



Chapter 9: Walk with the Word as a Churchwide Program

The best way to encourage the sustained, consistent efforts of individuals and small groups to commit themselves to the Word of God is to provide a churchwide framework.

We're not talking about wholesale, overnight change that demands razing everything in favor of building something completely new. It's more about enhancing the goals and efforts of ministries that probably already exist within your church, or addressing a gap you're probably well aware of. Just about every traditional church activity has a component of emphasizing the importance of the Bible. It may not have occurred to you that all those different emphases can be leveraged, even coordinated to have a multiplying effect for individuals, ministries, and the local church as a whole.

God has blessed your church with people, gifts, and goals to impact its immediate surroundings for the kingdom of God. The coordinated dedication to hear God speak through His Word is not a replacement of those gifts and goals but a concerted effort to use them more effectively.

Adopt a Reading Schedule

The first place to start is to publish a Scripture reading plan, samples of which you've probably already seen on the Walk with the Word web site.

A reading schedule can be listed on your web site, handed out as a bookmark, inserted in the Sunday bulletin or even mailed. And as will

be discussed further below, the easiest justification for publishing a schedule is so others can specifically read the passages each Sunday's main sermon will cover as well as the teaching for adult Sunday School.

This is a very non-threatening, low-change inducing first step towards coordinating all the ministries emphases on Bible study as well as providing a stepping stone towards introducing new opportunities if they don't already exist, such as implementing small groups.

The Pulpit Ministry

It cannot be over-stressed that without the full support of the pulpit, organization-wide success will be difficult.

Some individuals get intimidated because they think the style of sermon has to change to produce a weekly exegesis of consecutive passages of Scripture. If you think about it, even exegetical teaching takes one to other places in the Bible in the course of a sermon. If your current style is more "topical" than "exegetical", consider the fact that you can follow the reading plan by *starting* the sermon from a passage within each week's assigned reading even if covering the topic moves to other places in the Bible. You're still encouraging the congregation to read through the Bible without having to make material changes to your personal approach.

With a little encouragement and occasional plugs from the pulpit (e.g. *"There were so many wonderful things in this week's reading, weren't there?"*) you'll create an ever-increasing participation to connect the Word with the weekly message.

You can even effect this approach if you have multiple services that minister to different levels of believers. For instance, you may have a Sunday morning service that is oriented as a "seeker sensitive" service. Even though the sermon may be geared a little more towards the seeker than the mature believer, your lessons can still start from

each week's reading plan; and by making it known each week that a schedule is available, you're providing them direction as to where to get more information between Sundays. They won't understand everything at first, but they'll have already read the main text you're going to proceed from.

You may have a separate service – on Sunday or mid-week – that caters to mature believers. Those lessons can come from the same schedule and overall will have the benefit of focusing multiple levels of believers in different phases of their personal walk on the same area of study. This facilitates a stronger bond of sharing between these groups as they respond not only to God but to each other from the different applications they experience hearing God speak to them through the same portion of His Word.

Adult Sunday School

Because the weekly schedule covers many chapters, the pulpit ministry will probably only focus on a particular passage or just a few points or themes. Attempting to provide a more general overview of the entire week's reading should be the focus of Adult Sunday School.

Having encouraged attenders to do the reading the week leading into each Sunday School lesson, this is the place people should be encouraged to bring any general questions and where an overview is given to help everyone place the reading in the right historical and theological context.

This is the time to go over maps, the meaning of names, the timeline of Israel's or the early church's history, and so on, to provide a framework. It's great that a whole congregation reads the entire book of Isaiah, and even receives specific teaching on it from the pulpit, but the context of Isaiah's ministry, the setting for God's words, the historical events in parallel with his ministry are crucial to making the reading understandable and even enjoyable at all levels.

Consider that you may not necessarily need a seminary graduate to teach Sunday School in this manner because the local Bible book store is *bursting* with books, lesson plans, etc. It may simply be a matter of choosing materials that parallel the reading schedule. The various study aids available for download from Walk with the Word are oriented to address this need as well.

Small Groups

Whereas the pulpit provides concentrated spiritual guidance from a small portion of the reading, and adult Sunday School provides a more general overview, small groups are the venue where personal interaction, fellowship, and sharing of the Word takes place; the place where God's Word really becomes personal.

The Bible studies available on the Walk with the Word web site and emailed weekly in our newsletter are formatted to address the need of small group and individual Bible study, greatly emphasizing the application of God's Word to each individual's walk. Using this format, a small group "leader" is really more of a "facilitator". After reading through a specific portion of the reading (rarely more than a chapter and often less), the small group leaders guide the discussion through the Scripture point by point by asking questions that elicit the group's participation to jointly observe, interpret and apply the passage to their personal lives.

Having heard a sermon from a very small portion of the reading and received a general overview of the entire reading, the small group setting is the opportunity for personal sharing, exploration and mutual support in the study of a section of the reading. People tend to feel a little less inhibited in their participation at the group level having had reinforcement from their pastor and Sunday School teacher the previous Sunday. This creates the necessary bridge from passive listening to lives that begin to experience behavioral and heart changes. It is the final step of making all that they've learned to apply

to their personal life and heed the call of God's voice to become more committed not just as *hearers* of the Word, but *doers*.

Youth and Children Programs

You really need some talented people in order to create Youth and Children's Ministry's study materials that precisely follow the reading plan. When you develop a meaningful 6-week course through Isaiah for 1st Graders, *please* share it with us. [Insert big grin here.]

