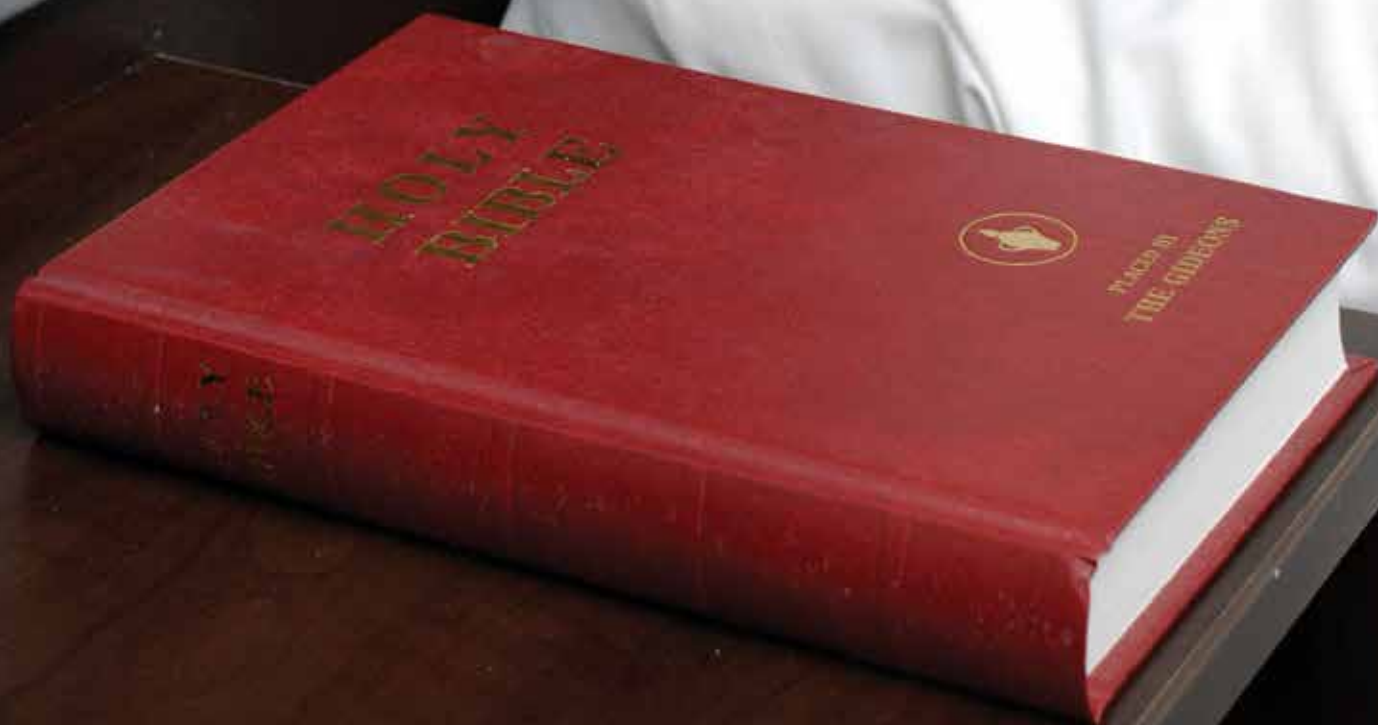


SOCIETY

BIBLE BACKLASH

Under threat from rising secularism, the iconic Gideon Bible is disappearing from classrooms and hotel nightstands. So the Gideons are devising new ways to spread the Word.

BY ANNE BOKMA



Janet Horbas was a “distraught and desperate” newly divorced mother of three when she travelled to Monterey, Calif., at age 31 to meet a man she had been in love with years before. “I was hoping he would be my knight in shining armour, but he ended up rejecting me,” she says. “I found myself in a hotel room, and I just didn’t want to live any longer.”

Horbas wrote a suicide note and intended to swallow a vial of prescription drugs. When she spotted a Gideon Bible in a nightstand drawer, her Catholic guilt kicked in. She believed suicide was a mortal sin that would prevent her entry into heaven. “If I killed myself that was like murder, and I would be forever separated from God and tormented for all eternity,” says Horbas. “I cried out for forgiveness, cut up the suicide note and flushed the pills down the toilet.”

That was more than 40 years ago. Today, Horbas is a 73-year-old great-grandmother of nine who lives in Richmond, B.C. She says opening that Gideon Bible was the first step in turning her life around. She found a local Baptist church whose members “brought kindness and casseroles.” And she stopped drinking, smoking and even swearing. “I had a truck driver’s mouth back then,” she says. “I was totally changed and set free, and I’ve never been the same since.”

The Gideons have been in the business of saving seemingly lost souls like Horbas for more than a century — ever since they were founded as an association of Christian businessmen by two travelling salesmen who met by chance in 1898 after rooming together in an overbooked hotel in Boscobel, Wisc. In 1908, they began distributing Bibles in U.S. hotel rooms, following suit three years later in Canada. “This spirit of door-to-door salesmanship” stuck with them, writes Kevin Kruse, professor of history at Princeton University, in his book *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America*. “Selling God was a second calling.”

The Gideon Bible became a staple in practically every hotel room in North America, achieving iconic status — it was even immortalized in the Beatles song *Rocky Raccoon*.

But today some hotels are wary about giving the Gideons access. Last year, the U.K.’s Travelodge hotel chain banned the Bibles from its rooms, saying the practice does not reflect Britain’s multicultural society. Some high-end hotels are also dispensing with the Gideon Bible — in

2007, the American Hotel and Lodging Association reported a dip of eight percent since 2001 in the number of luxury hotels that allow religious materials in their rooms.

