“Reading the Bible through the Eyes of Another”

“Fruits” of the International EMS Bible Project
2009 – 2011

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Dear friends,
dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

EMS Project “Reading the Bible through the Eyes of Another” 2009-2011

On behalf of the Project Committee, we are sending you warm greetings.

In 2009/10, when we invited groups to participate in the EMS Project “Reading the Bible through the Eyes of Another” within the framework of the EMS Focus 2009-2012 “Giving Account of our Hope – Christian Witness in a Pluralistic world”, your group registered as participants. We were very happy when approx. 90 groups in twelve different countries expressed their interest in joining the project, some within existing partnership relations, some asking for facilitation of contacts with a partner group. On our side, we had offered our assistance through the workbook with information in the method of Bible Sharing and with reflections on the suggested bible texts, through email correspondence and through an internet forum on the website of the bible reading project.

We are aware that experiences differed. In some cases, the exchange between partner groups was very intense, in other cases; groups were struggling with communication problems, with delays in corresponding with each other, with difficulties in mutual understanding across cultural borders. From 29th March to 2nd April 2011, an international EMS Bible Workshop was held in Neustadt, Palatinate, with 34 participants coming from eight different countries. 14 pairs of participating groups were able to send delegates. Like the first EMS bible Workshop, which had been held in 2006 in Tauberbischofsheim, Baden, this workshop was an extraordinary and inspiring experience.

We would like to share some experiences with all groups that had registered in the process, so that all can benefit at least in a limited way from this experience of sharing the bible and sharing fellowship in a very international and multicultural group. At the same time, the enclosed papers are meant to serve as an encouragement for further opportunities of sharing the Bible with partners across cultural and language borders.
For the workshop in Neustadt, we had compiled a reader with two articles on group experiences with group reports on Exodus 3 and Ruth, which featured prominently at the workshop, and with an introduction into intercultural learning. If you are interested in this reader, you can download it on the EMS Website [www.ems-online.org](http://www.ems-online.org) (EMS Focus).

We would like to encourage all interested groups to continue using the material available on the website, notably the workbook, in ecumenical partnership with other groups. For the year 2014, we are envisaging a new bible reading project. We should be very happy, if we could remain in contact with you. Your comments and your responses will be very much appreciated.

*On behalf of the Project Committee, we wish you God’s blessings in studying the bible and in witnessing to our fellow citizens in our respective countries.*

*Yours in Christ*

*Gabriele Mayer, PhD*  
*Secretary, Women and Gender Desk*  

*Bernhard Dinkelaker*  
*General Secretary*

*Bible workshop in Neustadt/Palatinate March 2011*
A variety of voices

The Bible in intercultural exchange

Birte Petersen

*When Christians of both genders and different cultures exchange views about the same Bible text, both sides gain surprising insights.*

What can modern Japanese-Filipino young people living in the megacity of Tokyo do with the Biblical passage that is many thousands of years old about the wonderful rescue of Moses from a reed basket? You might think they would find this ancient Biblical text totally boring and it would mean nothing to them. What in fact emerges is that they identify themselves with the small boy who was abandoned on the Nile. In fact the young people know all about the fate of being separated from their mothers. These are young people whose mothers came from the Philippines to Japan in search of work and a secure future. The women often landed in night clubs to earn a living. Many found Japanese husbands but in many cases, the mothers had no other choice but to send their children back to the Philippines in order to continue their work. Or they had to leave their children behind when they went off to Japan. This is why the young people can identify with the little Moses in the story.

