

Churchwide-Initiative Guide

Read the Bible for Life Initiative

It's a wired world, and today's Christians are constantly searching, surfing, and skimming the Internet for information about how to live their lives. If you want to grow in any area of life, there's an app for that. Yet the Bible, our greatest source for how to live life well, too often lies unopened. Most believers are not reading it, understanding it, and letting it change their lives. It's no wonder that biblical literacy has gone into a tailspin. More than 10 percent of Americans think Joan of Arc was Noah's wife, and fewer than half can name the first book of the Bible. Often those who know Christ don't do much better. This is an obvious tragedy for the church. We can't effectively present the truth of God's redemptive plan if we don't know Scripture, nor can we grow as disciples of Christ without a devoted reliance on the Word.

The time has come to address this ever-deepening biblical illiteracy. The time has come to bring the Bible back to a central place in our lives. That's why LifeWay, in partnership with the Ryan Center for Biblical Studies at Union University, has launched a biblical-literacy initiative called Read the Bible for Life. In homes, churches, and community gatherings across the country, it will help people rediscover, reengage, and rebuild their lives on the Word of God.

Churches need to renew their vision for engaging with God's Word. Every follower of Christ needs to be firmly grounded in the Bible, living a life saturated with a biblical view of the world and biblical patterns of living. In a survey by LifeWay Research, the number one predictor of spiritual maturity among those surveyed was whether they spend time in the Bible daily. And yet only 16 percent of churchgoers read the Bible every day. Another 32 percent read the Bible at least once a week. Only 37 percent of those surveyed said reading and studying the Bible had made a significant difference in the way they live. A lack of daily interaction with the Word has resulted in an ignorance of the Bible's content and a disconnect between the story of Scripture and their lives. Instead, most take their cues for thinking and living from cultural trends. Read the Bible for Life will help churches and individuals grow in patterns of life that lead to deeper biblical literacy and an authentic walk with God.

The Read the Bible for Life initiative focuses on two areas of need.

1. *We need to understand how to read the various parts of Scripture well.* In our culture we understand that different types of literature work in different ways. We don't read the comics in the newspaper the same way we read a history book. We don't read a poem the same way we read a novel. God inspired the biblical writers to use a variety of literary types, which include stories, poetry, proverbs, parables, history, and others. Therefore, we don't read the stories of the Old Testament the same way we read the Prophets. A psalm is different from a proverb. The teachings of Jesus do not work the same way as a letter written by Paul. Read the Bible for Life trains us to read the various parts of Scripture well and to apply the Word to life.

2. *We need to understand the story of Scripture to enter the story.* Most Christians lack an understanding of how the grand story of the Bible fits together. *Read the Bible for Life* provides tools and a process for ongoing, life-changing training in understanding this grand story of Scripture and how its various parts fit together to reveal God's nature and purpose for our lives. Once people understand the story of Scripture, they understand how they fit into that story.

Resources

1. *Read the Bible for Life Workbook* (item 005321768) and *Leader Kit* (item 005253507) by George Guthrie can be used in small groups to teach important principles for reading the Bible with greater understanding and for applying Scripture to life.
 - The workbook provides nine weeks of daily content and interactive exercises. Each week participants in the study will complete five lessons that consist of reading material and learning activities that guide them to apply what they learn about reading, understanding, and applying Scripture. Each participant will need a copy of the workbook.
 - The leader kit includes resources for conducting nine group sessions:
 - Three DVDs featuring the author's teaching sessions and interviews with Bible scholars
 - One CD-ROM providing supplemental articles about the Bible
 - One *Read the Bible for Life* trade book (number 2 below)
 - One *Read the Bible for Life* workbook
2. *Read the Bible for Life: Your Guide to Understanding and Living God's Word* trade book (item 978-0-8054-6454-2) by George Guthrie was designed to equip people to read the Scriptures for life change. Accessible to everyone—from the churchgoer to the casual reader, from the iPod-packing student to the seasoned businessperson—this book encourages us to bring God's Word back to the center of our lives. It employs a warm, conversational style to explain principles for understanding and applying God's Word. Every chapter takes the form of down-to-earth conversations with leading Bible scholars, pastors, and other Christian leaders. The result is a heartwarming dialogue about Scripture that is easy to understand and impossible to forget. The trade book is recommended for group-study participants who want to supplement the study and for people who are unable or unwilling to attend the group study.
3. *Reading God's Story: A Chronological Daily Bible* (hardback, item 978-1-4336-0112-5; softcover, item 978-1-4336-0111-8) is organized to make clear the step-by-step development of the biblical story. It also includes helpful introductory articles about each act and scene in the story.
4. *A Reader's Guide to the Bible* (item 005414497) by George Guthrie provides a one-year Bible-reading plan along with a brief commentary for each day's reading. It coaches readers day by day on how to read Scripture effectively and how to apply it to life. The guide helps readers grasp the way each book and chapter fits in the overarching story of Scripture and how their stories fit in God's plan.

