

THROUGH THE EYE OF ANOTHER

Intercultural Bible Reading Guide

Vrije Universiteit / Protestant Church in the Netherlands
October 2007

Table of Contents

1. Introduction
2. The Reading Group
 - 2.1. One's own Reading Group
 - 2.2. The Partner's Reading Group
3. Biblical Passages
4. Process
5. Tasks and Roles
6. Bible Study
7. Reports

Appendices

Appendix 1. Rules of Play

Appendix 2. Set-up of the Meetings

Appendix 3. Ten Rules of Thumb

1. Introduction

Bible Reading

Each community of faith opens the Bible in order to read it. The Word of our God needs to be heard, believed, and put into practice. The Bible is read in all kinds of settings: at home, together with youngsters and seniors, at Bible studies or during catechism, at school or together with people from other religions. Time and again the miracle occurs: hearts open up to the message, the gospel, and to each other. A number of questions arise:

Is it possible to read Bible stories together even though one lives in a totally different country, speaks a different language, and belongs to a different culture? Is it possible to have a discussion? Is it possible to see the Bible, the world, and oneself through the eyes of another person? Will this open new possibilities for discussion, meeting, change, and deepening of one's faith?

These are the questions behind the Intercultural Bible Reading programme.

Together

Christians all over the world form the body of Christ. The metaphor used by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 wants to make clear that people differ from each other and that the foot differs from the hand, and the ear from the eye. However, everybody belongs together and keeps up the body. Together they form the body of Christ.

The word *together* expresses the fact that the Intercultural Bible Reading programme wishes to promote that people read the Bible together, not only within one's own group, but also across borders. Groups from different countries and from different churches or religious communities are encouraged to participate, to meet other people through understanding and gaining insight into the Bible story, to learn from one another, to challenge one another if necessary, to put oneself in someone else's position. Why does he or she express this in such and such a way? Can I relate to it? Am I able to gain a deeper and different insight into the Bible story?

The word *together* has another dimension as well. Together the group members are responsible for the process to go well. Everybody has to make a contribution for which there are a number of ways: help organising, make a report, make coffee or tea, prepare a meal, and respect the rules. Some are asked to perform extra tasks: to be the discussion leader, the reporter, or the coordinator. It is important for everyone to feel comfortable and at home in the group. Everyone should feel free to speak one's mind. Nothing is out of the ordinary. Being open to one another is very important. Agreements have to be made to guarantee – if necessary – the participants' anonymity, for reports are made and sent to one's partner group.

Guide

The Intercultural Bible Reading programme / Through the Eye of Another has a history which already started in 2001. The material which was then compiled has been used for this guide. The youth programme of the Protestant Church in The Netherlands is participating as well. Good use is also made of the guide for young people, written by Friso Mout.

This guide hopes to help you on your way towards an exciting and fruitful exchange. Reading the Bible together and talking about it goes to the heart of the community and to one's own heart too.

May the Holy Ghost bless you and give you joy while reading, discussing, and exchanging your experiences.

Arie Moolenaar
October, 2007

2. The Reading Group

2.1. One's Own Reading Group

Every believer and/or Bible reader can participate in this programme. Reading the Bible together is possible for everybody. One could form a new reading group. This could happen spontaneously after a church service, for instance, when people are used to discuss the service. Some people are used to do this outside, others do this over a cup of coffee or tea. One could also use already existing groups within the religious community. Some churches organise a study weekend or have a special Sunday in September at the beginning of the church season. These are moments to get to work with the Bible story. Existing groups can participate as well: a Bible study group, a catechism class, a discussion group, a women's or men's group, a group at school, or a group of friends. Everywhere where people meet one another, discuss, or worship one can decide to participate. One could decide to share the experiences of discussion groups within the religious community in order to talk about one's faith and the Bible story. The process could be rounded off with a communal service. The experience could be shared with a partner group. In short, dare to be creative in finding a group and use existing possibilities.

