

raising the bar in biblical engagement

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What is Biblical Engagement?

To *engage* with something can mean to be interested in it and to give attention to it. Engaging also suggests being actively involved in something and taking part in it. Biblical engagement, therefore, is about encouraging children and young people to give attention to what the Bible says and about actively involving them in Bible discovery. When we open the Bible with children and young people we want to capture their interest and attention and we want to involve them actively in exploring the story or text as well as in thinking through it's meaning and it's application to our lives today. Ultimately, by doing this, our intention is that they should meet God, hear what He is saying to them and respond. When this happens, children are engaging with the Bible.

In Matthew 28:20 Jesus instructs His followers to go and make disciples of all nations and part of this involves not 'teaching them my commands' but 'teaching them to obey my commands.' These two words make all the difference! Our role is not simply to teach Bible truth so that children and young people know what the Bible says. Our role is to enable them to live as disciples of Jesus and, crucially, this involves enabling them to understand and apply Bible truth to their lives - hearing and responding to what God is saying to them through its pages.

What is Good Practice?

If our intention truly is to enable children and young people to hear and respond to what God is saying to them through the Bible a number of features will mark our approach.

Presence Of God

Every time we open the Bible with children and young people we need to acknowledge that God is present and that He has something to say to us through it. His Spirit is present to help us understand and apply the message of the Bible to our lives. As we open it, we are meeting with Him and all should

be encouraged to come expecting that God will speak and to be ready to listen and respond.

Relationships

In order to make disciples, we are called, like Jesus, not simply to share the message of the Bible in words - but to model its truth in our lives. Children and young people need to see 'the Word made flesh' as we enter their world, build relationships with them, seek to understand the issues they face and demonstrate God's love in all that we do for them. As we open the Bible it should come to them as the explanation for what they have already seen in our lives. It should be clear that the Bible plays a significant part in our lives. We will often share examples of times when God has spoken to us and we will be honest about the issues we sometimes struggle with.

Relevance

Whilst the world of the Bible may be far removed from today's world - nevertheless familiar contemporary issues such as family breakdown, peer pressure, jealousy, betrayal, greed, temptation and so on are never far from the surface. The message of the Bible is as relevant as ever but we need to help young people discover this. We need to make connections with their world - shining the light of its truth on to the path before them so that they are enabled to hear it as God's Word for them for today. In order to be able to do so we will make every effort to know and understand the children and young people we are working with and the world they live in today.

Creativity

Around two-thirds of the Bible is story. The Bible is the story of God and His people. A story is one of the most powerful and effective ways of communicating truth. We need to find ways of telling God's story that will captivate a new generation - ways that allow them to enter the story, explore it and experience it from the inside. As well as mastering the art of storytelling, multimedia resources, drama, role-play, group discussion, games, music, art and craft can all be used to good effect. As young people become part of God's story they will discover the truth about Him in the most memorable, transforming way possible.

Bible Handling

If we want children and young people to engage with the Bible, then as often as is possible we will want them to see, hear and handle the actual text of the Bible. Where Bibles are available and children can read, they will be encouraged to open them and look at what it says for themselves. Where they are not, the Bible will be read, or some part of it displayed or printed out for them to see. A variety of creative methods will be used to allow them to explore, interact with and respond to the text. In the course of a longer programme, children will be taught about the Bible itself - what makes it special, what it is for and how it came to be written. They will be given opportunities to handle a Bible and taught to find their way in it. They will be encouraged to read it for themselves outside of group meetings. Resources will be made available to help them do so and they will be given some basic advice on how to use these. If in the short time they are with us we can show

children how to use the Bible to meet with God for themselves - we are providing them with one of the 'spiritual tools that will last a life time.'

Interaction

Children and young people need to be actively involved in the process of discovering Bible truth if they are to emerge with a faith that is truly their own. They need to be encouraged to think for themselves and they need time, space and a small group environment in which they are able to do so. As we open the Bible with them we need to learn to ask stimulating, open-ended questions, which allow them to engage fully with the text and hear what God is saying to them through it for themselves. In this way we can model Bible engagement for young people so that they know how to open the Bible and hear God speak to them through it when we are not around.

Response

The Bible is 'God's invitation to experience reality' and it's truth always demands a response of obedience and trust. Since our role, as we have said, is not simply to teach Bible truth but to help children and young people to understand and respond to what God is saying we will allow time and provide opportunity for response every time we open the Bible with them. This might take the form of a creative prayer, a time of praise, silent reflection or practical action - but in some way, those present will be encouraged to think about and express their response to what they have heard.

Conclusion

Perhaps a really effective approach to Bible engagement requires a new mindset. Let's bring the creative storytellers to the fore. Let's think about the setting we teach in. Let's search for imaginative ways of handling the text. Let's allow more space for interaction and response. And let's do all this within the context of a relationship with those we seek to teach and lead. Most of all, let's not forget a reliance on the presence of God to guide, lead, shape, transform and change.

By seeking to develop our thinking and practice in these areas and by producing resources to help staff and volunteers we can continue to 'raise the bar in Biblical engagement.'