

salt & light



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Twenty years of Bible storytelling in schools

It's hard to believe it's been two decades since our first brave volunteers stepped into a school assembly hall with a handful of props and bags of enthusiasm – and told their first Bible story. Today, more than 800,000 children are regularly hearing the Bible thanks to Open the Book. And we're in one in six primary schools in England and Wales.

This phenomenal growth is in part due to the simplicity of the storytelling, the high fun factor, the dedication and creativity of more than 17,000 volunteers, and the fact that we offer tremendous benefits to schools. But above all, we've ridden a wave of God's making.

As one storyteller once said, 'To get a group of adults, dressed up in bed sheets and with tea towels on their heads, and get them to share the Bible with children... You would never come up with this in a strategy meeting. The fact that it works suggests it must be God's plan.'

We've experienced the guidance of the Holy Spirit at every turn over the last 20 years. While we're taking time to celebrate and give thanks in this anniversary year, we're also looking forward to the next stage of the adventure – as we take the amazing stories of the Bible to more children across our nation.

Julie Jefferies
Head of Open the Book

'We will tell... the next generation. We won't keep secret the glorious deeds and the mighty miracles of the Lord.' **Psalm 78.4-6 (CEV)**

The Bible / coming to life for children



'It's much more interesting than someone reading the story. It gets into your brain because you visualise what happened. The volunteers make it fun, with props that help us see how the story happened in real life.'

Beth, aged 9



'Sometimes when you read a book, you go off it because there are too many words. Open the Book brings the stories to life.'

Alfie, aged 9



'I heard the Good Samaritan story from Open the Book when I was six. 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. The stories are not

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

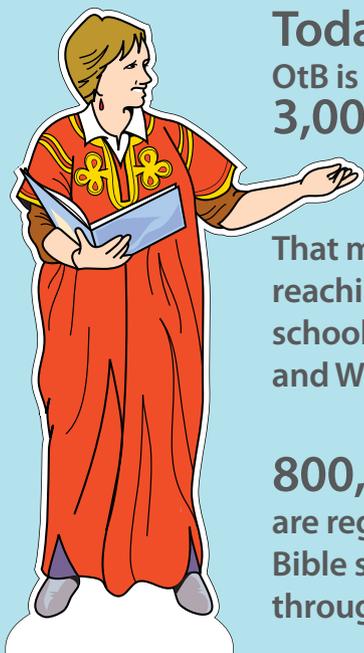
Sadie, aged 10



'Noah's Ark tells you to always trust God, and God can do anything. David and Goliath teaches that no matter how small you are, don't feel underestimated. And the Good Samaritan teaches that not everyone in the world is what they seem.'

Balteerath, aged 11

What is Open the Book? Open the Book (OtB) is a project which offers primary school children an opportunity to see and hear the major stories of the Bible through the academic year. It is a three-year rolling programme of chronological stories with an additional, but optional year of material based on Christian Values. Teams of volunteers from local churches present the stories during assemblies/acts of collective worship using drama, props and costumes. OtB aligns to the criteria used by school inspection agencies including Ofsted, ESTYN and SIAMS.

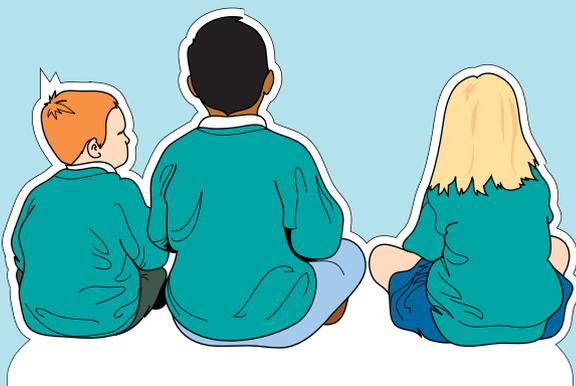


Today...
OtB is in more than
3,000 schools

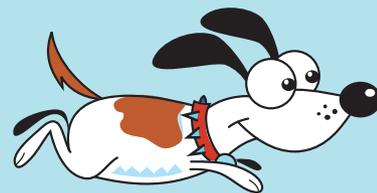
That means we're
reaching one in six
schools in England
and Wales

800,000 children
are regularly hearing
Bible stories
through OtB¹

More than **17,000**
volunteer storytellers
go into schools



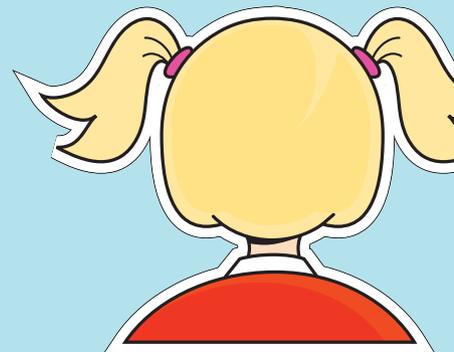
Our aim: bring the Bible to life for every child,
in every primary school in England and Wales.
That means reaching all 18,280 schools
and 4.5 million pupils



