

How Can I Get Follow Up For My WBS Student?

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If your time is limited, please go straight to Point 5 “What *You* Can Do.”

However, if this subject is important to you, please take time to understand it better.

WBS follow up deserves the attention and the solutions we all can bring to it.

1. The Importance of Follow Up

The World Bible School method has two parts: 1) Correspondence/interactive Bible studies that use mail, email and the Internet; 2) Follow up for responsive students. Of these two, follow up is the most difficult (for reasons outlined below). By “follow up” we mean helping students to obey the Gospel and to fulfill their roles in the Lord’s body, the church. Follow up difficulties discourage some teachers. It is my hope that better perspectives and practices will encourage you, as a WBS teacher, to persist and to enjoy better results.

2. Qualifications

My wife and I became involved in WBS follow up in the early 1980s. From 1985 to 1991, as continuing missionaries in South Africa, we devoted full time to WBS student recruiting and follow up. Our growing team helped many others to join in the follow up. We organized many seminars across South Africa that yielded hundreds of baptisms and established new congregations. From 1991, we have worked with WBS in Austin, Texas, bringing our field experience to the WBS process, including development of the current curriculum, the Master Series. We also conducted many WBS campaigns for student recruiting and for follow up. Since becoming WBS president in 2006, US workshops and international travels have continued. These years of experience with WBS teachers, with students and with follow up workers lead to these notes. They aim to give your WBS student a better opportunity to obey the Gospel and grow into Christ’s likeness.

3. Spiritual Perspectives

After Jesus fed over 5,000 people, large crowds pursued Him. But His teaching offended them, and even His own followers left in droves. “From this time many of His disciples turned back and no longer followed Him” (John 6:66). What a drop-out rate—from thousands down to a faithful few! This happened more than once, so that after three years of Jesus’ ministry, the group that gathered for prayer in Jerusalem numbered just 120. If that was true for Jesus, the supreme Teacher, why should we be surprised by drop-outs and by difficulties with making or

keeping true disciples? What if Jesus had quit? As He Himself said, “Many are invited, but few are chosen” (Matthew 22:14). Our task is to invite, to spread the call of the Gospel. Then God and the individual determine who is “chosen.”

Effective correspondence evangelism begins by inviting *many*. The correspondence process sifts through the many to find the few. God is active in the process, and remains active when we refer responsive students for follow up. We should remember this when we feel frustrated. When Paul left Corinth, he did not know God’s plan for follow up. But God knew. Later Paul learned how it worked out, and he wrote, “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow” (1Corinthians 3:6). Instead of doubting, we need to focus on our part with confidence, trusting that God cares enough to do His part for the next step (whether we can see it all or not). So we are back to the basis of our Christianity: *faith*. Faith in God! Faith in His love! Faith in His Word’s power to do its work! Faith in His providence!

We share the Gospel because He said to do so. We persist because we love Him and those He calls. We overcome because we trust in God who provided His Son and provides even now. Yes, we are deeply concerned about follow up and with results. But we never let those concerns turn against the lost by causing us to stop serving them. Some have quit. But after a period of time, my question to them would be, “How many have you taught in that period? How many have you converted?” For WBS *does* offer the opportunity to share the Gospel with many hearts. While not every teacher learns of specific results, the cumulative effect of spreading so much Gospel seed is enormous. Since World Bible School began by that name (1973), some 25,000,000 have received WBS lessons. That represents plenty of Gospel seed, and the results are well known. My personal experience causes me to agree with Flavil Yeakley when he says, “We are making more converts worldwide through World Bible School than all other methods put together. That’s not the only thing, but that’s the point of contact, and that is crucial.”

4. Reality Check

Before we explore follow up solutions, we should assess the challenges. These are not excuses. They are simply the realities we deal with on many fields. Jesus sent His disciples “into all the world.”

- Geographically, that involves vast distances.
- Culturally, that involves overcoming great differences.
- Linguistically, that involves bridging across strange languages.
- Spiritually, that involves reaching people at various levels of acceptance or rejection.

