

biblefresh

was it a
success?

Authorship

This research and report were designed, conducted, analysed, and written by Nick Spencer and Paul Bickley of Theos Think Tank. Theos was set up in 2006 and conducts research, publishes reports, and holds lectures and debates into the role of Christianity in contemporary Britain. More details can be found in www.theosthinktank.co.uk

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Foreword

One of the most challenging moments of my life was my short visit to Burkina Faso. With 80 per cent of the population living below the poverty line, this was a dry and dusty land with an unremitting searing heat that sapped the life out of you. I visited a tiny village off the beaten track where the church was the only place of hope in a desolate landscape. Inside the church was a group of Burkina women, with young children draped from their shoulders, who were learning to read and write. This materially poor church was rich in vision and generosity and was offering both spiritual and practical help. Samuel Yameogo, President of the Evangelical Federation of Burkina Faso, told me that people in Burkina Faso would rather have Bibles than have shoes on their feet. This church was hungry for God's word but had very little access to it.

The UK church has the opposite problem - lots of access to God's word, but according to the best research we could find, very little hunger for it.

My hope through Biblefresh was that we could begin a journey to tackle both problems. Could we allow the riches of the hunger of the Burkina church for God's word to infect the UK church, while using the material wealth of the UK church to help make the Bible available in Burkina Faso?

This evaluation reveals that we made a good start to a long journey. Confidence in the Scriptures and an appetite to read, experience, live and communicate its message is not something that can be fixed in a year, but many churches, festivals and networks started some exciting initiatives.

My friend Joel used to love to quote an African proverb: "if you want to travel fast go alone, if you want to travel far go together." There was something exciting about taking steps forward on the journey towards biblical literacy together with Christians from across the evangelical spectrum and beyond. This was something that was mirrored in the small executive team that worked hard to strategise, dream and pray for this initiative. It was a pleasure to work with colleagues from Bible Reading Fellowship, Bible Society, Codec, London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, Scripture Union and Wycliffe Bible Translators on that team. My own organisation, the Evangelical Alliance, made a significant investment in staff time and money and I was challenged and impressed by our team's diligence, creativity and commitment to helping the church grow in confidence of God's word.

My hope is that the seeds planted by Biblefresh would grow - that the close working relationships that have developed among many of the Bible agencies, publishers, organisations and festivals would flourish. I was hugely impressed by the kingdom mentality that I saw exhibited by many of those we worked with. It was impressive during a time of economic downturn to find agencies who were more concerned about building confidence in the Bible than they were in selling their products.

There's still a long way to go - but I believe that as God's people listen again to his word, and with the Spirits help allow his word to shape and change us and reform our theology, we will be transformed into the likeness of Christ. In order for this to happen we need to continue to work together. It's only as the whole church listens to the whole of God's word that we will be able to communicate the whole of the gospel together, with words and actions, in spirit and in truth. This is going to require partnership and kingdom thinking, not just on a national scale, but on a global scale. So my prayer is that the Burkina church would receive more of the Scriptures they crave and we would develop more of the biblical hunger we need.

Krish Kandiah, Chair of the Biblefresh Executive Committee

Executive Director: Church in Mission / England, Evangelical Alliance

Executive Summary

- A wide range of churches and other organisations were involved in Biblefresh. **Participating organisations** were predominantly church-based, but these were spread widely in terms of geography, socio-economic status, cultural context, size, and to a slightly lesser extent, denomination. The research showed that participation was not limited to a narrow educated, suburban, middle-class constituency.
- Partners and users put on a **wide range of activities**, including Bible reading programmes, Biblefresh slots within services, reading- and small-group activity, 'Readathons', Bible-learning activity, new websites, and photography competitions.
- Partners organised a variety of **public and outreach events** in their local communities, often linked with schools or public libraries, occasionally involving the local MP or mayor. These included family fun days, interfaith events, public lectures, public exhibitions, celebrations (particularly linked to the King James Version anniversary), coffee mornings, flower festivals, art exhibitions, film screenings, and theatrical productions.
- E100 and the Biblefresh website were **the most commonly used resources**, although there was a good showing for the others, especially the Biblefresh book, monthly update and social media.
- Partner organisations were **overwhelmingly positive** about the way in which Biblefresh had helped them focus more on the Bible in 2011 than they otherwise would have done, and had helped them and their members read the Bible more frequently, understand it better and have more confidence in it.
- Partners spoke of its success in "immersing" and **"familiarising" people with the Bible**, of helping them "see the big picture", "see the relevance", "[go] deep as well as broad."
- They were slightly more mixed about the manner in which the initiative had effected co-operation. They were **largely positive about the mutual understanding and collaborative efforts** Biblefresh had encouraged and enabled, speaking positively about "being part of something bigger", developing a genuine "sense of partnership" and fostering unity within congregations and between different organisations.
- They were, however, a little less sure about whether these would amount to anything in the longer term. Biblefresh can thus be seen as **having made a start into enabling and encouraging co-operation** while recognising how much on-going work there is to be done here.
- Partners were overwhelmingly appreciative of **the "style" and "freshness"** of the initiative.
- Biblefresh helped partners **extend their reach into the wider community** by doing things that they are unlikely to have done without the impetus of the initiative. Partners spoke encouragingly about how different initiatives, some local and some national (The People's Bible and the KJV celebrations were repeatedly mentioned) had helped to generate publicity and wider public interest the Bible.
- Overwhelmingly partners said they would be **willing to do something like Biblefresh again**.
- Criticism from partner organisations was limited and tended to be specific. A number complained of **'fatigue' or 'burnout'**, others were unsure about the long-term, concrete impact of the initiative. Some complained about the limited geographical scope of some of the activities, and others about problems concerning collaboration. There were, however, very few blanket or acerbic condemnations.
- People's **use and experience of Biblefresh resources was on the whole a very positive one**. For example:

- No **reading resource** had less than 90% of people saying it was either very or quite good, with E100 coming out on top.
- All four **training resources** (evening classes, weekend classes, CD/ DVD training resources, and on-line audio and video resources) were judged successful, with evening classes receiving the highest praise.
- All Biblefresh **experiences** were judged better than 'quite useful', with film, photography and music coming out on top.
- User respondents thought that Biblefresh had been most successful in making them feel **"enthusiastic"** about the Bible, in helping them "personally to **read the Bible more frequently**", and in helping them **"value the Bible more."** In each of these instances somewhere between 60% and 66% of people agreed that Biblefresh had been quite or very successful.
- Of Biblefresh's wider objectives, the single most successful was in **helping people "explore parts of the Bible that [they] haven't read before"**, followed by helping people "connect the Bible to [their] everyday life", and then in "bringing the Bible to public attention". On balance, all were deemed to have been more successful than unsuccessful.
- The regular churchgoers among the respondents (which was 98% of the total sample) were **keen and engaged with the Bible**, both individually and corporately, most attending biblically-serious churches and drawing on resources and material as they needed it. They read and studied the Bible frequently, if not necessarily regularly, sometimes in public although most often in private, and were deterred from doing so primarily by living busy lives.
- Respondents saw the relevance of the Bible to a wide range of aspects in their lives, although more people 'got' the personal connections than the more public ones, and only a minority saw any connection between the Bible and the manner in which they travelled (e.g. car, bicycle, plane, etc).

Recommendations

- Biblefresh can be fairly judged to have been a success, earning high praise from the vast majority of people who came into contact with it, either as a partner or a user. In as far as there are recommendations for improvement in any further initiatives, they are:
 - Look to achieve a wider geographical scope.
 - See the public relevance of the Bible.
 - Build on successes and work to construct sustained relationships and co-operative ventures.
 - Extend the audience range to include less biblically-focused Christians and churches.

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Introduction

Biblefresh was an initiative involving an extended network of “churches, agencies, organisations, colleges and festivals”, which undertook a wide variety of Bible-focused projects in 2011.

Timed to coincide with the 400th anniversary of the publication of the King James (or “Authorised”) Version of the Bible (hereafter KJV), and the ensuing public interest in the role and significance of the Bible in national history, Biblefresh partners were inspired by “a vision to reignite and re-enthuse the church in its passion for the Bible”.

Biblefresh focused four key areas of activity – Bible Reading, Bible Training, Bible Translation, and Bible Experience – and had two main overarching objectives.

The first was “to encourage a greater confidence and passion” in the Bible among Christians. In particular, the emphasis on Bible reading, Bible training and Bible experience (the Bible translation work was focused on raising money and interest in providing a native translation for the Bissa people in Burkina Faso) was intended to help and encourage people in their use, understanding and confidence in the Bible. Thus, the first objective may be summarised as ‘biblicising’ UK Christians.

The second objective was to encourage Christian organisations to work with one another in achieving the first objective. This focus on facilitating co-operation may have been less immediately visible than the first but it was no less important for being so.

Early on in the Biblefresh year, it was agreed that research should be undertaken to explore how successful Biblefresh had been, and Theos was invited to tender for and then undertake this research.

In ensuing discussions, it was agreed that a classic pre- and post- study (in which respondents were interviewed before and after the initiative) was unfeasible.¹ In its place, two surveys would be deployed, the first measuring the extent to which those who had used and experienced Biblefresh perceived it to have made a difference to them, and the second assessing the extent to which the initiative had been a rewarding and fruitful collaborative effort among the participating organisations. To the first survey would be appended a series of questions measuring people’s current use, understanding and confidence in the Bible, as a means of providing some form of baseline data for any subsequent research into the subject.

Both projects were based around quantitative (i.e. measurement) surveys that were designed by Theos, in dialogue with the Biblefresh executive committee. These were then uploaded onto a host site and respondents encouraged to visit and complete the questionnaire. The two research questionnaires are available on request.

¹ This was for a number of reasons: (1) the initiative was already underway; (2) it would prove difficult to get the same respondents at the beginning and end of the session; (3) it would be difficult to determine in any sound way whether any measurable change in people’s use, understanding and confidence in the Bible was directly attributable to Biblefresh; and (4) it would be prohibitively expensive.

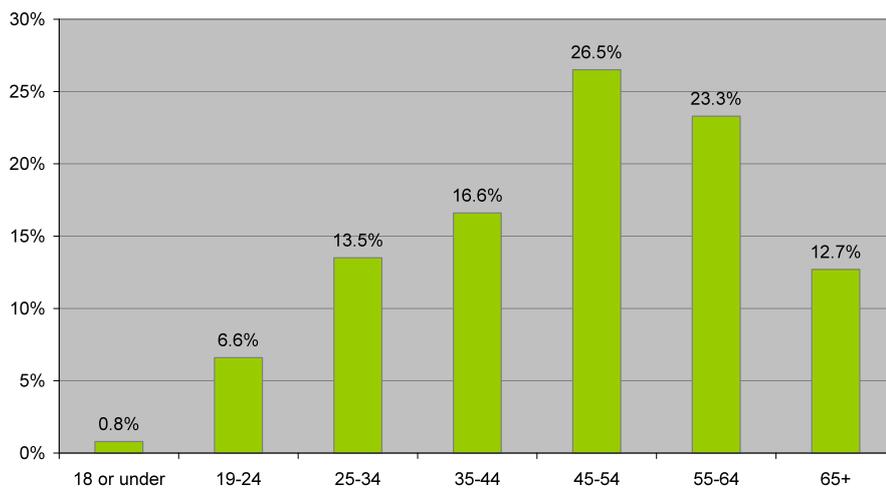
Who were the user respondents?

The 'user' questionnaire was intended for "individuals who have used Biblefresh resources, attended Biblefresh events or training, or been part of 'experiences' organised or facilitated by Biblefresh".

In total, this survey attracted 362 respondents. This was something of a disappointment as we had been aiming for 500+ respondents. It meant that while the overall sample was sufficiently large for analysis, sub-groups analysis (e.g. of what particular denominations thought of the initiative in comparison with others) would be problematic, as they would rely on inadequately small sample sizes.

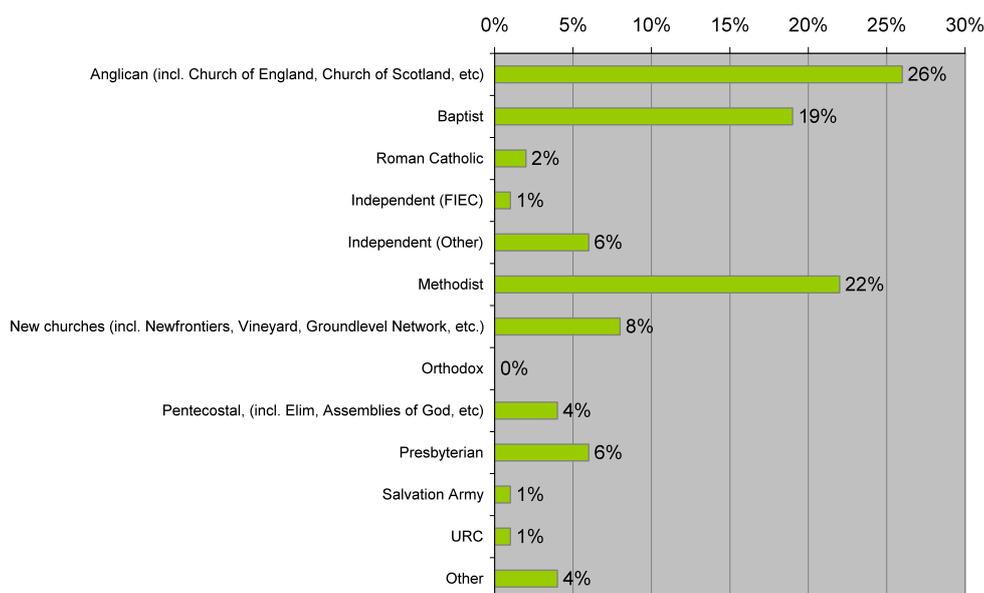
The user survey respondents were split in a roughly equal balance between the sexes (44% male vs. 56% female), and had a spread of ages, with a concentration in the 45-54 year old range (See Figure 0.1).

Figure 0.1: Age of Biblefresh 'User' respondents



User respondents came from a cross-section of denominations, with a concentration (around 2 in 3) attending an Anglican, Baptist or Methodist church. (See Figure 0.2)

Figure 0.2: Denomination of Biblefresh 'User' respondents



Respondents were spread across the UK, with the greatest single concentration (30%) coming from the London/ South East region (See Figure 0.3).

Figure 0.3: Geographic spread of Biblefresh ‘User’ respondents



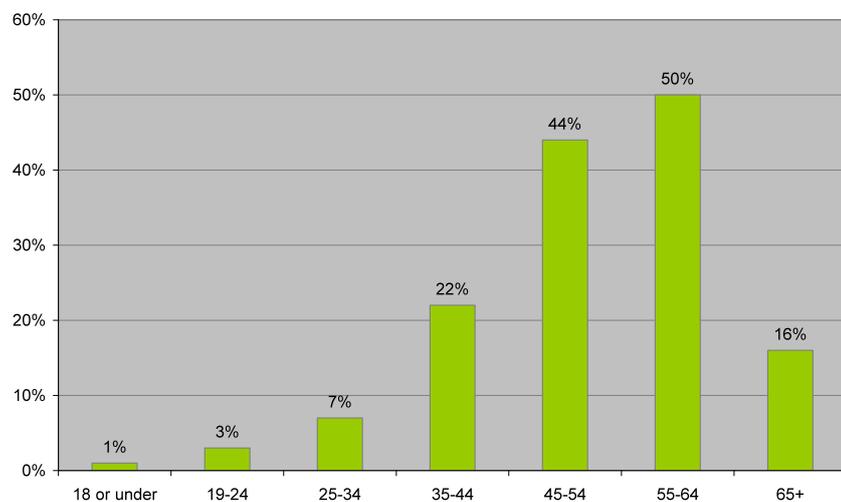
Users were, as you would expect, regular church attenders, with over 90% attending once a week or more often. This should not be a surprise given the nature of the initiative and of the partner organisations. However, it will also not be a surprise to say that if the objective of biblicising the church is to be achieved, it will be particularly important to reach those Christians whose commitment is weaker and less frequent.

Who were the partner respondents?

