



Vision4Life
Transforming the church

transformed by the Bible



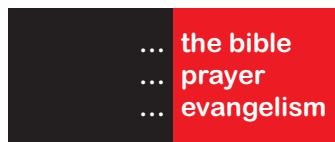
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conversations about



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Introduction

The vision

This is the first of four conversations which congregations across the United Reformed Church are having during 2008. *Vision4Life* follows on from *Catch the Vision* and was introduced in 2007 at General Assembly. It grew from conversations between people from across the denomination, who got inspired by exploring the Bible and prayer, and sharing their faith stories.

Churches planning local initiatives such as Hope '08 are encouraged to try including elements of *Vision4Life* within these events, and not to see it as being in competition with them.

What follows is not a Bible Study but an invitation to talk about how we use the Bible in church and in our everyday lives. The aim is to hear people's honest views of how well the Bible sustains their Christian life and witness now. How is it helping their church family, both when they're together and apart? The four sections – Remember, Reflect, Respond and Refresh – are followed by stories under the heading of 'Life'.

This material is for use by whoever leads the session – probably ministers or Elders. If leadership can be shared by several people then so much the better. Group members will each need a photocopy of the worksheets at the back of the booklet.

Please visit the website www.vision4life.org.uk for other *Vision4Life* materials including worship.

How to use the material

The most important role for leaders is to give everyone the best chance to talk openly and honestly about their story and experience. Set ground rules at the start – about listening to each other, respecting each other's views, encouraging everyone to speak and not letting anyone dominate.

For the opening 'Remember' section of this material there is a worksheet (pp 20-21) to photocopy and give out to everyone taking part. There are suggested timings for each section, eg: 5, 10 if you are using the material in one 90 minute session, which may begin and end with worship.

Here are some suggestions for using the material. Please choose any which suit your setting and feel free to adapt or add to them:

- Conversations woven into Sunday services
- Specially-arranged discussion groups at church or in people's homes (or a mixture)
- Pairs of Elders organising home discussion groups for those on their lists
- A church day conference for all four conversations, or two half day sessions
- People offering to host one or more discussions with a meal in their home
- Weaving these conversations into existing groups and events
- Conversational events with shared food at your church
- Parallel events for different parts of the church family such as young people
- Finding ways to include the housebound and those with mobility difficulties.



Notes to assist you
are in the margins



section one:
remember

'I will call to mind the
deeds of the LORD;
I will remember your
wonders of old.'

Psalm 77 verse 11

How well do you know the Bible? 5

Give out the worksheets and then ask everyone to answer the first question – ‘**how well do you know your Bible?**’ Encourage them to answer quickly. Then, invite anyone to share their answer and see if it rings bells with others.

Earlier understandings remembered 10

Take a little longer with the whole group to explore people’s earliest memories about the Bible. Invite people to tell stories of their first encounters with the Bible and Bible stories. You might use some of these questions to help get them started:

- Which stories made a big impression on them and why?
- As they started out in Christian faith, what did they think the Bible was?
- What did they think was good about the Bible?
- Have they ever learned to recite passages or texts and if so can they remember any?
- When thinking about Jesus, what kind of person did they picture?
- What image did they have of where Jesus lived?

Individual Bible journeys recalled 10

Now ask the group to take their worksheets and form twos or threes. Explain that they will be exploring the journey they have taken in life from their own first encounter with the Bible as a text for faith, whenever that was, to where they are now. In the small group, everyone can tell their own story of how well the Bible has travelled with them through life.

This section has two purposes. The first aim is to get people remembering back over their own relationship with the Bible. The second is to get them talking about these memories in a relaxed way with the group. Encouraging people to talk openly, honestly and freely about the Bible and faith, as they experience them, is at the heart of the whole process.



Remember, this exercise is a key part of helping people to share their faith experience in a relaxed and understanding atmosphere. Not everyone is comfortable with this, so be encouraging.

They can also tell each other how their perception of the Bible has changed over the years.

- What were the triggers for these changes?
- Has the Bible become richer and more valued or more remote and less relevant to their lives?

If there's time, each group should also give everyone a chance to say how they now picture Jesus and the world he lived in.

Be sure to tell the group before they begin that there are some starter questions to get their discussion going on the worksheet.

Allow a little more time for this exercise but not so much that it feels daunting. Be willing to extend the time if people seem to be talking well and make sure that everyone has had a chance to share their own story before the group comes back together.



This exercise needs two facilitators – one to write up and the other to interact with those giving feedback and with the whole group. The aim is to share and record what people have said, not to correct or judge their comments. It's about giving them an affirming welcome, and checking you understand what they mean, as you list their contributions.

Sharing our Bible journeys 5

Now gather the group together again and ask people to share a flavour of the things they said in their twos and threes. Try to build up a shared picture of the Bible journeys people have taken through life.

