

Bible societies mount effort to revive view of scripture as source of ancient wisdom

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(Video screengrab)

One of the biggest ever research projects into scripture is looking into how people use the Bible and what it means to them—an attempt to understand why, in a time when 90 percent of the world’s population has access to the Christian sacred text, relatively few consider it a foundation of their lives.

The study, with more than 90,000 interviews conducted so far, was commissioned three years ago by an international group of Bible societies, which publish and promote Christian scripture in hopes of encouraging people in historically Christian regions of the globe to rediscover it as a source of wisdom and universal truths.

“Bible societies are heavily invested in translating the Bible into many different languages,” said Richard Powney, one of the senior researchers on the project. “But

that is not the final frontier. We want to understand more about how people engage with it in different parts of the world. If there are cultural gaps opening up between people and the Bible we want to unpick that and work out why.”

Bible Society leaders from the West met in Geneva last month to discuss the early research findings; others from central and eastern Europe met last week in Bucharest, and those from Latin America will soon meet in Mexico.

The first stage of the research divided the world into geographical regions, with the United States, Europe, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand in one cluster, based on their social, economic and demographic connections as well as their common Christian heritage.

The research is being carried out on behalf of an umbrella organization called United Bible Fellowship by the British and Foreign Bible Society, which conducted [its own research](#) in 2018 into engagement with the Bible in England and Wales, where 63 percent of residents have never read the Bible at all.

The BFBS report concluded: “This is the world of #MeToo, and of a deep and increasing awareness of racism, violence and oppression. One of the reasons the Bible seems irrelevant to young people is that their Sunday schools or school assemblies don’t make these connections in a way that conveys the visceral power of Bible stories and their power to change lives for good.”

The United States is considered by Bible Society scholars to be today where Britain was 30 years ago in terms of engagement with Christianity. A recent study by the American Bible Society of Generation Z, born between 1995 and 2010, found this group’s members consider themselves to be suffering from stress, anxiety and other mental health problems, largely linked to their obsession with looking at screens.

Engagement with Scripture in this age group is in steady decline. “Today, just 1 in 10 Gen Z adults regularly engages with the Bible,” said John Farquhar Plake, chief ministry insights officer of the American Bible Society. “However, this generation still shows significant interest in the Bible and the message of Jesus.”

In New Zealand, Bible Society leaders have published results of [its engagement survey](#), which found that 41 percent of New Zealanders 13 years and older identify themselves as Christian, a noticeable increase from 30 percent in 2017. Among 13- to 18-year-olds, a substantial portion of respondents identified as Christians,

followed by a drop among the 19-24 age group.

The survey also found that just over half of New Zealanders own a Bible and 36 percent of those attend weekly discussions about it. Church attendance is low, however: A third of those aged 19-24 never attend church, while a third of those over 65 attend only for special occasions such as Christmas, weddings and funerals.

Younger people in the New Zealand survey reported that they make use of digital platforms to access the Bible, with up to 26 percent of young people using these systems for their accessibility and portability. This is likely to be a key issue worldwide for Bible Society leaders discussing how to better engage younger people with scripture.

But there are times when Bible experts are surprised by an increase in use of the Bible. The Bible Society in Ukraine has reported that since Russia invaded that country many residents have shown renewed interest in the Bible, with thousands of displaced Ukrainians, who have lost most of their belongings, asking Bible Society teams for copies of Scripture.

Fieldwork for the global survey is being conducted by Gallup, which expects to complete the project in December, with final results due in February 2025.
—Religion News Service