

The Word Speaks!

The Bible in Worship in an Inclusive Church

The church is a story-formed community... Baptism is our adoption into a story, God's re-creative story, which is recorded in the community's story book (the Holy Scriptures), incarnate in the community's life, and made present through its sacramental rituals, especially the Holy Eucharist. Each of us also has a story... In the context of our liturgies we are initiated into God's story and we appropriate its significance for our lives so that it might influence our common life day by day... Our most important and fundamental task as Christians is to learn God's story.

John Westerhoff, *A Pilgrim People*, Minneapolis: Seabury Press, 1984.

How does God speak to us through the Bible in worship today? From what Bible should we read, preach and teach?

As a denomination, the Uniting Church recommends the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) as the preferred translation for preaching and teaching. This is for several good reasons, including the calibre of the Biblical scholars involved in the translation, the approach to translation and the ecumenical acceptance of this version. Thus it is recommended as the norm for reading in worship, as a reference for preaching, and for study in English-speaking settings.

Does this mean that the NRSV is the only version of the Bible that can be used in worship?

As John Westerhoff suggests, our task as a church is not simply to read texts aloud in worship, but to let our lives be shaped by God's Story. How does Christ, the Living Word, speak through the Scriptures to diverse Christian communities today? Is this question mainly about which translation we do or don't use? Given the diverse nature of communities of faith, we can adopt a broader view than 'one translation fits all' for several reasons.

An inclusive church recognises that its members may include diverse ages, abilities and languages. This diversity includes:

- People of different ages, from young children to the very elderly
- People of different cultures whose first language is not necessarily English
- People of differing abilities, including intellectual or cognitive abilities, as well as literacy abilities

"If we want to raise children to rejoice in being members of the Christian community, what we do in worship is critically important."

Marva Dawn, *Is It A Lost Cause?*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997.

Becoming through Belonging

The first question regarding version or translations of Scripture is "To whom is this translation addressed? For whom is it intended?" Any text has a 'reading level'. Based on the complexity of language and concepts, specialist educators can estimate the age at which a competent reader can comprehend a text. To put it simply, the NRSV was not translated at a child's level of reading comprehension.

There are, broadly speaking, two views about the place of children in worship. One is that children will "grow into" adult understanding by participating along with adults. We shouldn't "dumb down" our language simply for their sake. Marva Dawn, noted for her book *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, sees that children and young people will grow into understanding and character as they experience the

richness of Christian worship. To paraphrase her slightly, “Shallow worship forms shallow people.” Dawn is resistant particularly towards the influence of contemporary culture upon the church’s faith, its worship and its nurture of children and youth. She also emphasises the need for the church to explain its traditions and practices to young people.

These are vital considerations for Christian worship. John Westerhoff, C. Ellis Nelson, and Iris Cully, for example, have highlighted the essential nature of the church as an intergenerational, faith-forming community. Westerhoff reminded us that children learn by participation in worship long before they understand what is going on. In Australia and New Zealand in the 1980s and 1990’s, Stan and Pauline Stewart, encouraged congregations to explore all-age worship rather than send children out to Sunday School.

It is important for children to participate in an intergenerational community in which they might learn from others and grow into mature faith and character. Baptism is the sign of full participation in the body of Christ. Alongside this, there is a sense in which the language and understandings of the Bible are foreign to all of us: we *all* need to be shaped by the story passed down through time and across cultures.

The same could be said to be true for people whose first language is not English: they will just grow into understanding the Bible spoken in the dominant language. However, these people can be of any and all ages. When the Bible is read or spoken aloud in English, what does it mean for them if we always choose a text at a high level of literacy? What are our considerations about their sense of inclusion? (Of course, the Bible can also be read in more than one language in worship.)

The point here is not to put children, people with intellectual disabilities, and people whose first language is not English into the same category (even though the language of “dumbing down” seems guilty of that). The question is whether it is enough to say, “They will grow into it.” (There’s also a problem here in conflating issues of culture, intelligence, and human development.)

We can affirm the vitality of an intergenerational community without suggesting that everything taking place needs to be at an adult level or within a particular cultural framework in order for people to grow to maturity.

“Up Close and Personal’: Being addressed by the Word

The Bible story is a symbolic narrative... It offers meaning on varying levels and enriches our lives in countless ways. The meaning of each story will change at different times in our lives; insights will vary, depending on our needs and experiences at the moment.

John Westerhoff, *A Pilgrim People*, Minneapolis: Seabury Press, 1984.

The Uniting Church affirms that Christ addresses people across time, space and culture. God’s Story invites our participation not only in the future but also in the present. A key theological question about our understanding of children relates to their identity.

There is a classical view that a child is primarily a ‘person in the making’. (See C. Traina in Marcia J. Bunge, *The Child in Christian Thought*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). This is more or less the view of significant theologians in history: when children were not invisible, they were valued but not seen as people in the same way as were adults. Both theologically and liturgically, in scholarly thinking, children are often or something of an after-thought. Theologians through the ages have struggled to make sense of “the child” in relation to their systematic expositions.