Offering a Churchwide Emphasis

In the Read the Bible for Life initiative a church uses the foregoing tools in a biblically oriented, whole-church approach to greater biblical literacy.

1. *Offer group studies.* The church begins by using *Read the Bible for Life Workbook* and *Leader Kit* to train people in how to read the Bible more effectively. Offering the study before the church starts reading the Bible through together will prepare readers for an enriching experience.
2. *Launch chronological, one-year Bible reading.* Involve the whole church in reading the story of Scripture together, using the group study *Reader's Guide to the Bible*, the *Bible Reading God's Story: A Chronological Daily Bible*, or both. Pastors can also preach through the highlights of the story of the Bible throughout the year, helping people grasp the grand narrative of Scripture. The Web site www.lifeway.com/readthebibleforlife provides tools for implementing a churchwide emphasis, including sermon outlines and suggestions for worship services.

The combination of training, daily interaction with God's Word, small-group discussion and encouragement, the Word preached, and worship promises an effective means to greater depth in biblical literacy for your church and a more biblically oriented life together as God's people. The same resources can also be used in an ongoing way to train new members and new believers in how to read the Bible effectively, laying a strong foundation for their lives and ministry as part of the church community.

Planning a Small-Group Study

Who. This study should appeal to church members who want to grow in their understanding and application of God's Word. Consider targeting groups like these.

- Sunday School classes or Bible-study groups
- Discipleship groups
- Women's or men's groups
- Deacons or lay leaders
- New believers

Read the Bible for Life is also an excellent tool for reaching individuals who are unchurched but who nonetheless acknowledge the Bible's authority or those who simply may be intrigued by the subject. Consider promoting the study to the entire community, using some of the methods suggested in "Promoting the Study."

Where. Studies can be offered at any site that has a DVD player and adequate room for participants to meet comfortably. Suggestions include a church, a home, a community center, a workplace, or a prison. If you offer multiple groups, consider meeting separately for the first half of the session and then coming together to watch the DVD segment in a large meeting room. However, if groups need to meet in different locations, you can download the video sessions from www.lifeway.com/readthebibleforlife. Churches offering multiple group studies can also order copies of the DVDs by calling LifeWay Church Resources Customer Service at (800) 458-2772.

When. *Read the Bible for Life* can be studied anytime:

- Sunday morning
- Sunday night
- A weekday or weekday evening

Offer the study anytime the church calendar allows for nine consecutive weeks to complete the study. If your church plans to read the Bible through together beginning in January, offering this study in the fall will equip church members to read with greater understanding and meaning.

Planning process. Here is a suggested planning timeline.

Six to eight weeks before:

- Order materials by writing to LifeWay Church Resources; One LifeWay Plaza; Nashville, TN 37234-0113; phoning toll free (800) 458-2772; faxing (615) 251-5933; e-mailing orderentry@lifeway.com; ordering online at www.lifeway.com; or visiting a LifeWay Christian Store.
- Enlist study leader(s).

Four weeks before:

- Form a prayer team to begin praying for the church. Continue throughout initiative.
- Begin promotion. See “Promoting the Study.”
- Distribute materials to leaders.

Two weeks before:

- Continue promotion.
- Distribute workbooks to group participants or make them available for purchase.
- Decide on details like refreshments, greeters, attendance keepers, and name tags.
- Have worship bulletins or inserts printed.

One week before:

- Continue promotion, including bulletin announcements or inserts.

After the study:

- Involve the church in reading through the Bible together, using *Reading God’s Story: A Chronological Daily Bible*, *Reader’s Guide to the Bible*, or both.
- Consider preaching messages that support the weekly readings in the chronological Bible for an entire year. See the sermon suggestions at www.lifeway.com/readthebibleforlife.
- Consider offering other studies on the Bible, such as *Growing Disciples: Live in the Word* by Philip Nation or *Living God’s Word* by Waylon B. Moore.

Promoting the Study

The following tools are provided on the CD-ROM for promoting a small-group study, churchwide emphasis, or community campaign.

- Bulletin template
- PowerPoint® slide
- Poster
- Logo sheet

Depending on your target audiences, you may also want to use e-mails; the church’s Web site; announcements in worship services; and radio, TV, and newspaper ads.

Offering a Small-Group Study

The following process is recommended to complete a group study, using the workbook and the leader kit.

