounds these reflect). What different kinds of people live in our community and what are their distinctives?

2) **Peter shows a wide understanding of the diversity of the people there in Jerusalem.** How could we ensure we know as much as possible about the different people in our community? Share personal experiences and make additional suggestions. (3s FB)

3) **What kind of things divides people from different backgrounds?** To what extent do these 'dividing factors' affect our community, our church, ourselves? What suggestions are there as to how these divisions might be limited or even overcome in this passage? What can we (or are we doing) do a) to affirm and support those who seek to bridge the divisions b) to contribute ourselves?

4) **One alienating experience is to be laughed at (see 2.13).** Another is not being understood because of language barriers. What other attitudes and actions can cause us to feel separated hurt or angry towards people who see us as different? Peter did not allow this sense of being 'laughed at' to prevent him from sharing God's Good News with everyone. Have such concerns ever hindered us? How can we prepare ourselves to cope with such experiences? (3s FB)

### Action point

Review the steps your church has taken to help integrate people with different backgrounds, experiences and tastes over the past 3 years. What else might you do?

## SESSION 3 – Proverbs 17.14–26

### Facilitator's introduction

The Book of Proverbs belongs to a strand of the Old Testament called 'Wisdom literature'. Much of this book is a collection of short sayings, often apparently based on careful observation of human behaviour, but arranged in a rather ad hoc way. Some of them are commands – as here in the second half of verse 14. Sometimes they appear to be observations of nature. Often they seem common to many cultures, and so they enable us to respond (not necessarily with agreement!) easily to them.

The context for them is the sense that because God is the creator of the world, we can observe and respond to the patterns of behaviour which are right. Many of them tell us that the beginning of wisdom is a deep respect for God, so these proverbs are not simply good advice; they belong within the community of faith. Often they are presented as the advice of a father to his son, so they are also relational and not abstract.

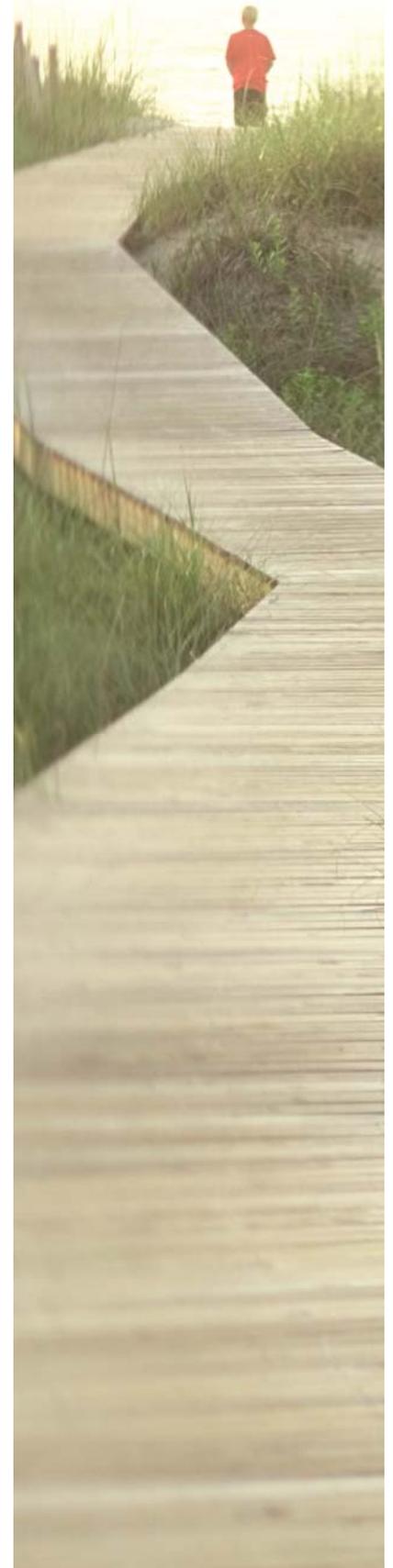
### Opening activity (optional)

Hand out sheets of paper and invite people in pairs to write down up to 5 popular 'proverbs' or sayings they recall. Then invite one pair to read one from their selection out. After each 'proverb' ask the other pairs if they also had the same one – if so collect them in. Then ask another pair to do the same – until all the sheets are collected. 1) Compile a list of popularity by counting the sheets. 2) Consider if any seem contradictory or unrealistic.

**Connection** – looking at our common sayings as preparation for looking at the selection from the Bible.

### Contextual Bible Study questions

- Is there anything that is not clear to you in this passage?
- Which proverb do you find most memorable, which do you most agree with and which do you most disagree with? (On your own, then in 3s then plenary.)
- Pick the most popular for each category indicated below (in bold):
- Most **memorable** – why is this so memorable?
- Most **agreed with** – why is this so? What do other people think about this one?
- Most **disagreed with** – why is this so? What do other people feel about this one?



- Most **contemporary/relevant** – why is this so? What aspects of life does it relate to? What might its impact on us be?
- What community activities and social justice issues do you notice in this passage? (3s FB)

### Community questions

1) **There are several references to wise/wisdom and fools/folly (see verses 16, 21, 24, 25).** What attitudes and behaviour are considered 'wise' in our locality? Do you think the community views us as 'wise' or 'foolish' and why? How does (or might) our church offer wisdom to those who are struggling with life's challenges?

