

# Just Scripture Facilitation Guide

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**Christian Aid exists to create a world where everyone can live a full life, free from poverty. We are a global movement of people, churches and local organisations who passionately champion dignity, equality and justice worldwide. We are the change makers, the peacemakers, the mighty of heart.**

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**Cover:** Climate Change Advocacy Group,  
Masue village, Makueni  
Photographs: Tom Pilston / Christian Aid

**Just Scripture is a form of intercultural bible study in which groups of Christians from different parts of the world meet online to discuss Scripture together and explore how it can equip or inspire us to take action against injustice. The methodology is inspired by churches in South Africa and Bolivia and so has truly been forged in global partnership.**

### **Introduction:**

Just Scripture normally involves a group from the UK meeting up with a group from the Global South, most often on zoom. This can be as a one-off event, but we encourage churches to commit to a series as a way of building long-term relationships.

The aim of Just Scripture is to:

- build relationships between churches globally
- equip and encourage us to be people who challenge injustice
- strengthen our collective prophetic voice

### **Intercultural and contextual bible study:**

The core feature of Just Scripture is intercultural biblical dialogue (ICBD), groups of believers from around the world meeting together and engaging in dialogue about a passage of Scripture. We have found Contextual Bible Study (CBS) to be a helpful approach for such cross-cultural exchanges. CBS is not the only approach to Scripture that can be used, but it is one that works well in this kind of intercultural engagement.

Contextual Bible Study (CBS) is a way of reading the Bible in groups, which over the last 50 or so years has spread globally from Latin America to South Africa and eventually to the UK. It is a prayerful way of reading the Bible which allows the group to explore the text in light of their own particular context. In this way, it allows readers to engage in dialogue with one another about their current concerns in light of the biblical texts.

Compared to other approaches to bible study, CBS is:

- slower – that is, we really meditate on the text allowing it to speak to us and our situation. The text is often read more than once in order to enable this
- open – the goal is not so much to find the ‘right’ answer to a question, but to allow scripture to speak to us, and through us to one another

The main purpose of pursuing Just Scripture as Christian Aid is to engender a deeper sense of solidarity and enter into the shared struggle with Christian Aid communities across the world.

Wendy Lloyd, Just Scripture founder, Christian Aid

The purpose of ICBD is to get to some questions that will allow us meet the “other” from many readings and interpretations of a single text, but framed within a global context.

ISEAT, Christian Aid partner, Bolivia

- heartfelt – Western approaches to bible study are often very analytic and speak solely to the mind. CBS, especially when practiced by groups in the Global South, often speaks to the heart and / or our lived experience
- practical – a typical CBS session ends with the question: what should we do differently as a result of this study? Its goal is not mere information, but transformed lives

Above all, this is a method which encourages us to learn from one another, to hear one another, and to encounter one another and God as together we explore Scripture.

For this reason, the questions in a Just Scripture session tend to follow the 'See, Judge, Act' model. It begins with open-ended 'see' questions which explore how participants understand the text having heard about each others' context. The second set of 'judge' questions are where we really interrogate the text and our lives to explore the connections between the different characters / ideas in the text, and how they resonate or not with our own lived experience. This includes the reality that sometimes the text judges us as much as we might judge it. The final 'act' questions are all about translating this into practical action for us as individuals and a group. What now should we do in light of this study?

### **A short guide to cross-cultural dialogue:**

As indicated, at the heart of Just Scripture is a model which brings together groups from across the world. Such intercultural dialogue has huge benefits for all of us as we explore scripture together. These include:

- hearing the experiences of people from parts of the world very different to our own and learning something of their culture and context
- experiencing a different approach to reading / studying the Bible
- seeing the Bible through another's eyes can both give us new insights, and help us see how our own interpretations are affected by our cultural assumptions
- experiencing something of how other cultures worship / pray
- building relationships as part of the global Christian community
- gaining a greater sense of being part of one global church
- feeling equipped, motivated and empowered to work more effectively for global justice

Ubuntu is often translated 'I am because we are.' This Bantu concept describes how our identity is formed in community.

### **Cultural differences**

- Individualism v collectivism – Western cultures tend to be far more individualistic than those in the Global South
- Power and inequality – the extent to which hierarchy is accepted versus challenged. Some cultures offer much greater respect to those who are older than is the case in the West for instance
- Gender expectations – the traditional role of men and women can vary tremendously across cultures
- Long-term v short-term outlook – some cultures are occupied with questions of immediate survival; others have the luxury of long term planning
- Indulgence v restraint – there can exist marked differences in what is considered extravagant, and where extravagance can and should be displayed
- Closure v ambiguity – some cultures prefer a single clear conclusion ideally with unanimity; others feel comfortable with open-ended disagreement

Just Scripture gives expression to that reality, as we develop our Christian identity in global community.