By targeting “the world” Jesus did not select just convenient places. He included the receptive fields and the unreceptive fields. Gospel preaching is to continue “in season and out of season.” Ease and efficiency in follow up have never been guaranteed.

Offers of Bible correspondence (and Gospel invitations in general) tend to be accepted more readily in poor regions of the world. With that fact come special challenges. Consider three examples:

- The poor may move often in search of work and better conditions.
- The poor may not have their own formal addresses.
- The poor often lack dependable communications.

Now, consider that the *nearest* follow up workers must live with similar conditions. They too may lack means for transport and communications. Sure, we may help the worker with tools such as a bicycle or a P.O. Box or cell phone. But that does not change the surrounding conditions. Suppose you pass along to the worker a student's P.O. Box address. Among poor people, many may be sharing the same P.O. Box number. Besides, the worker still has no physical location to visit. Even with better information, such a visit may mean searching on streets without names and numbers.

Add the next reality: The follow up workers are few. (After all, this is a "mission" area, meaning the church has a long way to grow.) One diligent worker may receive thousands of follow up requests. He can visit some, but not all. Even after visits, he may lack time, money and means for timely communications with hundreds of anxious WBS teachers in America. Believe it or not, he too may become discouraged. The physical and spiritual obstacles are daunting. Even when contact is made, the visit may prove unfruitful. To request a baptism on paper is relatively easy. To follow through with the life-changing implications is much harder. Some students who claim to be responding do so for ulterior motives. Some think an American will come and give them some kind of earthly gain. Such false leads are particularly disappointing. When a worker quits in disillusionment, the few who follow up become fewer. In an ironic twist, some WBS teachers take out their frustrations on the faithful few who are still trying. Would that the roles were reversed! With that reality check, teachers might be far more understanding, patient and helpful.

Yes, there are ways for the teacher to help. In fact, much of the success of follow up starts with the WBS teacher. We'll look at that momentarily. First, let's round out the reality check. We should understand and expect the disadvantages of working with the poor. We should also rejoice with their receptivity. James asked, "Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom?" Throughout history the answer has been a resounding, "Yes, God has chosen the poor!" They know that they need Good News. Despite every setback, many thousands have become true disciples through WBS.

Here is just one example: Sixty years ago, Nigeria had no churches of Christ as far as we knew. Today it has well over 4000. Missions professor Wendell Broom conducted church growth studies every ten years. In response to his latest survey one third of the churches said they started through WBS. That entire Restoration movement began with one correspondence

course sent from Nashville, Tennessee. My father and Eldred Echols were the first missionaries to “follow up” on that movement, but they did so after many hundreds had already been baptized into Christ. God was in charge from the beginning, and He continues to be in charge. The question is, “Do we believe that?” (For another example of WBS’ contribution to growth, see “Exhibit: Zimbabwe as a Working Model” after the conclusion of this article.)

5. What *You* Can Do

The faith-filled perspectives just discussed form the foundation for effective WBS teaching. Trust in God and His way will lead you to persist more positively, and to be wiser in how you work. Here are suggestions for the latter.

A. **Pray and teach.** Consciously place your WBS efforts into God’s hands. Trust that His Word will take root in honest hearts. Pray for your students by name, especially in the follow up process.

B. **Let the process work.** WBS correspondence shares the Gospel. Like every other evangelistic method, that has the effect of keeping the responsive while sifting out the unresponsive. The resulting “dropout rate” is distressing, which unnerves some WBS teachers. They want follow up for *all* their students, so they short cut the process by demanding follow up before the student has shown readiness. Their unqualified requests flood overloaded workers and divert their time from responsive students. WBS labors continually to improve retention. But even in a perfect system, the sifting process is both biblical and necessary. Work with the sifting principle, not against it. Even when a student does not respond immediately, the Gospel seed may be growing for future fruition. Remember that Saul rejected Stephen’s powerful preaching (Acts 7-8), and only later became the believer Paul.