Each year, children can hear up
to **33** stories from the Old and
New Testaments



More than **25%**
of churches launched
Messy Church
services as a direct
result of being
involved with OtB



¹ The average size of a primary school in England and Wales combined is 270 pupils

² 2015 survey, 165 schools responded

³ Pass it On research, Bible Society 2014

⁴ Pass it On research, Bible Society 2014

1999 OtB started up with
a handful of volunteers going
into Bedford schools



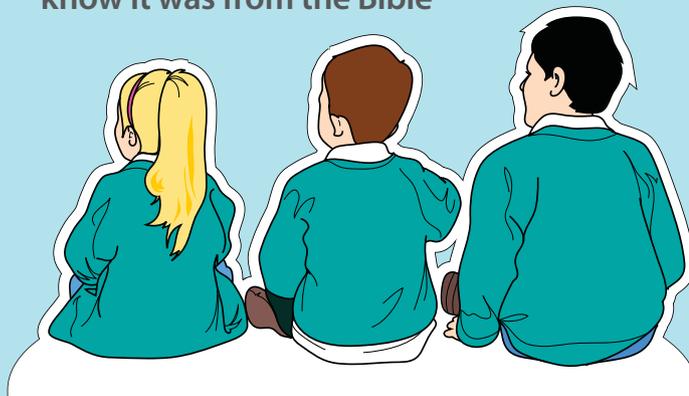
96% of schools questioned believed it had a positive impact on the life of the school²



Almost half of children cannot identify Noah's Ark as a Bible story³

9 out of 10 people in England and Wales have no regular engagement with the Bible

A third of 15-year-olds have never heard the story of Jesus' birth, and didn't know it was from the Bible⁴



2007 OtB registered as a national charity

2013 OtB joined with Bible Society

2019 celebrating 20 years of OtB, now in one in six primary schools in England and Wales

'So let's tell them!' / How the Bible was opened for children

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It all started when Dave Todd, a Christian outreach volunteer in Bedford, realised the children he met knew hardly any Bible stories.

What did he do? Lament the loss of biblical literacy? Blame the parents? Retreat back to his church bubble? No. Dave's pragmatic and so-simple-it's-obvious response was this: they don't know any Bible stories... I'll tell them!

He vowed to tell 30 Bible stories to every child in Bedford over a year.

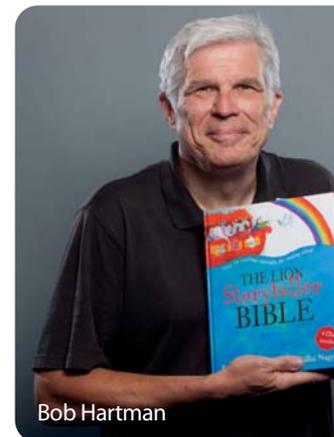
Dave gathered a five-strong team that included a retired accountant and retired headteacher, from four churches across the town. They prayed for a year. They talked to schools. Happening across Bob Hartman's *Lion Storyteller Bible* in a Christian bookshop was a game-changer, and they hit on the idea of props and costumes to help tell the stories.



In 1999, they launched a one-year package of stories in Bedford schools— and Open the Book was born.

Not long afterwards, Bob Hartman heard about this new venture and started talking about it at Christian festivals around the country. In 2001, two women from Gloucestershire – Dianne Brookes and Jacqueline Rodwell – were at one of these festivals, and were inspired to try it out.

Within five years, 500 committed volunteers were going into 100 Gloucestershire schools every week, and 17,000 children were hearing the Bible's stories. That's around eight times as many children as those turning up to CofE churches in the diocese each Sunday.



Meanwhile, word was getting out and momentum was growing. OtB teams were springing up in Coventry, Luton, Southampton and Cornwall. As one observer said, *'It was too good an idea to remain unknown, and all the signs were of the quietly powerful, propelling activity of the Holy Spirit.'*

Around this time, retired headteacher and member of the Church of England General Synod, Peter LeRoy, became involved. He helped source a £25,000 grant to set up a basic national coordination and training centre. Core values were agreed, a logo designed and a vision pinned down. In April 2007, with 114 school teams and 670 storytellers on the books, OtB officially became a charity.

Dianne Brookes was appointed as National Coordinator, working out of a spare room in her home at first, then moving to a unit on a local industrial estate. Val Ralston later joined to train new teams, and oversaw the introduction of merchandise including *'I helped Open the Book'* stickers for children who took part in assemblies.