2.2. The Partner's Reading Group

How does one find a partner group? Groups who want to participate can register their group. In order to do so visit the website www.bible4all.org. A 'registration form' has to be filled in in which one states a number of things, such as group, city, country, age / group characteristics, and the Bible passage one would like to discuss. It is possible to view the other groups that have registered and are waiting for a partner group to contact them. Contact by email can be easily arranged. After getting acquainted and making appointments about the Bible passage that will be read and the amount of time that will be needed it is time to get to work.

For groups in **The Netherlands** there are other contact possibilities as well:

1. As a group one could apply to JOP, the Protestant Church in the Netherlands' youth programme, so that JOP can connect you to another reading group elsewhere in the world. This group may come from Europe or from another continent
2. Through JOP your group could also be linked with a reading group in The Netherlands, close by or further away. In one way or another this group will have a different cultural background, coming from a non-western church for instance
3. Maybe your church / religious community has a 'partner church' in another country. One could ask youth groups in this partner church to join you and work together in this project.
4. One could also try and find a church that is quite different from one's own church. Think for instance of a church in Amsterdam getting into touch with a rural community in the province of Zeeland.
5. One could also start reading with different youth groups in one's own city. This means that you will not encounter real cultural differences, but you will experience different ways of reading and interpreting the Bible. The local Council of Churches may be able to organise this. In this way you will strengthen relationships with other churches in your own city.
6. The religious community could also participate in the *Kerk in Actie Interactief* programme. This programme by The Protestant Church in The Netherlands wishes to get church members more directly involved in the churches' missionary and diaconal work. Arrangements are made to do so. Reading the Bible together could well be part of this programme for exchanging and sharing



experiences, and Bible reading should be part of every project. Should one opt for this possibility, please contact the service desk: telephone: 030-8801880, or: servicedesk@pkn.nl. A *Kerk in Actie Interactief* staff member will get into touch in order to discuss the programme and make arrangements.

3. Bible Passages

The Intercultural Bible Reading Programme does not want to prescribe a certain Bible story. One can make one's own choice. However, a number of possibilities are suggested:

1. The reading group chooses a Bible passage and proposes this to the partner group.
2. For a reading group of young people the following passages are suggested from which one can choose:

2 Kings 5:1-19	Naaman
Ruth (any chapter)	Ruth, the Moabite
Matthew 13	Parables, e.g. of the sower
Luke 15:11-32	The Prodigal
Mark 6:30-44	The Feeding of the Five Thousand
Luke 8:40-46 / Mark 5:22-43	Jairus' little daughter

3. One could focus on one of the themes mentioned below and choose a corresponding Bible passage. The themes were chosen during an international conference.

1. Economy, globalization (inequality, poverty, and balances of power)
2. HIV/Aids (exclusion because of illness, recovery, healing)
3. Violation of human rights, violence against women, because of sexual nature; gender
4. Interreligious dialogue
5. What does it mean to be a church in the world? Does the church have a political message worldwide? How do the Christian communities worldwide relate to one another?
6. What does it mean to be a church in a multireligious and multicultural community?
7. Ecology, creation
8. Confidence in faith

4. One could choose from the Bible passages mentioned below (some are similar to the ones suggested for young people). This list was compiled during an international conference as well. The numbers listed behind the Bible passage refer to the above mentioned themes which makes it possible to choose a Bible passage linked to a theme.

Genesis 1-11	- The first chapters of the Bible: The creation up to and including the tower of Babel (7)
Psalms 23	- The Psalm on the good shepherd (8)
Psalms 90	- The Psalm on taking refuge with God (8)
Philemon	- The story of the slave, slavery and the love of Christ (1)
Mark 10:17-22	- Christ as servant (1)
Matthew 5	- The beatitudes and the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount (1)
Revelation 21	- The new heaven and the new earth (5)
Daniel	- The book of faith in times of persecution and oppression (6)
Luke 10:25-37	- The Good Samaritan (1)
Luke 8:40-46/Mark 5:22-43	- Jairus' little daughter (2)
Matthew 13	- Parables, e.g. of the sower (5)
Acts 4:32-37	- Life of the first church (5)
Numbers 5:11-31	- The law in cases of jealousy (3)
John 7:53-8:11	- The adulterous woman (3)
2 Kings 5:1-19	- Naaman (4)