The second survey was intended for “anyone who has worked with or in Biblefresh – either at a national level, as a partner charity, or in a church congregation”. This included churches and other organisations and was thus a broad category. In total it attracted 143 respondents which exceeded the number we had been aiming for (100+).

Partner respondents (i.e. those who responded on behalf of their organisation) were older than user respondents, with two-thirds of the sample being in the 45-54 and 55-64 age ranges, as one would expect of organisation leaders (See Figure 0.4).

Figure 0.4: Age of Biblefresh ‘Partner’ respondents



Partner respondents were disproportionately male (105 vs. 38) and came from across the UK, with a concentration in the London/ South East region (See Figure 0.5).

Figure 0.5: Geographic spread of Biblefresh ‘Partner’ respondents



How representative are the samples?

It is important to recognise at the outset that it cannot be known how representative these samples are, either in terms of sample size or composition. There is no established ‘universe’ for either Biblefresh Users or Biblefresh Partners unlike, say, with a nationally representative sample, in which the balance of sex and age is established.

That noted, there was nothing in the sample definitions just outlined that should give cause for concern. In terms of gender, the user sample gave a good mix of sexes, and while the partner was disproportionately male, it was not excessively so and, in all likelihood, reflects the gender balance of leadership within Biblefresh partner organisations.

In terms of age, both surveys were disproportionately older, the partner one more so than the user one. However, nearly four in ten user respondents were under 44 and although ideally there would have been more younger people within the samples, it is likely again that the age range of respondents reflects the age of users and, in particular, of partners.

Finally, in terms of geography, the spread of both users and partners is encouraging and, in as far as there was a concentration in both samples in the South-East and London region, that is not significantly at odds with the overall national population concentration in those areas.

In short, although it is impossible to say so definitively, we can be reasonably sure that the research samples on which this report is based are both acceptably diverse and accurate for the conclusions we will draw.

Report structure

This report is structured in four sections. The first offers an overview of what Biblefresh activity went on according to the users and partners. It looks at what kind of organisations partnered in the initiative and what, in their own words, they did. It then explores what resources and experiences the users utilised over the year.

Part two looks specifically at the partners, examining who they were and what they did in a little more detail, and asking whether Biblefresh worked for them. It explores the perceived successes and failures of the initiative, by means of quantitative measures and, more fully, respondents' own ideas and impressions given in their own words.

Part three then turns to the users and asks similar questions of them, drawing more heavily on quantitative data to get a detailed measure of what, in users' opinions, worked and what didn't.

Finally, part four looks at the use, understanding and confidence that respondents have in the Bible today. As already noted, the level of each of these cannot be directly attributed to Biblefresh, although neither users nor partners leave any doubt about the fact that Biblefresh did impact all three of these areas. Rather, this section should be seen as a barometer, measuring the current 'biblical weather' among UK Christians, in such a way as to help guide and inform subsequent Bible based initiatives.

1. Biblefresh activity: what went on

The partners that were involved

Partner respondents were from a variety of contexts. Some were festival organisers, some worked with youth organisations or school Christian Unions, some in academia. One worked in an IT department, another in a diocesan advisory role, a third with “people who are blind or partially sighted”. However, the overwhelming majority were linked to a church, with the majority of those being a position of leadership.

If that appears unduly homogenous, what was striking was the sheer range of churches and local contexts in which partner respondents operated. There were respondents from “suburban” churches, “urban” churches, “city-centre” churches, churches on council estates and “inner city areas”, churches with a “town centre ministry”, churches in “rural” and “semi rural” villages, churches in “rural scattered communities”, and churches in “seaside towns”.

Such different locations signified different socio-economic conditions. Partner churches were to be found in “middle-class areas” and “urban professional middle class residential areas”, but not only those. There were churches in “urban, multicultural” areas, and others in “an inner city multi ethnic community where Christianity is a minority religion”.

This variety extended to the size of the churches. Partner respondents spoke of “very small” churches with “24 elderly folk, [the] youngest 50+”; of medium-sized churches with “about 60-70 adults and children”; of large churches with “around 350 active members”; and of very large churches with “500 people regularly involved”.

This diversity clearly made a genuine difference when it came to the circumstances and contexts in which partners engaged with Biblefresh. Indeed, several partner respondents were clear and direct about the way in which their context had to shape their activities.

One wrote how he was in “a financially struggling ex-mining area where literacy is not high”. Accordingly, “the numerous initiatives [not necessarily Biblefresh ones, in this instance] that are offered to the wealthy are simply out of reach”. “What we need,” he concluded “are simple, straightforward ideas (like ways of doing messy church) that will communicate the gospel message in ways that the church can cope with” (#115).

Another respondent spoke of how he ran “a multicultural church” which had “a variety of levels of spoken and read English.” This reflected the wider community which had “a high percentage of Hindus and Muslims” (#116). Once again, this placed a considerable emphasis on the kind of activity that was feasible or than might be fruitful.

These findings are encouraging for Biblefresh. What could easily have been an activity limited to educated, suburban, middle-class, majority-white congregations clearly was not, but was spread widely in terms of geography, ethnicity, socio-economic status, church-size, and to a slightly lesser extent, denomination.

What did they do?

The nature of the partners’ involvement varied considerably, as one would expect. Although it is not possible to quantify the nature of partners’ involvement, most appear to have made use of a variety of Biblefresh resources within their churches and/or small groups, and to have given a sustained length of time to focusing on Biblefresh themes within their congregations and communities.

E100 was the most popularly mentioned resource. Many churches integrated the E100 reading plan into their existing home group structures and a number of partners described setting up new or extra mid-week “small groups” and “book groups” often for a shorter course of reading during Lent or Advent. Other resources commonly mentioned included You’ve Got the Time, Route66, One Story, BIG Story, Cover to Cover, and E100 for youth. Some churches set up online blogs to share experiences and encourage members in their reading.

“[We set up an] E100 youth project across Ireland. 10,000 copies of specially printed books [were] given out and a blog site established.” (#8)

Many partners described using Biblefresh materials as the basis for teaching series in their churches, often for a term but in some cases for the whole year. Often this complemented the small group reading plans mentioned above. A number of partners mentioned holding special services to launch or promote Biblefresh, while others integrated the theme in the service every week.

“We have had a short ‘Biblefresh Slot’ at the beginning of every service, highlighting different aspects, especially Bible Translation.” (#35)

Several participating groups either sold or gave away Biblefresh resources and Bible reading plans to members of their congregations. Alongside E100 and other resources already mentioned, Selwyn Hughes’ ‘Getting the Best From the Bible’ was specifically mentioned a few times. Some partners created their own reading plans, websites and other resources for their own churches.

“We...created a new resource inspired by Biblefresh: ‘Why does Easter matter?’ [It is] a video-based study pack for Lent for all ages. It won the 2011 Silver Award from the Christian Broadcasting Council in their DVD-based training category!” (#5)

Partners also organised a variety of public events and outreaches in their local communities, often linked with schools or public libraries, occasionally involving the local MP or mayor. There were family fun days with puppet sketch Bible stories, interfaith events, public lectures, coffee mornings, film screenings, and theatrical productions to name just a few. Some attempted to tackle common ‘cultural objections’ to the Bible today.

“We organised a series of four public meetings...to consider four ‘problems’ that our culture has with the Bible: The Bible and Science... The Bible and Jesus... The Bible and Sex... The Bible and Violence.” (#137)

Many used the celebrations of the 400th anniversary of the KJV as a ‘hook’ for outreach events. For example, one partner organised an exhibition in Harrogate Library on “The book that changed the world”. Another used the KJV theme to run events in schools and train teachers on inset days. A few partners mentioned their involvement in a large public event at St. Martin’s-in-the-Fields celebrating the accessibility of the Bible.

“We organised a ‘Celebration of Accessible Bibles’ entitled ‘Touching the Word’ at St. Martin’s-in-the-Fields, and had a public reading of the Bible in Braille prior to the service, with many passers by stopping to listen. The service in St. Martin’s was attended by over 300 people and the main contributors were blind or partially sighted.” (#91)

Worthy of special mention amongst these events were the numerous ‘Readathons’ and public readings of scripture. Many participants read aloud, in relay, through vast portions of the Bible, often drawing together large numbers of participants in the process.

“[We] read the whole Bible out loud on the streets of St. Austell over a fortnight. Over 30 churches and 150 people [were] involved.” (#16)

Some churches also tried out new ways of reading the Bible in their usual gatherings, for example reading it in different languages or in as many different translations as possible. One group recorded the entire Bible on www.audioboo.fm.

Groups together made efforts to memorise verses or sections of scripture. One partner described memorising the entire New Testament with a group. Another learned all the names of the books of the New Testament by singing them to the tune of ‘Hark the Herald Angels’.

“We learned a Bible verse each month and had small business cards with the verses printed on.” (#121)

Many partners described applying the Biblefresh theme to existing projects they had planned: missions events, annual lectures, children's Bible holiday clubs, and family fun days.

"As a Diocese we have badged our major event for the year (a Bible-based all age activity day) with Biblefresh branding." (#14)

The same approach was taken to regular church communications, such as displays and church magazines. Biblefresh articles and themes were adapted for use in regular church magazines or used to produce informative displays to encourage members to use Bible study notes and other materials.

"Our magazine had a book review each month - when a book of the Bible was reviewed by someone whose favourite it was." (#7)

Over and above all this activity, there was a range of notably creative activities, including:

"A Display of texts of different historical Bible documents (facsimiles dating to the 15th Century)." (#7)

"Developing a 'Bibles' webpage to help people find accessible Bibles." (#91)

"A Biblefresh flower festival with groups, organisations and other churches interpreting passages of scripture." (#9)

"A set of art installations based on the Bible to enable people to look at issues which they may not have done before." (#27)

"A 'Bible at Breakfast' morning in May at which there was an art exhibition with paintings, photos, children's work, stained glass, calligraphy, our own versions of Psalm 23 and an open air reading of a gospel." (#35)

"A Bible photo competition." (#1, #66)

"Telling Bible stories in playmobil." (#143)

"A labyrinth telling the big story of the Bible." (#143)

A smaller number of partners mentioned attending Biblefresh training days and events together with their leadership teams, such as a six month update, Cardiff pastors lunch, a Biblefresh communications meetings, 'Get a Grip', and the LST Biblefresh events.

Open Heaven Church, Loughborough

"Alongside [some] joint church initiatives, [our church] is following the E100 Bible Reading Challenge – 50 key passages from the Old Testament and 50 from the New....There's a much higher chance of people achieving this than trying to read the whole Bible in a year...Rather than giving a list of readings, we recorded people's voices reading a passage and then praying, which was then put on the church website as a podcast. We are getting lots of hits, partly as people want to hear who is reading!"

Many partners also raised money for the Bible translation project in Burkino Faso. This was done through gift days, collections and profits from events. Some partners spoke of building new relationships with other organisations as a result of this involvement.

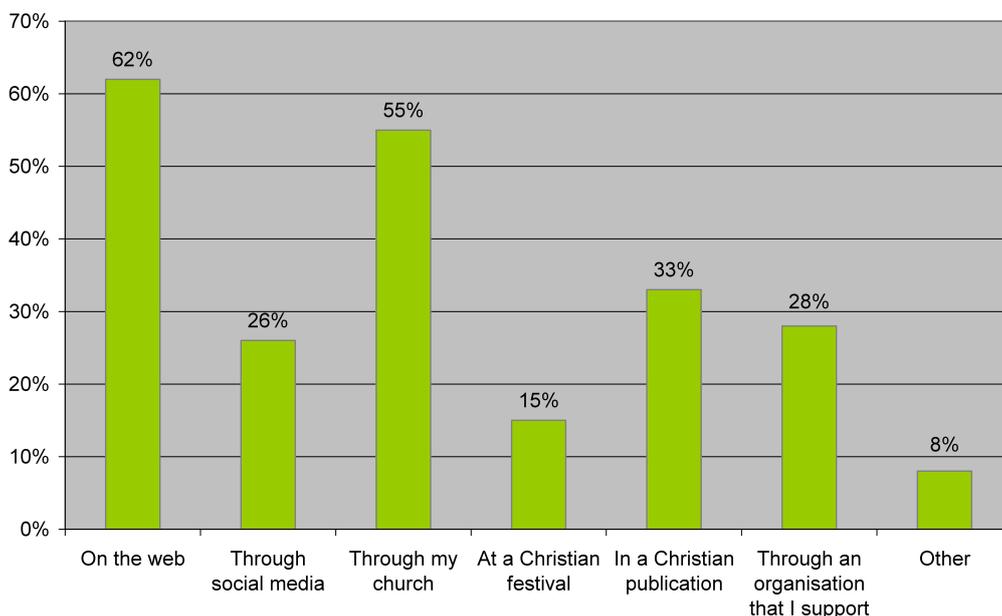
"We plan on linking up with the Bible Society re: translation towards the end of the year and into 2012 for the first time." (#15)

The users who were involved

When it came to users, the vast majority (around 90%) were "aware of Biblefresh or any Biblefresh resources, initiatives or experiences over the last 12 months", indicating a high level of brand awareness. This is noteworthy in as far as there had been concerns, voiced early on in the research planning process, that there would be many people who had experienced Biblefresh without knowing it was Biblefresh. Given that, according to a subsequent question, of those respondents who had not been aware of Biblefresh, only 15 (i.e. around 4% of the total sample) said they had been aware of new Bible-focused activities over the last twelve months, the data suggest that those who engaged with Biblefresh knew it was Biblefresh.

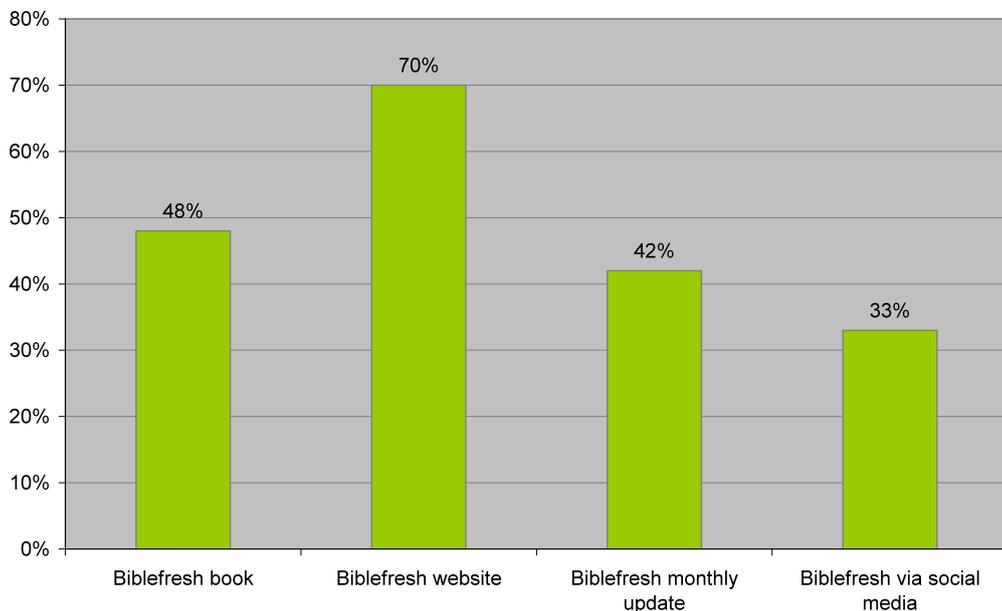
Of those who were aware of Biblefresh initiatives, there was a strong mix of awareness through different media, with web-presence and church coming out top (See Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1: Where users became aware of Biblefresh resources, initiatives or experiences