Up to 300 new teams were being added each year. Safeguarding procedures were introduced and formalised, a further year of content was developed, work began to translate the materials into Welsh and more grants were forthcoming. The team felt like they were riding a wave.



'Open the Book and Bible Society were natural bedfellows. We went from friendship, to engagement and eventually marriage.'

Peter LeRoy
former OtB Trustee



By 2012, more than 200,000 children were hearing the Bible through 6,332 storytellers in 1,212 schools throughout England and Wales.

But expansion threw up challenges. There was never enough money and the staff were stretched to the limit. OtB needed a proper office, more people and better IT.

That's where Bible Society stepped in. *'We were natural bedfellows,'* said OtB trustee Peter LeRoy, who helped establish the partnership. *'We went from friendship, to engagement and eventually marriage.'* On 1 September 2013, OtB merged with Bible Society – and the next chapter was underway.

Beards and Bibles, tea towels and togas / a storyteller's perspective

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There's a buzz of pre-assembly energy in the brightly-lit school hall. Ruth, a professional make-up artist, is applying beards to various faces ready for the retelling of Jesus' parable of the great feast. Helen, the narrator, is hastily briefing the children chosen to take part. The local vicar, wielding Sellotape, is heading towards the props.

These volunteers, committed, lively and clearly enjoying themselves, are what makes Open the Book work – and it's their input that brings the Bible to life for children.

Helen Andrew, who established and leads the group at All Saints Church of England School, in Horsham, West Sussex, said, *'The headteacher had heard about OtB at a meeting and asked me if we could get a team together for the school. I said absolutely yes! Volunteers just came forward.*



Helen Andrew

'We meet once a week to plan, then on the morning of the assembly – so it's not a lot of work. I love coming into school and seeing the children's faces each week.'

Ruth McGeown, the beard-toting storyteller who wears a brown dressing gown to play Jesus, added, *'I heard about OtB and thought it sounded brilliant. Doing this has given me a heart for children and families in the school and we have started a prayer group. I feel like I'm invested in school in terms of faith and prayer.'*

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

Many storytellers say they see the Bible through fresh eyes as they present it to children, and their own faith has deepened.

A qualitative survey found that volunteers perceive OtB as a privilege and an opportunity to share Christianity with the next generation. 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 OtB.'*

But, despite the 1,490 storytellers added in 2018 and the network of more than 17,000 storytellers in England and Wales, the thing that holds back large-scale expansion of OtB is the shortage of volunteers.

Every week, we receive requests from teachers who have heard about Bible storytelling and want a team to come to their school.

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

What do the Horsham storytellers say to this, as they notch up another successful assembly, pack up their props and scrub off their beards?

'To people thinking about doing OtB, I would say, without doubt, do it,' said Helen. *'You will make friends. You will have time. You will have fun!'* And Revd Mike Nelson, local vicar, school governor and enthusiastic storyteller, added with a twinkle in his eye: *'It's just an amazing opportunity to tell the Bible stories... and to dress up.'*



Gifts in wills / reaching future generations with the Bible

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Leaving a legacy gift is one of the most significant ways to support this mission. It means the Bible will be passed on to children far into the future.



Photograph supplied by Peter and Angela LeRoy

We are profoundly grateful to people who have remembered OtB in their wills, and we spoke to two of our volunteers, Peter and Angela LeRoy, to find out what motivated them.



'We have decided to leave a gift to Open the Book in our will for three main reasons,' said Peter. 'Fifteen years ago, it was OtB that opened the door to the community primary school near our church. Our team has had the joy of sharing the good news of the Bible with 400 infant and junior children, many of whom have since attended our church holiday clubs.

'Angela also launched an OtB team in a nearby village school so that our grandchildren and their friends could take the great stories of God's loving purposes into their memory-banks. "The Bible is difficult to read," our granddaughter Eva told Angela, "but I remember the stories that you and Grandad acted for us."



'Our third reason is that OtB is such fun and so fulfilling. It's a delight to be welcomed into schools and to see so many 'unchurched' children absorbed by what they see and hear.

'As we thank God for 20 years of OtB, our hope is that additional funding will enable many more children to discover the riches and wisdom of his Word.'

If you'd like to know more about leaving a legacy gift to Open the Book or Bible Society, call **Howard Barker** on **01793 418222**, email **howard.barker@biblesociety.org.uk** or visit **biblesociety.org.uk/legacies**



Could you share the Bible with school children?
Fancy joining the fun of bringing stories to life?

Become an Open the Book storyteller.

Join an existing team or start one in your church.

openthebook.net