The Japanese-Filipino youth group in Tokyo is one of about 90 groups in 16 countries which are taking part in an international Bible reading project: For the second time, the Association of Churches and Missions in South Western Germany (EMS) has called for participation in the project "Reading the Bible through the eyes of another". Groups of two from different countries read the same Bible passage using the same method and exchange their results by letter or email. The Bible offers a basis for people in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and Europe to enter into dialogue. It apparently succeeds better and more intensively than many other conventions and conferences.
It will become exciting when Japanese-Filipino young people read what their partner group from Alsfeld in the German state of Hesse, a house group made up of adult men and women, thinks about the same passage. At an international seminar in the coming spring, many of the participating groups will even experience the joy of meeting members of their opposite group face to face and exchanging information directly with them. Experiences from the last Bible project show that an intercultural exchange or Bible texts results in interesting insights. Many participants realise for the first time that their interpretation of the Bible passage is conditioned by their own cultural context. The composition of the partner group stems from a totally different culture and results in different realisations. But it can be said that no composition is more right or wrong that another. In this way, a participant's horizon becomes extended and his or her understanding of truth is relativised.

For example, a study group from Gwangju, South Korea, reads Miriam's Song in Exodus 15:20-21 against the background of the experience of the massacre against the democracy moment that took place there in 1980. The group calls for a confrontation with the burden of history and to act as liberators today with social reality even today: "Miriam's name means resistance. " With the same Bible passage, a women's group from Reutlingen remembers the fruit boycott made by women in Germany with the aim of ending apartheid in South Africa. They write, "Let the picture of liberation and a dance of joy live on in our hearts – like a blessing. " And the Japanese-Filipino young people see Miriam as the longed-for elder sister who stands by them.

It is astonishing how strongly the Bible reading project appeals to people in congregations. The method used for Bible sharing requires no previous theological knowledge and relies intensively on the personal and social experiences of the participants. This leads to the situation that in the past, the participants in fact had very little access to the Bible. Lively discussions arise. What also means a lot to participants is that they come into contact with a group "on the other side of the world" through this exchange. As the Japanese-Filipino young people expressed it, they felt how much it motivated and strengthened them that people in a totally different country are interested in them and their thoughts and enter into dialogue with them.

Gabriele Mayer from the EMS relates how helpful intercultural Bible reading is in theological training. After a long period of studying specific Biblical texts in the usual academic way, she
confronted co-workers from the Diakonia in Germany with interpretations of these passages from Lebanon, India and Japan. Suddenly, the Germans discovered how much Bible reading was conditioned by their own cultural background. Their reading become much more definite and they discovered the many new possibilities that opened up to them to convey Bible texts within the German context – to people whose cultural backgrounds are also not uniform. In this way they found totally new points of contact for their future target groups.

The example of Tokyo shows that the Bible often speaks directly to the life of readers. The Bible "reads" people, so to speak. Readers take possession of the book and make it into their own. In this context an African woman is often quoted. She says, "The Bible is the only book that I read and that also reads me. “ The Bible fits many cultures so well as if it had originated from them. It is the opinion of Cameroonian theologian Babila Fochang that the Cameroonian culture is so similar to the Biblical culture that people in Cameroon almost have the impression that the Bible was written in Cameroon.

On the other hand Biblical passages can also be disturbing and alienating. It is not at all easy when, for example, a Nigerian theologian in conversation with a German theologian talks as a matter of course about the impact of the devil and refers to relevant passages in the Bible. The German theologian sees the danger of demonising certain forms of behaviour or people. The Nigerian theologian thinks that Germans are naive because they disregard the reality of evil. Nonetheless, in this discussion, the Bible is the basis of a constructive dialogue "at eye level" that brings the two forward and develops their theological thinking.

To this day, the Bible is the only book that is available for people in many cultures in their own language. Where books are so rare in their own language, the Bible assumes en even greater importance, and an even greater "brilliance". In the Southern Indian language of Kannada the Bible is called "Pavithra Sathyaveda", which means the "true and holy book". But is this true? The Southern Indian theologian John Sadananda appeals not to approach this question from an individual viewpoint. For him, the Bible, which Christian men and women want to live by, is supposed to transform not only the individual but also the whole society. "We are called upon to lead a life as the Body of Christ as parishes and communities. “ The Indian theologian encourages people to continue writing the Bible by Christian communities telling their own stories today of how God acts and becomes visible in their communities. This is how God's revelation can continue and remain alive. Like Christ in the multi-religious
society, he holds that it is necessary and important to involve not only the insights, thoughts and questions of Christian men and women from other cultures, but also those who belong to other religions, in other words, people of other faith cultures. For example, there are wonderful and worthy poems by Hindus on Biblical themes. A dialogue with Hindus about basic ethical questions, for example, can also assist both sides in the search for righteousness.

