

Conducting a Small Group Bible Study

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There are many ways to conduct a parish Bible study. One of the most common ways is a lectionary study where the epistle and gospel readings for the following Sunday are read and studied. This allows the participants to prepare themselves to hear the scripture during the following Sunday worship service and to also prepare to hear the sermon, because the sermon is usually based on the scripture readings used in the service. A lectionary study is most appropriate for groups that cannot meet regularly or for groups that are just beginning a Bible study program.

Another way to study the scriptures is by using a word study format. In a word study the group focuses on a particular word or set of words from the Bible. The leader chooses words such as love, neighbor, or justice, and by using a concordance, selects passages from the Bible using this particular word. A word study method allows the group to read a larger portion of the Bible. For example, the group can focus on the word “love” in the gospel of Matthew or the word “love” as it appears in Paul’s epistles. This method allows people to increase their scriptural vocabulary while at the same time learning how a particular word or words are used in specific contexts. As with a lectionary study, the word study format is good for new groups or for groups that do not meet often.

Finally, one of the best ways to study the scripture is to study an entire book of the Bible, such as one of the gospels, reading one chapter each week. This method has several advantages. First, its focus on one book of the Bible allows the group to better understand the words and meaning of that book. Second, by following this book

throughout the course of one year or part of a year, the members understand the relationship of the text to our liturgy. It is likely that they will also hear a part of that gospel sometime in the liturgical year such as the Lord's Prayer, Beatitudes, Feeding of the Five Thousand, or the Passion narrative. This method is good for groups that meet regularly and have a good basic knowledge of the scriptures. Also, it encourages participants to attend regularly because if they miss a few sessions they will also miss out on a large portion of the scriptural text. The Bible study should always begin and end with prayer, either the Lord's Prayer or any prayer that the group wants to use.

Resources for Bible Study

Many people begin reading scripture and become frustrated, bored, or lost in the vast amount of information contained in the Bible. Words or phrases may seem unfamiliar; terms and concepts might seem foreign; and many names and geographical places seem far removed from our cultural understanding. Likewise, there may be confusion about which of the many translations of the Bible should be used. This may end up in what is generally called "DBS" or the "dusty Bible syndrome"—everyone has a Bible, but never reads it! It is important to have access to a translation of the Bible that you feel comfortable reading. I like to use the Revised Standard Version (RSV), but others prefers the New International Version (NIV), or the King James or New King James Versions (KJV or NKJV). A newer translation edited by Eugene Peterson called The Message is a very good Bible to have as a resource. It is more of a paraphrase type of

Bible much like the Today's English Version that was popular in the 1970's. It is helpful to have more than one translation available at the Bible study so you can compare words and phrases from each text. Likewise, there are numerous "study Bibles" available which contain notes and cross references for further reading and reflection.

Of the many resources available, one of the most important is a concordance. A concordance contains a complete list of all of the words in the Bible and the specific chapters and verses where you can locate them. For example, if you look up the word "salvation" in a concordance it will direct you to every single verse where the term salvation is used.

Similarly, a Bible dictionary provides concise definitions of proper names, geographical place names, and definitions of weights, measures, and social and cultural concepts. A Bible dictionary also provides background information on the formation of the scriptures and historical information about the various Bible translations.

Finally, a serious student of the scriptures should have a Bible commentary handy because this provides detailed discussions of Biblical words and phrases. Smaller commentaries may be devoted to a single book of the Bible such as Genesis or Luke, and larger commentaries cover the entire Bible. There are also devotional commentaries which provide introductions to the scriptures and are not as detailed as a full-length commentary.

Other resources such as maps, atlases, and lexicons also will assist you in your life-long study of scripture. Many of these Bible reference tools can be found in local bookstores or on the internet

Benefits of a Bible Study

A regular Bible study program enhances knowledge of the Word of God and also fosters fellowship among parishioners. Furthermore, a Bible study provides a wonderful opportunity for seekers and potential catechumens to become more familiar with the Christian faith. It is uplifting to spend time together in prayer, study, and fellowship during the week with other parish members.