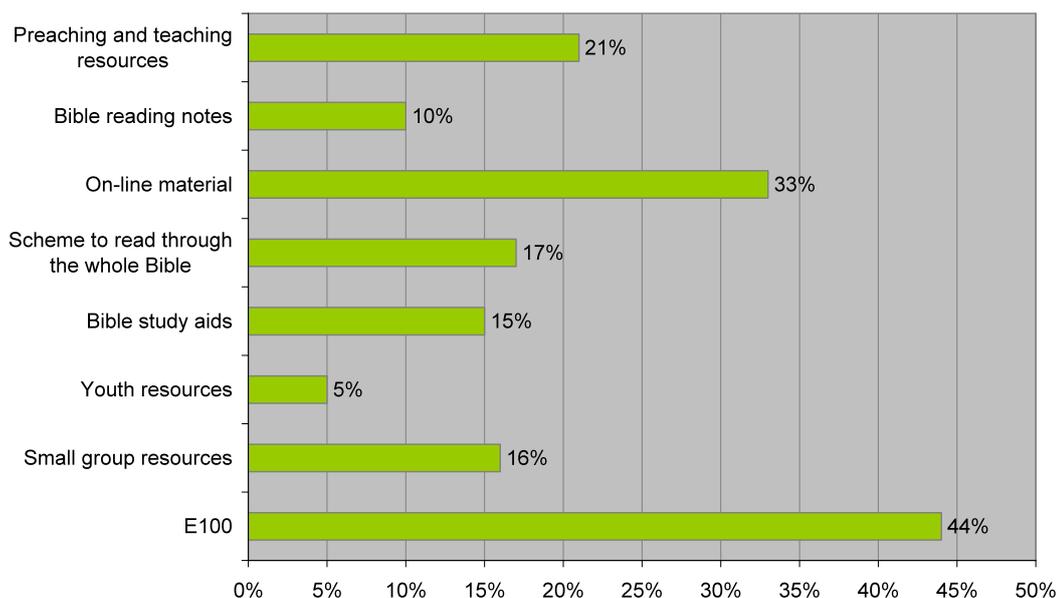
Accordingly, the Biblefresh website was the most commonly used resource, although there was a good showing for the others, i.e. book, monthly update and social media (See Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2: Use of different Biblefresh resources



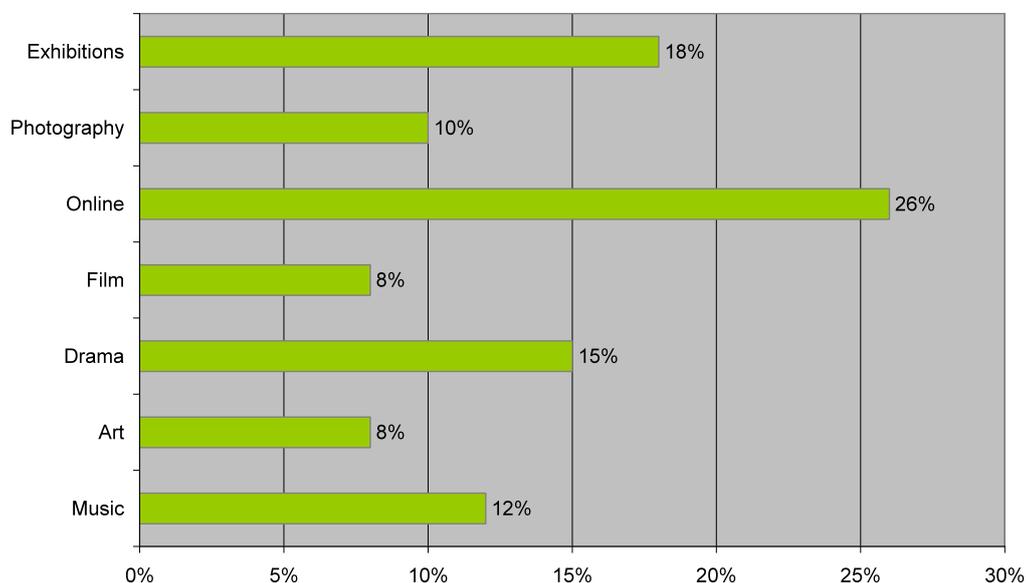
At a slightly more detailed level, respondents were asked which resources they had used over the last twelve months. When it came to reading resources, E100 was most widely used (by 44% of all respondents who had been aware of Biblefresh), followed by on-line material, (33%) and preaching and teaching resources (21%) (See Figure 1.3).

Figure 1.3: Which Bible reading resources promoted by Biblefresh have you used over the last 12 months?



As one would expect, fewer user respondents had engaged with a Biblefresh ‘experience’ over the past twelve months, although the figures here were relatively high.² Once again, on-line experiences came top (26%), followed by exhibitions (18%) and drama (15%) (See Figure 1.4).

Figure 1.4: Which Biblefresh ‘experiences’ have you witnessed or been involved in over the last 12 months?



Not surprisingly, far fewer user respondents had made use of the actual training resources (around 1 in 10), of which the largest proportion was the on-line audio and video resources (about 2/3 of those who had used any training resource) with smaller numbers (less than 1 in 5) experiencing evening or weekend classes, or CD/DVD training resources.

² One needs to be alert to the fact that such surveys are more likely to attract respondents with something to say (whether that is positive or negative) rather than those whose engagement has been tangential or indifferent, and thus these figures may be slightly inflated. Nevertheless, they can rightly be judged as encouraging.

Conclusion

By way of summary, we can see that Biblefresh involved a range of organisations from a wide range of socio-economic and cultural contexts, spread across the UK. The variety of activities initiated was considerable and very often showed a great deal of creativity and engagement. E100 was the single most widely used resource, although on-line/ e-communication was also particularly widely spread.

Now we shall turn to an assessment of those activities, firstly by examining what partners thought of them.

2. Partners: did Biblefresh work for them?

What were its perceived objectives?

As already noted, the Biblefresh partners came from a wide variety of contexts and it should not be assumed that they had identical concepts of what the initiative would achieve.

Accordingly, we asked them what they believed Biblefresh was intended to achieve. The most common overall response was helping people and organisations to focus on the Bible, “to give a more Biblical focus to our general activities”.

Following that, partner respondents recognised Biblefresh’s relational objectives, to “bring people together,” and “build community”. In the words of one respondent;

“we...believe in collaboration and so saw this as an opportunity where together we might have a far greater impact than each ‘doing our own thing’.” (#143)

Probing more closely about the first objective (“a more Biblical focus”), partner respondents gave two types of answers, one quantitative and one qualitative, with many respondents highlighting both.

The quantitative answer was primarily about increasing the number of people who read scripture and the frequency with which they did so. Sometimes audiences were specified, such as “young people”, “those new to faith”, “students”, and “people who are blind and partially sighted”. These groups, and indeed the main focus of this ‘biblicising’ effort, were internal (i.e. Christians) although occasionally respondents spoke of ‘biblicising’ those outside the church as an objective.

“[We hoped] that parishes would take initiatives to encourage people outside the church to hear Bible stories or encounter the message of the Bible through imaginative activities.” (#77)

The qualitative answer moved away from the number of people and their frequency of engagement, and looked at improving the quality of that encounter. This came in various different ways.

First, there was the aim of improving people’s level of understanding, their “literacy” and “knowledge”, helping them “interact more deeply”, to “empower the congregation to become more skilled in understanding and interpreting the text”.

Second, a crucial part of that understanding was to “see the Big Picture of the Bible rather than just bits,” to grasp “God’s Sovereign plan for humanity”. Third, there was the desire to “reawaken commitment” and “keep the Bible central” to people’s lives. Fourth, was the intention to help build confidence in the Bible, in the words of one respondent, “to tackle many of the liberal /secular doubts and questions about it which have taken root in church culture and practice”.

Fifth, there was the idea of helping people see the relevance of the Bible, to “equip people to apply the Bible to everyday life”. Sixth, for a minority of partner respondents, there was a desire to improve appreciation of the Bible, to help people “know a bit of the cost involved in our having a Bible at all,” and to “signal to the general public the importance of the Bible in our history and culture”.

Finally, but probably most widespread, was simply the desire to inspire people. Repeatedly, partner respondents talked about the aim of generating “enthusiasm”, of “re-invigorating engagement”, of “inspiration”, of “passion”, of helping people “see it [the Bible] in a fresh way.” They spoke of wanting to see an “increased love of the Bible in the church”, “to realize afresh the importance of God’s Word to Christian life and growth”, “to make it interesting!”, of creating churches that were “biblically hungry”.

These were the main objectives, to which might be added one more, which was the specific ambition of the Bible translation for Burkina Faso.

One or two more substantial responses put a number of the distinct objectives together neatly. Thus, one respondent wrote:

"I floated the idea in our church magazine to see if there were any takers - not expecting a lot - so was very pleased when it was received with enthusiasm...my main desire was to get us all to read the Bible through and for people to get enthusiastic about reading it. In reading the Bible individuals would grow in their relationship with God, which will hopefully have a knock on effect on the quality of our fellowship with each other and service to local community." (#61)

This list reminds us that within the overall umbrella objectives of biblicising the church (and in the process growing and deepening relationships and co-operation) different partners had subtly different ideas of what Biblefresh should achieve. These were partly about simply getting more people reading the Bible more often but also, crucially, about helping them understand it, have confidence in it, deepen commitment to it, see its relevance, and get enthusiastic about it.

Did they think it achieved those goals?

Torch Trust, Market Harborough

"Four local blind readers read aloud the Gospels of Matthew and John from Braille in the Waterstone's bookshop. The event attracted a great deal of interest and over 60 people attended throughout the day, many staying for extended periods to listen."

Did they think Biblefresh achieved its objectives?

Partners were asked about the success of Biblefresh in a number of ways: what they thought were the best and worst things about the enterprise; what they thought were its particular successes and failures; and whether they agreed with various statements relating to their engagement with the initiative.

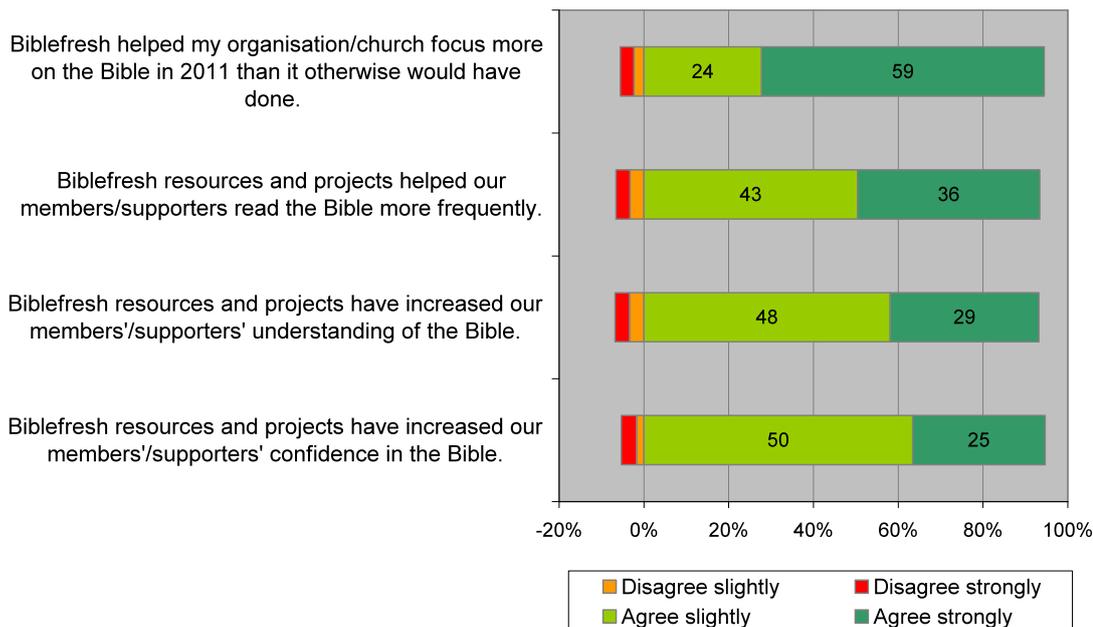
Of those statements, the first group related to the initiative's impact on supporters' engagement with the Bible. To these the answers were overwhelmingly positive.

When asked whether Biblefresh had "helped my organisation/church focus more on the Bible in 2011 than it otherwise would have done," an impressive 83% agreed slightly or strongly, compared with 5% who disagreed slightly or strongly (the remaining 12% 'neither agreed nor disagreed': this category has been removed from charts for sake of clarity).

Closely following this, 43% of respondents agreed slightly and 36% agreed strongly that "Biblefresh resources and projects helped our members/ supporters read the Bible more frequently". (again a small minority - 6% - disagreed).

Respondents were similarly positive when asked whether resources and projects had increased members'/supporters' "understanding of the Bible" (77% agreed vs. 6% disagreed) and whether resources and projects had increased members'/supporters' "confidence in the Bible (75% agreed vs. 4% disagreed). These data are shown graphically in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1: The impact of Biblefresh on supporters' engagement with the Bible



Thus, at this initial level the various key objectives around biblicising the church, were clearly met in partners' eyes.

St Michael's, Braintree

"I organised and edited a church cookbook of the congregation's favourite recipes to raise money for Bibles for Burkina Faso. People were asked to comment on why they like that particular recipe and/or give an anecdote if they wished. Thirty members of the church contributed recipes. The book was 136 pages long and included colour pictures of food as well as a section on recipes from Burkina Faso.

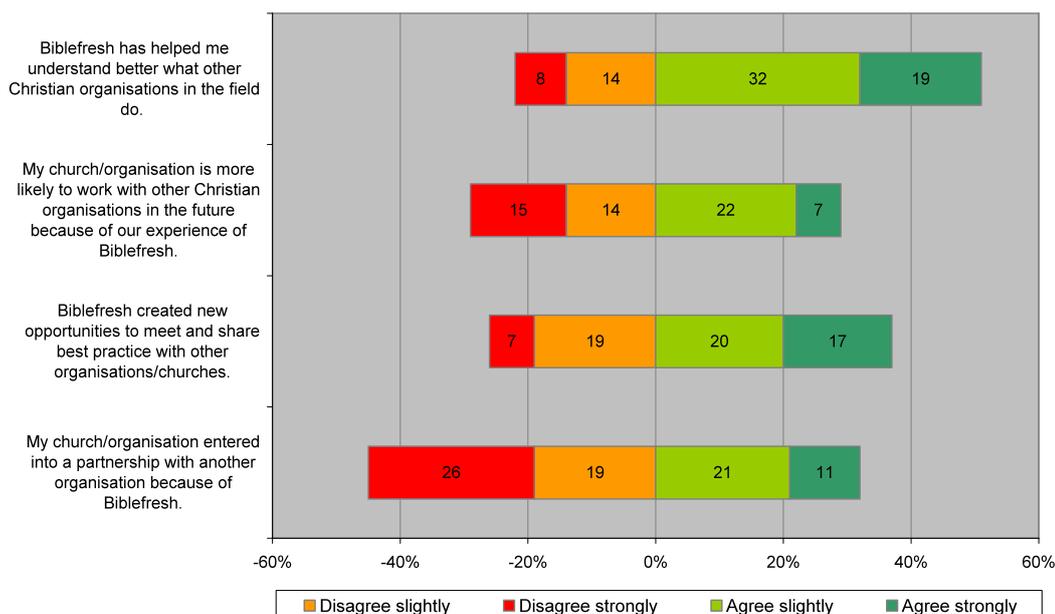
"There was also a 'King James Bible Cake' recipe which required people to look up verses in the KJV to find the ingredients. We printed and bound 200 copies locally, and they went on sale in mid-October, ideal for the Christmas market, priced at £7.50. The total surplus after expenses was £836.32, helped by some people paying well over the price to support the cause.

"Copies have been sent to friends and family as far afield as the USA, Mexico and New Zealand. On a couple of Sundays we boosted interest by getting people to cook their recipes as after-service refreshments!"

The second key objective relating to working with other organisations received a slightly more mixed response. Partner respondents were most positive when asked whether Biblefresh had helped them "understand better what other Christian organisations in the field do," with half saying it had (19% agree strongly, 32% agree slightly) compared with 22% saying it had not (14% disagree slightly, 7% disagree strongly).