Bernhard Dinkelaker, Secretary-General of the EMS, also makes this clear, "The Bible places us within a common solidarity. It places us before joint basic questions that we must answer by the way we live. He sees the Bible as a "friend and travel companion". Sometimes it questions the people who read it, sometimes it comforts and encourages them. Sometimes it is a familiar voice that confirms who we are, sometimes it is a disturbing third person who agitates us and wants to change us. In so far, the Bible means constant questioning about our personal lives and calls us to debate these questions. Reading the Bible means being addressed in surprising ways and experiencing change as a result.

Published in: darum 6/2010

Bible Workshop Neusatdt/Palatinate
Group Experiences:
Overcoming obstacles – building bridges

Claudia Rauch

“Keeping it up was worth the effort“ – that was the conclusion of those participating in the 5-day international Bible workshop in Neustadt (Germany), which concluded the EMS Bible Reading Project “Reading the Bible though the eyes of another”.

Obstacles
Participating in the Bible Reading Project for some groups was quite a stony road which required a lot of stamina and at times also some frustration tolerance: starting with technical difficulties (wrong e-mail addresses, internet connections that did not work) and communication problems (for basically all participants English was a foreign language), there were some further obstacles to overcome.

Thus, when getting to know the partner group it became clear that both sides – mostly unconsciously – had preconceptions about “the others”: “Why do they think this way, why do they express themselves in this way?”

Quite soon the limits of a written exchange with a mostly unknown group became clear: for basically all participants English is a foreign language, so that it was difficult for them to write the reports. Moreover, the inhibition about opening up to an unfamiliar group and
“exposing” personal thoughts was great, combined with the fear that own observations about the biblical text might not meet the expectations of the partner group. Some groups experienced: where people from different countries meet and read the Bible together, different cultural, theological and personal contexts – environments that are at first completely strange – clash.

**Bridges**

Thus, why did the participants reach a positive conclusion saying “it was worth it” in spite of all these difficulties?

What did the groups from different countries and continents gain from reading the Bible together?

At the end of the workshop the “journey” of each tandem group was reviewed. Apart from the difficulties already mentioned, most of the experiences they had were positive: by writing e-mails already encounters were made and relationships were built. Reading together the same biblical texts united them; they exchanged photos and stories as well as Christmas greetings. Many groups learned that where people from different countries read the Bible together, Christians meet and perhaps discover also familiar and common things in the others. Asked where and when the partners felt close to each other, first and foremost the personal encounter at the workshop and the singing and praying together in different languages as well as the Bible studies were mentioned. The language barrier was no longer perceived as a problem: “The others understand me even though my English might not be perfect.” This became particularly clear during the devotions in the crypt, where the focus was on singing and praying together. The conclusive Lord’s Prayer underlined the diversity of the multicultural group – everyone prayed in their own mother tongue. There were Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam voices besides Twi, Afrikaans, Arabic and Korean, and Bahasa Indonesia next to German and Japanese.

Thus we could hear and feel: at the “other side of the world” there are people who share our faith. The differences which had often been perceived turned into diversity enriching the participant’s lives. And it became clear: Despite all cultural and/or theological differences there is one thing that unites us: “Though we are different in many ways we are one in Christ Jesus”.


Reading the Bible in the midst of severe living conditions in Brazil

Roselei Bertoldo from the South of Brazil, pastor and catholic nun of a religious community. Since more than 15 years she has been working in Piauí, in the northeast of Brazil. She accompanies women farmers affected by land conflicts.