5. It is also possible to read one of the above mentioned Bible passages without focusing on the listed theme.

6. Finally: one could choose one's own theme and choose a corresponding Bible passage.

4. Process

Experience teaches that the whole process of Intercultural Bible Reading takes a year. The process consists of three stages. Below we describe the characteristics of each stage.

Stage 1

- a. Looking for a reading group and explaining the purpose of the project. Choosing a Bible story together. Keep in mind the suggestions mentioned before.
- b. Naturally your group wants to introduce itself to the other group. In order to do so you make a 'group portrait.' Be creative. Tell who you are, what you do, what you like. Discuss what you would like to tell and how you want to tell it. You could send pictures, make a scrap book, write a letter, make video portraits ... it is completely up to you. Dare to be creative.
- c. Studying and discussing the chosen Bible story. One of the group members has to make a report of the discussion. This can be a written report, but you can also choose a different form. Be creative here as well. Discuss this with your partner group. Send at least a summary report of the discussion. Below under 'tasks and roles' you can read what aspects you should pay attention to when discussing a Bible story.

Stage 2

In this stage you will send the report to your partner group and you will receive your partner group's report. You will then discuss your partner group's report in your own group. You make a report of this discussion as well and send it to your partner group. You will receive a second report from your partner group too, which will be discussed in your own group.

Stage 3

In the final stage both reading groups write each other a letter to conclude the project with. In this letter you will tell the other group what the project has meant to you.

5. Tasks and Roles

Evidently all this takes time. Depending on which country the partner group comes from reports may have to be translated. Beforehand find out whether one of the group members will be able to do so. Experience has taught that it is wise to share the different tasks. That is the reason why we suggest to ask someone to lead the discussions, someone to make a report, and someone to make sure that the discussions will be able to take place. Thus there should be a *discussion leader*, a *reporter*, and a *coordinator*.

a. Discussion Leader

This person should preferably have experience in leading a group discussion. He or she may be your youth group leader, a pastor, etc, and has the following tasks:

- If necessary, make sure everyone gets introduced to one another;
- Create an atmosphere of trust and safety;
- Be acquainted with the whole process of Intercultural Bible Reading and to be able to explain the process;
- Make sure that all group members have the chance to participate;
- Make room for moments of silence;
- Exercise restraint in the discussion. It is about stimulating and promoting the discussion between the group members. Generally the discussion leader does not participate in the discussion itself;
- If necessary, provide a short summary of the discussion;
- Leave room for creativity;
- Make sure the reporter has a chance to make notes;
- Open and end the sessions;
- While discussing the partner group's report, make sure that the partner group's opinions, ideas, and questions are really dealt with;

- Consult with the group how to react to the partner group's report: are they going to write a verbal report or a letter, or will they choose a different form altogether?;
- Make sure that the group prepares and executes the evaluation carefully and to pay attention to valuable learning moments.

b. Reporter

This is a time-consuming but very important task in order to maintain good contact with the partner group. He or she has the following tasks:

- Make notes of the group discussions and work them up to a good and readable report. Make sure to note down the songs that have been sung and the work forms that have been used;
- This task has to be carried out during the entire process. So he or she also makes a report of the group portrait, writes the first reading report of your group, writes a report of the discussion of the partner group's report and draws up the concluding letter. It goes without saying that throughout the project he or she will be supported by the other group members.

c. Coordinator

This person makes sure the whole process takes place in an orderly way. He or she has the following tasks:

- Arrange a place where the group will meet. An already existing group can use the place it normally uses;
- Ask the participants to take along their Bible. (make sure there are some extra Bibles or copies of the Bible story available);
- Consult with the discussion leader and the reporter: keep an eye on the time schedule;
- Make sure that the reading reports are translated;
- Act as postal address;
- Be the contact person within the church;
- Prior to discussing the partner report, consult with the discussion leader if more background information about the partner group's country, culture, church, and society is needed. (This depends on the report received. It may already contain sufficient information).



