

The Bible: A Foundation For Community Transformation

Reflections of the work of the Regional Group in Southern Africa

(Background: The Southern Africa Regional Group sought to ensure their work engaged with the structures of the Anglican Church in Southern Africa and drew up tools to help make their observations more objective. From their work the project can offer not only these reflections but the tools they devised that could be helpfully used in other parts of the Communion.)

The Southern African Regional Steering Committee of the BILC Project was deliberately constituted to be as representative as we could be of the diversity of our region in terms of gender, culture and churchpersonship. We made the decision from the beginning to engage the church structures of Anglican Church of Southern Africa (ACSA) formally and obtain a range of information from across the spectrum.

Our fieldwork involved workshops with official representatives from the dioceses sent by their bishops. We recorded the process of producing an agreed set of “**instruments**” to measure the people who constituted Bible study groups, how they set about the process of reading the Bible in practice, and wrote a set of *instruments* which could be used to facilitate group readings. Although a number of the participants among the bishops and clergy had reservations at the beginning of the process, holding to an agreed process in which no step would be taken without agreement and no report made without checking with the participants first not only enabled us to overcome our initial suspicions but also to become a ‘community of readers’ of the Bible during the period that the project lasted.

This reflection is based on agreed processes and a common excitement in what we discovered in our common reading of the scriptures: 22 facilitators and 337 ordinary people from across 14 dioceses. Because those who participated in the different phases of the BILC project discovered that we held a love for reading the Bible in common, we were able to move beyond stereotypes we might have had of each other and listen together to the scriptures, exploring how we could read the text together without judging in advance what we would hear.

Our exploration revealed that people read the Bible in a variety of contexts and in a variety of English versions and vernacular languages, not all of which formed part of the specific form of Bible Studies for which we have statistics. Some groups do not normally meet in the ‘Bible Study Group’ format, but use the Bible in revival services, funeral vigils, women’s groups and youth groups without reservation or any sense of distance from the text.

However, for those who shared in this process we found for the overwhelming majority:

- that Bible reading took place in the context of worship and prayer, mostly non-liturgical
- that sharing of experiences, personal needs, crises and joys were a central part of the Bible reading process, whether before, after or integrated with the study
- that Bible study groups of the kind studied tended to have a long life span, varying from newly organized ones (*some for the purpose of the study*) to those which had been meeting for as long as 35 years
- that people expected to find meaning for today in the text and mostly moved fairly directly to questions arising from their context, personal or communal. As one of the Steering Committee observed: *“... the hermeneutical gap between the text and the reader is not experienced as a gaping chasm which can only be bridged by the methods of the academy. Rather, Scripture is intimately connected with past and present experiences, and through the sharing of the same is constantly brought into connection with the lived reality of those who have gathered together to study it”*
- that, unless there was a ‘**strict policing**’ of the Bible study by a facilitator with a particular agenda, there was a wide degree of acceptance of, or at least tolerance of, diversity of opinion in the Bible study groups in ACSA. Only 3 out of 26 Bible studies recorded showed a rejection of or intolerance of diversity. Disagreement was more likely to be expressed by shared glances and/or a respectful silence, which kept the divergent thinker feeling secure in the “**safe space**” of the group, than by confrontation
- that a non-directive and affirming role of the facilitator in leading the Bible study process is very significant in determining whether a study opens up new perspectives, whether people get excited by reading the Bible, and whether the reading is potentially transformative. Some groups tried to move from Bible study to action directly (*over the environment*) but for most it was more like a “transformation of consciousness” which might or might not lead to action in the longer term
- that there is a real desire for new methods and training for contextual and communal reading of the scriptures in ACSA, and a willingness to put aside differences of traditional church personship in working towards this, provided it does not come with a ‘*ready made agenda*’.

Jonathan Draper