C. **Bring the personal touch to your teaching.** During our many years of follow up work we noticed that certain teachers had more baptisms than others. When we investigated, we found two main factors: 1) These teachers kept teaching *many* students. The sifting process works best with significant numbers. 2) They wrote friendly notes and took a personal interest in their students. These relationships made a big difference for student retention and for effective follow up.

D. **Send all helpful information.** The best WBS workers receive more requests than they can possibly visit. Mere lists (names and postal addresses) do nothing to help workers prioritize. Begin with details given on the Intro’s return page. Share the student’s progress and most relevant comments. Through your relationship with the student, get better contact information such as a physical location, a phone number and an email address (even if the phone and email belong to a cooperative friend or business person).

E. **Keep trying,** especially for your very best students. Reminders raise them in the priority lists of busy follow up workers. Where your student is in an area isolated from

helpful Christians, please send to your student the WBS booklet “How to Become a Christian and Establish the Church of Christ in Your Community.”

F. Encourage student initiative. The follow up worker only has so much time to spread over many contacts. Your student also has limited time. The difference is that the student needs only to make *one* contact—with the follow up worker. A meeting will happen much sooner if the student takes the initiative. So, where possible, make a habit of giving your student the name, address and other contact information of the closest follow up worker or church. Urge your student to make the visit or at least to write. If your student truly is responsive and able, the dilemma of receiving follow up will be solved much sooner. Also ask your student to report to you the outcome of his initiative.

G. Continue teaching and encouraging. When a student is baptized, keep helping that student to grow. Certainly the local church should take the lead in caring for the new convert. But they often lack printed materials and advanced courses. You may be the one in a position to supply these, and to encourage contacts for further maturing and leadership training. WBS can provide you a list of advanced resources.

H. Use WBS tools and events, such as follow-up seminars and campaigns. For years WBS has honed ways to help follow up. Let WBS expertise serve you and your students. Pay attention to WBS advice. Benefit from WBS networking. We know a lot of members around the world, and we may be able to link your student with a helpful Christian. (For important examples of WBS tools and events, please see “Exhibit: Zimbabwe as a Working Model” after the conclusion that follows.)

Conclusion

Not every country has a full-service WBS Center. But the principles discussed above are applicable elsewhere also:

- World Bible School benefits from four decades of experience in correspondence teaching and follow up in many nations.
- WBS leadership includes long-term missionaries whose combined experience adds up to many more decades.
- There are good reasons behind the advice and the services offered by WBS.
- There are good reasons for certain things WBS does *not* do. Some of this relates to scalability. Some relates to WBS’ philosophy that WBS should not do for churches and individual Christians what they should be doing for themselves.
- WBS serves as an informational hub for what others have developed.
- We all accomplish far more by sharing information and by working together than by working in isolation.

No matter which country you target, certain follow up principles are always true. Among these are the eight actions under point 5, “What *You* Can Do.” God has put these eight actions into your hands. Pursue them on behalf of your student’s salvation. Some things are out of your

hands, and no amount of worry or frustration changes that. However, we can go forward confident of these facts: God loves my students more than I do. He gave His Son for them. Therefore He is working to make His sacrifice effective for them. I may not see all the answers or know how my student's needs will be met. But I will not be deterred because my God's name is *Yahweh Yireh*—"the LORD will provide" (Genesis 22:8,14). I press on because of His sacred assurance:

**He who did not spare His own Son,
but gave Him up for us all—
how will He not also, along with Him,
graciously give us all things?**

(Romans 8:3)

For further information on WBS follow up, please contact us at 512 345 8190 ext. 114.

Exhibit: Zimbabwe as a Working Model

I was born and raised in Zimbabwe. That also happens to be the nation with the most WBS students at present. In setting up WBS' follow up system there we had two choices: 1) Publish for WBS teachers a directory of all churches and church leaders in the nation, or 2) Set up a WBS Service Center to assist follow up.

Experiences with the first option had shown several disadvantages. Often student addresses did not match towns listed on directories or maps. For example, the student's address might give a rural village or a suburb not listed in the directory, making a match impossible for the WBS teacher. Even with a proper match, there was no guarantee that the closest congregation would help. (As in any country, some are not evangelistic, some are poorly informed, and some quit after a less-than-rewarding experience.) Further, directories become obsolete as information and circumstances change.