1. In session 1 participants will watch DVD session 1. As they watch, they should complete the DVD viewer guide on page 9 in the workbook.
2. During the following week participants should complete the daily studies in week 1 in the workbook on their own. These lessons will expand on the DVD teaching they have viewed.
3. In group session 2 participants will discuss the material they have studied during week 1. Then they will watch DVD session 2 before completing week 2 in the workbook during the following week. Each subsequent group session follows this pattern.
4. An optional group session is provided on page 205 in the workbook for groups that want to follow up on their individual study of week 9 in the workbook.

Here is a suggested format for group-study sessions. Open and close each session with prayer.

Session 1

1. Welcome participants.
2. Lead the group to complete “Getting Started” on page 8 in the workbook and to share responses.
3. Identify the purposes of this study:
 - To help people learn how to read the Bible more effectively and consistently
 - To help people learn how to apply Scripture faithfully and specifically to their lives
 - To help people grow in their delight in God’s Word
4. Review the process for completing each week’s individual and group studies, as explained at the bottom of page 8 in the workbook.
5. Share any details from the introduction to the workbook, pages 5–6, that you think would be helpful.
6. Mention ways participants can go deeper if they choose:
 - Do more in-depth study of the Scripture passages in the workbook by using a study Bible, a Bible dictionary, and Bible commentaries.
 - Choose a passage from the week’s study to memorize and meditate on. Write the passage on an index card and spend 5 to 10 minutes each morning memorizing and meditating.
 - Read the trade book *Read the Bible for Life* as a companion to the workbook.

Sessions 2–9

Use the discussion questions provided in “Group Experience,” which appears before each week’s study in the workbook.

Session 10 (Optional)

An optional group session is provided on page 205 in the workbook for groups that want to follow up on their individual study of week 9. No DVD is provided for session 10.

Leading Small Groups

Share the following information with persons who are enlisted to lead small-group studies of *Read the Bible for Life*.

Every Christian is called to be a leader. Some are more gifted at leadership than others, but we worship a God who calls each of us to influence the people around us—to lead them to a fuller understanding of who God is, of what He has done for us, and how He wants us to live our lives.

The Great Commission is perhaps the clearest statement of our call to leadership (see Matt. 28:18-20). It's reasonably straightforward, isn't it? Make disciples. Influence people. Love people enough to lead them from one place to another. Indeed, every Christian is called to be a leader.

Maybe you're approaching the leadership of a study with the utmost confidence. Maybe you've done this sort of thing before, and you're pretty good at it. But if instead you're one of those people who are uneasy about leading a study because you think God has not specifically gifted you to lead others, try to set those concerns aside. That's not a biblical way of thinking about who God has made you to be. God wants you to be a discipler, an influential person—a leader—and He will give you the ability to facilitate well if you ask Him. This collection of ideas is intended to offer you some helpful hints about how to lead a small group through a study, whether it's your first time or your hundred and first.

A lot has been written on how to lead a small group and how not to lead one. Here's a compilation of some of the best ideas out there—21 tips that will assist you in leading your group to a life-changing experience.

1. *It's not about you.* Let's get one thing straight from the beginning: leading a small-group study is not about you. It's about God. The more you can remain in the mind-set of magnifying God and minimizing yourself, the more others will learn from the study. Take a cue from John the Baptist: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

For some small-group leaders, this humble posture is quite natural. For others, the ego has a funny way of creeping into everything they do. If you find yourself saying and doing things out of concern for what others will think of you as the leader, that's a red flag. Instead, try not to worry about your reputation—about pleasing people, in Paul's words (see Gal. 1:10). Your job as a small-group leader is simply to colabor with God to draw people closer to Him.

To lead a small group with excellence, be the guide on the side, not the sage on the stage. This is God's group. Keep Him at center stage, and He will bless everyone in the group.

2. *Operate in God's strength.* Tip 1 said great small-group leadership happens when you make the study about God. Here's the flipside: great small-group leadership also happens when you lead the study through God. The best leader is one who is first a follower of God. Ask God

to empower you to lead beyond your abilities and return to this prayer often. Additionally, make prayer the bedrock of your group time together, at the very least opening and closing each session by collectively talking to God.

3. *Operate in joy.* The leader's disposition powerfully drives the disposition of the whole group. If you adopt a joyful disposition throughout the study, others will follow. When you smile, when you're upbeat, when you're genuinely excited to be leading, when you celebrate successes, it will infect the group—and that will significantly improve the experience for everyone involved.

