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What is a Lectionary?

Through two thousand years of Church history, there have been many lectionaries, lists of scripture passages to be read during community worship. In Christian tradition, the liturgy, which literally means “the work of the people,” is a form of worship built around these appointed scripture readings. Early Christians inherited this form from the Jewish synagogue, where regular readings from the Torah and the prophets were heard.

As a faithful Jew, Jesus participated in such readings. Luke 4:16-17 records his return to his hometown of Nazareth, when “he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the sabbath day. And he stood up to read; and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah.”

By the middle of the second century, Christians at worship read not only the early Jewish scriptures, which we now call the Old Testament, or Hebrew Scriptures, but also the “memoirs of the apostles” of Jesus, which eventually became the New, or Christian Testament.

Liturgical conformity resulted when the Roman Empire adopted Christianity as its official religion; sometime between the sixth and the ninth centuries the Church in the West developed the Roman rite, which has continued in use to this day. By the end of the Middle Ages, a rich, all-encompassing liturgy with rites for various sacraments had developed.

In 1549 the first Anglican prayer book was published, gathering materials used in the Roman rite from various sources and containing appointed Bible readings. Early lectionaries included a one-year cycle of readings. In 1969, the Catholic Church adopted the *Ordo Lectionum Missae*, which includes a three-year cycle. This lectionary was prepared in response to the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of Vatican II.

Both because of the greater inclusiveness of the new lectionary and its incorporation of current biblical scholarship, other denominations were quick to adapt the Catholic lectionary for their own use – the Presbyterian, Episcopal, Lutheran, United Church of Christ, and Methodist Churches. The Revised Common Lectionary, first published in 1992,

derives from The Common Lectionary of 1983, both based on the *Ordo Lectionem Missae* of 1969.

The Revised Common Lectionary

The Revised Common Lectionary is a three-year cycle of weekly lections used to varying degrees by the vast majority of mainline Protestant churches in Canada and the United States today. The RCL is built around the seasons of the Church Year, and includes four lections for each Sunday, as well as additional readings for major feast days. During most of the year, the lections are: a reading from the Hebrew Bible, a Psalm, a reading from the Epistles, and a Gospel reading. During the season of Easter, the Hebrew Bible lection is usually replaced with one from the Acts of the Apostles. The lections from the Hebrew Bible are sometimes chosen from the Apocrypha.

The seasons of the Church Year reflect the life of Christ. Consequently, the gospel lections for each Sunday provide the focus for that day. The other lections for a given day generally have a thematic relationship to the gospel reading for that day, although this is not always the case. In Ordinary Time, the Revised Common Lectionary offers two sets of readings for the lessons from the Hebrew Bible. One set proceeds semicontinuously, giving the story of the Patriarchs and the Exodus in Year A, the monarchical narratives in Year B, and readings from the Prophets in Year C. In the other set of readings for Ordinary Time (shown in italics on this site) the readings from the Hebrew Bible are thematically related to the gospel lections. Denominations or local churches generally use either the semicontinuous readings or the thematic readings during Ordinary Time. They do not typically move back and forth between the two over the course of a single season.

The gospel readings for each year come from one of the synoptic gospels according to the following pattern:

- Year A - Matthew
- Year B - Mark
- Year C - Luke
- Readings from the Gospel of John can be found throughout the RCL.

What is a Lectionary-Based Curriculum?

When we follow the lectionary, we read large sections of the Bible over a three-year span. Many churches also choose to go deeper each week with all ages, exploring the lessons in age-appropriate ways. Such types of curricula offers a unified approach - all age levels explore at least one common Bible reading each week. Family members are able to discuss their discoveries at home. Take home papers present a doorway for entering into discussion

around the dinner table, car rides, or family gatherings.

The lectionary is not a chronological approach to reading the Bible, nor is it a book-by-book approach. Each week the scripture readings are closely linked to the season of the Church's life cycle, its liturgical calendar. In the first half of the Church year (Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost) we follow the major events of the life of Jesus, including his birth, death, resurrection, and the birth of the Church. In the second half (Season after Pentecost, or Ordinary Time), we study Jesus' actions and teachings.

Other Approaches

To learn about other models of faith formation and their associated curricula, check out the following Building Faith article: [Approaches to Faith Formation](#)

[Living the Good News](#) is a lectionary-based curriculum that has been used by churches for over thirty years. It comes in two formats - Revised Common Lectionary and Roman Catholic Lectionary. To customize the lessons for your denominational perspective, there is a [website for downloading free support materials](#) for the Episcopal, Lutheran, United Methodist, Presbyterian, and Roman Catholic Churches.

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