

Highland Mennonite Brethren Church Ministry Manual - UPREACH Scripture Reading Guidelines

At Highland Mennonite Brethren Church we consider reading scripture aloud an important component of our worship services. It helps listeners become familiar with what the Bible has to say and raises their anticipation of how the preacher will address the subject at hand. Our hope is that people will be challenged to grow in their faith and be transformed by the words they hear. In order to read God's word confidently and as distraction-free as possible, some preparation is required. Malcolm Guite puts it in perspective in his sonnet, "The Lectern":

Some rise on eagles' wings, this one is plain,
Plain English workmanship in solid oak.
Age gracefully it says, *go with the grain.*
You walk towards an always open book,
Open as every life to every light,
Open to shade and shadow, day and night,
The changeless witness of your changing pain.
Be still the Lectern says, *stand here and read.*
Here are your mysteries, your love and fear,
And, running through them all, the slender thread
Of God's strange grace, red as these ribbons, red
As your own blood when reading reads you here
And pierces joint and marrow... So you stand,
The lectern still beneath your trembling hand.

www.malcolmguite.wordpress.com

Here, then, are some suggested steps to help you read scripture aloud in our worship services:

Get organized:

- Confirm that you are able to serve on the Sunday you are scheduled or trade with another scripture reader. Have a back-up plan in case of illness or emergency.
- Access the service order on www.myworshipplanning.com or contact the church office to find out what passage of scripture you will be reading. HMBC uses the New International Version most often, but sometimes another Bible translation is preferred for specific wording.
- Use a Bible with print large enough to see when standing or print off the passage from a site such as www.biblegateway.com in a font size that is easily legible.

Prepare your heart:

- Ask God to show you what He wants you to see in the passage. Ask for insight and take the time to understand what you're reading. Meditate on it. Allow it to transform you as you pore over it. You may find it helpful to block it by concept. For more complex concepts, block it into smaller ideas. Then read each block *aloud* and *slowly*. When it speaks to you personally, it shows in how you read.
- Ask God to use you as an ambassador to convey His word to the congregation. Ask Him to speak through your reading. Convey with your attitude that you have something important, exciting, and wonderful to share with your listeners.

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Improve your skill:

- Slowly and thoughtfully read the passage aloud several times.
- Look for phrases or verbs that grab your attention and allow your voice to express excitement, energy, or emotion (appropriately and authentically). Practice saying words in different ways.
- Look for the story, and prepare to take the congregation on a journey through the beginning, middle, and end.
- Try memorizing the passage of scripture, or memorize the first and last phrase so you can look up at the congregation.
- Speak clearly. Use your diaphragm. Use inflection (pitch, tone) and change volume to emphasize essentials.
- Practice in front of a mirror, paying attention to your hand gestures and other movements.
- When you have practiced and prepared well, the words will flow naturally.

On the Sunday you are reading:

- Arrive 20-25 minutes ahead of the worship service start time for a sound check.
- Practice where you will read during the service, with the sound system on.
- If possible, practice the whole process – from going to the front, to getting the microphone adjusted, to introducing the passage, to reading it. For some people the transitions can be more awkward than the actual reading.
- During the service, pay attention to the service order and come on stage promptly.
- Place your Bible or the print-out where you can see it easily.
- Position the microphone. If you need help with this, talk with the sound tech ahead of time. Rather than saying, “Testing 1, 2, 3” or, “Is this microphone working?” use a greeting phrase such as, “Good morning” to ensure that the mic is on.
- Stand still; balance yourself.
- Have a friendly demeanour. Smile, if congruent with what’s being read.
- Introduce the passage by repeating the “address” twice (e.g. say “Matthew 5 verses 1 through 5” when you first get to the microphone, pause briefly to collect your thoughts or find your place in the Bible, then say “Matthew 5 verses 1 through 5” again just as you are ready to start reading.)
- Before you start reading, quickly scan the first line, then look up and begin.
- Speak conversationally and across the room. Imagine you are talking to someone who is 20 feet/6 metres away. Adjust your speaking to ensure that you can be heard.
- Take deep breaths to help you pace yourself and slow down, particularly if you are nervous and tend to rush when speaking. Use your diaphragm throughout your reading.
- Try to periodically look up and make eye contact with the congregation.
- If you don’t get flustered by phones ringing, babies crying, things dropping, etc., congregants will be more likely to keep their focus on the reading. (Under extreme circumstances, someone in leadership may intervene and ask you to pause.)
- When finished reading, look up and briefly pause before returning to your seat.