6. Bible Study

Each group is used to approach the Bible and study the Bible story according to one's own tradition. This is the basic principle in reading the Bible together.

One could also use the method mentioned below and be guided by the suggested questions. One could take the following steps:

Step 1: read the Bible text individually and silently.

Step 2: one of the group members reads the text aloud.

Step 3: the discussion leader asks the following questions, which the group will go into. This concerns the following key questions:

1. About the story and one's own life experiences:

- *What thoughts, memories, and experiences from your own life does the text evoke?*

2. About understanding the text:

- Does the story contain aspects (positive/negative) you can relate to? If so, which ones?
- What is the story about?
- What does the story tell you?

3. Identifying with the text

- Which person in the story do you identify with?

4. One can of course add one's own questions.

Step 4: exchange your experiences about the reading and the discussion.

Step 5: evaluation: does this collective reading of the Bible story add to your ideas of the text?

7. Reports

During each stage your group has to make a report which you will send to your partner group. Below we shortly indicate what information the various reports should contain. Within your group you can use this to make sure communication with your partner group goes well.

a. Group Portrait

In the group portrait you introduce your own group to the other group. Getting to know the other person forms the highlight of any meeting. Experience has taught that reading groups are very interested in the persons behind the reading reports. Therefore it is good to make a group portrait in which the participants introduce themselves to the partner group.

Contents of the group portrait:

- Biographical information
You introduce yourself. Who are you? Tell about yourself, work, school, family, friends, hobby's, future plans. Think about the things you would like to know from the other person. Think also about the things the others should know about you in order to be able to understand you. Each group member makes its own portrait.
- Social – cultural information
You live in a certain country, a town or a city. You do or do not belong to a church. Tell something about your life. Here as well: what are the things you are curious about, what would you like to hear from the other person. Remember which prejudices about your country exist worldwide. You do not have to tell everything, make a choice. Later on more specific questions will probably come up.
- Religion
Tell something about your religious life. What does make you happy, what does not? Why is religion important to you? Which role do others play? What do you think of the church/religious community you go to?



b. Discussion Reports

- The report contains an accurate description of your discussions. This can be a literal transcription of the discussion, but can also be a summary. Use short sentences. This promotes readability.
- Pay attention to the group's emotions and experiences as well.
- Discuss the report within your own group before sending it to the other group. After the group has agreed to the report the coordinator will then take care of (translating it and) sending the report.

- Not all partner groups will be able to use computers and other technical equipment. Reports may therefore differ in size and detail.

8. Dare to be Creative

The project Intercultural Bible Reading concentrates on the Bible, but it is also about meeting people: reading the Bible together, gaining insight in other people and in yourself. Dare to be creative. Invite other people to participate in the programme. Invite your own church for instance by organising a special church service around your project.

Think also of various work forms which you could use during the project. The Bible story can be sung, played, told. You can write letters to the characters in the Bible story. You can make a game in which the problems you have encountered play a part. You can paint, cut, glue, and make a collage. All kinds of work forms are possible.

Maybe you can keep in touch with the other group by means of chatting or emailing. If you use a group chat every member can participate in the group discussion. In that case it is not necessary for a reporter to take notes. The chat session should be saved, however.

You may need this creativity to narrow the 'distance'. A group does not only live far away, but could also meet at other times than we are used to. It could take weeks or months for a report to be discussed, for a reaction to be written, for a text to be translated. Sometimes the summer holidays play a role. For instance, in the southern hemisphere people enjoy their summer holidays when it's winter time in the northern hemisphere. All this asks for patience on the part of the partner group. Narrow the time by studying the partners' country, church, and religious life. This could be done by reading, going to a movie, visit a museum, listening to music. The Internet too offers numerous possibilities. In the meantime one could carry on a campaign for a missionary and/or diaconal project. In short: keep the group together and dare to be creative here as well.

