



# Tea towels and togas

Bringing the Bible to life for every child in every primary school



**Claire Smith**

Claire Smith is a freelance journalist.

In a brightly-lit primary school hall, 100 children are gruesomely contorting their faces as they enthusiastically ‘ribbet’ like frogs and ‘gobble’ like locusts. Urged on by a group of older people mainly dressed in togas, the children hit their crescendo with a loud ‘buzz’ indicating a swarming outbreak of flies.

This lively scene is a re-enactment, believe it or not, of the plagues that struck the Egyptians when Pharaoh refused to release the Israelites. And it’s a snapshot of one of the UK’s most successful Bible-engagement projects for children – Open the Book. Now in its eighteenth year, Open the Book sees teams of volunteers from local churches go into primary schools to re-enact Bible stories during assembly or collective worship times.

It’s a project that stands out in an otherwise bleak picture of biblical literacy among young people in the UK. The Bible may be the world’s all-time bestseller, but research has shown that a third of 15-year-olds in England and Wales have never heard the story of Jesus’ birth, and don’t know it’s from the Bible.<sup>1</sup> A similar number of children had never read or heard about the crucifixion or Adam and Eve, and almost half of children surveyed failed to identify Noah’s Ark as a Bible story. Many young people questioned for the study had simply never been told these stories before, either at home or at school. Only a third of children had been read a Bible story by their parents.

Back in Manor Park Primary School, in Knutsford, Cheshire, the ‘Great Escape’ story reaches its conclusion. Moses – played by a retired

aeronautical engineer – waves his gnarly staff and the company of nine volunteer storytellers and five children disappear behind a blue curtain as the ‘sea’ closes over the chasing Egyptians.

Ten-year-old Harry reflects on the drama as the children file back to class. ‘Everybody knows it’s not real life, but it looks so close to real life,’ he said. ‘If they just had real sea it would be *really* good.’ Alfie, aged nine, adds, ‘Sometimes when you read a book, you go off it because there are too many words. Open the Book brings the stories to life.’

These children have thoughtful and intelligent responses to the characters and narratives they’ve discovered. Ten-year-old Sadie offered her own interpretation of a favourite parable: ‘I heard the Good Samaritan story from Open the Book when I was six,’ she said. ‘It’s basically saying that if I fell and hurt myself then my friends might walk past me, but someone I wasn’t friends with would help me up.’ Sadie added, ‘The stories are not boring. I think every school needs people like Open the Book who show them the Bible.’

Open the Book has seen a phenomenal expansion in recent years and is currently reaching one in seven primary school children in England and Wales. It’s just over three years since the project merged with Bible Society, and Open the Book now has more than 14,300 volunteers going into 2,533 primary schools. It means more than 650,000 children aged 4 to 11 are regularly hearing and engaging with the Bible’s stories in primary school.

## NOTES

1. Pass it On report, Bible Society, 2014. Survey carried out by YouGov.

2. PhD dissertation by Meleri Cray, 3,000 questionnaires sent to Open the Book teams registered in Britain and Channel Islands, 652 responses received.

3. Oulton-Lee Research Ltd, OtB Qualitative Research, 23 November 2016.

4. 2015 survey, 165 schools responded.

5. Oulton-Lee Research Ltd, OtB Qualitative Research, 23 November 2016.

The Open the Book concept is very simple. Volunteers from local churches join forces to create a team of between four and seven people – though often the group will be around 12-strong and will operate on a rota system according to the time each person can give. The team links with a primary school and goes in weekly or fortnightly during term time. There, they run an assembly or act of collective worship, in which they re-enact and retell a Bible story. Different children join in each time and there's plenty of interaction.

Training is provided by the Open the Book team. All the materials to run an assembly have been sensitively and carefully prepared, and are available at a small cost. There are 105 stories in a three-year rolling programme. In year one, children receive an overview of the Bible in 33 stories from creation to ascension. The second and third years of Bible storytelling are modular and have been developed around themes. New material is currently being written, grouping stories around Christian values such as perseverance or justice. Each story comes with an introduction, conclusion, time for reflection and a final prayer, as well as tips on how to present it. The local volunteers create their own costumes and props, which can be as simple or as elaborate as they wish.

Its straightforward storytelling approach is one of the reasons why Open the Book has been so extraordinarily successful. Matt Fletcher, Executive Headteacher of St Mary's CE Primary in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, said, 'Children love a story, and these are great stories. They love the storytelling, they love it as a performance and they love seeing their friends involved. Open the Book has been great and I wouldn't want to be without it.'

Another strength of the project is the fact that relationships with schools are rooted in the local church. A recent survey found that almost nine out of ten churches said Open the Book improved their links with schools.<sup>2</sup> More than a quarter of churches launched Messy Church services (family-friendly services for those who may have little church background) as a direct result of being involved in Open the Book.

When you talk to Open the Book volunteers, the word they most frequently use is 'fun'. Everyone works to their strengths; some roll up their sleeves to create amazing props, some commit to praying for the children, others scour charity shops for costumes, extroverts don fake beards and test out their best 'God' voices as they prepare to act out the stories.

Sue Hughes, a volunteer in Anglesey, describes herself as a 'Granny for God' and said, 'I just love being with the children and giving them something that's going to be priceless. I think this is God's outrageous plan. To get a group of people like me, dressed up with tea towels on our heads, and get us to share the Bible with children ... If you were in a strategy meeting, you would never come

up with this. But the fact that it works suggests it must be God's plan.'