The results were less clear-cut when asked about the concrete nature or future possibility for partnerships. When asked whether the respondent's church/ organisation was more likely to work with others Christian organisations in the future because of the experience of Biblefresh, 29% said it would and 29% said it would not. When asked whether "Biblefresh created new opportunities to meet and share best practice with other organisations/churches", 37% said it had whereas 26% said it had not. And when asked whether their church/organisation had entered into a partnership with another organisation because of Biblefresh, 32% said it had whereas 45% said it had not (See Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2: The impact of Biblefresh on organisational co-operation



It is important to read these responses correctly. Just because a respondent disagreed with the statement that they were “more likely to work with other Christian organisations in the future because of the experience of Biblefresh”, it does not mean that their experience of Biblefresh had made them less likely to do so.

In some instances, it may mean that – although, as we shall see, very few partner respondents were overtly negative about the co-operative elements of the initiative. However, it may also mean that, although the collaborative element was appreciated and beneficial, it is unlikely to be translated into longer-term and more sustained co-operation.

This fits in with the answers to the other questions, which show that Biblefresh had clearly enabled partnership (as the open-ended questions below illustrate) and given opportunities to understand better what other Christian organisations do, but that did not necessarily translate into on-going concrete opportunities for co-operation.

In other words, the best reading of the research results at this point is to see Biblefresh as having made a start in the area of enabling and encouraging co-operation but at the same time recognising how much on-going work there is to be done here.

Peterborough Cathedral

“A staggering 3,000 shoeboxes filled with 3D images of Bible events were displayed in Peterborough Cathedral last month. The brainchild of Diocesan Director of Education, Dr Stephen Partridge, the boxes illustrated every book of the Bible. Church schools, parishes, organisations and individuals of all ages in the Peterborough Diocese contributed to the display. In one week over 800 children with their teachers from schools across the diocese visited the Cathedral to view the display and to attend a series of workshops on the Bible.”

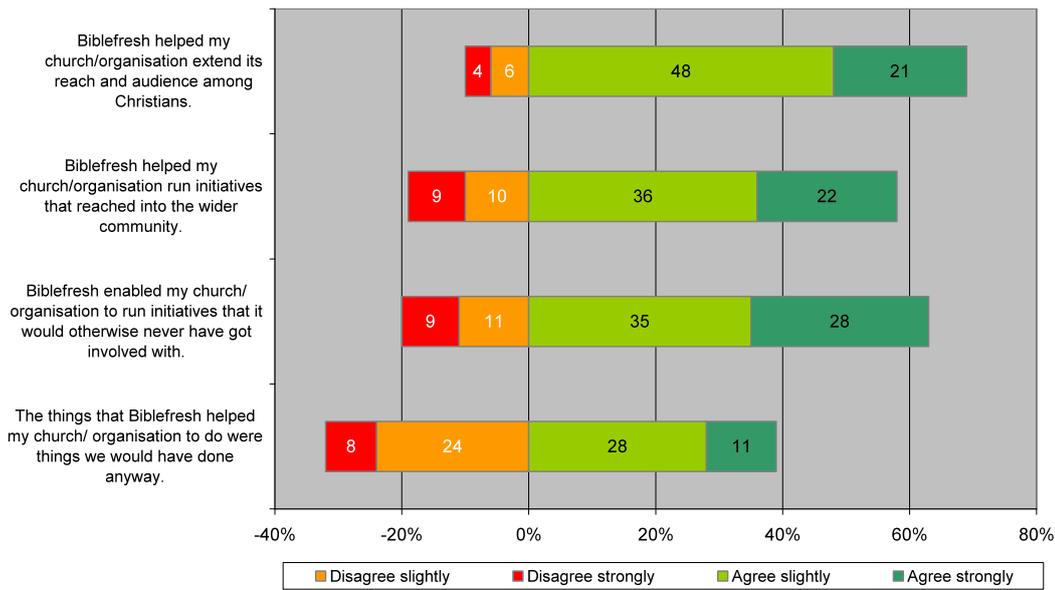
Finally, in terms of quantitative questions, respondents were asked whether Biblefresh had helped them achieve their own mission. Again, here, the results were predominantly positive. An overwhelming majority (69%) agreed that Biblefresh had helped their church/organisation “extend its reach and audience among Christians” (vs. 10% who disagreed).

A slightly smaller number (58%) agreed that Biblefresh helped them “run initiatives that reached into the wider community” (vs. 19% who disagreed). A similar number (63%) agreed that Biblefresh enabled my church/ organisation to run initiatives that it would otherwise never have got involved with (vs. 20% disagreed).

This statement was also tested in reverse, as it were, with respondents being asked whether the things that Biblefresh helped “my church/ organisation” to do were things we would have done anyway. Tellingly, a third of people disagree with this compared with 39% who agreed. In other words, the data from the previous statement need modifying slightly.

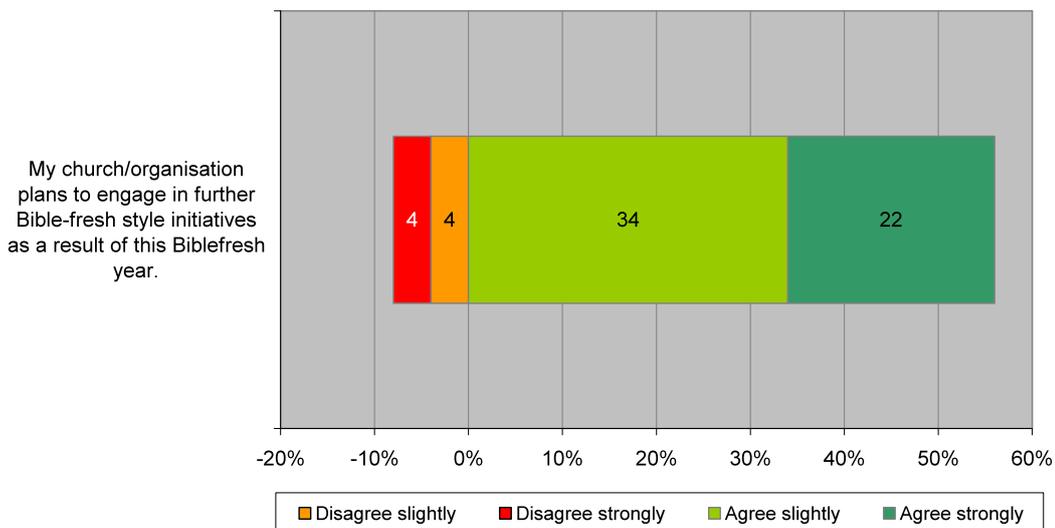
However, the general picture is clearly one in which Biblefresh helped partners extend their reach into the wider community by doing things that they are unlikely to have done without the impetus of the initiative itself. (See Figure 2.3)

Figure 2.3: How far did Biblefresh help you achieve your own mission



The final statement asked in this question merits particular attention. Partner respondents were asked whether their church/ organisation planned to engage in further Bible-fresh style initiatives as a result of this Biblefresh year. The results here were the most positive of all those asked in this final question, with two thirds of respondents saying it would and 8% saying it would not. (See Figure 2.4)

Figure 2.4: Would you do something like Biblefresh again?



Overall, therefore, the results of the quantitative elements within the partners' questionnaire strongly show that in the eyes of those partners:

1. The objective of helping organisations focus on and improving people's use, understanding and confidence in the Bible was a genuine success.
2. The objective of achieving partners' mission objectives of reaching a wider audience in their localities was also successful.
3. The objective of enabling conversation and co-operation between different Christian organisations was also achieved, although with a few more reservations than the biblicising objectives.
4. The objective of enabling on-going and long-term co-operation between organisations was embarked upon with a measure of success but will itself demand a great deal of on-going and long-term effort.

If this was the result from the quantitative questions in the partners' survey, it is important to assess whether the open-ended, qualitative ones gave the same impression.

How was it a success?

What, in partners' own words, had been the real success of Biblefresh? Answers were numerous and varied but a number of key themes emerged.

The first was a cluster of objectives centred on the Bible, many of which echoed the partners' perception of the objectives of Biblefresh.

There was genuine success felt in simply (re)immersing people in Bible. This meant "getting people back to regular reading of scripture". This was a quiet and unglamorous activity but it was, nonetheless, a crucial one. In the words of one partner respondent: "Mostly, it was just the gentle, regular chivvy along on the importance of actually reading the Bible."

Perth North Church

"From offerings, a coffee morning and part of the surplus made from a Stewart Townend concert we raised £3,000 for Burkina Faso Bible translation work. As part of our Biblefresh year we hosted 'An evening with Stuart Townend' which saw over 500 people join us for a great evening of witness and worship led by Stuart.

"We held a hugely successful flower festival in which our church groups along with other churches and organisations interpreted verses from the Bible with colourful presentations, from which we have produced a full colour 2012 calendar (now sold out).

"In collaboration with the Perth branch of the Scottish Bible Society we held a full public reading of the Bible from cover to cover – this involved dozens of readers and teams of stewards, 24 hours a day for three and a half days and nights! Those reading included people from other congregations, school pupils and politicians, including two Scottish Government ministers and one of our local MSPs."

Alongside this, there was the business of (re)familiarising people with the Bible. This meant helping people "read...parts of the Bible...that are unfamiliar or less familiar [to them]", encouraging them to "focus on forgotten parts of the Bible", and "reading the whole Bible and reconnecting to those parts not often read yet still part of the whole". As this last quotation suggests, this involved helping people see the big picture of the Bible. One respondent enthused about how "people here actually now see how the Old and New Testaments tell the same story".

There was success in helping people go deep as well as broad and, in particular, in seeing the relevance of the Bible, effecting "deep engagement with Scripture, [and] helping us to explore pressing contemporary challenges."

There was also success in helping people have pride in the Bible, knowing and recognising its immeasurably vast impact on British life and culture. The initiative managed "to capture the significance of the Scriptures as both a foundational text for our faith and the living Word of God today".

Pride was linked to confidence in the Bible, an achievement repeatedly mentioned by partner respondents. Getting “over 150 different people reading it in a public place was great confidence builder for some,” claimed one partner. “Reading stories of what others are doing – it encourages you and gives you ideas,” remarked another.

This first cluster of success, broadly labelled as biblicising the Church, and in particular the emphasis on giving ordinary Christians confidence, was directly linked by some respondents to a second cluster, namely giving Christians confidence by helping them understand that they were part of something much bigger than just themselves.

One partner respondent enthused about “just being able to pray openly and know that there are many other Christians out there! - which helps when you live in quite a remote place!”; another about “the sense of being part of something national”.

Open Heaven Church

“In February [we held] some Bible Encounter workshops over a day and an evening...These were for people who felt they were ‘stuck’. Maybe traditional Bible reading notes hadn’t worked for them, so we tried to think of new ways to connect, thinking of different personality types or those who were on different spiritual pathways.

“[We] used three different approaches: (1) Word-based, talking in twos, telling a story, feeding back or retelling it in your own words; (2) Ancient approaches using Lectio Divina, from Bible Society, a dynamic method of reading Scripture from AD 300, and an Ignatian contemplative approach, where you imagine yourself in a Bible story; (3) Experiential approaches used the senses to bring a story to life; and a series of film clips showing how a Bible story had been interpreted in film down the decades.

“Although the group attending was relatively small, it was nevertheless felt to be a worthwhile start to something that could be used again or developed in the future.”

Respondents spoke repeatedly and approvingly of “the sense of partnership”, of “being part of something bigger”, of being “part of a national movement”. They thought it was “a tremendous way to get churches working together on a mutually valued goal”, of “galvanising the Christian community to work together with one common goal”, it “galvanised [the word appeared on several occasions] a whole group of ministries to consider their use of the Bible”. “Getting so many people, across such a broad spectrum of churches and organisations involved” was a genuine achievement, which engendered a real confidence among people.

“The knowledge that other people out there were striving to engage congregations with the Bible in meaningful ways, with very similar challenges as we face.” (#52)

That confidence and partnership led to a sense of unity that was equally widely appreciated. People appreciated “the way the initiative brought us all together in a united endeavour”.

That unity was two-fold. First, there was unity within congregations. This could be achieved through “the structure of a set of weekly readings which most, if not all, the church followed”, or through “the Biblefresh weekend when everyone illustrated their favourite Bible passage. All ages involved including community groups and schools”.

As this second quotation indicates, unity within was often closely paralleled to unity beyond, meaning unity between different organisations. Respondents spoke approvingly of co-operation, of a “common focus...for such a substantial period of time”, of the “sheer range of credible organisations”, and of “fresh opportunities to work with other denominations and gathered interest from the wider community”. They applauded the “co-ordinated approach” and said that “being part of something bigger has helped organisations to make this a focus where perhaps they wouldn’t normally”, something that was clearly facilitated by the successful e-communication:

“For me the success of Biblefresh has been the e-contact with others when we are not geographically situated in the mainstream.” (#52)

If these were the two main areas of perceived success – biblicising Christians and generating a sense of co-operation and unity – a third success cluster was in the publicity and wider public interest the enterprise generated.

This could be at a local level, such as according to one partner respondent:

“the market stall [which] was a great success as we were encouraged in our witness by the welcome we got from regular stall owners and it opened up the possibility of doing more of this in the future.” (#74)

It could also be connected to a wider public stage, in particular through The People’s Bible. “The People’s Bible was a great community event in our area,” was a regular refrain.

“Many people, from various walks of life, came to the Library exhibition and asked many questions. Some contacted us with further enquiries.” (#135)

The same applied to the media coverage for KJV celebrations. According to one partner: “the 400th anniversary of the [KJV] was not allowed just to be a nostalgia fest”; while in the words of another the KJV celebrations were another plank in building up people’s confidence in the Bible: “The impact of the [KJV] on the roots of our society provided a very interesting background to this year.”

Although a number of specific resources were mentioned in the question of success, in particular E100, electronic/social media, Twitter, MP3s, and a monthly e-newsletter, these were less a feature of partners’ responses than users’ ones (see below).

That noted, there was a widespread appreciation of the “style” and “freshness” of the initiative, with people speaking of its “fresh, vibrant, engaging style”, and “the vibrant, creative and clearly-focused range of ideas”.

This appreciation wasn’t just limited to the style of the overall initiative, but also to specific activities, which brought a new and engaging approach to the Bible. One respondent spoke of how an “art competition was helpful as it encouraged people to share their experience of the Bible in a new and creative way”, while another spoke of a similar impact through a range of activities:

“[The] art exhibition gave our many and varied artists in the church the opportunity to use their gifts and imagination. Far more money was raised for translation than anticipated. [The] drama weekend was very well received and very thought provoking. It was helpful to have outside input and new ways of experiencing Bible truth.” (#35)

Overall, therefore, partner respondents judged the main success of Biblefresh to be in the way it:

- (1) Biblicised Christians – re-immersing them in scripture, helping them reach parts of the Bible that church didn’t normally reach, connecting up the dots, and giving them confidence and pride in the Bible.
- (2) Connected different Christian organisations, helping them to learn more about and share more in one another’s activities and thereby building a sense of unity and being part of something bigger.
- (3) Generating public attention and interest, both locally and nationally, in the role of the Bible in British life.

Many of the themes of these successes were summarised by one quote from this partner respondent:

“[Biblefresh gave us] the opportunity...to highlight the Big Story of scripture and to join with other churches in the city for an evangelistic initiative during May when we all preached from the same passages in Luke and gave away many copies of Luke’s gospel.” (#41)

How was it a failure?

Such positive responses and opinions were genuine and widespread among respondents. However, the research questionnaire also took care to probe into any negative experiences or general criticism that partners (or users) had. The research was never intended to be an uncritical exercise in PR and there is as much benefit to hearing about problems and reservations as there are successes and triumphs.

The first thing to say in response to this is that these questions – about what had been a failure and why, and what had been the worst thing for them about Biblefresh – generated a great many empty answers in the survey, and many of those who did respond to the questions – around a quarter in all – effectively said “nothing”.

In addition to this, there were very few blanket condemnations. “The general comment was that it was quite a chore,” was the opinion of one respondent, while another said there was “some interest but nowhere near what we might have expected”. A third comment (from the same respondent who thought the initiative a “chore”) read: “It didn’t seem to offer many ‘fresh’ ideas. ‘Novel’ and ‘gimmick’ are not the same as ‘fresh,’” whilst a fourth remarked:

“the actual take up in churches seems to have been low...FIEC [Free Independent Evangelical Churches] and other conservative take-up seems to have been very low indeed. The optimistic tone about impact - even in the blurb accompanying this survey - seems quite unjustified and unhelpful. (#79)

Beyond these there were no blanket denunciations of the initiative.