So we decided to set up a WBS Service Center with secretarial personnel known and respected around the country. Most importantly, these personnel are on site and current. At any given time, they know (or can learn) the up-to-date situation. They know who is helpful, who responds to requests for follow up, and who reports back. The WBS Service Center does not take the place of follow up. Rather, it serves as a conduit for information, receiving follow up requests and conveying those requests to the closest reliable evangelist, church leader or church. The Center also reports back, *to the extent that anything is known*. That caveat is necessary because workers are deluged with requests (a wonderful problem arising from over 500,000 WBS enrollments since 2007), and because they struggle under severe disadvantages (described at

times by sad news headlines about Zimbabwe). Despite many setbacks, conversions through WBS have blessed many congregations and started new ones. Many now studying with our schools of preaching and colleges came into the church through WBS.

A few WBS teachers, of course, have their own contacts and bypass the WBS Service Center. They may not realize the importance of the WBS data base. First, the Service Center continually **networks** with churches and church leaders nation-wide. A lone worker may handle follow up requests for his vicinity, but he may not know the best or latest networking beyond his own reach.

Second, follow up **seminars** benefit greatly from a central data base. Let me explain. During our South African years we visited many individual students. We soon learned the sheer impracticality of visiting every individual of the 5,000 referred to us for follow up. So we examined our computer records for clusters of students. Based on these clusters, we set dates and venues for follow up seminars. Then we invited students to come to the seminars closest to them. This approach proved so effective that it became our standard method, with individual visits worked in as time and resources allowed.

In Zimbabwe too, similar seminars continue to prove their extraordinary value, with many baptized and integrated into local congregations. Recently a seminar near Murewa, Zimbabwe, drew about 500. Well over 150 were baptized, launching a congregation that continues to flourish. Much of that work was coordinated through the WBS Service Center, working especially with follow up worker Peter Mahumba—himself a convert through WBS who enrolled multitudes throughout his area. Peter's only support has been from the Avondale congregation in Zimbabwe's capital Harare.

The Service Center's data base is a powerful tool for effective seminars. Time and again the follow up team has consulted the Service Center's data to find student clusters as they plan their next joint seminars. The data base also has postal addresses for all follow up requests received. This means that invitations can be sent well in advance, giving students the best chance of planning to attend.

US teachers who bypass the Service Center also bypass its data base. Their students are not recorded and thus receive no such invitation. The irony is that the US teacher likely made other arrangements hoping for better follow up, and inadvertently robbed that student of a valuable avenue for contact. WBS's role is to facilitate, to offer tools and assistance, to offer relevant advice, and to encourage. How congregations and teachers use these advantages is up to them. But assisting each other tends to be more productive than working apart.

In this case, here is our advice: Even if you have personal arrangements for follow up in Zimbabwe, please include the WBS Service Center in your communications, at least about a new follow up request. This does not interfere with anything you or your contact may do. It simply allows your WBS student to benefit from future seminar invitations and similar opportunities. It

also allows the Service Center to extend the network of WBS workers. The Avondale WBS Service Center's email address is **alicewbs@africaonline.co.zw**. Alice Mhlanga is the "alice" in the address, and she will be happy to hear from you. If your personal contact uses email, a simple "cc" to Alice will be sufficient.

Some US congregations have long targeted Zimbabwe, and have developed effective methods for that nation. Some methods are scalable and transferrable, and WBS has helped make those available more widely (for example, Business Reply Mail, which was first pioneered in Zimbabwe by the church of Christ in Starkville MS). Some methods work well for a closed partnership—a US congregation and its supported worker—but are hard for others to duplicate. If WBS does not adopt a method, that in itself is no commentary on its validity, but more likely relates to scalability—making it practical for all WBS users. In the nature of WBS' role, anything WBS itself adopts must be widely applicable and sustainable for the long-term. There are many things congregations and individuals can do that WBS cannot duplicate for all others. However, WBS is aware of most methods, and can serve as a hub for information and idea exchange.