



How to help your parish participate in The Bible Challenge



- By the Rev. Marek P. Zabriskie, Rector of St. Thomas' Episcopal Church in Fort Washington, PA, Founder of the Center for Biblical Studies and The Bible Challenge

In order to encourage and support persons reading the Bible from cover to cover, we have found the following practices to be most helpful:

Churches can start The Bible Challenge at any time of the year they desire.

We have found that an ideal time to start The Bible Challenge is January 1, when many people make New Year's Resolutions. You can encourage members of your church and friends beyond your parish to make a spiritual resolution and join you in reading the entire Bible during the year.

Some churches sponsor a 90-day challenge to read the entire Bible, but this short time frame can be daunting to slow readers or persons with very busy schedules.

Our website thecenterforbiblicalstudies.org offers many resources to help the members of your parish and you.

Providing Options

We suggest giving your parishioners a variety of options such as:

- read the entire Bible
- read the New Testament
- read one of the gospels or
- read the Psalter.

This way there is something that everyone can choose as a spiritual challenge.

Those who accept reading only a portion of the Bible in the first year may accept a larger challenge in the second year when you re-launch the challenge.

Some parishes recommend using The Story – a collection of seamless Bible stories published by Zondervan, which omits genealogies, dietary codes, etc. This is very accessible for people not used to reading the Bible.

Harness the power of technology. Suggest participants read the Bible using a tablet, e-reader or smart phone, or listen to the Bible on CDs. The NIV Bible is readily available on CDs.

Recommended Strategies for Reading

We do not tell our participants how much of the Bible they are expected to read each week or month. Instead we give suggestions on how to read the Bible in a fashion that is likely to help them read through the entire Bible.

We strongly discourage participants from reading the Bible from cover to cover starting with the Book of Genesis and ending with the Book of Revelation, because most readers who do this do fail to reach the end. There are many parts of the Hebrew Scriptures that readers find challenging and spiritually dry that discourage them from completing the Bible.

Instead, we encourage participants in The Bible Challenge to read three chapters of the Old Testament, one psalm and a chapter of the New Testament each day. This will help them read the entire Bible in a year. Reading a chapter of the New Testament and a psalm daily sustains readers through spiritually drier parts of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Our website offers a schedule of readings for those who want to follow a clear plan of daily Bible reading, which will help you complete your reading in a year's time.

We advocate using a devotional approach to reading the Bible as opposed to a purely intellectual or academic approach. We suggest that each reader put him or herself in the presence of God before they start to read. We like the ancient monastic practice of *lectio divina*, where a reader reads the text, meditates on the reading, offers a prayer to God and listens in silence for God to respond. We encourage readers to pause during or after their reading to offer prayers to God.

We encourage participants to skim over long genealogies or dietary codes in order to ensure that they do not get bogged down in tedious sections of the Bible, but continue to read and reach their goal.

How to Promote The Bible Challenge in Your Church and Beyond

We recommend placing an article in your church newsletter, using verbal and written announcements in Sunday worship and sending a letter inviting your entire membership to participate in The Bible Challenge. You may even place an ad in the

local newspaper, inviting members of the community to join you.

We encourage each parish to invite people in the community who do not belong to the church to participate in The Bible Challenge. By doing so your church will offer a vital spiritual outreach to others who may eventually join your church.

Offer free Bibles to those who do not have one, if you can. This is a wonderful way to welcome people outside of your church.

Encourage your local newspaper to write an article about The Bible Challenge and the effect that it is having on your congregation. You may be pleasantly surprised by the positive reception and press coverage that you receive.

Each month, invite one or more members of your church to write a short article for your parish newsletter sharing their experiences of reading the Bible. It is powerful when lay persons share with others the joy and insights that they have gained from daily Bible reading and pass on what they have learned and how it has impacted their faith and brought them closer to God.

Reaching All Ages

We recommend using age appropriate Bibles to allow children and parents to read Bible stories together.

We encourage teenagers with a mature faith to join The Bible Challenge. We also suggest inviting church youth groups to read and discuss one of the gospels every year and to read another book of the Bible such as The Book of Acts.

Providing Ongoing Support

Many people make New Year's resolutions. The most common New Year's resolution is to lose weight. The second most common resolution is to exercise more often. Within six days most people have quit their resolutions. Psychologists say that people forgo their resolutions because they have no one to hold them accountable. Hence it is vital to offer ongoing support and hold people accountable, especially through the first three months of The Bible Challenge. Those who succeed for the first 90 days are likely to reach their goal.

We recommend offering a series of ongoing classes for participants to ask questions that come up during their reading. We call our classes "Intelligent Talk about the Bible." Others call theirs "The Good Book Club." We recommend that churches offer these on a

weekly basis with daytime and evening options for the first twelve weeks of The Bible Challenge. These are the most difficult weeks when novice Bible readers, especially those reading the Old Testament, struggle with stories of violence, wrathful actions attributed to God, women being treated poorly, and strange facts such as persons living to be 920 years old. If a novice reader can be led in working through these difficult areas, success will be likely.

We recommend printing the names of everyone who participates in your church's Bible Challenge in your parish newsletter. This lets others know who and how many in your parish are participating, and it holds the participants accountable to their commitment. Participants can also seek each other out to discuss the Bible.

We suggest using e-mail tools such as Constant Contact to send out regular e-mail messages to Bible Challenge participants to support and encourage them to reach their goal. Many readers said that this regular nudge inspired them and kept them from giving up.

We recommend that clergy occasionally send individual e-mails to The Bible Challenge participants asking them how they are doing and encouraging them to persevere. Replies from participants are often full of spiritual insights and questions. This communication becomes online spiritual direction as church members share insights and feelings about the Bible and God that they would not take time to share face to face with clergy members.

Pray each Sunday for members of your church and non-members who are participating in The Bible Challenge. Prayer is powerful, and it supports those participating in the challenge. In addition, as people hear their names read, they realize that there is a faith community supporting them in reaching their spiritual goal. Many in our church were lagging in their reading when they heard prayers said for them in church and returned home and reengaged in reading the Bible.

Hold a celebratory banquet for those who participate in The Bible Challenge. Give a certificate to everyone who has been a faithful reader of the Bible for a year and a special certificate to those who have read the entire Bible.

Providing Options

Ask those who have finished or have made significant inroads in reading the Bible to invite several friends or family members to participate in The Bible Challenge when you re-launch it the following year.

Allow members of your church who have successfully read the entire Bible to preach or speak in your adult forum and share with your congregation how it has transformed their lives.

Prepare follow up classes for those who succeed in reading the entire Bible or those who have struggled and not been able to finish the task. Participants will have many questions and a deeper hunger to know more about the Bible.

Encourage those who finish the Bible to become mentors for beginners when you re-launch The Bible Challenge, or to lead new Bible studies or programs such as Education for Ministry, which is an excellent follow-up to The Bible Challenge.



St. Thomas' Church

W H I T E M A R S H

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