The Use of the Bible and Smartphones in Sunday Readings

When the Bible is read in church, does it matter whether the reader holds a printed Bible or follows the reading on a smartphone? As digital technology becomes increasingly part of everyday life, this question invites Anglicans to reflect not only on how Scripture is accessed, but also on how God's Word is proclaimed and received within the worshipping community.

Smartphones offer convenience. They allow readers to locate biblical passages quickly, compare translations, consult commentaries, and prepare for their ministry. Yet public worship is not simply an occasion for individuals to read the Bible independently. Within the Anglican tradition, Scripture is proclaimed in the context of the Church's liturgy, tradition, and reason. The manner in which the appointed readings are presented therefore deserves careful consideration.

To understand current practices and attitudes, a survey was conducted among members of the Anglican Church in Peninsular Malaysia. Its purpose was not to reject technology, but to examine its place in Sunday worship and encourage a balanced approach that upholds the reverence, attentiveness, and communal character of the public proclamation of God's Word.

1. Understanding the Survey

The survey sought to establish how widely smartphones are used alongside, or in place of, printed Bibles and service books during Sunday readings. It also explored respondents' understanding of the lectern, the responsibilities of appointed readers, and the significance of the Church's lectionary in shaping worship throughout the Christian year.

The questionnaire was circulated primarily through WhatsApp to clergy, heads of diocesan committees, and churches. It sought responses from people involved in different aspects of church life.

Young adults aged 18–29 accounted for 31.6% of respondents, while those aged 60–74 accounted for 30.8%. Together, these groups represented 62.4% of participants. In terms of church roles, clergy, lay readers, and appointed readers accounted for 42.8%; altar servers, 20.3%; choir members, 8.3%; and general congregants, 23.3%.

The respondents were regular participants in Sunday worship: 77.4% attended every Sunday and 22.6% attended most Sundays. Their responses therefore offer useful perspectives from people familiar with Anglican worship.

Nevertheless, the findings must be interpreted with appropriate caution. The survey was conducted over two months and was available in only one language. Its circulation through existing communication networks may also have limited participation by some members of the diocese. Future surveys could be made available in Malay, Tamil, and Mandarin to encourage wider participation and greater linguistic inclusivity. The results are indicative of the views of those who responded and should not be taken as a statistically representative account of the entire diocese.

2. What Does the Survey Reveal?

One of the clearest findings is the continuing preference for a physical Bible during the public proclamation of Scripture.

When respondents considered the most appropriate normal practice for Sunday readings, 75.4% favoured using the Bible placed on the lectern, while 39.6% identified another printed Bible. Smartphones were selected by 19.4%, and printed service sheets or lectionary booklets by 21.6%. Screens and presentation displays accounted for 6.7%.

When asked about actual church practice, 51.9% reported the use of a lectern Bible and 46.6% the use of another printed Bible. However, 29.3% reported that smartphones were used during the proclamation of Scripture, while 6.0% identified the use of projection screens.

These responses suggest that digital technology has become part of the worshipping life of some churches, even though the physical Bible remains strongly preferred.

The distinction becomes clearer when respondents were asked whether smartphone use to proclaim Scripture was appropriate. A majority, 60.9%, considered smartphone proclamation inappropriate when a physical Bible was available at the lectern. Only 19.5% regarded smartphone use as fully acceptable in all circumstances, while 18.0% were uncertain.

For ordinary Sunday worship, 69.9% favoured reading from the lectern Bible, compared with 33.1% who favoured another printed Bible. Only 8.3% endorsed direct smartphone proclamation as their preferred practice.

Taken together, these findings indicate that the convenience of digital technology has not displaced the perceived importance of the physical Bible in Anglican public worship.

3. The Lectern Bible: More Than a Reading Platform

Why does the physical Bible matter when the same biblical text can be displayed on a smartphone?

The survey offers an important insight. A combined 91.7% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the physical Bible placed on the lectern is an important visible symbol of the authority and presence of God's Word in the gathered Church. This included 57.1% who strongly agreed and 34.6% who agreed.

The lectern is therefore understood not merely as a convenient place from which to read. It is the designated place for the public proclamation of Scripture, giving the reading a visible and recognisable position within the liturgy.

When the reader approaches the lectern, the congregation recognises that the appointed lesson is about to be proclaimed. The open Bible provides a common focal point, reminding the gathered Church that it listens together to the Scriptures appointed for that service.

For Anglicans, this practice is closely connected with the lectionary. The appointed readings are not selected simply according to the individual preference of the reader. They form part of the Church's ordered reading of Scripture throughout the Christian year, enabling the congregation to encounter the breadth of the biblical witness over time.

The readings also prepare the congregation for the sermon and the celebration of the Eucharist. They provide the biblical foundation for preaching, prayer, and sacramental worship. The Word and Sacrament are thus received within the same act of worship.

The physical Bible at the lectern makes this communal and liturgical character visible. While a smartphone may display the same words, the survey suggests that respondents do not necessarily regard the two forms as equivalent in their symbolic significance.

4. Scripture Must Be Proclaimed, Not Merely Read

The survey also examined the responsibilities of those appointed to read Scripture. An overwhelming 97.0% identified the reader's principal task as proclaiming God's Word with reverence, clarity, and understanding.

This finding highlights an important distinction: the ministry of the reader is not simply to pronounce words aloud, but to enable the congregation to hear and understand the appointed passage.