Teen ministries are less challenging and, in fact, have proven to be able to follow the exact reading plan as adults, especially when implemented in small groups is tailored for them. But the point to consider here is close to the one made for adult Sunday School: Rather than invent materials, be flexible and work on coordinating the materials you plan to buy or use. In other words, already published materials can be loosely tied to the reading schedule so that entire families are basically going through the same portions of Scripture at the same time.

Just the benefit of the family driving home together Sunday and being able to relate different aspects from the same portion of Scripture cannot be understated. Parents and children are bonded through their sharing of what they each learned from the same reading. What occurs in children's and youth ministries is no longer considered by adults to be disconnected or detached from their own experience each Sunday.

You're already securing materials for these ministries so this isn't a huge change. It's really a matter of matching the schedule and content of those materials with the reading plan. This small effort yields a tremendous pay-off as it not only connects many different ministries together, but builds a natural thirst for a deeper commitment to God's Word as children transition to adulthood.

Tie Everything Together with a Coordinator

Everything's probably not going to happen overnight all at the same time – publish a reading schedule, tie in the pulpit ministry and Sunday School, get small groups going, coordinating children's and youth ministries; but at some point you're going to need coordination and this is a burden you want lifted from the Pastor so he can concentrate on *his* ministry. You're going to need a coordinator.

Practically speaking, if you *don't* have a coordinator you run the risk of the Sunday morning message, the Sunday School lesson and the small group study covering the exact same topic over and over again. The first duty of the coordinator is to act as the communicator between these ministries to enable each area to compliment the others and avoid unnecessary redundancy or overlap. The coordinator talks with the Pastor about the focus of upcoming sermons and is self-informed as to what the small group study will cover that week. Then he can communicate to the pastor, Sunday School teachers and small group leaders these intentions so that each will avoid covering to any depth the same material.

This is most beneficial to the Sunday School teacher because it's always near impossible to provide even the most general overview of the chapters in each week's reading, so knowing what will be emphasized from the pulpit and in small groups reduces the material needing to be reviewed. While going through the overview the teacher can plainly state, *"We'll skip chapter 5 because that is the focus of this morning's sermon and chapter 7 because that's reserved for small groups this week."* It doesn't mean anyone's absolutely prohibited from teaching from those passages, but they'll be aware to not emphasize them too greatly for the benefit of the pulpit and small groups. In fact, it's a great "marketing" tool for those who attend Sunday School that are not yet enrolled in a small group that subtly says, *"You need go to a small group to get the rest."*

Ideally this should be your “Small Group Coordinator” who oversees the creation of small groups, placing new members, recruiting new hosts and leaders for new groups, and distributes the weekly small group Bible study to the leaders of the groups. In this role this person will have dual ministry tasks in the area of teaching to coordinate the weekly study and working closely with the small group leaders, but also in the area of enfolding as they encourage people to join existing small groups or to create new ones.

If you’re just starting a small group ministry in your church, a person more gifted in enfolding is more desirable than a theologian as Bible studies are available not only from Walk with the Word but literally thousands of web sites and books; but a person who can make people comfortable joining a group or recruiting new hosts and leaders will increase the size and depth of the ministry many times over. If you become *really* successful you’ll be delighted to have a “Small Group Coordinator” and a separate person to write or coordinate the weekly Bible study guides.

The Ministry Incubator

This is an especially important concept for the pastor who might, in the beginning, be on his own, the sole advocate of this new emphasis on reading the Bible: This is a tremendous opportunity for you to identify, encourage, and train for higher service the people in your organization who are currently more passive than active in their ministry participation. This is a ministry incubator.

NO ONE – at least no Believer with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit – can long engage in the pursuit of hearing God speak to them personally through His Word without being **CHANGED** more and more into the image of Christ. The gifts God has given will arise and be noticed. More teachers, more helpers, more witnesses. Your future Sunday School teachers, small group leaders and so on will emerge if you pay attention and provide them the opportunity and encouragement to serve. The burden of the pulpit and church becomes

much lighter when borne by so many more shoulders than just your own.

Probably one of the most important factors to keep in mind is that not everyone is in the same place in their walk. Some are more mature, some may have never seriously read the Bible in the 30+ years they've gone to church every Sunday. The eggs in this incubator will hatch chickens, so to speak, that are at many different stages of growth. This is a blessing, not a problem. Coordinating the Bible study efforts of all ministries within your organization will allow everyone the opportunity to grow into ministry at the same time they're provided accountability and fellowship with others. It works both collectively and individually.

To conclude, let's go back to one of the opening observations of this section, that nearly every activity in your church already provides some kind of emphasis on the Bible. Obviously the sermon highlights the Bible. Lessons for children's, youth and adult ministries all have a current emphasis on the Bible. If there are already small groups connected with your ministry there's most likely a strong Bible-emphasis. Missions, outreach, etc., etc. all emphasize the importance of the Bible in one way or another. So the suggestion for your consideration is that these can all be coordinated and leveraged with a manageable-sized effort without huge, massive changes. Can you see the benefits of coordinating the focus of all your ministries' Bible emphases? Bible teaching will continue in all these activities regardless, so why not tie those separate efforts together to compliment each other? Unify the individuals and groups within your organization into the body of Christ through God's Word. It's called "discipleship."