At the same time, communication across languages, cultures, time zones and technological barriers does bring some challenges. It can be helpful for us to be aware of these in advance so that when they occur they do not prevent us from continuing to engage in the dialogue that brings so many other benefits.

The kind of challenges we might face include:

- Language barriers – spiritual truths are sometimes best expressed in one's mother tongue, and so any translation can feel 'off' or wrong. Also, words can have different connotations across languages and cultures, even when the translation is technically correct.
- Cultural barriers – a number of differences exist that can hinder mutual understanding. Some common cultural differences are detailed on the previous page
- Theological barriers – similar to above, but in respect of our faith, significant differences can exist between groups. These are detailed in the sidebar to the right.
- Economic differences – huge differences in wealth can create barriers to mutual understanding. A wealthy person may be worried about paying the mortgage; a poorer person may be worried about eating today
- Technological barriers – finally all of the above can be compounded by technological barriers. If you are in a middle of a discussion on some matter, and the zoom connection keeps cutting in and out then this will not help to ease any tension that may be on the horizon. As part of this, it is sometimes the case that participants in poorer regions of the world may turn off their video stream as a way to save money. This can be misunderstood by participants in the Global North as an unwillingness to fully participate when in reality it is simply a way of keeping costs down when your data bundle is not unlimited (as it often is in the West).

### Theological differences

- Shame culture v guilt culture – the former of these is focussed on a person's standing within the community; the latter is focussed on how you feel about yourself. Both can impact our interpretation of sin.
- Spiritual v material – some expressions of Christianity are far more comfortable talking about the spiritual aspects of the world, and others tend to view the world purely in physical, material terms
- Evangelical v progressive / liberal – especially in regard to some social issues, there are clearly some differences of opinion that can impact cross-cultural exchange

One of the significant benefits of being required to work through these challenges is that they can give us insight into our own cultural assumptions. At the same time, they can also act as blocks to true mutual engagement if we do not enter into dialogue with the right set of attitudes. Hence, our conversations will benefit if we demonstrate a set of virtues that should be ours anyway as disciples of Christ:

- Active listening – really hearing what others are saying, not just hearing what you think they are saying.
- Patience – for when technology breaks down, or time differences frustrate us
- Openness and Humility – a recognition that we can learn from others, and that our view may need to change
- Gentleness – that even when we do disagree, we do so with grace not abrasiveness
- Acceptance – always looking for the best, not the worst, in others. Believing that they mean well even if their words are hard to hear.
- Vulnerability – a willingness to show that we do not have it all worked out
- Trust – in the process and in each other

**Below:** Nurse Judith Lassie prays before going to work at the health clinic in Sawula village, Pujehun district. Credit Tom Pilston / Christian Aid



## **Leading an intercultural study:**

Crucial to any intercultural bible study is effective leadership. When a group is from one culture and especially knows each other well then often it is possible to engage in a group bible study with no apparent facilitator. However, this is not the case with intercultural studies. The two groups may not know each other well, they may encounter some of the barriers described above, and if we are to ensure that the study remains a positive experience for everyone involved then this requires the art of skilful facilitation.

Good facilitation has both a task and a relational focus, with the emphasis on relationships. Sometimes, facilitators from the Global North can get so caught up in the task at hand – getting through the questions, ensuring good feedback in plenary sessions – that they forget to ensure a good relational dynamic. On the other hand, if one completely ignores the task and the study becomes a chaotic chitchat then some folk might wonder if it was worth taking part. The skill then is to prioritise good relationships between everyone involved while keeping one eye on the need to progress the discussion.

For these reasons, good facilitation aims to:

- create an open and non-threatening atmosphere
- enable a 'dominance free discourse'
- encourage every participant to take part fully in the session

The role of the facilitators then is to:

- make it happen – but not by dominating the discussion themselves
- work with ease, so the conversation just flows
- give a feeling of confidence and safety
- enable people to talk
- ask the right questions
- be an attentive listener
- affirm and encourage, but also be willing to challenge / critique in a spirit of affirmation
- ensure mutual understanding
- keep things moving
- and yet be comfortable with silence (recognise that some people need longer to process ideas, and we should allow that to happen)