Preparation is therefore essential. A total of 73.7% emphasised preparing the text, pronunciation, pacing, and meaning beforehand. Another 68.4% affirmed the importance of checking the correct reading at the lectern. Only 4.5% considered it acceptable to locate the reading only after arriving at the lectern, while 3.8% accepted reading the passage for the first time during the service. These findings indicate that careful preparation is widely recognised as a basic responsibility of the reader.

Smartphones can be particularly useful at this stage. Readers may use them to study the passage, check unfamiliar words, compare translations, and explore the biblical context. Such preparation can improve confidence and understanding.

However, preparation should ordinarily take place before the service. The reader should arrive knowing the appointed passage and should verify the reference and text as necessary. The lectern should not become a place for searching hurriedly for the reading or navigating between applications while the congregation waits.

The reader must also remain within the assigned liturgical role. The purpose is to proclaim the appointed text faithfully, not to provide an

additional commentary or introduce informal remarks. Greetings, responses, and other actions should follow the authorised liturgy rather than personal preference.

5. Reverence, Distraction, and the Sacred Character of Worship

The survey explored concerns about smartphone use at the lectern. The principal reservations related to diminished reverence, identified by 30.8% of respondents, and operational problems such as unexpected notifications or screen glitches, identified by 27.1%.

Furthermore, 50.4% felt that reading Scripture from a smartphone rather than a physical Bible diminished the sense of sacredness in the service. Another 31.6% indicated that the effect depended considerably on the reader's poise and preparation.

These findings do not establish that a smartphone is inherently irreverent. Rather, they reveal that the device may affect how the act of proclamation is perceived within the worshipping community.

A smartphone is commonly associated with communication, messages, entertainment, and daily activities. When it is used at the lectern, congregants may be uncertain whether the reader is following the appointed text or attending to something else. Notifications, incoming calls, or technical difficulties may also interrupt the reading.

The issue is therefore not simply whether a digital device can display Scripture accurately. It concerns the attention, preparation, and visible conduct of the person proclaiming the Word, as well as the congregation's experience of the liturgy.

The survey widely supported the use of smartphones for personal study, checking biblical context, and preparation before the service. Between 57.9% and 66.2% approved of these uses. In addition, 73.7% supported silencing or switching off the device during the liturgy.

This points towards a practical distinction: digital technology can serve the reader's preparation without necessarily becoming the normal instrument for public proclamation.

6. Towards a Balanced Anglican Practice

The findings suggest several practical steps for parishes and diocesan leadership.

*First, retain the physical Bible at the lectern as the normal practice***.** Churches should ensure that a suitable Bible is available and properly positioned for every service in which Scripture is proclaimed. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) may be used as the principal English text, with appropriate vernacular translations provided according to the linguistic needs of each congregation.

*Second, encourage the responsible use of digital resources***.** Smartphones and other digital tools can support biblical study, devotion, preparation, and the checking of references. Their value should be recognised without assuming that every useful personal study tool must become the normal means of public proclamation.

Third, establish clear guidelines for digital devices during worship. Readers who need to use a device should ensure that the correct text is ready, notifications are disabled, and the device will not interrupt the service. Such guidance should promote reverence rather than create unnecessary conflict between printed and digital resources.

Fourth, clarify guidance and directives. The article's survey found no specific instruction from the International Anglican Liturgical Commission on using smartphones to proclaim the appointed readings, although it offers broader guidance on smartphone use in church. Similarly, no diocesan guidelines currently address this practice by identifying the concerns, preferences, and practical needs of worshippers.

Fifth, provide regular training for readers. The survey identified liturgical instruction concerning the lectern and Bible as a priority for 55.6% of respondents. Vocal practice and pronunciation were requested by 52.6%, while 38.3% sought further guidance in biblical context and meaning. Rehearsal opportunities, identified by 36.1%, and written guidelines, identified by 23.3%, would also be beneficial.

Sixth, make Scripture accessible to all. A commitment to the physical Bible should not become a barrier to participation. Large-print Bibles, suitable digital resources, and assistive technology should be made available when needed. Pastoral judgement is necessary when a reader has a disability or another specific requirement that makes an alternative format appropriate.

Finally, parishes should review their practices periodically. The aim is not to reject technological change, but to ensure that technology supports rather than diminishes the Church's ministry of the Word.

Conclusion: Let Technology Serve the Word

The survey reveals a clear preference among respondents for the physical Bible in the public proclamation of Scripture during ordinary Sunday worship. The lectern Bible is valued not only for practical reasons but also as a visible symbol of the central place of God's Word in the gathered Church.

At the same time, smartphones have a legitimate place in personal study, biblical research, and preparation. They can also provide important accessibility benefits. The question is therefore not whether the Church should accept or reject technology, but how it should be used wisely within the liturgy.

For Anglicans, the guiding principle is that Scripture must be proclaimed faithfully, reverently, and clearly, in continuity with the Church's worship and the appointed lectionary. The reader's preparation, conduct, and understanding matter as much as the medium used.

A balanced Anglican practice will preserve the physical Bible at the lectern as the normal means of public proclamation while welcoming digital resources where they genuinely serve the Church's ministry. In this way, technology remains a servant of the Word, and the congregation is helped to listen attentively, receive God's message, and respond in faith and obedience.

Written by Bishop Charles Samuel