Anne Heitmann pastor of the Protestant Church in Baden, member of the international project committee of EMS Bible Reading Project, exchanging thoughts with her German women’s group with women farmers in Piauí, Brazil

A beautiful white hammock was chosen by the women from the dry northeast of Brazil as their “symbol of hope”. In the midst of the hammock you can see a painting of green palm tree branches and the Bible which “rests” upon them.

“This symbol combines both, the daily life of the women and the power of faith which has been deepened through reading the Bible,” tells Roselei Bertoldo. As a Catholic nun she accompanied this group of female farmers within the frame of her ministry.

The hammock is bed, cradle and sickbed in the daily life of these women. More pieces of furniture are seldom in the humble clay huts. Those who build a stone house must be aware that it might be torn or burnt down by the land owners. It is still a matter of conflict in the northeast of Brazil that their traditional homestead is not being recognized.

The women earn their living for themselves and their families by small-scale subsistence farming, with special focus on the fruit of Babcu coconut palm tree. From the pulp a fine, healthy and nutritious flour can be extracted and also valuable oil. The women in Miguel Alves have joined together to process the nuts. To open the small nuts is hard work. They bought together a mill with which the seeds can be processed more easily – for example into soap and cleansing agents.
The branches of the palm tree stand for that which made survival possible for these women. And the Bible is in the middle. It is an essential part of their survival. This is astonishing as most women of the group cannot read or write.

Roselei Bertoldo tells: “It was a great challenge to perk up one’s ears and to interpret the texts which we had listened to in detail. During the women’s meetings the first question is what they feel like and which problems and concerns, but also which pleasures they bring along. After the first contact with a biblical text the women took the text along to their homes and asked their family to read it again aloud. Mostly the children can take over this task. Thus, the whole family is involved in that kind of “Bible Study”. During the next meeting the text was read aloud again, then the women tell in their own words what they heard, paid special attention to the individual persons in the text or to the pictures which rose special interest. In small scenes the stories were connected to their realities. Then they search to transfer the text into their life, into their congregation and families. At the end we pray and sing before God.” In this way some of the women had their first encounter with a specific Bible story. Or, for the first time in their life, they took a paint brush into their hand and brought colourfully to the paper what is important in their lives.

Roselei Bertoldo tells with how much ease these women transfer Biblical stories to their life, how easily they can perform scenes of life or paint pictures. As “preservers of life” they have a close relationship to the land, the soil, the seeds and fruits. Although they cannot read and write, they are very close to the Bible stories and experience them physically. This became especially clear when reading the story of Ruth and Exodus. The women know about the struggle for survival which Ruth and Naomi went through. Often they are solely responsible for their families, because during the periods of drought their husbands go south to search for work. “The story of Ruth helped them to trust in the mercy and care of God in situations in which they lack the essential,” says Roselei Bertoldo. All women have also suffered land conflicts. They know about the longing for a piece of land belonging to themselves and the joy when a lot of land is granted. Then they sing and hold a service as Mirjam sang with a loud voice after the flight form Egypt land. The certainty that God goes with them in conflict situations strengthens them.

The intensive contact with Bible stories also opened new horizons for the women, new horizons going far beyond their own situation: “The exchange with the Bible reading group in
Ettlingen, Germany has widened their view on the world and initiated new interests – e.g. to learn to read”, says Roselei Bertoldo, “and their self-esteem was strengthened. At the beginning they felt like: We have nothing, we know nothing and can nothing at all contribute to this exchange on the Bible. But then they realized: Our experience is important. Yes, we all are “women theologians” and can interpret the Bible – not only pastors or those who accomplished their study courses. What we can contribute counts. And it helps others to better understand Biblical texts.”
„I am the Way, the Truth and the Life“ – a Journey of Learning

How to speak about “truth”, when in a pluralistic world we are rather expected to speak of tolerance, peace and mutual understanding? How to respond to a Muslim taxi driver, who I happened to meet and who unexpectedly asked me about the meaning of John 14:6 “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” How to find a common language in the diversity of languages, cultures, denominations, traditions, gender?