Appendices

1. Rules of Play
2. Set-up of the Meetings
3. Ten Rules of Thumb

Appendix 1

Rules of Play

It is important for a group discussion to be dynamic. People enter into a conversation with each other about the Bible story, but add experiences from their own lives. To allow this process to proceed smoothly it is useful to adhere to the following rules of play during the discussion.

1. *Believing is a verb; a road which you travel searchingly – along with other people.*

Believing is not the same for everyone because people differ. It is a road which one can travel alone, but which can be travelled together as well. The nice thing about this project is that it offers opportunities to practice how we can travel part of this road of faith as a group and even together with an entirely different group.

2. *Nothing is crazy or stupid.*

The fact that we are taking the road together means that we have confidence in the fact that the other group members mean well and vice versa. The fact that we enter into a conversation testifies of positive intentions.

3. *Speak for yourself!*

Holding different views does not necessarily lead to differences in opinion or heated discussions that alienate us from one another.

4. *Listening has priority.*

We will pay attention to what the others speak, think, believe and experience. We want to try to do so with as much empathy as possible. We do not judge, approve, or reject, but will become engaged in everything that concerns the other people's lives and will give them the room to do them justice. We expect the others to treat us similarly.

5. *Disruptions have priority.*

In order for the discussions to go well irritations must be removed, statements that are not understood must be explained, misunderstandings must be resolved.

6. *Participants who have a ready tongue will come last.*

7. *Each participant will get an equal amount of time and attention.*

8. *Anonymity is guaranteed if something personal or confidential comes up for discussion.*

9. *Nobody is obligated to tell more than they want to.*

10. *The discussion leader is no more of an expert than the other participants.*

Appendix 2

Set-up of the Meetings

Below we will give some suggestions about the set-up of the meetings. However, the set-up may differ from group to group. Therefore use these suggestions creatively. Do not view them as imperative demands.

First phase: Group portrait and reading the text through one's own eyes

The first meeting could proceed as follows:

- Welcome by the discussion leader
- Liturgical moment
- Explanation of the project by the discussion leader
 - what was the reason for this project, who is participating, what is the procedure, who owns the project;
 - the collective nature of the project: all participants can learn from it; research is an important aspect: participation of groups surpasses individual interests; other participants (see list); possible outcome for the group; the amount of time that has to be invested; reporting and safeguarding anonymity; time frame.
- Discussion about the group portrait that is intended for the partner group.

The second meeting

- Welcome by the discussion leader
- Liturgical moment
- First reading of the text (in silence or one verse per participant)
- Discussing questions listed under chapter 6 Bible Study.
- Brief inventory (if necessary)
- Evaluation and conclusion

If necessary, a third meeting can be spent on further Bible reading

Second phase: The confrontation: reading through the eyes of another person

The group receives the partner group's reading report. Similarities and differences are analysed. The rules of play and the procedure of the previous meetings remain about the same. The rule: 'everyone will get an equal amount of time' also applies to members of the partner group. In this phase the role of the discussion leader will be somewhat more directive than in the first one. Experience has taught that groups tend to go back to previous discussions and that a change of perspective does not occur all by itself. It is important to put oneself in someone else's shoes.

The group will participate more actively in drawing up a reaction for the partner group. At the end of this phase the group will have formulated a reaction to the partner group's interpretation (letter, poem, song). During the second phase the group will think about the question which reaction they plan to send the partner group.

Procedure of the meeting:

- Welcome by the discussion leader
- Liturgical moment
- Reading the partner group's report; the Bible story will be read once again, this time through the eyes of the other people.
- What attracts our attention? Are there any differences and similarities?
- How do we respond to our partner group?

Tip: In this phase it is possible to ask individual group members to follow the 'reading path' of a member of the other group. One can think of a group dynamic that makes this possible. For instance, when the partner group's report is read together this could be done by letting each member read an individual group member's contribution. Thus the reading together becomes a kind of role play.

