

An Introduction to Scripture Engagement and its Place in IFES

A deep commitment to the Bible has always been central to the ministry of IFES. In all of our IFES movements, we affirm the divine inspiration and entire trustworthiness of Holy Scripture, as originally given, and its supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct. This commitment is also reflected in the current strategic vision of IFES – the Living Stones Vision 2020. In it, we commit ourselves to being shaped by Scripture in all areas of our life and ministry.

What is Scripture Engagement?

It is in the context of the Living Stones Vision 2020 that IFES started to use the term “Scripture engagement.” This terminology is helpful because it invites us to have a broad and relational view of the place of Scripture in our lives. Let’s take some time to think about what is meant by “Scripture engagement.” Is it the same as reading the Bible?

_Scripture engagement involves reading and studying the Bible. But it is more than that: It is also loving, living, and sharing God’s Word.

_Scripture engagement needs specific times and places in which we interact with God’s Word. But it is more than that: Scripture engagement is not just an activity, it is a lifestyle.

_Scripture engagement helps us grow in our knowledge about God and this world. But it is more than that: It is entering into a transformative encounter with the living God.

At the heart of Scripture engagement lies a relationship. Scripture engagement is interacting with the Living God through his written word. The texts of Scripture are not just objects of study, but a room in which we enter to meet Jesus (See John 5:39-40). And so God’s Word draws us into the presence of God himself – inviting us to know and trust him, receive his grace, enjoy his fellowship, and renew our commitment to him. Hans Bürki, a pioneer of the Swiss IFES movement, said: *“We don’t read the Holy Scriptures in order to store up knowledge, but in them with a loving heart we seek the face of our loving Lord.”*



Scripture engagement involves listening and responding to God. We know so much, yet often struggle to live it – many of us have big heads and small feet. But a response is essential. God’s Word was not given to make smart students out of us, but lovers and disciples of Jesus who incarnate his gospel in a lost and broken world.

So Scripture engagement is not finished until it is translated into life – into our words and deeds (See Matthew 7:24-27). This will only happen if we are willing to obey and able to engage Scripture in a way that is relevant to our context. Engaging with Scripture, with God, and with the world around us need to go hand in hand.

Who is the main actor in Scripture engagement? Is it we who pick up the Bible and study it? No. It is God. As we start to investigate Scripture, we soon discover that we are being investigated by the Word. God uses Scripture to connect with us through the work of the Holy Spirit. And so we come with the openness to listen, to be changed, and to be given our place as active participants in God’s story with this world.

The Bible mentions many ways of handling God’s Word: praising, honoring, hearing, meditating, taking it to heart, remembering, eating, studying, understanding, accepting, receiving, trusting, doing, obeying, teaching, singing, proclaiming... and more. All of this is Scripture engagement. It involves us as a whole person – our mind, will, feelings, and actions. It is possible to study a Bible text with inner distance; you cannot truly engage Scripture at a distance.

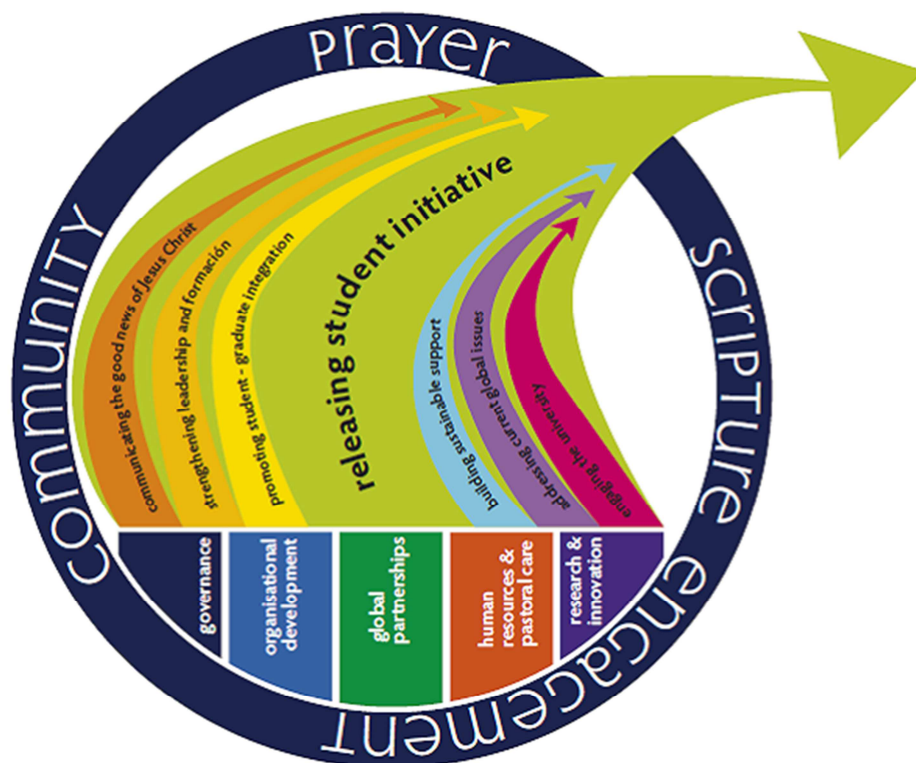
What is Scripture engagement? I encourage you to take the time to talk about this question in your student groups and staff teams. If the term “Scripture engagement” does not translate well into your language, then ask yourselves what terminology you can use to similarly communicate a relational and broad view of the place of Scripture in our lives.