Open the Book volunteers say they see the Bible through fresh eyes as they present it to children, and their involvement had deepened their own faith. A recent qualitative survey about the impact of the project also found that volunteers perceive

**'I think every school needs people like Open the Book who show them the Bible'**

Open the Book as a privilege and an opportunity to share Christianity with the next generation.<sup>3</sup> One volunteer taking part in the study said, 'I've done Sunday school teaching over the years, but I have never had a group of 400 multi-faith, multi-racial children – and yet that's what we get every week with Open the Book.'

So, Open the Book is loved by children, it builds community relationships for churches, it's great fun for volunteers. But its other strength – and arguably the key to its success within the education system – is that it offers tremendous benefits to schools.

Every primary school today must promote the spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development of its pupils. This is something particularly important to Ofsted, which inspects and regulates education services. Schools must show how well their pupils do things like explore faith and belief, recognise right and wrong, appreciate diverse viewpoints, engage with British values of liberty and respect, and appreciate cultural influences.

Open the Book directly supports the delivery of this aspect of a child's learning. According to one survey, nine out of ten schools doing Open the Book say it 'raises spirituality' among children and 96% of schools questioned believed it had a positive impact on the life of the school.<sup>4</sup>

Qualitative research carried out for Open the Book in November 2016 concluded: 'Open the Book increases biblical literacy, builds moral character and supports British values.'<sup>5</sup> RE coordinators quizzed during the study said Open the Book is enjoyed by children of all faiths and ages, with older children engaging with the stories at a deeper level than the younger ones. It enriches the teaching of RE and supports the application of school values.

Lorraine Colquhoun, Headteacher at Rowde Church of England Primary Academy, near Devizes Wiltshire, said, 'We have conversations where I remind pupils of a story and what happened as an outcome of a certain activity or choice. The children don't have the life experience to know what outcomes there might be, for example, of telling the truth or making a brave decision. So I

can point them towards a Bible story they've heard and we discuss what happened there.'

The Open the Book team believe it's absolutely vital for children to have an understanding of Scripture as part of their preparation for adult life. Julie Jefferies, Development Manager for Open the Book, explained: 'Aside from personal belief, the Bible has played a major part – and goes on playing a major part – in shaping the civilisation in which we live.'

## bringing the Bible to life for every child in every primary school in England and Wales

'We can't understand our history, or our current moral, legal and artistic practices, without an understanding of the Bible. We're preparing our children to be global citizens, but today more than ever, they can't understand our global culture without understanding the Bible.'

'We want schools to generate an enthusiasm and passion for the Bible, which will lead young people to look at the Bible more seriously and decide for themselves whether to take it into their lives.'

The aim of Open the Book is to bring the Bible to life for every child in every primary school in England and Wales. That means getting into more than 18,000 primary schools and reaching around 4.5 million pupils.

Historically, Open the Book has had particular traction in rural areas – with teams mushrooming in places like Cornwall, Gloucestershire, Norfolk and Suffolk, largely thanks to one or two passionate advocates in each county. The target in 2017 is to break into urban areas.

In recent years, five extra Open the Book staff have been recruited to train volunteers. Wales has seen some of the sharpest growth, with more than 300 teams. London also launched its first Open the Book team in June 2016, and more are expected to launch this year. The first international Open the Book pilot teams have even been formed in Ghana, and are now going into schools in Accra, the country's capital, and Cape Coast.

Currently, Open the Book is launching in around 300 new schools every year. But at this rate, it will take more than 50 years to achieve the goal of bringing the Bible to life for all primary school children.

Large-scale expansion is being thwarted, at the moment, by a shortage of volunteers. Every week, the Open the Book team receive requests from teachers who have heard about Bible storytelling and want a team to share the Bible with their

pupils. But there simply aren't enough people coming forward to be trained.

Julie Jefferies said, 'We simply don't have enough churches engaging with Open the Book. It's a challenging situation. I just want to be able to send teams into schools that ask.'

Julie first became involved in Open the Book some 14 years ago, when her daughter started school and a bunch of Christian parents from different churches joined forces to bring the Bible's stories into the building. She knows first-hand how powerful the project can be.

'We didn't have an easy ride to get things going,' Julie recalls, 'But once we started, we were able to build on Open the Book and offer the school more help with RE through projects like Experience Easter, Prayer Spaces and visits to church. I remember a four-year-old boy in the very first week who played Adam during "Creation" ... He ran up to his mum at the end of the school day and told her the whole story. He did that every single time after an Open the Book assembly.'

Julie has run training sessions for thousands of Open the Book volunteers all over the country, and the question she always asks is this: 'Who told you your first Bible story?'

'For many people, it will be their parents or grandparents. Maybe a teacher at school, or a Sunday School teacher. But today, children simply aren't hearing the Bible,' said Julie. 'So who is sharing the Bible with them? Whose responsibility is it to pass on the message to this generation?'

'God is clearly at work in this ongoing expansion of Open the Book, at a time when so many churches are lamenting the loss of children from their congregations. My prayer is that more churches will come on board to bring the Bible to life for children in primary schools, and my message to church leaders would be: give it a go.'

Open the Book's adopted 'verse' – the team's inspiration and motivation – is taking from Psalm 78: 'We will tell ... the next generation. We won't keep secret the glorious deeds and the mighty miracles of the Lord' (vv. 4–6, CEV). Thousands of children are already discovering the riches of Scripture through Open the Book – but there are millions more for whom the Bible remains a closed book.

Back in the school hall, Moses has peeled off his sticky beard and the rest of the volunteers are packing away the props. Next week, the Ten Commandments, a special tent and a long trek to the edge of the Promised Land ... all in a 10-minute assembly.

• To find out more, or to get involved, go to [www.openthebook.net](http://www.openthebook.net), email [enquiries@openthebook.net](mailto:enquiries@openthebook.net) or call 01793 418355.