As you know, though, joy doesn't just happen. It's not something you can engineer on demand, nor can you fake for very long. Rather, real joy starts with clearly seeing the opportunity God has blessed you with. You have been commissioned to help Him make the lives of people better through leading this study. Your work with this group, in fact, is a sacred ministry. This sort of perspective leads to gratitude for the opportunity, and from gratitude flows joy, both in your preparation and in your leadership of the discussion.

4. *Encourage accountability.* Accountability matters, and because it matters, we see it in a lot of contexts. CEOs answer to boards. Accrediting bodies hold schools to high standards. Governments guard against excessive power in their branches by maintaining checks and balances.

Accountability matters in small groups as well. We're more likely to experience permanent change when we have an accountability partner who supports us, asks us whether we're keeping up with the studies, and checks on our progress. So early on encourage people to walk through the study with at least one other person.

5. *Prepare, prepare, and prepare.* In real estate the three most important things in a property are location, location, and location. In small-group leadership—and in teaching generally—one could piggyback on this axiom and say the three most important things are preparation, preparation, and preparation. There's no substitute for it (as some of us have seen from witnessing an unprepared group leader or teacher). If you're going to facilitate effectively, you need to have mapped out how you'll begin the group meeting, what questions you'll cover, approximately how much time you'll devote to each of them, some proposed answers for each question, and a way to bring the meeting to effective close. In your planning, though, don't worry about becoming an expert on the subject matter. Great facilitation can easily happen even though you're not an expert on the topic (remember, you're a guide on the side.) But it's unlikely to happen without planning and thorough preparation.
6. *Model the way.* If you want people to listen to one another, then listen closely to people. If you want them to be transparent and candid, then you go first. If you want them to dig deeper to identify root causes of their problems, then model that yourself. If you want them to be accountable to one another, then be sure they know of your accountability relationship. Lead by example, not just by what you say.

7. *Create a safe environment for sharing.* In almost any small group, there will be people who are intimidated or shy about participating. There are some things you can do, though, to make it safe for them to engage. For starters, be transparent. Share your own struggles. Admit your own challenges with the issues being discussed. Confess your own imperfections, and others will feel freer to then share their own.

It's also important to be supportive early in the study of almost every comment. That doesn't mean you tolerate heresy, but it does mean signaling that people don't need to be profound to contribute something of value. Try to avoid strongly disagreeing with people until a point when everyone feels comfortable contributing.

Along the same lines, it's also wise to remain sensitive to others' traditions. More and more, people are crossing denominational lines to participate in small-group studies. If you have an ecumenical small group, seek to understand where others are coming from and minimize the disparagement of other denominational perspectives. Of course, there will be times when it's appropriate to raise and examine these differences, but those discussions should probably be deferred until the group has matured a bit.

8. *Hone your listening skills.* There's an old adage that says, "Being listened to is so close to being loved that most people can't tell the difference." You may have experienced that feeling firsthand. Do what you can to make sure everyone in your group feels it as well.

Concentrate on what each person is saying, rather than thinking about your own response. Rephrase their point when appropriate so that they'll know they've been heard. Use nonverbal cues that show you're listening—cues like maintaining a comfortable level of eye contact with the person speaking, occasionally nodding, positioning your body to squarely face the speaker, slightly leaning toward the speaker, and so on. You'll be amazed at how such little things can make a person feel listened to—and loved!

9. *Stay on point.* This is the bane of many small groups. One off-topic comment gives license to the next, and before you know it, a series of loosely related remarks has taken up your entire meeting time. Ever been there? This is a leadership problem. To avoid it, keep the group focused on the question at hand and follow up on tangential comments by bringing the group back to the actual question. Everyone benefits when a leader steers the conversation, and everyone suffers when he or she does not.
10. *Be sure Scripture is your filter.* It seems that sometimes our filters for right and wrong get clouded, even in Christian circles. Some people use their experience to judge right from wrong. Others use society's rules. Some are pragmatists, basing the right thing to do on what works. A lot of worldviews are infecting Christian thinking these days, so when group members suggest solutions to problems, don't shy away from asking whether their suggestion aligns with Scripture. Ask them whether Jesus did it that way or would do it that way. Ask them for any biblical support they can think of. If, as group leaders, we persistently come back to the Bible as God's standard, our group members will too.