2) **This passage refers to arguments in verse 14 – how do you respond to arguments?** Where do you think arguments are most likely to happen in our community e.g. in the home or outside the pub on a Friday night or where? Have you ever been involved in serious arguments – what can happen in them? How can we as a church help those who are being damaged by arguments? (3s FB)

3) **What does this passage have to say about 'justice'?** Do you think the insights are valid today? Have you ever been involved in the justice system 1) as an 'accused person'; what was it like?

2) As a magistrate, witness or juror; what was it like? 3) Professionally e.g. police officer, solicitor or court usher? What can we do to help and support people involved in the justice system?

4) **Verses 21 and 25 deal with the pain that children can cause their parents.** What causes parents pain today? How do parents cause their children pain? What resources are there in our community to help in these circumstances? How might the church offer help? (3s FB)

### Action point

Either at the end of your meeting or, if the group prefer, during the week, spend time praying for parents and children (you can include grandparents too!) – especially over the issues which cause them pain.

## SESSION 4 – 1 Corinthians 1.26–31; 6.9–11

### Facilitator's introduction

Corinth was an important Greek city and port. It was prosperous as a trading city and was very cosmopolitan. Paul brought the Gospel to Corinth (see Acts 18.1–18) although there may have been some believers there already. As usual he had to leave the synagogue and concentrate on the Gentiles. The people in the church in Corinth were a rich mixture, but as this passage indicates mostly from the poorer parts of society.

### Opening activity (optional)

Provide (or ask the group when you last met) to bring copies of magazines or newspapers. Provide scissors and glue, together with a large (flip chart) piece of paper. The task is to construct a collage of people who the media reckon to be influential and popular – e.g. TV, music and film celebrities, sports stars, politicians, possibly national or local 'heroes'.

Connection – Paul refers the Corinthians to those who were 'influential and popular, in their culture.

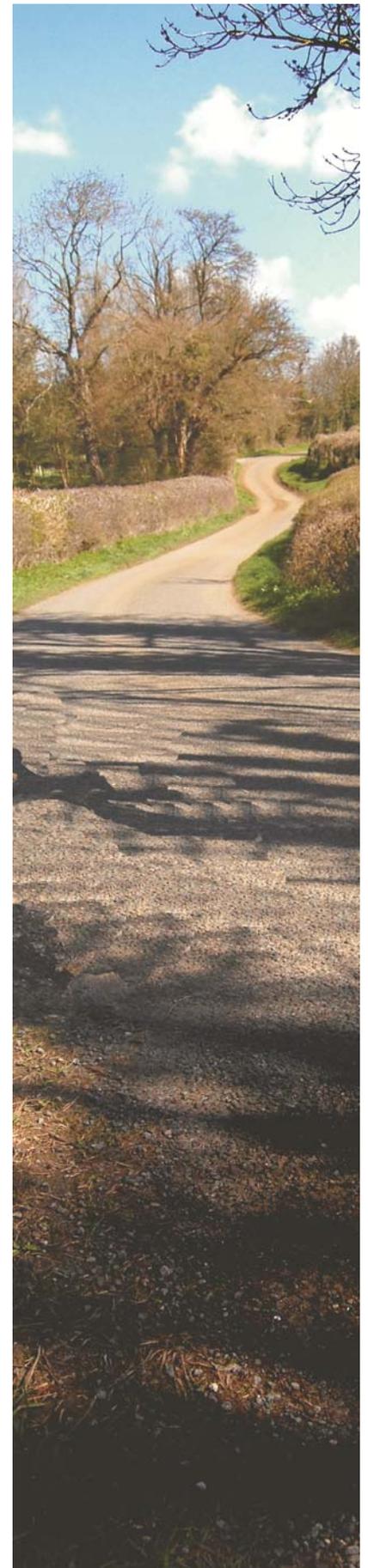
### Contextual Bible Study questions

- What jumps off the pages at you/what strikes you about this passage? (3s FB)
- Is there anything that is not clear to you in this passage?
- Who do you think would have counted as the wise, powerful and high social standing people in Corinth? Who comes to mind in our community? How significant do you think such people are for the wellbeing of our communities?
- Re-read 1 Corinthians 6.9–11. How comfortable would you feel sitting in church with people described here – note Paul says, 'Some of you were like that' (verse 11). (3s FB)

### Community questions

**1) What social classes are represented in our church community?** Are there other kinds of differences in our church – such as younger and older; traditionalists and innovators; ethnic or racial differences? How do you think you get on together? Is there anything we can do to improve this?

**2) With how many of the kinds of people described in 1 Corinthians 6.9–11 do we have contact?** Does our church have contact with any of these? If so, do we provide support services for them? (3s FB)



3) Who provides support services for these kinds of people in our community?

4) Do any people from the church work or help in these services?

5) What other groups of people can be marginalised in our society? Are people from these groups part of our church? Can we help them? Should our church be doing something specific to help one or more of these groups of people?

### Action point

Agree, as a group, to share some of the insights that these Pathfinder Community Bible Studies have generated with others in your church, perhaps by a newsletter article, a talk or by leading a prayer session on them.

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