In the bible project, John 14:1-14 wasn’t chosen by too many participating groups who made their reports available, and yet it is a very crucial text, challenging us with the message of truth. What is the biblical understanding of truth? At the Bible workshop, we adopted an approach of enacting this bible portion, using the method of “frozen pictures” (Augusto Boal, “Theatre of the Oppressed”), individually and in groups. Participants were divided into four groups of eight or nine persons, entering into a dialogue with the text by following seven steps:

1. Looking at the text in its context, not only just verse 6, but verses 1 to 14 as part of Jesus’ “farewell speeches” (John 14-16), promising the Holy Spirit as the “comforter”, and placed between the Last Supper and the Betrayal and Arrest of Jesus.
2. Reading the text in different roles: evangelist/narrator, Jesus, Thomas, Philip.

3. Discussing in groups of three the following questions:
   - How did the disciples feel?
   - Remember situations, when you asked yourself questions like Thomas and Philip.
   - What personal experience do you connect with the confession “Jesus is the way, the truth and the life”?

4. Reflecting individually: How can I express “the way, the truth and the life” with my body, without words?

5. Sharing “body languages”, first in groups of two or three, then in the entire group of eight/nine, showing and explaining movements, and then “freezing” the movement at one moment of expression

6. Forming a “frozen picture” of the entire group, incorporating each individual movement/picture, presenting the “group picture” to the other participants

7. Other participants comment, what they see and perceive, however without interpreting. Then the group members explain their own understanding of their “frozen picture”.
The process in each of the four groups, the presentations of four “frozen pictures” by the groups, the comments by the observers and the reflections by the presenters were highly interesting and very exciting. Everybody participated very actively and authentically.

Some observations:

- None of the groups discussed “truth” as a controversial issue, but as a matter of personal experiences and testimonies.
- There was room for many individual aspects, however, after sharing the personal expressions in “body language”, each group developed a joint picture with many facets, and yet in each case with a common message.
- Each group picture was dynamic, each group was “on the move”: “way” was portrayed by people walking in different ways, at different speeds, in one case someone driving; “life” was portrayed in expressions of joy, happiness, transformation from distress into hope, faith and love; “truth” was portrayed in movements of feeling one’s way forward as well as of confidence and determination.
- Expressions differed very much: There were members who led the way, others who were hesitant, rather timid or doubtful. Some needed to be encouraged, convinced, others were trying to share their vision and hope. Some were carrying burdens, others were walking freely – and yet all were together on the same way, interacting with each other.
- Certain gestures spoke a lot: one person was pointing forward, to the sky, another person was crossing her arms over her heart, another person was reading the Bible, lost in thought.....
- When the observers shared their perceptions, it was necessary to remind them not to interpret what they saw, but simply to describe. Some pictures were speaking very clearly, others were rather puzzling, because they gave expression to life experiences and personal life stories. It became evident, how important it is to narrate our stories and to listen carefully in order not to misinterpret what we see through our own “glasses”.
- When participants shared their personal stories, it might have been a strong testimony of how Jesus truly became the way, the truth and the life, or it might have been doubts and hopes, sorrows and comforts, they shared their journeys in dialogue with the text, how the biblical text became their own, in their own context and culture.
Thus, many participants expressed how much they were touched and moved by the experience, that Jesus’ word “I am the way, the truth and the life” is not a dogmatic statement of judgement or exclusion, but much more a pastoral word of encouragement, of comfort, of assurance, of hope, sometimes in deep crises. “Truth” in the biblical (Hebrew/Aramaic) meaning stands for reliability, faithfulness, of God’s covenant with his people. “Truth” is neither “absolute” nor “relative” but “relational”, because God in Jesus Christ compassionately relates to us in love, inspiring us with the spirit, opening up the way that leads to life in fullness.