## Session tasks:

### Before the session

1. Identify a facilitator from each group
2. The two facilitators (plus perhaps the Christian Aid Just Scripture Advisor) should meet online and agree:
  - The number of sessions (including date / time / platform). In our experience, Zoom is best, but other platforms are possible
  - The format of the sessions including the texts to be discussed and who will facilitate / host each part of the discussion – see suggested session outlines which can be accessed by [signing up here](#)
  - The need for data support / food / translation / travel – see Financial Support below
  - Whether or not WhatsApp will be used as an additional tool – see WhatsApp below
  - Expectations about ongoing partnership work. It can be helpful at the outset to be clear with each other whether or not this is the start of a long-term relationship between two groups / churches, or whether this is simply a short series with no intention to form a long-term partnership. We would recommend that you agree a series of three Just Scripture sessions, and then discuss what form any ongoing relationship might take. If you do this, then you may want to make the first session primarily about building relationships between the two groups and an outline session for this is provided on the resources page which can be [accessed by signing up here](#). An alternative to this is that you agree a series of five, but you only meet online for sessions one, three and five. Sessions two and four take place as monocultural groups without any intercultural dialogue or online meeting.
3. Recruit people to attend for each group. We suggest up to 10 people is the appropriate size for each group

**Below:** Christian Aid supporters worshipping. Credit: Elaine Duigenan / Christian Aid



## During the session

The typical structure of a Just Scripture session (with suggested timings) follows this format. Facilitator 1 means the facilitator from one of the groups; Facilitator 2 means the facilitator from the other group:

Running time	Content	Who
2 min	Intro and welcome	Facilitator 1
3 min	Opening act of worship (e.g. song / prayer) – possibly in two languages	Facilitator 2
10 min	Introduction to context of each group – if the topic is climate change, this could for instance be an introduction to how climate change is affecting the country / region where each group is located	A spokesperson for each group, not necessarily the facilitator
5 min	Passage of scripture read aloud in two languages where appropriate	Participants from each group
15 min	Breakout Session 1: Discussion in mono-cultural groups of the first set of questions – these discussions can either be led by the facilitator for each group or if the groups are confident discussing scripture, the facilitators can leave them to it. It can help to put the questions in the chat function on zoom during these breakout sessions.	Participants +/- facilitators with each group
10 min	Plenary feedback 1 During this time, each group shares what they thought, and dialogue between the two groups is encouraged. It is at this stage that skilled facilitation is required to foster this dialogue. Without active facilitation at this point, there is a danger that the two groups simply feedback what they thought, but there is no genuine exchange and discussion	Facilitator 1
15 min	Breakout Session 2: - with second set of questions	Participants +/- facilitators with each group
10 min	Plenary feedback 2	Facilitator 2
10 min	Breakout Session 3: with third set of questions	Participants +/- facilitators with each group
10 min	Plenary session 3	Either facilitator
5 min	Closing act of worship (e.g. song / prayer)	Anyone

Typically, a whole session lasts 95 minutes but if using non-simultaneous translation this will be longer. In addition, the facilitators may want to meet 15 mins ahead of the session just to make sure all the technology and sound is working.

## After the session

1. Especially for the first one or two sessions, each facilitator should obtain some feedback from their group about how it went and whether or not things could be done to improve the session. Such feedback can simply be captured by encouraging the group to message the facilitator with any comments. Sometimes, simple tweaks to the process (eg. allowing more or less plenary time) can significantly improve the experience for participants
2. Meet with your co-facilitator, or just have a message exchange, to share any learning, agree any changes for the following session, and confirm when you will meet again.
3. Provide some feedback or a case study for Christian Aid. We'd love to know how it went so we can encourage others to run their own Just Scripture!

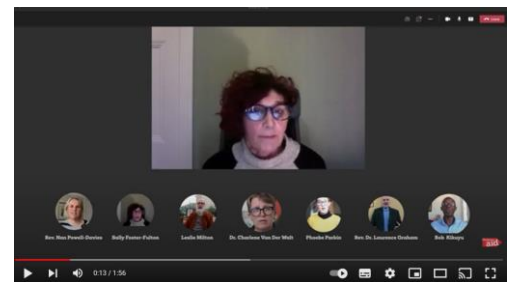
## Practical considerations:

### Online versus face to face

In our experience, Zoom has proven to be the most stable and reliable platform for a Just Scripture session. However, teams, google meets, skype and others can also be used. There are at least three different options for how the platforms are used, and all three can work:

1. Everyone participating has their own laptop / device and joins independently of each other. In this scenario, you have the option of creating breakout rooms where the two groups are mixed, or where the two groups are monocultural (eg. all the UK participants in one breakout room and all the Global South participants in another). We recommend that initially, until people get used to talking and dialoguing, that you use monocultural breakout rooms. Once relationships of trust are established then mixing rooms can be highly successful. The clear advantage of everyone joining independently is that you can involve people who are geographically dispersed; the disadvantage is that it is only possible if everyone has their own laptop / device and internet connection.
2. One group is face to face in a room using just one laptop, and the other group is scattered across the internet with each individual joining independently. The key to making this work is to ensure you have a microphone on a longish lead which connects to the laptop for the face to face group. Inbuilt laptop microphones only pick up people near to the laptop so anyone sitting further away won't be heard and if you end up in a situation where the person near the laptop simply has to repeat what has been said by someone further away then it slows