Peter Marshall, president of the Gideons International in Canada, says some hotels in this country have also refused to stock their Bibles, a fact that disheartens him. “The hotel industry will tell you that every hotel has had people who take their lives — it’s where they go to escape. If we can save even one person every 10 years, that’s good enough for me.”

While hotel Bible distribution may be the most well-known aspect of the Gideons, it represents only four percent of their evangelism efforts, according to Marshall, who notes his organization distributed 1.7 million copies in the past year alone of full-text Bibles, pocket-sized New Testaments and magazine-style scriptures in public schools, colleges and universities, prisons, hospitals and military bases, door to door, at community festivals and overseas in places such as Africa, Latin America and China.

The Bible backlash certainly isn’t new for the Gideons. It’s been going on ever since 1953, when the New Jersey Supreme Court ruled the Gideons’ longstanding practice of distributing Bibles to schoolchildren was unconstitutional. The Gideons were “bewildered by the objections to what they saw as a selfless act of kindness,” writes Kruse in *One Nation Under God*, adding that 40 years later the president of the U.S. Gideons attributed this ruling to the fact that “Satan has been and still is vigorously opposed to this particular program.”

Gideon Bibles’ are still distributed to Grade 5 students in many Canadian public schools today — more than 70,000 were handed out last year. (Parents have to sign a permission slip.)

But the Good Book is making for some bad blood in school districts across the country. When Ontario’s Bluewater District School Board banned the Bibles in 2012, trustees reported receiving threatening phone calls. Some groups have unsuccessfully lobbied to have their texts distributed alongside the Gideon Bible in schools, including the Centre for Inquiry Canada, which wanted to hand out *The Magic of Reality* by atheist author Richard Dawkins, and a Waterloo, Ont., Muslim leader who applied to have free copies of the Qur’an sent home with students.

Marshall acknowledges that giving Gideon Bibles to school

5 GIDEONS FACTS

1 The Gideons International in Canada employs 32 people and has an annual budget of \$8 million. It’s funded by membership dues, non-member donations, bequests and major gifts and donations from its 275 chapters.

2 Since its inception, the Canadian arm has distributed 28 million copies of the scriptures in this country and 46 million copies worldwide.

3 The Gideons are an association, not a church. Members pay a minimum of \$10 a month and must be endorsed by a pastor and affiliated with an evangelical church.

4 Distribution of Gideon Bibles by all worldwide chapters reached the two billion mark this year.

5 The Gideons are a global enterprise with more than 300,000 Gideon members and auxiliary members (wives of Gideons) in 200 countries. In 2011, the Canadian Gideons (who number 3,755) broke off from their parent body in order to comply with Canadian charitable status regulations and also to allow women to become full-fledged members.

— A. B.

kids is coming under greater scrutiny in a “post-Christian society,” but his organization is committed to continuing the practice. “Saying we cannot go into schools to share God’s word is taking away the opportunity for students to hear an alternative viewpoint,” he says. “To be truly inclusive, there should be room for Christianity.”

That’s hogwash, says Rene Chouinard, a father of three who says the time has come to close the book on Bible distribution in public schools. He waged a three-year battle against the District School Board of Niagara, taking his case to the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal after his Grade 5 daughter brought home a Gideon Bible permission slip from her Grimsby, Ont., school. He won his case in 2013, and the school board no longer allows any religious material to be circulated by outside groups. “The school system should not be used to go after kids when their parents aren’t around, whether that’s Coca-Cola, tobacco companies or an organization pushing a particular religious ideology,” he says. “The concept of schools protecting children should be paramount.”

Typically, the Gideons’ response to such challenges is to quietly withdraw. “We go where we are allowed, and we go in with respect. We aren’t confrontational,” says Marshall, adding that they have no interest in “fighting back with schools and hotels to demand we are there.”

But the Gideons are devising new methods to circumvent the roadblocks they increasingly face. For example, they now engage in sidewalk distribution of Bibles out-

side high schools. A new youth arm called SendMe has 236 youth members committed to sharing the scriptures with their peers. Light, a glossy magazine with professional photography illustrating verses from the Bible, is strategically sent to churches during the Easter and Christmas seasons when many non-churchgoing Canadians will actually step inside a sanctuary. And a NewLife app for smartphones allows users to access the Bible in 14 languages and links them to over 1,000 Pentecostal and evangelical churches in Canada.

The Gideons have even started doing door-to-door meet and greets, offering Bibles with an invitation to a selected nearby church tucked inside. Members are also encouraged to share their faith widely. “We don’t want our practice of sharing the Gospel to be awkward and unnatural,” says Marshall, who points out it’s most effective to have a conversation about faith “when it intersects with someone in a particular moment in their life.”

Marshall, 43, a former president of a retail clothing business that earned more than \$1 million in annual sales, takes every opportunity to share his own story of how he became a Christian. His “divine appointment from God” involved seeing two visions through his bedroom window: one of a mansion with a three-car garage and dozens of clothing stores in the distance; the other an image of himself, his wife and Jesus walking through a field of grain. “God asked me which life I wanted, and I said, ‘God, I want the one with you.’”

Asked if he was unhappy with his former lifestyle, Marshall says not at all: “Life was working out great for me. I had no burdens. A pig is always happy in its own slop.” But he says his life changed radically after his conversion. He stopped drinking and smoking, started reading the Bible, joined a church and began working for the Gideons in 2006, becoming president four years ago. In his old life, he says, he loved money. “The number one change people saw in me was a love for others.”

It’s that kind of love, he says, that drives the Gideons’ mission to “make God’s word accessible to every person on Earth so they can come to the saving knowledge of Christ.” Whether spreading the good news through Bible verses on a mobile phone app or the onion-skin pages of a book in a hotel room, the Gideons, like the fierce Israelite warrior they are named after, are determined to continue their battle for souls.

Anne Bokma is a writer and editor in Hamilton.

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