

Bible societies research Scripture as source of wisdom

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(RNS)—One of the biggest research projects into Scripture ever conducted 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.”

Regional meetings

Bible Society leaders from the West met in Geneva last month to discuss the early research findings in Europe, the United States, Australia and New Zealand.

Others from central and eastern Europe, including Russia, met last week in

Bucharest, and those from Latin America soon will 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 and their common Christian heritage.

Another cluster consists of central and eastern Europe, while there are separate ones for the Middle East, Latin America, Muslim-majority areas of Africa, other parts of Africa and Asia.

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 never have read the Bible at all.

Complex picture in England and Wales

That study drew a complex picture of religion among young people particularly in an increasingly secular country.

Some 70 percent of adults aged 18-24 think it's important to make a difference in the world, and half of them actually think they can. Among the rest of the population, 56 percent and 39 percent thought these statements were true, respectively.

Young people also are most likely to be searching for a sense of meaning, with 54 percent claiming this as opposed to only 33 percent of the total sample.

But they are also mostly detached from conventional religion. Sixty-seven percent say they are "not religious," the largest proportion of any age group. They are the age group least likely to say there is definitely or

probably a God/gods/higher power—only 29 percent, compared with 38 percent overall.

Nearly three-quarters of young adults rejected the idea that people need religion to know the difference between right and wrong. The same proportion said they have negative views of the Bible, considering it outdated, homophobic and irrelevant to their lives.

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.”

United States Bible engagement in decline

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.”

Some surprising findings

In New Zealand, Bible Society leaders have published results of its engagement survey there, which found 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 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 they use 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 better to 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 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.