Below: Just Scripture Online Study



down the dialogue hugely. Some inbuilt microphones also pick up ambient noise which can be distracting. It can also help in this situation to project the laptop screen onto a wall or have it connected to a large monitor, though this isn't essential. The advantage of this approach is that, at least for the face to face group, only one laptop / internet connection is required. You may also need a set of speakers as sometimes plugging in a microphone mutes the speaker output. The key is to test your laptop in advance.

3. Both groups are face to face in separate rooms, one room in the UK, and the other in the Global South, connecting via zoom for the plenary sessions. As with 2) above, both groups would need microphones on longish leads and it can help to find a way to enlarge the screen as indicated above.

### WhatsApp

WhatsApp incurs much lower data charges – even for video – than zoom, and so is a very popular app in the Global South. While relatively few people, if any, in poorer communities would have zoom; many would have access to WhatsApp. For this reason, you might want to consider using WhatsApp as a supplement, or even as a replacement, for your zoom discussion.

If using WhatsApp as a supplement then it would involve creating a WhatsApp group of all those involved, and perhaps having message exchanges both during the zoom dialogue, and perhaps after. Obviously, everyone involved would have to consent for their mobile number to be shared in this way and Christian Aid can provide advice regarding this if necessary.

Alternatively, it might also be possible (we have not yet tried this!) to run the whole of an intercultural bible study on WhatsApp. The steps involved are detailed to the right. If you do run a Just Scripture session this way, please let us know how you got on!!

### Financial support:

As already indicated, the primary purpose of Just Scripture is for two groups from across the world to meet online and to explore scripture together. It is not about a financial relationship between the two groups. Having said that, we cannot ignore the fact that the two groups might have very different financial resources at their disposal and inevitably there are some costs for both sides in putting on a Just Scripture event (eg. data / refreshments). In normal circumstances, we would expect each group to fund these costs themselves. However, if this is not possible, we encourage the

### Whatsapp bible study

1. Create the WhatsApp group
2. Agree a date / start time
3. At that start time, post audio or video messages which cover the introduction, opening act of worship and contextual introductions
4. Post the initial question – and allow the whole group (ie. from both UK and Global South) to respond with written or audio comments, then post the next question and so on. In this way, there would be no breakout v plenary distinction, and everyone would be together the whole time. The key to making this work would be agreement from all those involved to be on their phones at the appointed hour!
5. Finish with audio / video prayer.

groups to help each other out which means that, at times, it may be appropriate for the group from the UK to assist the group in the Global South by paying for some of these direct costs. Such costs might include:

- Translation – it is usually the case that Just Scripture takes place in English plus one other language. However, there may be times when all of the group in the Global South speak a different language and translation is required. If a translator is required, we would expect the UK group to pay for that translation
- Data – unlike the UK, some folk in the Global South (especially Africa) do not have unlimited data bundles in their homes or places of work. A 90 min zoom session, especially with video, may therefore incur additional data costs for participants. This would usually cost just a few pounds.
- Food – if a group meets in someone’s home or church then food is often provided. Rarely, it may be appropriate to assist in paying for that food.
- Travel – occasionally, some participants in the Global South may incur additional transport costs in order to attend a Just Scripture session, and it may be appropriate to reimburse these

With all of these costs the key thing is to agree upfront with your co-facilitator whether or not any of these costs will be paid for, and if so by whom. In many cases, there will be no financial transaction between the two groups, but in some cases there might be. Transparency and openness is the key to ensuring that there are no surprises for either party.

**Below:** Margaret Nsona Praying in Chikwawa, Malawi. Credit: Adam Finch / Christian Aid



### Where to get further help:

If you want any further guidance on running a Just Scripture session then please consider attending one of our equipping days, dates of which will be advertised in due course, and / or contact our Just Scripture Advisor, Dr Justin Thacker on [jthacker@christian-aid.org](mailto:jthacker@christian-aid.org). He would love to hear from you.

### Further reading

[The Bible and Transformation: The Promise of Intercultural Bible Reading](#) by Hans de Wit and Janet Dyck

[Reading the Bible Interculturally](#) by Max Lee

[Doing Contextual Bible Study](#) from the Ujamma Centre, KwaZulu Natal

[Anglican communion Contextual Bible Study overview](#). Including a bibliography for further reading