This itself is noteworthy as research surveys of this nature can often act as a magnet for complaints, the best opportunity available to someone who has been left disappointed by their experience to take out their frustrations on anyone, in particular on those they hold responsible. Had Biblefresh flopped or disappointed in this way, there is no doubt that there would have been more blanket criticisms and much more vitriol. The fact that there was so little is implicit testimony to its success.

Partner respondents were, however, willing to criticise and it is to those criticisms to which we now turn.

First, picking up on a theme hinted at above, some partner respondents were less sure about the concrete outcomes of the project than its more nebulous successes.

There were a number of concrete examples of success. So, for example, several people said that they/ their church had started daily Bible/ devotional readings for the first time as a result of Biblefresh, and others said that they had forged links with the other churches in the village, or with local schools, or “with several new families who we can invite to future events”. One respondent even spoke of a person:

“who...is following up on a calling to go into the ordained ministry, sparked...she said by some of the conversations she had when attending the Bible Awareness Exhibition.” (#52)

All that duly noted, the sense of achievement was usually more vague, with respondents using more of the word “hopefully” in their answers, and a number of people saying that it was “too early to say” or “still too early to assess” or “[the] project [is] still on-going” or “[it’s] hard to measure” or that they were simply “unsure”.

One or two of the more sceptical respondents questioned whether the initiative would have a lasting impact at all or whether such a thing could be measured:

“Not sure what long term impact it will have but I do not know how to measure that.” (#83)

So the first reservation (it would be too strong to call it a direct criticism) was about the concreteness of the initiative’s outcome.

The second one voiced, and the only one that could be deemed to have been in any way widespread was the problem of burnout or under-capacity. A number of respondents spoke of the difficulty in sustaining enthusiasm for a year.

“I found it difficult to sustain through more than a few months, although there were plenty of ideas in the book.” (#38)

“We found it difficult to keep up the momentum in terms of specific ‘events’ as the year wore on.” (#74)

“[It is] a real challenge in an initiative of this kind is to maintain momentum over the whole period of the initiative.” (#142)

In its own way, these comments comprise something of a backhanded compliment, as they imply there was too much going on as part of the initiative. A number of respondents picked up on this point:

“[It was] difficult to sustain it throughout the year. Other things crowd in. Not a ‘failure’ of Biblefresh - just the reality!” (#84)

“I think ‘failure’ is a bit strong. If anything, the strengths above have also been a potential weakness. By this I mean Biblefresh ‘fatigue’. A year is a long time to keep the excitement up!” (#30)

“Failure might be a bit of a strong word for it, but we are a small congregation with no full time or paid staff. Everyone is volunteering in their [free] time, so it has sometimes been difficult to maintain the energy to focus on all four sections of the Biblefresh initiative.” (#61)

A third problem related to the geographical limitation of the activities. This was mentioned less frequently than the two criticisms above but it was nonetheless clearly heartfelt.

“Sadly [there were] no major events (apart from drama tour in Feb), which happened in the West Midlands which we could get people to.” (#65)

“Some of the ‘tours’ missed out N[orthern] I[reland]. ...that’s life - and economics...” (#53)

“[It] could have done with more regional and national promotion and events.” (#34)

“[There was a] lack of large regional events we could bring people to, so we could compliment our local activity.” (#4)

“The perception in the Midlands [was] that it was a London initiative.” (#18)

A fourth point was that some people were disappointed by a lack of interest in the translation, saying that it “didn’t really engage people”. Sometimes this was for understandable if frustrating reasons:

“[We] struggled to get commitment to doing anything about the translation project - just because as a church we have significant commitments to overseas mission already.” (#93)

In other instances, the interest was simply flatter than they had hoped:

“While it has been good to raise financial support for Bible translation the scale of the response seems much smaller than I had hoped.” (#72)

A fifth criticism was the flip-side of the emphasis on co-operation, i.e. problems with collaboration. Sometimes, this was just par for the course for such collaborative ventures, as respondents recognised:

“I can’t think of anything glaring that’s been a disappointment - sure there have been challenges working with some other organisations, but that’s part of the synergy of partnership.” (#71)

Some respondents, however, were more critical:

“The experience of ‘working in partnership’ has been a huge disappointment. I feel like we have given a lot and where we have received support it has been on the terms of others rather than in ways that we need.” (#72)

This was not a widespread criticism (it was mentioned by three or four of the 143 partner respondents) but when it was, it was deeply felt.

“It seems to have been dominated by a few large national organisations and missions, giving the impression of a ‘club’ of insiders. It needed to be far wider in its appeal.” (#79)

“The People’s Bible was a disappointment. I had volunteered to be involved with that, but it was ‘taken over’ by a large church in the city who failed to communicate with other local churches so anyone else was squeezed out and it became impossible to accurately steer people towards a place and date where they could be involved.” (#90)

These, then, were the main criticisms: uncertainty about concrete achievements, a sense of burnout or fatigue, a (limited) concern about geographical limitation, a (limited) disappointment about lack of interest in the translation, and a (very limited but often heartfelt) frustration about some of the collaborative ventures.

Beyond these there were various individual comments worth mentioning. One person spoke about the “need [for] more direction in community projects”, and another mentioned a concern that the initiative connected more with church leaders than “with the average church member.”

A couple of people spoke about how some “people within the church did not want to get involved” or how they had real “frustration of trying to get people to pick up their Bibles and often failing”. A third commented on some “people in local churches not wishing to engage with some of the ideas because it was ‘evangelical’”.

Two or three people mentioned problems with *The People's Bible*, specifically with regard to the particular verses some people had got:

"[The] People's Bible [was a] good concept, but i. [there was] no link up for those who came beyond signing, e.g. letting them know [about] websites like bethinking.org on the Christian faith. [and] ii. young people [were] doing very unsuitable verses when taken out of context, with no pastoral care/explanation, whereas trailer spoke of someone getting a 'good' verse: irresponsible." (#76)

"[The worst thing about Biblefresh was] the terrible passage we had for the handwritten Bible as part of the Methodist Church initiative. Not something you could ask the Brownies to write!" (#88)

These, however, tended to be isolated criticisms. Overall, whereas a handful of partner respondents were generally critical of the initiative and a few more had criticisms of specific aspects of it, the negatives were consistently outweighed by the positives among partner respondents.

Teddington Baptist Church: A year of activity

"...The first was a Bible reading plan for E100. Some followed the programme and others didn't, but those who did have found it to be a very positive experience. E100's use of longer Bible readings helped many to gain a 'feel' for scripture in a way they had not experienced before.

"...The second enclosure was a motto card with the heart logo below, and the first of 50 Bible verses the church has been learning from memory this year. Many of those verses have been personally introduced in worship services by those who have chosen them – testifying to a deeply personal relationship with scripture, often in the most testing of times.

"...The next event on our Biblefresh calendar was a 'Bible surgery'. At this evening service people brought along their most commonly used Bible, laid it at the front of the church, and talked openly about their problems with reading it.

"...Two months later saw our Bible photo exhibition: 79 images from 28 photographers illustrating over 60 Bible verses, with prizes sponsored by three local businesses. Quite apart from being a celebration of our creativity, the exhibition helped people to see the world biblically and the Bible visually.

"...June saw the longest day of the year, and our 12-hour Bible reading marathon on the pavement outside the church. Many of the readers found this to be a challenging and uplifting experience, and just last night I spoke to a young man investigating the Christian faith for whom those public readings were a step on the way as he walked by and listened.

"...Five days later we held an all-age Bible special Sunday service. Amongst other things, this included a 'dragons' den' where our teenagers provided the dragons, and adults in the congregation pitched their ingenious ideas for Bible reading.

"...Next on the agenda was our Harvest Festival service, with a focus on the harvest of God's word around the world and a speaker from Wycliffe Bible Translators. In particular our thoughts turned to Burkina Faso, resulting in an unusual piece of footwear.

"...November brought a visit from The People's Bible. This smart piece of technology allowed our 66 visitors of all ages to engage personally with the Bible in a brand new way, and many will remember it forever. The last piece of our Biblefresh puzzle is the writing of a 100-word Bible. The winning entry will be tastefully combined with graphics and produced as a bound gift book for Easter 2012.

"...Has Biblefresh changed our world, like it says on the tin? It is too early to say just yet. However, it has provided the opportunity for this local church to push the creative boat out as far as it will go – and for that I am grateful."

Conclusion

Overall, it is very clear that from the partners' point of view Biblefresh was a real success. It re-invigorated biblical engagement, understanding and confidence within their organisations; encouraged and enabled understanding, co-operation and unity within and between Christian organisations; and generated public attention in fresh and engaging way.

If there were any criticisms it was that there was too much to do, that the geographical scope could have been broader, and that sustained, long-term outcomes, in particular those relating to collaboration between organisations, were unsure.

That recognised, given the size of the task of generating co-operation and unity between organisations many of whom would be used to generating their own agenda and ideas, this criticism is hardly stinging and is rather a confirmation that Biblefresh was right to try and tackle the issue of co-operation.

Moreover, given partners' clear willingness to engage in a similar initiative again at some point in the future, there is a clear green light here for further collaborative ventures.

3. Users: did it work for them?

As explained above, the larger of the two Biblefresh research surveys was focused on ‘users’: “individuals who used Biblefresh resources, attended Biblefresh events or training, or [were] part of ‘experiences’ organised or facilitated by Biblefresh.”

This part of the research was split into two parts, one looking at users’ experience and opinion of Biblefresh, and the other at the current pattern and level of their engagement with the Bible. Part 3 of this report examines the former, whereas part 4 looks at the latter.

Assessing specific resources and initiatives

User respondents were asked to rate their experience of Biblefresh, both overall and through specific resources and experiences. Data pertaining to the latter – i.e. opinions of specific elements within Biblefresh – are clearly statistically less reliable than the former, as virtually everyone had an overall opinion of Biblefresh but only those who had used or experienced them had an opinion of specific resources. Nevertheless, the data are still useful and both areas provide a valuable perspective on the overall success of the initiative.

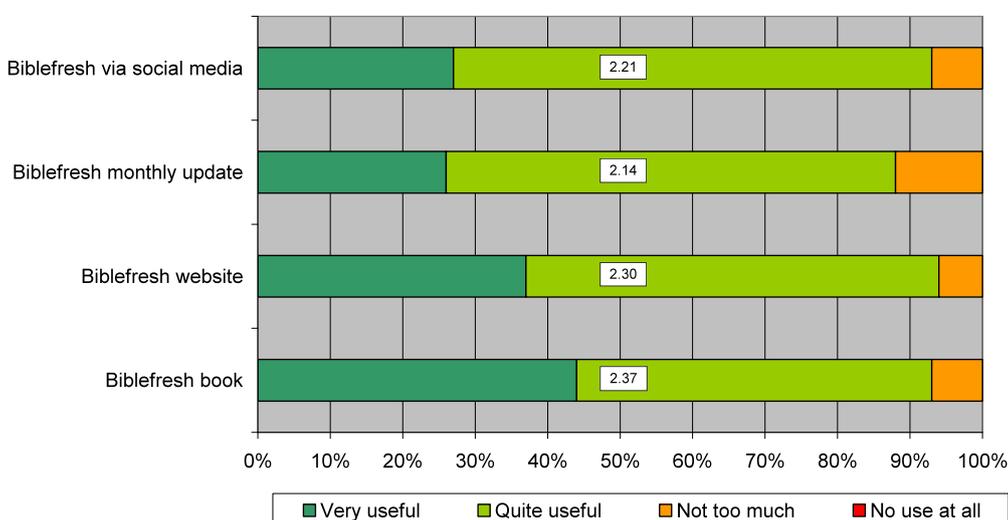
Evaluating resources

The first things to say is that, with one single exception, no respondent rated any of the resources as “no use at all”. Furthermore, only a minority ranked any of them as “not much use”. Overall impressions were on the high side.

This is a significant point because, as noted above, research such as this can attract those who have had a disappointing experience and want to complain about it. The fact that there was only a handful of people with something “to get off their chest” is significant. This cannot be interpreted as a definitive conclusion that no user was disappointed with Biblefresh resources, but it certainly points in that direction.

Working to a scale where ‘Very useful’ = 3, ‘Quite useful’ = 2, ‘Not much use’ = 1 and ‘No use at all’ = 0, we can see that, at a general level, the Biblefresh book was most lauded (2.37) but that all four resources were judged better than “quite useful”. (See Figure 3.1)

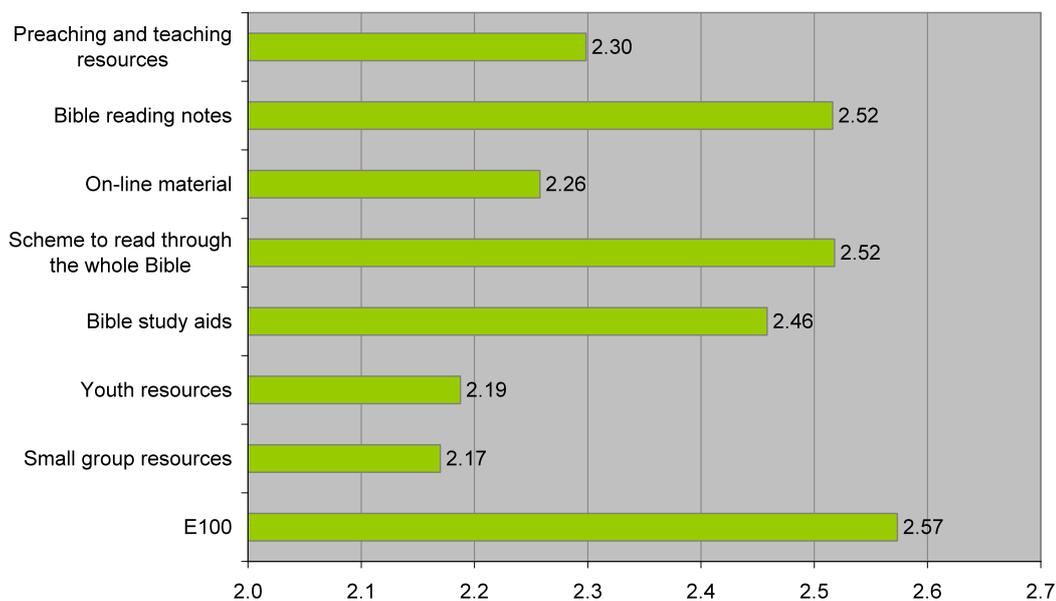
Figure 3.1: Overall usefulness of Biblefresh resources



Looking at a more detailed level at specific reading resources, we can see that E100 was the most appreciated of these, closely followed by Bible reading notes and the scheme to read through the whole Bible, all of which scored a mean greater than 2.5 (i.e. closer to ‘very useful’ than ‘quite useful’). Given that E100 was also the most popular reading resource, this counts as a real success. (See Figure 3.2)

On-line material scored slightly less well (2.26) in spite being the second most used reading resource, with youth and small group resources coming last. However, it is important to recognise that ‘last’ in this context still means a mean score of more than 2, i.e. better than “quite useful”. Put another way, the only reading resource that had fewer than one in three people saying it was ‘very good’ was youth resources (25% said ‘very good’) and no resource had less than 90% of people saying it was either very wor quite good.

Figure 3.2: Opinion of Biblefresh reading resources



As smaller numbers of people engaged with the training resources, firm statistical results are more difficult. For example, when only ten user respondents took the Biblefresh evening classes, you do not have a sufficiently large sample to derive reliable statistics.

That recognised, it is noteworthy that no respondent classified any of the training resources as ‘no good at all’ and only one classified one (weekend classes) as ‘not much’ good. For all four training resources examined (evening classes, weekend classes, CD/ DVD training resources, and online audio and video resources) opinions were positive.

Evening classes received the highest praised (60% very good; 40% good), with online training resources coming next (44% very good; 56% good). Although one must treat these figures with reservation, the overall picture is nonetheless one in which the training had been nearly universally approved.