In contrast, Christian educators have for the past century given considerable attention to the nature of childhood. [There is also an evident gender difference across these two groups of scholars.] How do people of different ages and stages engage with the Bible, and what are the ways in which children explore and

experience faith? Due to the rise of Christian schooling, there is a growing body of research about how children and young people make sense of the Bible. However there seems to be a communication ‘gap’ between liturgists and educators regarding children and the Bible.

There is a similar ‘gap’ in relation to people with intellectual disabilities and for people for whom English is a second language. Again, the intent is not to put these groups together, but to highlight similar problems when it comes to liturgy; in particular how the Bible is communicated in a diverse and inclusive community.

In his book, *Faith Shaping*, Stephen Jones described the importance of *nearness* and *directness* in the faith development of young people. (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1980.) *Nearness* was about being ‘up close’ to expressions of faith. (Consider what children see or hear or touch or taste during most Sunday worship.) *Directness* was about being personally addressed by what was taking place. The message or sacrament or activity is perceived as directed at me personally. These are helpful insights into engaging a diverse community with the Bible.

In a well-functioning family, many kinds of communication at various ‘levels’ takes place among the members during the course of a day. At numerous times, communication is *near* and *direct* for every member. In the sense that we all and each are addressed by the Living Word through the Scriptures, I suggest that it is entirely appropriate, and in fact vital, for people of varying ages, cultures and abilities to encounter the Word that is for them.

In a community whose members have different first languages, the use of simpler or plainer English texts can be a helpful way not only to help individuals encounter the word; in fact it helps the whole community hear differently.

“Holding the Bible high above her head, she said with a big smile: “Yes, of course there are many books which I could read. But there is only one book which reads me!”
Hans-Ruedi Weber, *Experiments with Bible Study*, Geneva: WCC, 1981.

Rather than see the above as two alternatives, we can affirm *both* that people grow into understanding of the Bible over time, *and* that the Bible speaks to them here and now. This suggests that the Bible be allowed to speak with more than one ‘voice’ over time.

Paraphrases and Versions

Given that the NRSV is the recommended version for use in worship, how might we, alongside this, allow the Bible to come alive for all people?

Many worship leaders, from time to time, use paraphrases such as Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* or Nathan Nettleton’s Australian-flavoured versions at www.laughingbird.net. These don’t claim to be translations, even though the author has worked from the original text in creating the paraphrase. These can add a freshness and vibrancy and strike a contemporary chord. A paraphrase can even be read alongside a translation; for example, reading a paraphrase early in the service and a translation prior to the preaching of the Word. Paraphrases can also be helpful when rendering a text as a prayer or meditation. The Psalms in particular lend themselves well to being versified as paraphrases with communal responses.

“Story Bibles” go a step further in imagining details as they may have occurred. Ralph Milton’s *Lectionary Story Bible* series (Woodlake Books) is an excellent, all-age resource. *Stories Seldom Told* by Lois Miriam Wilson (Northstone, 1997) retells Bible stories from the perspective of the seemingly minor characters, particularly women. Walter Wangerin renders the Bible as a novel in *The Book of God* (Zondervan, 1996). None of these are intended to replace the use of translations, however these and other such resources provide narrative material that can be woven into a service of worship alongside biblical texts. Curriculum

resources such as *SeasonsFusion* (seasonsfusion.com) and *Spill the Beans* (spillbeans.org.uk) often provide narrative re-tellings or choral readings.

The Dramatised Bible (Collins, 1990) draws from three translations to present the whole Bible in script form with narration and characters. I have used it on many occasions to help a group portray a passage of Scripture.

Reading from different translations can help us to find new meaning in texts. My bookshelf includes the *Jerusalem Bible*, the *New English Bible*, the *Revised English Bible*, Elizabeth Edwards' recent *The Gospels for Hearers* (Dianggellia Press, 2013), and the *Christian Community Bible* from the Philippines. Not only can these aid in the preparation of worship, but the use of a different translation from time to time brings fresh language to familiar verses and helps us receive a Word that we hadn't heard before.

There are number of "Children's Bibles" available. However when seeking a lower reading level for a group setting I use and recommend the *Contemporary English Version* or CEV (Nelson) from the American Bible Society for its scholarship and approach to translation. The CEV is used in a number of church school settings. This is also suitable when a 'plain language' version is helpful in settings with multiple language groups. The CEV is also a helpful starting point when seeking to dramatise a text.

Stories are fundamentally oral and communal in nature. They are meant to be told, dramatised, sung, danced, and expressed through visual arts... In an oral culture..., learning involves all the senses and the imagination as well. In an oral culture truth is poetic, and storytelling is understood as the doorway into the realm of the sacred... The biblical story becomes a sacred story that is to be imagined and participated in, not studied objectively...

John Westerhoff, *A Pilgrim People*, Seabury Press, Minneapolis, 1984.

Finally, when we open the Bible in worship, we hope to encounter the Living Word through its words. May we put heart and soul, creativity and imagination, skill and craft into allowing God's Story to envelop and shape our lives.

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