What is the place of Scripture Engagement in IFES?

Starting with the IFES vision statement will help us respond to this question:

“The IFES vision is to see students built into communities of disciples, transformed by the gospel impacting the university, the church and society for the glory of Christ.”

If this is our vision, we need to be asking again and again: What are the implications of this vision for student ministry today? What should our generation focus on in order to achieve this vision? When delegates from all IFES movements met for World Assembly in 2003 and then again in 2007, they asked how we can work towards this vision in the next 15-20 years. The result of this communal reflection was the Living Stones Vision 2020. The different elements of the Living Stones vision are summarized in the image below. Their purpose is to help us fulfil our overall vision.



In the coming years, IFES has decided to concentrate on **six strategic priorities**. These strategic priorities are not the vision and do not replace the vision; all together they are a means of achieving the vision. (They are not automatically identical with the priorities of every national movement. Each national movement is free to ask what they need to focus on in light of the overall vision.) Running through all of these priorities is the desire to see **student initiative** released – so that the full potential of students is given space to unfold. For growth to happen in a healthy context, the **five firm foundations** are necessary.

The **three core commitments** in this vision are prayer, community, and Scripture engagement. Their role is described as follows:

“As we work to achieve our vision, every aspect of IFES life will be surrounded and supported by three core commitments: Scripture engagement, community, prayer.”

What does this imply for the role of Scripture engagement in IFES?

We need Scripture engagement to be integrated in all aspects of our life and ministry. Scripture engagement is not a separate department of its own, but a part of everything we do. In order to achieve our vision, we need Scripture engagement to surround and support everything else. So we need to be asking: How do we let Scripture shape the content, understanding and practise of evangelism? What role does Scripture play in strengthening leadership and formación? How is Scripture shaping the way we engage with the university and address global issues? How does God’s Word help us to value people and take good care of them? And so on. This integration requires deep theological reflection and the willingness to acknowledge the lordship of Jesus over everything. I encourage you to look at all aspects of your life and student ministry in order to ask how this is happening.

Scripture engagement is not the aim of our ministry, but we need it to reach the aim of our ministry. As we seek to strengthen Scripture engagement in IFES, our ultimate aim is not to see more students reading and studying the Bible. Yes, we want to see many students involved in Bible study groups, reading the Bible regularly on their own, and listening to inspiring biblical teaching – but not because that is an end in itself. We want to see that happen for the sake of something greater.

It is through God’s written word that students meet Jesus Christ, the Living Word and get to know and trust him. Scripture alone shows the way to Jesus and his saving grace. Through God’s word, students grow in their love for God and for others, they learn to see themselves and our world differently, they are challenged to place all of life under the lordship of Christ. And so, Scripture engagement is essential in bringing students to Christ which lies at the heart of our vision. It is essential in forming them into communities of disciples, transforming them and enabling them to have an impact on their context. Scripture engagement is not the aim of our ministry, but it is absolutely necessary to fulfil our overall vision. Scripture engagement is not an end in itself, but leads beyond itself to Jesus Christ and his redemptive power.

Scripture engagement is central to the ministry and vision of IFES. And so, it is worth taking the time to stop and reflect on how we can strengthen this core commitment. It is not enough to just keep our programmes running. We need to identify and address the challenges of today if we want this generation of students to love, study, live and share God’s Word.

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