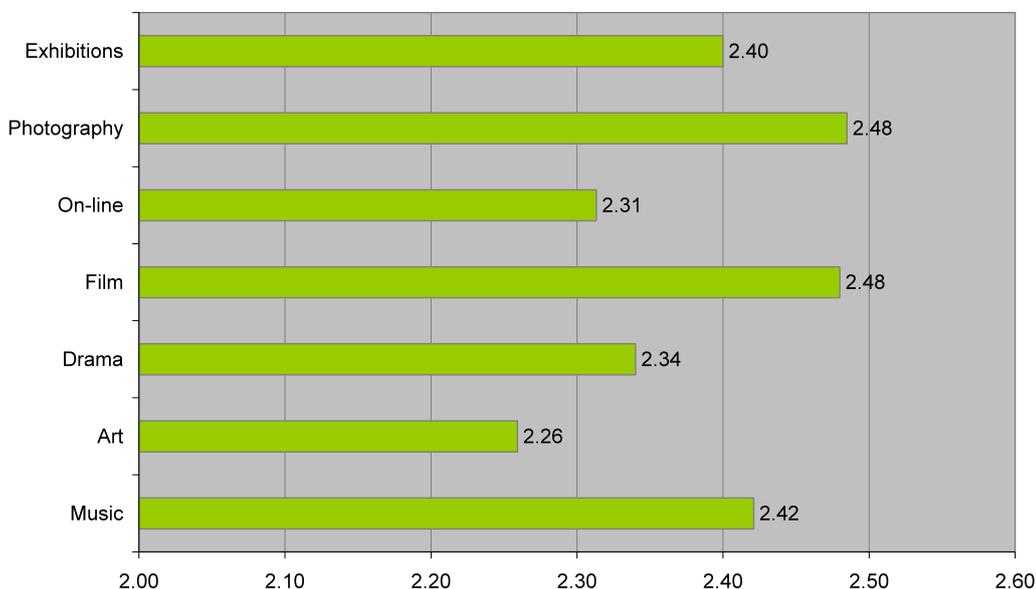
Les Capelles Methodist Church, Guernsey

“We held monthly meetings throughout 2011... to encourage those reading the Bible in a Year and to study the Books of the Bible in creative ways. Numbers of those attending lessened as the year progressed but I see it as being like a mountain climb. People on a mountain climbing expedition team leave it to just the few to reach the summi! That is what happened and the view was great!!”

The Biblefresh experiences came somewhere in between reading and training resources in terms of the number of respondents, so figures can be given here, although still need to be treated with some caution. Once again, overall opinion was high. There were no experiences that were deemed ‘no good at all’ and no experiences where the proportion of people judging them ‘not much good’ went beyond 12%.

Film appeared to divide people more than any other experiences, with 60% of respondents deeming it 'very good' and 12% 'not much good'. Other experiences garnered more homogeneous responses, which, when collated as below show that, again, all experiences were judged better than 'quite useful', with film, photography and music coming out, on balance, on top. (See Figure 3.3)

Figure 3.3: Opinion of Biblefresh experiences



Overall, therefore, the data clearly show that all the separate Biblefresh resources were largely highly appreciated by users. A handful of negative responses aside, and a few categories (in training) where numbers were too low to be fully reliable, the results show that people's use and experience of Biblefresh resources was on the whole a very positive one. Did that then translate into the bigger objectives of Biblefresh?

Assessing overall objectives

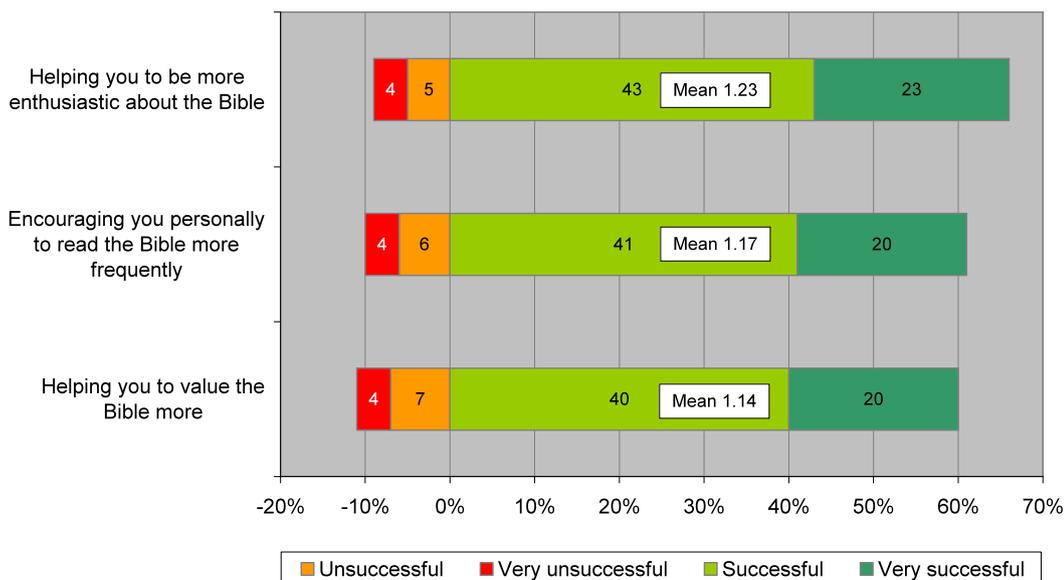
User respondents were presented with a number of statements relating to the overall impact of Biblefresh and asked whether they agreed with them or not (on a classic five-point agreement scale from 'Strongly disagree' to 'Agree strongly'). These statements were divided up into two questions, the first asking about the core objectives of Biblefresh, concerning reading, understanding and valuing the Bible, and the second still focused on Biblefresh but looking at a wider range of questions.

Again, the first thing to say about these core results is that they were generally very positive. Although some respondents did rate various specific objectives as either unsuccessful or very unsuccessful, the majority were more encouraging.

User respondents were most appreciative of Biblefresh making them feel "enthusiastic" about the Bible, about the initiative helping them "personally to read the Bible more frequently", and about it helping them "value the Bible more". In each of these instances somewhere between 60% and 66% of people agreed that Biblefresh had been quite successful or very successful. (See Figure 3.4)

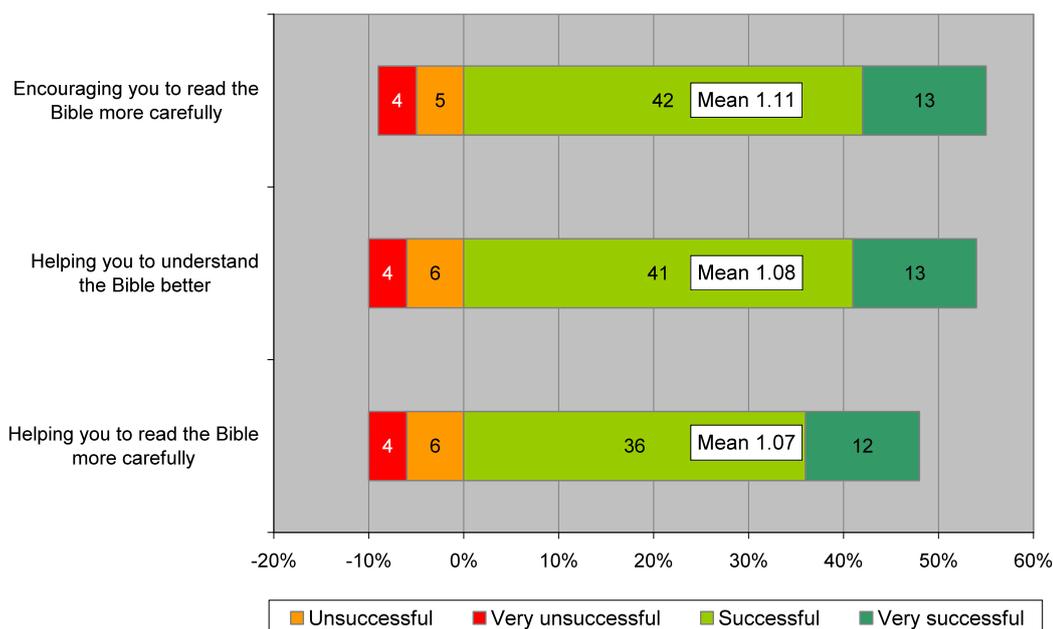
Mean scores here and below are calculated on the basis that 'Very successful' = 2, 'Successful' = 1, 'Neither successful nor unsuccessful' (which has not been charted below) = 0, 'Unsuccessful' = -1, 'Very unsuccessful' = -2. Consequently, a mean of 1.23, for example, indicates that the overall response from all respondents, negative as well as positive, was slightly above 'successful'.

Figure 3.4: Overall success of Biblefresh – top ranking



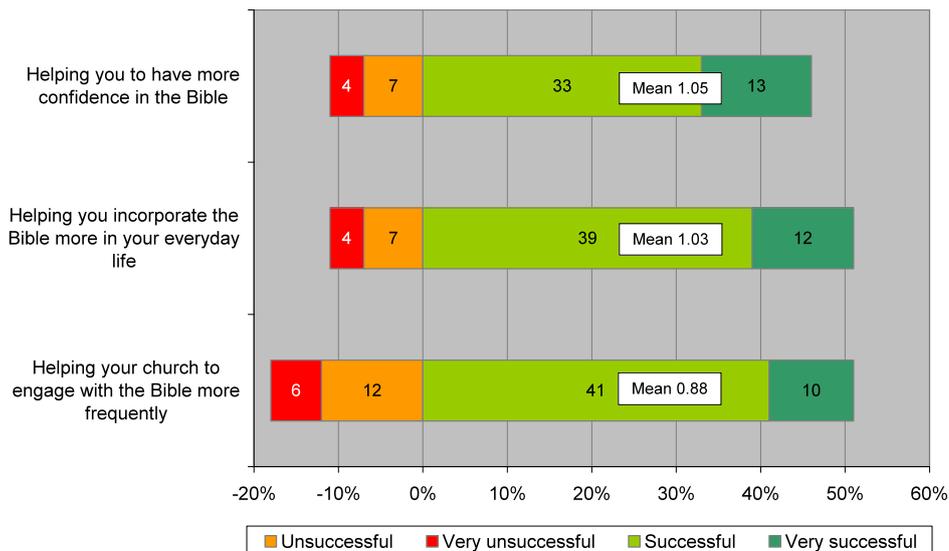
Slightly less positively (but only slightly), respondents thought that Biblefresh had been ‘quite successful’ in its endeavours to encourage people “to read the Bible more carefully”, to “help them understand it better”, and to “help them to read it more carefully”. (See Figure 3.5)

Figure 3.5: Overall success of Biblefresh – middle ranking



Finally, the least successful endeavours were helping people “to have more confidence in the Bible”, helping them to “incorporate the Bible more in [their] everyday life” and helping their “church to engage with the Bible more frequently”. (See Figure 3.6)

Figure 3.6: Overall success of Biblefresh – lowest ranking



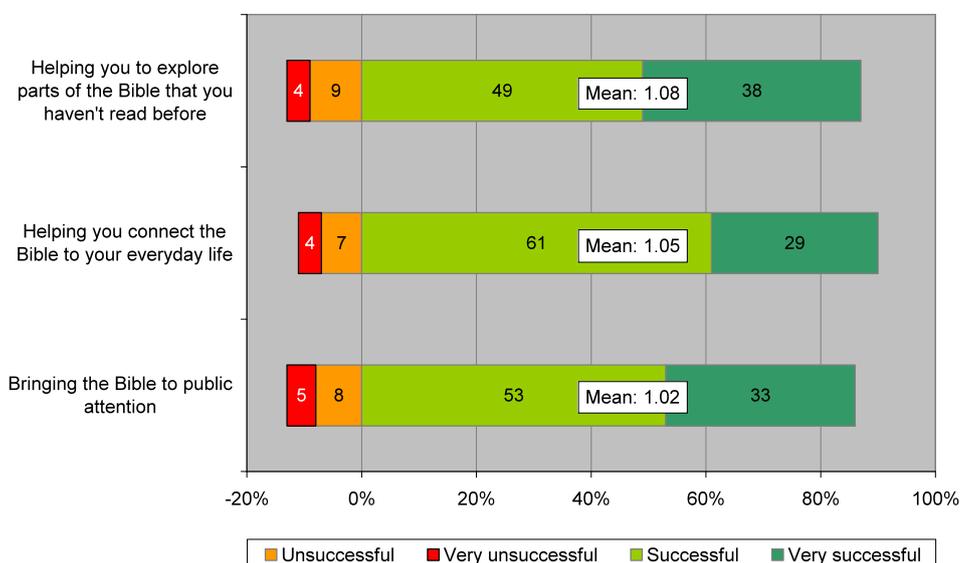
It needs repeating, however, that none of these results are in themselves negative; merely that some are slightly less positive than others. Even the objective of “helping your church to engage with the Bible more frequently”, which scored lowest of the nine on offer, still had over 50% of people saying Biblefresh had been a success, and recorded a mean of 0.88, meaning that the overall balance of opinion, including those who those the initiative was unsuccessful or very unsuccessful in this area, was slightly less than ‘successful’.

According to the overall user measures of Biblefresh, therefore, the initiative was a success. What can tentatively be suggested from these data is the idea that it was slightly more successful in enthusing and edifying people *personally* than it was *publically* (e.g. either through incorporating the Bible into people’s everyday life or through helping the church engage with the Bible).

The second set of statements tested still asked people about how successful they thought Biblefresh had been but widened out the various objectives on offer. At first glance at these results, two observations can be made. The first is that, like the previous ones, they are on balance positive, and the second is that they are, on balance, slightly less positive than the previous set of statements.