11. *Listen for segues to the next question.* It's invaluable to always know where you want to go next with a discussion. Sometimes you simply have to announce the transition (for example, "Let's turn a corner now and look at the next question"), but the meeting flows more smoothly if you capitalize on natural transition points. Expert facilitators listen closely for comments that connect to where they want to go next and quickly use those comments to move the discussion forward.
12. *Echo what has been said.* This is an essential facilitation technique. From time to time you'll find it helpful to restate what somebody has just said—to echo it for the group. Echoing not only lets the speaker know that he or she has been understood but also serves to clarify that person's point for everyone else. Beyond that, echoing makes it more likely that the rest of the group will respond to that person's comment rather than follow with an unrelated comment. So echo comments where appropriate, and then, since you have the floor at that moment, invite commentary on what's just been said. The flow of discussion will improve dramatically.
13. *Connect the dots.* Another way to enhance the flow of discussion is to connect some people's comments to other people's comments: "So Sherry, you think the verse calls us to action, but Fran, two minutes ago you said you didn't understand it that way. Can somebody else help us out here?" This is good facilitation because it clarifies where we are with the discussion and where we want it to go.
14. *Cut off dominators.* Let's face it: they're out there. Many groups are blessed with that spirited person who contributes a little too much. And that can diminish the experience for everyone else. Usually, if the leader doesn't take control of this situation, no one will.

One solution is to talk to the person away from the group. It doesn't take much. Start by affirming the positive and then candidly make your request: "Hank, you really have a lot of good stuff to contribute in this study, but I want to make sure others have an adequate opportunity to share too. Would you be willing to scale back—at least a little—the number of times you contribute?"

A second way to balance contribution is to simply cut in when the dominator takes a breath, echo what he or she has said to that point (so that they'll know they've been heard), and invite someone to respond to that. As a last resort you might say to the group something like: "I don't want you to feel as if you're in school, but in the interest of managing this discussion, it would help me if you would all raise your hands when you want to comment." Then regulate the dominator's contributions in a way that is more helpful to the group.

15. *Ask for people's opinions.* "How about somebody who hasn't spoken yet?" "Anyone else want to comment on this issue?" "Does anyone have a different perspective on this?" These and similar questions are nonthreatening ways to invite people into the conversation. Make a list of phrases you're comfortable with and use them at strategic points to draw in quiet group members. Sometimes this little nudge can be a turning point for someone.

16. *Frame questions using why and how.* Usually, when you ask a question that begins with *why* or *how*, people tend to answer with more thoughtful, extensive responses than if you ask a question that begins with *who*, *where*, or *when*. Think about it. Questions that begin with these latter words can lend themselves to one or two word answers, right? But try answering a *why* or *how* question with one word. Not likely. If your goal is to get people talking, think about reframing the questions you ask.
17. *Permit silence after you ask a question.* Eventually, it'll happen. You'll ask a question, and no one will say anything. Avoid the temptation to fill that void with your own voice. Give people time to think. Let them muster the courage to answer a tough question. Give them a moment to hear from God if that's the prompting they are seeking. Get comfortable with silence after posing a question. Often, your patience will be rewarded with some of the richest and most poignant answers of the week.
18. *Stay with fruitful conversation, even if it's taking too much time.* For group leaders who are especially time-conscious, it's natural to march through a set of questions and make sure everything gets covered in the time allotted. The best group leaders remain mindful, though, that the real goal of the meetings is transformation, not efficiency or box checking.

Sometimes a question will stimulate lots of discussion. It will go deep; it will touch a chord; it will create excitement; it will surface pains or misunderstandings that need to be addressed; it will plant the seeds of lasting change for people. Avoid cutting off God's work in these situations. Don't be a slave to a script, insisting on covering all five questions in 10 minutes each. Some questions may require 20 minutes, others 3 minutes. So be flexible and learn to discern when to deviate from your original plan.

19. *Use a board or easel if appropriate.* Chronicling relevant points on a board that people make is a wonderful way to affirm, echo, and clarify. It will also help you "connect the dots." Many people will retain more of what's said if they've both heard it and seen it in writing.
20. *Summarize key points.* Many people will find it instructive if you can recap some of the more important lessons from the discussion. The end of the session is a natural time to do this, but it's also helpful to do it at the beginning of a group meeting ("This is what God has taught us so far in this study"), as well as after particularly important or complicated points in the discussion. Brief, oral summaries from the leader enhance learning and retention, so take notes during the discussion and emphasize essential takeaways.¹
21. *Offer lots of encouragement.* When people are learning new skills, they need to be encouraged. A phone call, a hallway conversation, or a note can help someone who is struggling. Make full use of social-networking tools on the Internet. For instance, start an e-mail discussion with your group during the week. Create a Facebook group for your small group, allowing participants to share their experiences or to ask questions. Start a Twitter account to encourage your group or to send them resources like the articles on the CD-ROM in *Read the Bible for Life Leader Kit* or on the Web site www.lifeway.com/readthebibleforlife.

1. Adapted from Michael Zigarelli, *Freedom from Busyness* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 2006), 72–83.