You may find it valuable to keep a note of what people have shared, using whatever method you wish, whether a flipchart or electronic means.



section two:
reflect

**'If there is any excellence and
anything worthy of praise,
think about these things.'**

Philippians Chapter 4 verse 8

This section is to get people reflecting on their relationship with the Bible. As before, the answers are important, but so is the process. How well are people responding and sharing? Is the process relaxed and encouraging?



Try to allow time to hear some of the argument, especially if a particular passage or book generates different opinions. Be prepared for people to voice some strong opinions and for the sparks to fly.

Describing the Bible now 5

Still with the whole group, gather ideas and phrases to describe how people see the Bible now.

- How do they think the Bible works as 'God's Word'?
- Is it all 'The Word of God' or are there other voices too?
- How does God speak to us through this library of books?

Is the whole Bible helpful? 10

Offer the group three or four passages (see suggestions on the next page) from the Bible, some familiar and some unfamiliar, and invite people to score these out of 10 as to how helpful they are as a guide for Christian living.

- 10 points = absolutely vital
- 3 points = keep it but not sure it helps much
- 1 point = wouldn't notice if it went

When the scores are all in, invite people to reflect together on what this exercise says about our use of the Bible.

Do this as a whole group, with people calling out until a broad agreement is achieved. You will need someone to act as scorer.

It would be a good idea to prepare a chart of the passages you intend to use before the session.

These are some suggestions for parts of the Bible people could score together. You may think of others:

- The Parable of the Good Samaritan:
Luke 10:25-37
- The Third Epistle of John
- The Book of Leviticus
- The Story of Samson: Judges 16
- The Story of Micaiah ben Imlah: 1 Kings 22:1-40
- The Book of Ruth
- The Psalms
- The Book of Proverbs
- The Massacre of the Innocents: Matthew 2:16-18
- The Book of Revelation
- 1 Chronicles
- Song of Songs
- Paul's Epistle to Philemon
- The Story of the Woman taken in adultery
John 8:1-11*

(*the New English Bible prints it separately)



section three: respond

'The one who hears God and
does not act is like one who
built a house on the ground
without a foundation.'

Luke Chapter 6 verse 49

Making the Bible work for us 10

Here is a chance to respond to what has been said so far, in the light of what the group has shared.

- Does the way they understand the Bible relate to their daily lives and experiences?
- Do they think their church needs to refresh and change the way people engage with the Bible?
- If so, how does it do this?

How typical of our congregation are we? 5

Ask the group to consider what they have shared about experiences of the Bible, and how it works for them now, in the light of those members of the congregation who are not present.

Would those others have agreed with the views expressed in the group or not?



This is going to be the crunch question to allow the whole process to proceed in any church.



This is actually quite an important question. *Vision4Life* needs to encourage as many people as possible in each fellowship to engage more deeply with the Bible – not just the ‘faithful few’.



section four:
refresh

'Be not hearers who forget
but doers who act – they will
be blessed in their doing.'

James Chapter 1 verse 25

Any ideas as to how we do this? 5

Ask if the group want their church to sign up for *Vision4Life*, which includes the Bible year starting in Advent 2008. The website www.vision4life.org.uk will have a menu of practical suggestions and materials from the autumn onwards. This will not be all that's needed for every church but it should allow local groups to come up with their own programme, suited to the needs around them.

Meanwhile, if people wonder how they might start refreshing their engagement with the Bible now, here are some suggestions. Maybe they do some of these already:

- Is the Bible an indoor book only? Could a group go outdoors to talk about Bible stories that happened in the open air? In the local park, a churchyard, a shopping arcade or the town centre you might ask what things around you link with your chosen story and what are different.
- Could you ask people to share their favourite psalm or story about Jesus – perhaps during worship?
- Might you choose a Bible theme for games and quizzes at a church supper? What about Biblical versions of panel games or charades?
- Can you get people spotting the Bible storylines in soap opera plots? There will be plenty of them.

This is a chance for the group to stop, draw breath, and consider how their conversation so far could relate to what their church does now and might do in the future.



life

'Our common stock of biblical knowledge is running down and we need to replenish it and we can do so.'

Revd Dr Stephen Orchard,
General Assembly Moderator 2007-8

A book for everyone 5

For most of the last century, academic study of the Bible focussed on a number of literary, social and historical questions. These were important and interesting but they always seemed to leave the text firmly in the hands of the specialist scholars. In church life, biblically-trained ministers got cast in the role of resident experts in most congregations, those who would be likely to know the Bible better than anyone else. Bible studies could all too easily become a chance for the minister to correct the wrong ideas of those who turned up, or deliver a monologue to them, with no space for questions.