Third phase: Conclusion

A lot has happened, the group invested a lot. Some groups will be satiated with communicating interculturally, others will wish to go on. The groups decide for themselves!

This phase puts emphasis on the evaluation of the process. Did the participants learn anything? Is intercultural Bible reading worthwhile? Have expectations been met? Was it really possible to read through the eyes of another? Did our attitude, our way of life change? The group can discuss whether it wishes to share this experience with its own community of faith.

The (provisional?) last response from the partner group is on the table, which may be a sensitive moment. In intercultural discussions words should be weighed carefully. Expressions of appreciation and respect, no matter how subtle, can have a very positive effect on the interaction. Critical observations, hasty remarks, prejudices, all this may disturb the process.

The group will reflect on the question whether the members want to continue as a group and, if so, whether they want to do so with the same partner group. These questions should be discussed freely and openly.

Procedure of the meeting

- Welcome by the discussion leader
- Liturgical moment
- Reading the partner group's response to the Bible reading by one's own reading group
- Discussion
- Evaluation: looking back on the exchange.
Essential questions in this stage are:
 - Did the process meet people's expectations?
 - What aspects were missing?
 - What did the participants like the least/the most?
 - How do people view the procedure, the collective reading and the intercultural encounter?
 - Is it possible to indicate the value of what has been gained (did a learning process really take place or was it more getting acquainted with...)?
 - Did anyone ever tell people outside the group about the project?
 - Has it become clear what intercultural Bible reading involves?
 - How do the participants view this way of using the Bible?
- Are we going to continue the project?
- What are we going to write to our partner group?
- How do we pass on our experiences to our own (church) circle/religious community?
- Rounding off

Appendix 3

Ten rules of thumb

1. People are central

People meet one another around a Bible story.

The group members get to know one another very well and share their life stories.

The partner group wishes to get acquainted with the people behind the reading report.

2. Prepare well

Ask yourself what your expectations are, what you would like to learn, what you would pass on to the others about yourself. Communication may be difficult. Think beforehand what you need to be able to communicate well.

3 List the possibilities within the religious community

Various people are needed: a group leader, a reporter, a minutes secretary, a translator, a secretary to maintain contact. All this could be done by people outside the group. Find out who could perform these tasks.

4. Let the Bible story affect you

Look forward to what you are going to read. Be receptive to the Bible story itself and let yourself be affected.

Dare to be critical, but allow the story to pose questions to you. The reading method offers beautiful guidelines.

5. Be patient

The entire reading process with a partner takes a large amount of time. Think of the time needed to write the report, to translate and send it, to wait for a reaction.

It can take months before the report – which has to be translated first – can be discussed. Thus patience is important.

6. Find ways to keep up the pace

Think beforehand in what ways the group will fill the intermediate period of time. Be creative. One could discuss another Bible story, but one could also engage in other activities. It is also possible to use other work forms, such as music, poetry, painting, cooking, photography, and film.

7. Stick to the protocol

An exchange gains in power if the partners stick to the protocol. Mutual clarity will be created by drawing up a good group portrait and by following the guidelines for the reading questions. Everybody knows what to expect from the others.

8. Involve the church / the religious community

It is all about exchange. This exchange will deepen all the more if more people are involved. Other groups can get to work with the Bible story. Especially young people will enjoy using other work forms than discussions. During a special service a large number of people could be brought in to participate.

9. Let the partner surprise you

Try to have as few expectations about the partner as possible. A partnership allows a group to receive an unexpected guest who is accompanied by its own story, background, and culture. Opening up to this partnership and doing one's best to get to know the other and allowing questions to be asked will deepen the group and meeting process.

10. Enjoy every step

Every step and stage offers new chances and possibilities to explore the Bible story, the poetry, art, and music. This is true for one's own society and church community as well as for those of the partner group.

Feel free to enjoy all this.