The single most successful of these wider objectives was that the initiative had helped people “explore parts of the Bible that [they] haven’t read before”, followed by helping people “connect the Bible to [their] everyday life” and then, interestingly in “bringing the Bible to public attention”. (See Figure 3.7)

Figure 3.7: What did Biblefresh achieve – top ranking



Slightly below these aims was a fourth (“helping you to see the relevance of the Bible in the modern world”) and then a small gap (of about 0.2 mean points) followed by “helping you change your life through deeper engagement with the Bible” and “giving you more confidence to teach the Bible to others”. (See Figure 3.8)

Figure 3.8: What did Biblefresh achieve – middle ranking

Finally, there were two more objectives that ranked on a par with these last two (“encouraging you to study the Bible in a group” and “giving you opportunities to talk about the Bible in public”), with a final, ninth statement some way behind (“helping you to ‘experience’ the Bible through the arts”). (See Figure 3.9)

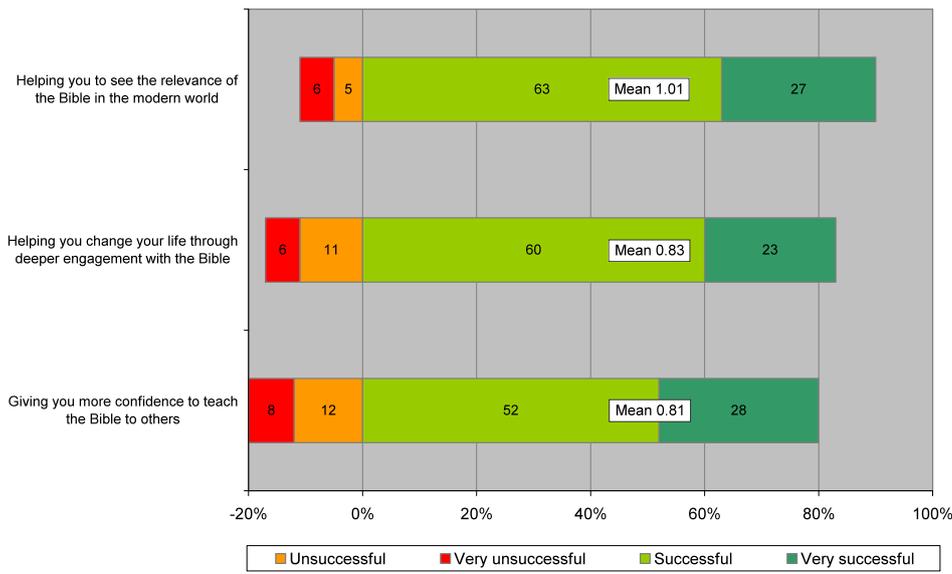
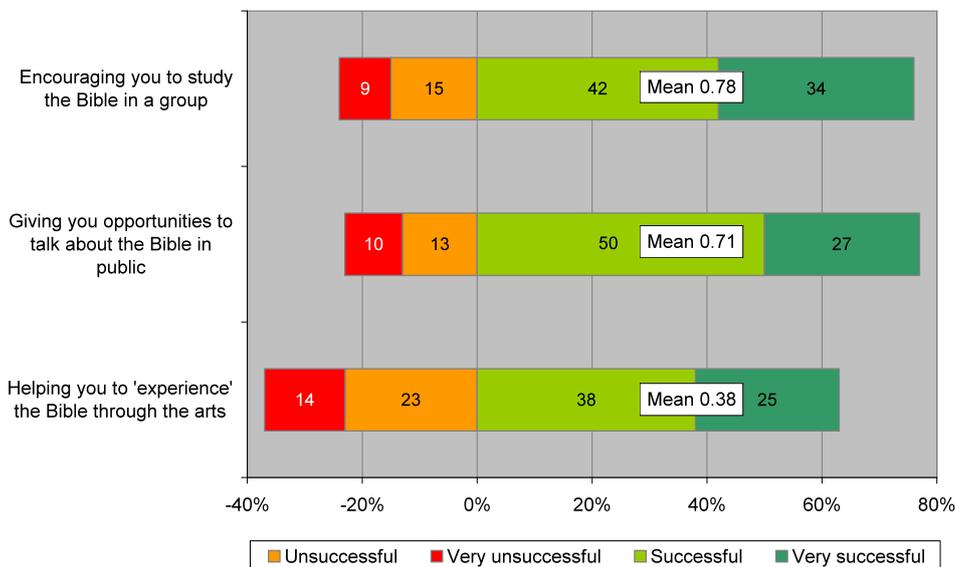


Figure 3.9: What did Biblefresh achieve – bottom ranking



The comparatively low score of this final statement is something of a mystery. There is a temptation to imagine that some respondents who did not have an arts experience at their church therefore marked this particular initiative as being unsuccessful. However, while that may have happened, respondents were given the option of answering ‘not applicable’ to any statement in this question, as well as the standard ‘neither agree nor disagree’ option. Therefore, it seems more likely that some respondents had had unsuccessful Bible/ arts experiences throughout the year, with over one in three of those who said they had experienced it judging it to be unsuccessful.

Overall, and at the risk of repetition, it is important to emphasise that none of these nine objectives, like the nine before, constituted a failure. Even the least successful was judged to be more successful than unsuccessful, and the most successful ones were deemed more popular still.

If there is any distinction that can be drawn between the varying responses, it is that, as with the previous set of objectives, Biblefresh's success was slightly greater on a personal or 1-2-1 level than on a public or corporate one.

This wasn't unanimously the case. It is striking that one of Biblefresh's more successful objectives, according to user respondents, was in "bringing the Bible to public attention", presumably a view inspired in large part by the KJV celebrations and *The People's Bible*.

That noted, however, it seems that user respondents' opinions of the success of Biblefresh's overall objectives was marked by a similar theme that we have seen throughout this report, namely that it is easier to inspire and inform individuals than it is groups.

4. The Bible today: setting a baseline

The final element of this research was to provide a baseline for respondents' current use of the Bible.

One needs to be cautious in doing this as baselines can be self-fulfilling if the samples are not comparable. For example, attitudes to and engagement with the Bible are bound to be more positive in a sample of churchgoers than in a sample of people who only call themselves Christians, for the obvious reason. Similarly, they are liable to be more positive in a sample of keen, regular churchgoers than of 'ordinary churchgoers' many of whom will be less committed. Or, again, they are liable to be more positive in a group of self-designated evangelicals than in a group that prefers not to use that label, irrespective of the fact that the latter group is equally committed in its faith.

In other words, when setting a baseline from which to measure Christian engagement with the Bible, one has to be very careful to define what one means by 'Christian'. For the sake of this research, we have chosen respondents who attend church once a fortnight or more, which happens to constitute virtually all the sample (98% to be precise).

The logic of this is that, while what people call themselves is important (*contra* Richard Dawkins), it is those Christians who attend church regularly who are most likely to show some genuine (as opposed to cultural) commitment to the Christian faith and, more importantly, who are more likely to come into contact with Bible-based initiatives in the future.

It should be noted, however, that even this isn't a foolproof definition for a baseline survey. As intimated above, the 'regular churchgoing' group from this sample is likely to be from churches where the Bible is "taught and explained at most or all services or meetings" (85% indicated they were, to be precise). That is very unlikely to be the norm: i.e. a national sample which selected similarly regular churchgoers would find that many went to churches where the Bible was not so much a focus.

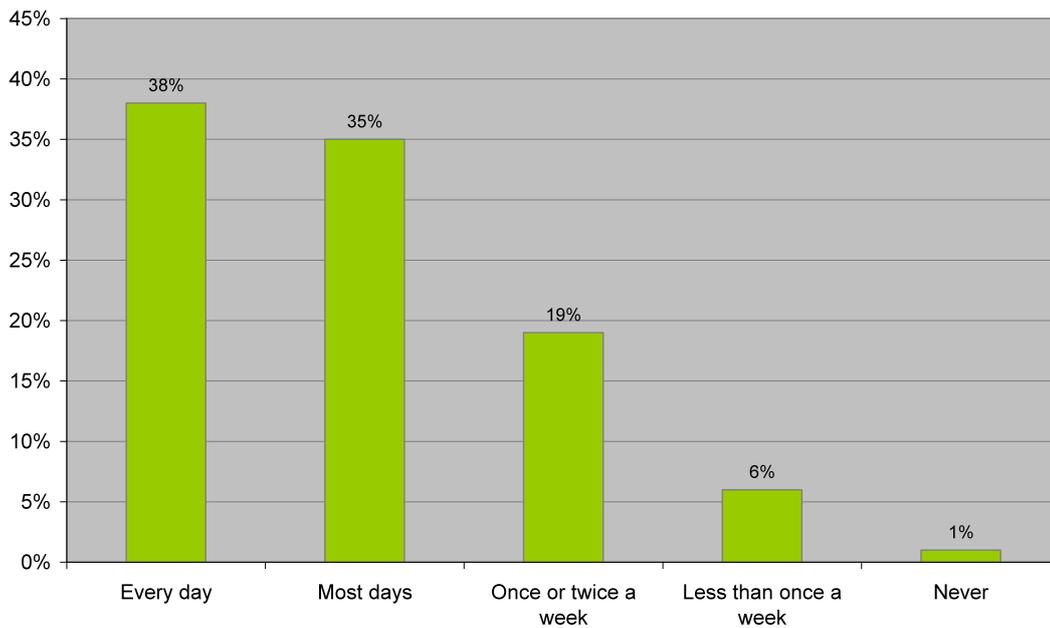
Consequently, these data are liable to be slanted towards Christians (i.e. regular churchgoers) who are *more acquainted than average* with the Bible. Accordingly, the level of confidence and engagement with the Bible evident in this sample is also likely to be greater than that from a randomly selected sample of regular-churchgoing UK Christians.

This is not a problem for this research; the results are as valid as any sample would be. However, it would need to be noted and taken into consideration in the context of any follow up or 'tracking' research.

Bible reading patterns: reading alone

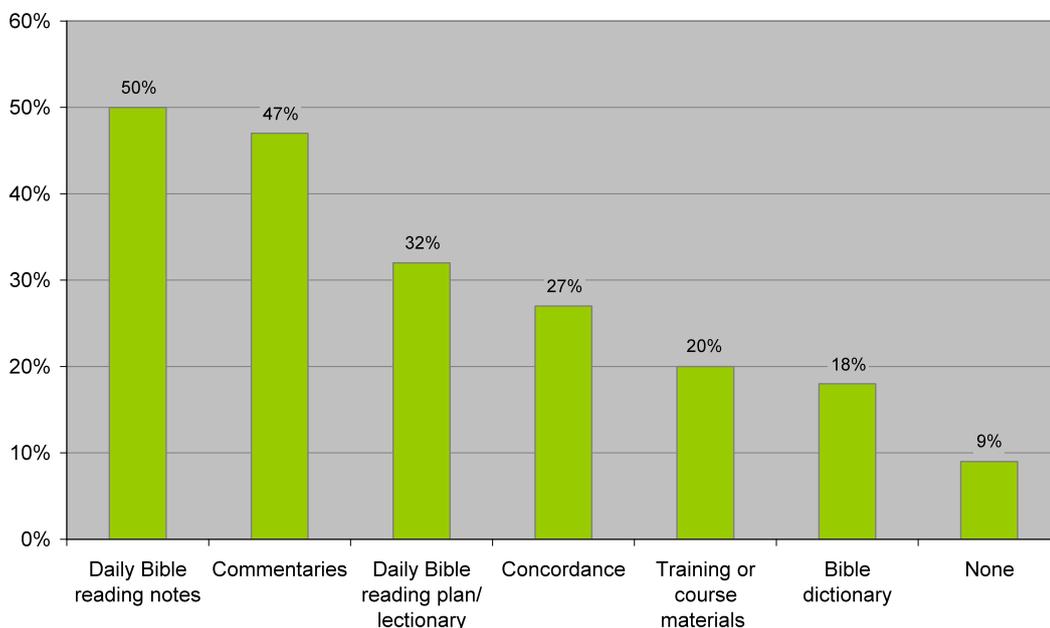
The overwhelming majority of respondents were regular Bible readers, with over two thirds reading or studying on every day, or most days. (See Figure 4.1) This confirms initial suppositions as to the disproportionately biblically-engaged nature of the sample.

Figure 4.1: How often do you read or study passages from the Bible on your own?



When reading the Bible, respondents used a wide range of aids, the most popular being daily reading notes (50%) and commentaries (47%), ranging from a daily reading plan or lectionary (32%), to a concordance (27%), to a Bible dictionary (18%). (See Figure 4.2)

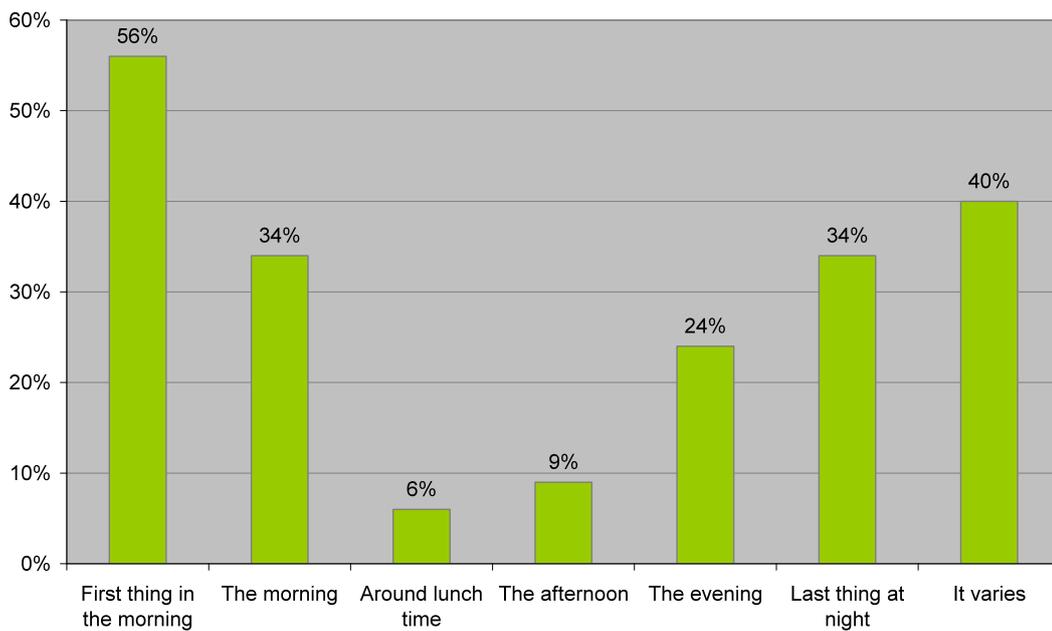
Figure 4.2: When you read or study passages from the Bible on your own, which, if any, of the following aids do you use?



When it came to when respondents engaged with scripture, the day had a clear ‘U’ shape to it, with the majority of respondents saying they read the Bible either (first thing) in the morning or in the evening/at night.

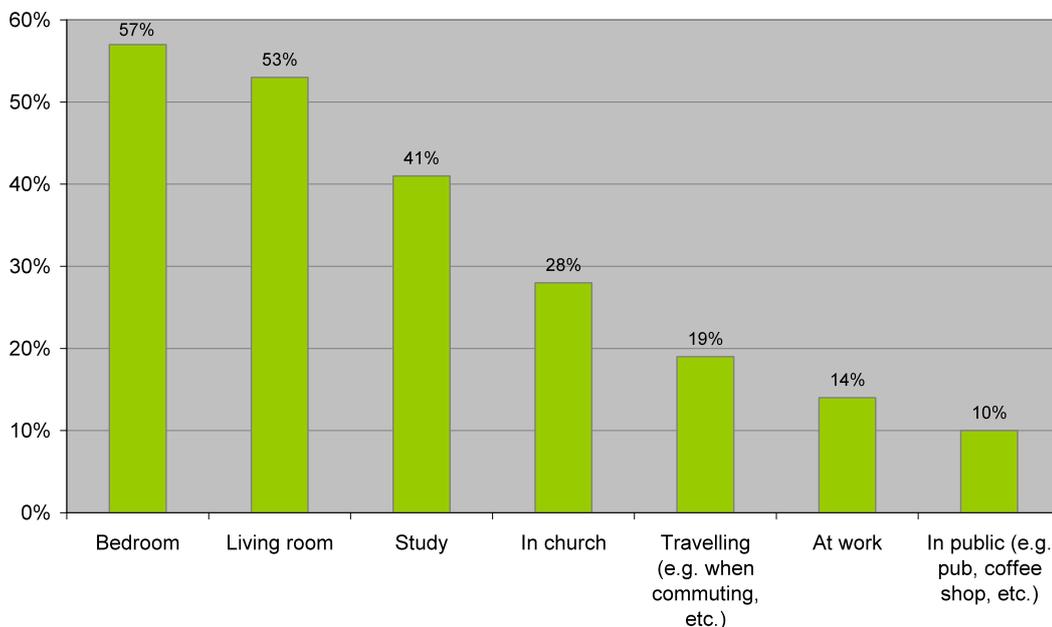
That said, the number of responses to this question, combined with the fact that 40% of people said ‘it varies’, shows that while people may have a general pattern to the time of their Bible reading, for the majority that is flexible. (See Figure 4.3)

Figure 4.3: When you read or study passages from the Bible on your own, what time of day do you usually do so?