Over the last thirty years there have been huge changes in the sorts of questions academic Bible scholars ask about the text. Now they are interested in story, the plot, the characters and in what the text might be trying to say to its hearers. Suddenly, being able to understand and discuss a TV 'soap' or a novel becomes as important a skill for understanding a Bible text as knowing the history or the social background.

This means that people can be encouraged to make exciting connections between their own world and the world of the Bible story. They can even get used to crossing back and forth between the two, using each world to challenge and enrich their understanding of the other. Suddenly, it's time to rediscover the Bible as the People's Book!

Four stories of people using the Bible 10

At this point you might offer one or more of the following four stories of people reclaiming the Bible. You can decide which to share with your group or you may think of others to encourage and inspire people.

This section can be shared as a trigger for further thought. It gives a brief overview of the way biblical scholarship developed over the last century. It may help encourage people to reclaim the Bible as a book for them. You may have other ideas for how to do that. Try not to overdo this or stop people from wrestling with the text for themselves.

'You'll be surprised how intrigued with the Bible the locals can be'

Lecturing in the pub

A university lecturer in the south west of England, was so impressed with the new ways of reading the Bible which some scholars have developed, that she decided to try this herself. She started a project to see how Bible stories might work in the everyday world around her. Working with various groups in a number of towns and villages she now shares Bible stories in places like the local pub. She starts by asking, 'What jumps out at you from this story?' and she lets the mixing of Bible and life take off from there. You'd be surprised how intrigued people are with the Bible, and how relevant its stories seem to be to their own story.

Exploring a good mystery

Borrowing an idea from a good teacher, one minister asked a group to see what they could remember of the parable of the Lost Sheep. People were frightened at first, as if it was a memory test they might fail, but when they got going they remembered plots, settings, phrases and hymns. With these clues, they worked out that we have two versions of the parable written for different communities. Some people couldn't think of this story without remembering Psalm 23 or the way John's gospel has Jesus calling himself the Good Shepherd. The discussion had all the thrill of a good mystery and opened up the question of what a story like this might say today. If even the Bible has stories which have already been retold for new communities and times, then what's stopping us from doing that now?

'It's not a memory test'

Connecting with worship

What happens when a new minister comes to a church and offers to lead a Bible study? Typically, only a handful of people turn up and they do so mainly out of loyalty. That was the story in one Cheshire congregation, too, but in this case the Monday evenings have now taken an interesting turn. The group starts by talking about the previous day's sermon, and then reads the Bible passages for the coming Sunday. People share their questions and responses, and the session always ends by asking, 'So what?' Answering that question has got people to think about the difference what they've shared and discovered could make in their everyday lives. It is helping them to see the value of reading and talking about the Bible together. Now there's a Tuesday afternoon group too, and more than a third of the congregation go to one of the sessions regularly. People say it means they get far more out of Sunday sermons as well.

The Bible we carry around in us

At a church in one of the poorest parts of Sheffield, people use the Bible in worship without needing to open the book and read the words. This began by choosing a story most people already knew and inviting people to tell those around them what they could remember of it. When everyone had done their talking in small groups the whole congregation would be invited to chip in with the bits they remembered, and so put the whole story together. It didn't matter if people couldn't read, or remembered bits from other stories, or left out bits that were in the text. What mattered was that the Bible came alive – the Bible that people carry around inside them and use every day. The congregation made real connections between the Bible story and their lives; sermons became dialogues; worship really made sense.

'What difference does this make to our everyday lives as Christians?'

'Tell each other the story as you remember it'

worksheet

transformed by the Bible

HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW THE BIBLE?

In this box, please put a word or phrase that describes how well you think you know your Bible:



INDIVIDUAL BIBLE JOURNEYS RECALLED

In your small group, take turns to tell the story of your own individual 'Bible journey' ...

Share your earliest memory of the Bible and how you thought it worked.

Tell how your picture of the Bible, and how it works, has changed over the years – whether this change has been gradual or sudden.

Now try to say what you think caused your ideas about the Bible to change, if they have done, or why they've stayed the same if that's the case.

If there's time, go round again and allow each person to try answering the following questions:

- How has your picture of Jesus changed since you first began your faith journey?
- How has your picture of the world where Jesus lived changed over that period?



Hearing back from you...

We hope that our ideas have helped you to have a useful discussion and that your church is considering engaging with the next three years of *Vision4Life*.

A lot of *Vision4Life* materials, including downloadable versions of the words and images in this booklet, will be on the website www.vision4life.org.uk as well as worship ideas. Please use the website if you can and let us know if having printed materials as well is really important to you.

Comments, stories and suggestions on our website:

www.vision4life.org.uk

or send an email to:

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or write to us at:

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Many thanks from the *Vision4Life* steering group