Some of these ideas on the public reading of scripture have been gleaned from the book, McLean, M. & Bird, W. (2009). *Unleashing the Word: Rediscovering the public reading of Passage of scripture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

WAYFARING

Wesley Hill teaches New Testament at Trinity School for Ministry in Ambridge, Pennsylvania, and is writing a book about friendship.



Why Personal Devotions Aren't Enough

The Bible was made to be read in church first.

Each day began the same way: I would get out of bed, take a shower, and sit down at my desk. I'd place my New American Standard Bible in front of me and open it to where the bright green M'Cheyne's Bible reading calendar kept my place. I would close my eyes and ask God to illumine the texts I was about to ponder. And then I would begin to read—usually two chapters from the Old Testament and two chapters from the New.

For years this ritual was the high point of my spiritual life. Of course there were missed days. And take it from me: It's *hard* to catch up when you've missed a day or two of 19th-century Scottish minister Robert Murray M'Cheyne's calendar. (Knowing this firsthand, a friend of mine created her own irreverent alternative, "A Bible Reading Plan for Slackers and Shirkers," which you can find online.) There were days when none of the readings seemed particularly edifying or inspiring. Still, this is where I believed I encountered God most fully and immediately. This was the best way to remember God's love and demonstrate love for him in return.

I also believed God was fully present when I would open the Bible on Sunday mornings. As a growing young Christian, I attended churches whose pastors preached for 40 minutes or more, explaining the biblical texts with radiant joy and scrupulous attention, the way my science teachers had breathlessly described what I was seeing through the telescope pointed at the night sky. At the time, I would have told you that Sunday mornings were extensions of my daily meditations on Scripture. My

personal Bible reading was the center of my spiritual life. Following along as my pastor preached was like a rippling aftershock: still powerful, still moving, still transformative—but all those things the furtherance of what I already experienced on my own.

Today I think about the relationship between those two readings—private, devotional reading and Sunday morning sermon-listening—in reverse. It's not that I've given up private Bible reading. But now I think of *that* daily ritual as an extension of what I do on Sunday mornings, when I'm gathered with fellow believers to listen to Scripture expositied. First comes hearing, and *then*, by implication, comes personal meditation.

Why did my perspective change? Mainly because of what I came to understand Scripture to be. Contrary to what you might think if you only engage Scripture in bite-sized "thought for the day" morsels, the Bible isn't a random collection of profound nuggets of truth designed for silent meditation. Rather, what we know today as "the Bible" is actually a collection of books approved to be read publicly in the Christian assembly. The "canon" of Scripture is, literally, the *rule* of which books are trusted to deliver

the words of the prophets and apostles to the people of God.

Likewise, the New Testament is called that because it's titled after the Christ-centered "testament" or "covenant" that God made with his people after Jesus' resurrection and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, as promised through the Prophets (Jer. 31:31). It's a covenant I renew each week when I gather in God's presence with fellow believers to eat bread and drink wine and proclaim our faith in his risen Son.

In short, I now think of the Bible primarily as the book of the gathered people of God—the church. Notice the order of John's words in the Book of Revelation: "Blessed is the one who *reads aloud* the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who *hear it and take to heart* what is written in it" (1:3, emphases added). God's Word is proclaimed and corporately heard, and we commit ourselves to pondering it and storing it up in our memory. As early church father Theodore of Mopsuestia put it, "All of us, having come to faith in Christ the Lord from the nations, received the Scriptures . . . and now enjoy them, reading them aloud in the churches and keeping them at home." We read privately in order to remember and rehearse what we've listened to publicly.

Bible reading is still essential to my life of faith. But the reason I consider it essential has changed. It's vital to me now because I am mulling the words I've heard with fellow believers, proclaimed to me in the living voice of readers and preachers. Scripture is the Word of God for the body of Christ, and I want to keep meditating on that Word until I hear it afresh next Sunday.

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