“Christian Witness in a Pluralistic World” – by sharing the Bible with body and soul participants felt the promise: Journeying together in dialogue with the Bible will transform us. By sharing our life stories we will become witnesses to “the way, the truth and life” in Jesus Christ.

*Bernhard Dinkelaker*
Some hermeneutical reflections

**Which Frame do we use in Reading & Understanding Biblical Texts?**

You might think what a strange question …?
Reflecting the Bible project we observed an amazing variety of perspectives and understandings regarding the same Bible passage.
Some groups were excited about such observations, others felt a little awkward.

We wonder how these various views and understandings were shaped in the various home countries. We also wonder why do we feel excited at times – and why sometimes awkward …
During the Bible project and in particular during the Workshop in Neustadt/Palatinate those various views and understandings started to interact and to mingle.
At some places our own limited horizon opened up. New aspects from other contexts enlarged our previous understanding.

In reading the Bible through the Eyes of another EMS had aimed at
1. Acquiring a deeper and multi-faceted grasping of biblical texts
2. Connecting with Christians from diverse cultural and religious background
3. Mutual learning to give account of our Christina hope in one’s own context

Looking back at the whole process it appears that many groups encountered in their reading process various “frames” of reading and understanding biblical texts:
- historical frame of the biblical text
- their own and local frame perceiving the world
- the frame of the “other” group and their respective context
Example:
The **Book of Ruth** was read by most groups. Many participants in Ghana and India felt close to the life conditions and challenges Ruth and her mother-in-law had to face in biblical times. Elisabeth Aduama indicated the historical frame by saying *The story of Ruth occurred when judges ruled Israel.*

Can we read the book of Ruth as describing our world today? Is it the same message addressed to an audience more than three thousand years ago? *As believers it is important to take the Bible seriously but not in a literal sense.*

Later Elizabeth Aduama asks in the workbook: *The story reveals barriers such as culture, religion and faith. What are some of the situations in your family, workplace, in your church that generate barriers?*

Here Elizabeth Aduama is encouraging today’s participants to employ 21st-century experience and analysis of barriers, their frame of seeing the world.

Some responses groups were sharing:

- Bible groups in India felt closely connected to the fate of the widow and the struggle Ruth and her Noemi went through.
- Bible groups in Germany recalled narratives from their grand-mothers when they had to flee and became strangers. Other groups i.e. Ghana shared family tensions where daughter-in-laws were not welcomed because of different ethnic or religious background.

It is such an important tool for mutual learning to become aware of one’s preconceived frame. The necessity for such a self-understanding became obvious when we as an international group of Christians visited two worship places of other believers such as a Jewish Synagogue and a Turkish Mosque in Mannheim.

The next day we tried hard to look through the frame of a Jewish believer respective a Muslim believer. We tried hard to express in two or three sentences what is important for a Jewish or Muslim person – from her own frame of understanding. One result of this “exercise” has been that a young Christian brother for the very first time in his life realized that believing in Allah is for the Muslim guide as important as it is for him, a deeply committed Christian fellow. In that moment **deep respect** for the other person’s faith was tangible.

Furthermore, a new humble question emerged: how can we relate to this person in a really respectful attitude?

*Gabriele Mayer*
Groups participating in the International Bible Project

72 groups – four continents – 12 countries – about 16 different churches

**South America**
- Brazil (1 Group)
- Nicaragua (1 group)

**Africa**
- Cameroon (1 group)
- Ghana (9 groups)
- Kenya (1 group)
- South Africa (10 groups)

**Asia**
- India (7 groups)
- Indonesia (2 groups)
- Japan (3 groups)
- Lebanon (1 group)
- South Korea (3 groups)

**Europe**
- Germany (33 groups)