Respondents predictably engaged with the Bible most commonly in private rather than public locations, although a surprising number said that they read or studied passages in public places, such as when travelling (19%), when at work (14%) or generally ‘in public (e.g. pub, coffee shop, etc.)’. (See Figure 4.4)

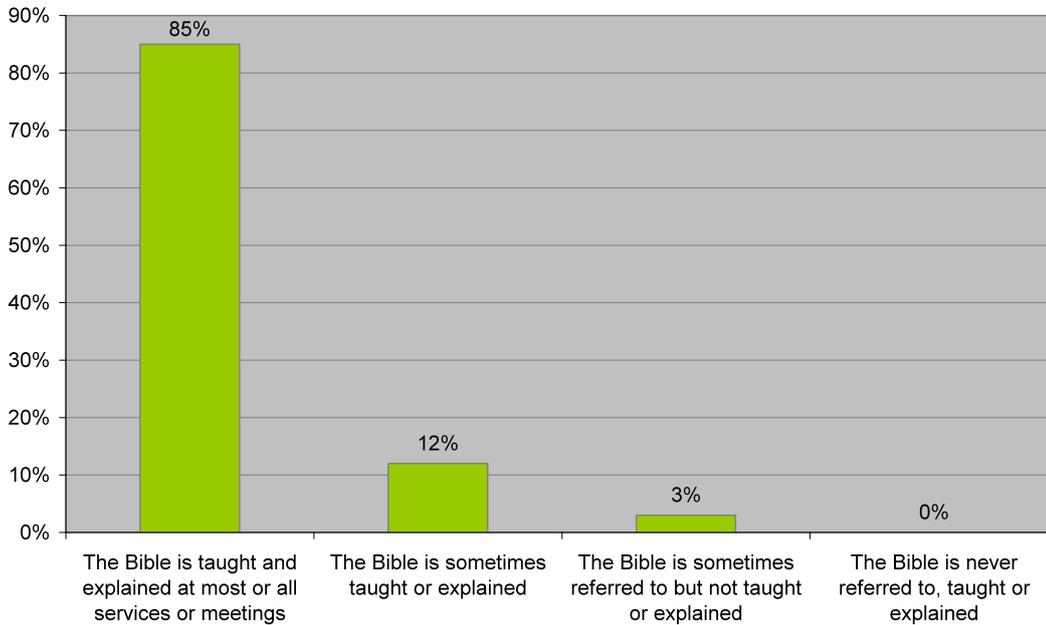
Figure 4.4: When you read or study passages from the Bible on your own, where do you usually do so?



Bible reading patterns: reading together

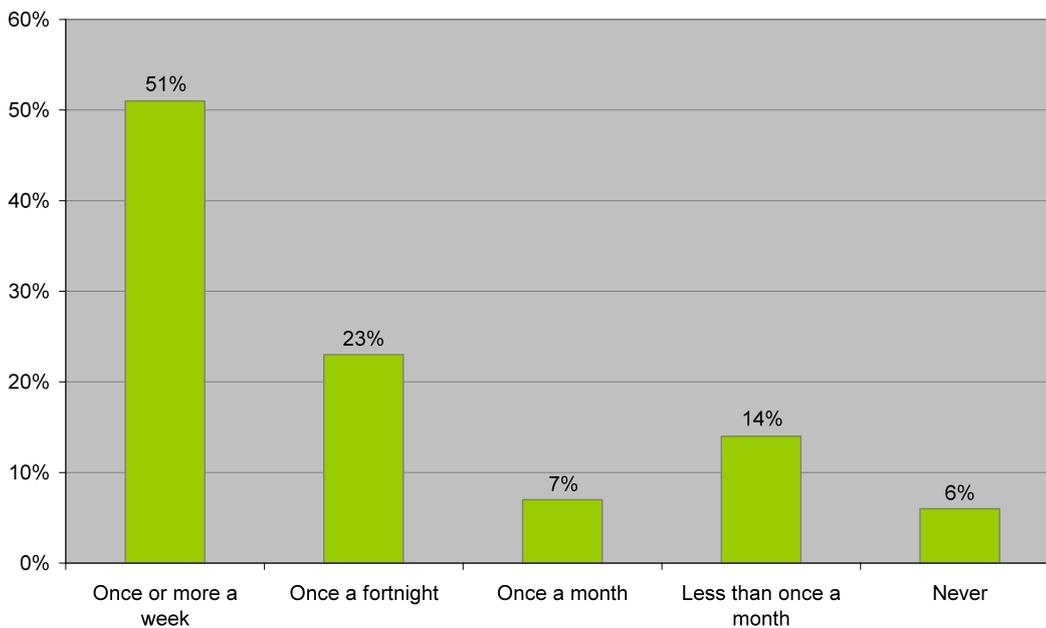
Respondents were also asked about the nature of their corporate engagement with the Bible. As already noted, the vast majority of respondents (85%) attended a church in which the Bible was taught or explained at most services. (See Figure 4.5)

Figure 4.5: To what extent is the Bible taught or explained in your own church?



Beyond this, a significant number of respondents also engaged with the Bible with other people, be that in a 'cell', 'home' or Bible study group, with around half doing so on a weekly basis. (See Figure 4.6)

Figure 4.6: How often do you read or study passages from the Bible with other people (e.g. in a 'cell', 'home' or Bible study group)?

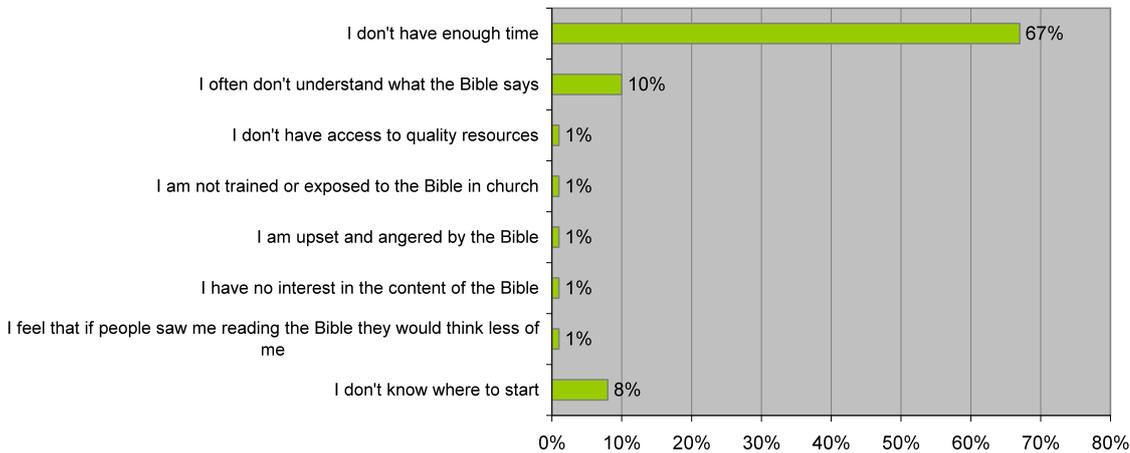


These group meetings took place primarily in people's homes (82%), with a small number being in public (8% in e.g. 'a coffee shop or pub'). They were as heavily resourced as private Bible study, with published Bible study group resources proving most popular (used by 56% of respondents), followed by training/course material (32%) and church-produced study group resources (29%).

When people were asked what factors prevented them from engaging with the Bible, the answer was decisively “lack of time” (67%), with the only other option to get into double figures (10%) being “I often don’t understand what the Bible says”. One in 12 (8%) said they didn’t know where to start.

More negative and critical reasons, such as not having “access to quality resources”, being “upset and angered by the Bible”, or worrying that other people would “think less of me” if they saw me reading the Bible all received minimal support. (See Figure 4.7)

Figure 4.7: What are the factors that prevent you from reading the Bible?



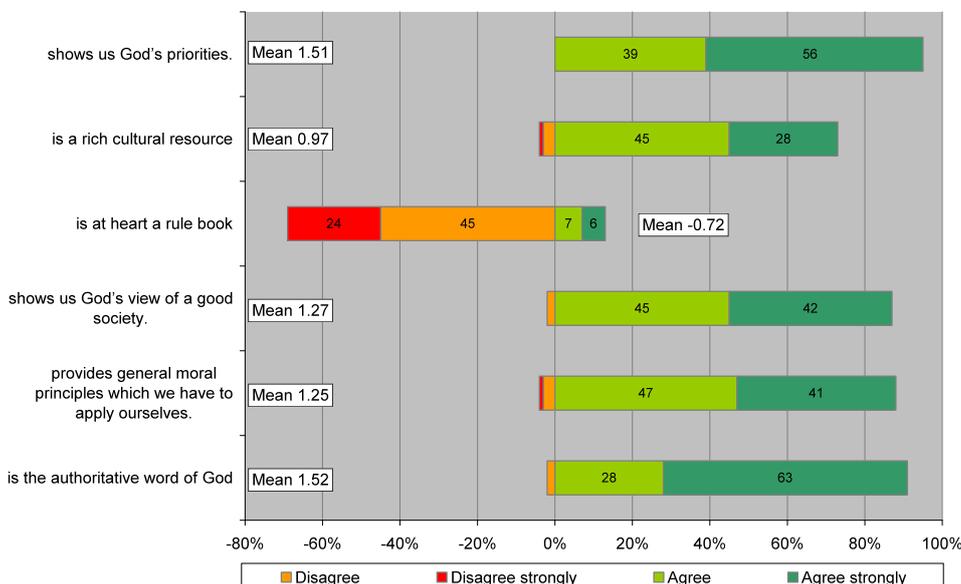
For the most part, therefore, the research shows that these particular church-going Christian respondents were keen and engaged with the Bible, both individually and corporately, attending biblically-serious churches and drawing on resources and material as they needed it. They read and studied the Bible frequently, if not necessarily regularly, sometimes in public although most often in private, and were deterred from doing so primarily by living busy lives.

Bible engagement: attitudes and influence

What did people think about the Bible? What, in their minds, *is* the Bible?

We asked respondents to indicate their agreement with a number of statements, according to the same five point scale used above. The results are given in Figure 4.8, with the mean scores denoting respondents’ overall opinion on that statement (ranging from ‘+2’ meaning everyone strongly agreed to ‘-2’ meaning everyone strongly disagreed).

Figure 4.8: The Bible is...



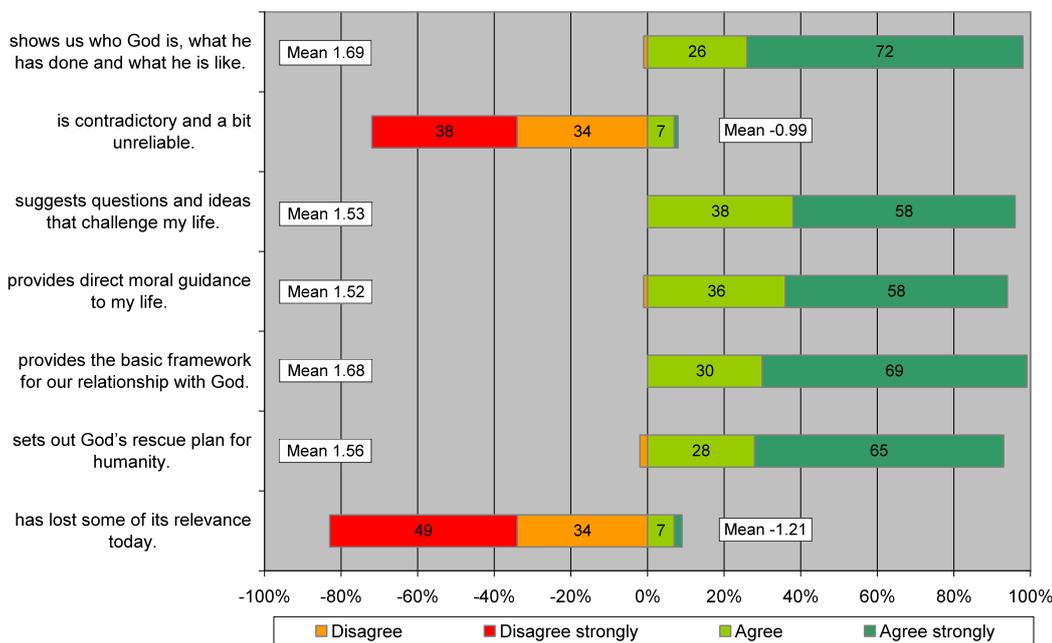
The first thing to note about these responses is that very few people saw the Bible as a rule book at heart, the overwhelming majority (69%) disagreeing.

At the opposite end of the scale, respondents had a clear conviction that the Bible is authoritative (91% agreeing) and that it shows us God’s priorities (85% agree). That recognised, a majority of respondents also recognised that people needed to work with the Bible in order to apply its principles, 88% agreeing that it “provides general moral principles which we have to apply ourselves”.

Slightly fewer saw in it “God’s view of a good society” (81% agreeing) and slightly fewer again (73%) saw it as a rich cultural resource, the lower figure here possibly denoting a reservation among some respondents that seeing the Bible as a cultural resource might be interpreted as seeing it as only a cultural resource.

Their understanding of the Bible was further explored by another series of statements, calculated by the same measure as those above. (See Figure 4.9)

Figure 4.9: The Bible...



Once again, two results stand out with particular clarity. An overwhelming number of respondents disagreed that the Bible had lost some of its relevance, or that it was contradictory and unreliable.

By contrast, around seven in ten people agreed strongly that the Bible “shows us who God is, what he has done and what he is like,” and that it provides “the basic framework for our relationship with God”. Two thirds agreed strongly that the Bible “sets out God’s rescue plan for humanity”, and just under three-fifths agreed strongly that it “provides direct moral guidance to my life”, with the same number agreeing strongly that it “suggests questions and ideas that challenge my life”.

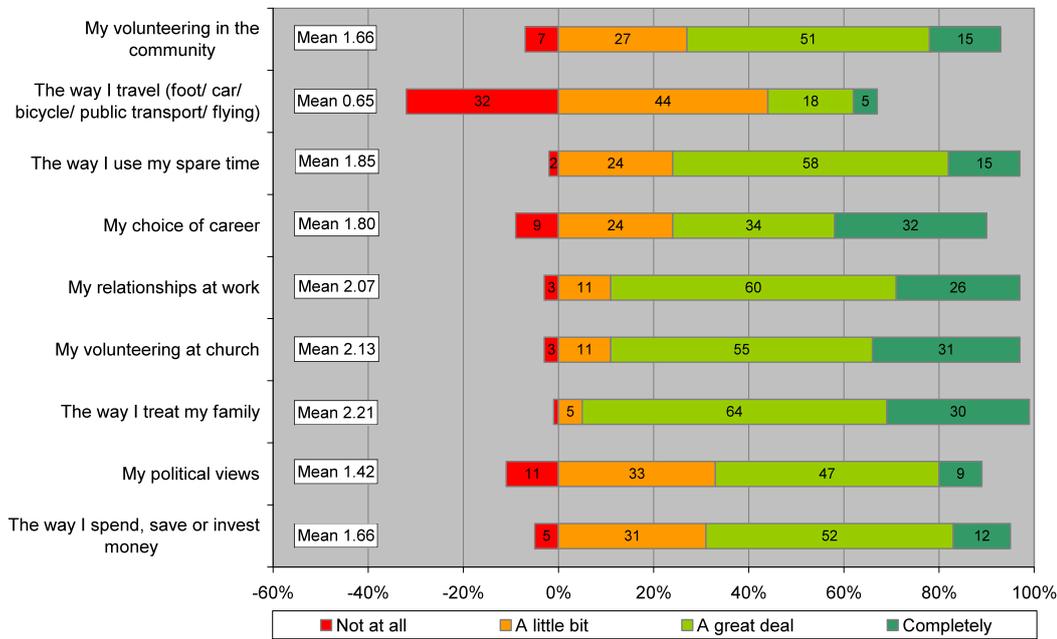
Finally, respondents were asked the extent to which the Bible “shapes different aspects of your life”. This was conducted to a different scale, ranging from ‘not at all’, to ‘a little bit’, ‘a great deal’, and ‘completely’ (scored respectively 0, 1, 2, 3).

Three areas scored above 2 (i.e. on average more than ‘a great deal’) in this question, “the way I treat my family”, “my volunteering at church”, and “my relationships at work”. For each of these areas, respondents saw and implemented the connection between Bible and life.

At a second level down, i.e. averaging a little below 2, were “the way I use my spare time” and “my choice of career”. Slightly below this, averaging around 1.6, were “the way I invest/ spend my money” and “my volunteering in the community”, and little below this came “my political views” (1.42).

The only area that fell beneath an average score of 1 (i.e. the Bible hardly influences it in their lives) is “the way I travel (foot/ car/ bicycle/ public transport/ flying)”, which averaged 0.65 and to which a third of people said ‘not at all’. (See Figure 4.10)

Figure 4,10: How much does the Bible shape different aspects of your life



Overall, therefore, these particular respondents appeared to have confidence in the Bible, adopting a high view of it (although not such a view as would preclude the need for intelligent reflection on it) and seeing its connection to a wide range of aspects in their lives, with, predictably, more people getting the personal connections than the more public ones.