Reading Scripture Together across the Anglican Communion: Why and How?

In the second phase of the Bible in the Life of the Church (http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/theological/bible/), the Anglican Consultative Council has commissioned a study entitled Reading Scripture Together across the Anglican Communion. The statement here offers a rationale and some preliminary guidelines for such a practice.

Why should Anglicans read Scripture together across the Communion? We offer three reasons:

1. Because reading Scripture together accords with the logic and the character of Scripture itself.
2. Because reading Scripture together accords with the character of the contemporary Anglican Communion.
3. Because as a church we are called to peace.

The key points underlying each of these reasons are set forth below.

The Logic and Character of Scripture

- Beginning with Abraham, it has been God’s intention that the world should experience blessing through the people called to worship the God to whom the Bible witnesses (Gen. 12:3, 18:18, 22:18). Further, it is God’s will for the church that it should be a multinational community of people “from every nation and culture and people and language” (Rev. 7:9). We are privileged to live in a time when that divine intention is increasingly a perceptible reality in the global church.
- It is God’s will that the church should not just grow bigger; it should grow up, having “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16, cf. Phil. 3:15, Col. 1:28). As the Apostle Paul taught the church in Corinth—itself a highly diverse, international body—the church grows to maturity as it gathers around the Word of God (1 Cor. 14:26, cf. Col. 3:16). That Word awakens new life: it nourishes and sustains God’s people in various ways: encouraging, restraining, rebuking, comforting, and guiding. Without study and teaching of the Bible in all its parts, the church remains immature, vulnerable to falsehoods, distortions, and extremes.
- The Bible in both Testaments witnesses to God from many different perspectives, reflecting the life of God’s people in multiple cultures, across more than a millennium. In its multi-dimensionality, the Bible is like a sculpture; it cannot be viewed in full from any one standpoint, in light of one set of cultural experiences and understandings. We Christians need each other, in order to hear the diverse voices of Scripture more fully and interpret them in light of our own diverse contexts.

The Character of the Contemporary Anglican Communion

- In this generation, Anglicans have widely come to acknowledge that we belong to a global Communion. Nonetheless, we have given little attention to what this position of privilege and responsibility means for us as interpreters of Scripture. Specifically, we have not given sufficient attention to how we should interpret Scripture within and as a global Communion.
- Anglicans have long used the image of our faith resting on the “three legs” of Scripture, reason, and tradition or ecclesial authority; the latter two have
classically been understood as guides and supports for the primary work of reading, understanding, and responding appropriately to Scripture. In the eighteenth century, John Wesley added another support, “experience”; in the present century, many rightly identify “(social and cultural) context” as an element, conscious or not, in all scriptural interpretation.

- The practice or goal of “reading Scripture together across the Communion” is important because it confronts us with our history and challenges us to work consciously out of our cultural diversity. We must begin by acknowledging that most non-European Anglicans (that is, the vast majority) belong to local and regional churches founded as part of an imperial-colonial-missionary enterprise; we recognize that elements of that history affect us strongly to this day.

- We must be careful that “reading Scripture together” not be taken to imply that uniformity is an expected or even desirable goal of interpretation. Rather, we should seek to offer an appropriately complex account of the elements that contribute to a recognizably Anglican mode of biblical interpretation. This entails identifying the complex interplay among reason, tradition, and context as they bear upon the work of interpreting the text. Equally, people in various Anglican contexts should formulate and share with each other differing accounts of how they read and interpret Scripture.

**Called as a Church to Peace**

- As a church, we are called to participate in Christ’s ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-20). More specifically, we are called to live in peace with one another even as we gather around God’s word and seek to make a place within ourselves for the word of Christ (Col. 3:14-16). In short, reading Scripture together is for Christians one of the primary “things that make for peace” (Luke 19:42). This is especially true for members of the Anglican Communion, with its base in the Reformation and its evangelical heritage.

- It is currently too common and evidently too easy for Anglicans of the (global) South and North to dismiss each other—on the one hand, as unfaithful, in not taking the Bible seriously, and on the other hand, as fundamentalists, historically naïve readers of the Bible. One tragic effect of this reciprocal vilification is to draw a line of separation between Anglicans who are relatively wealthy (in monetary terms) and those who are relatively impoverished.

- The primary aim of reading scriptural texts together is not agreement, either on their proper interpretation or on how they should figure in the process of Christian moral discernment. Rather, the experience of those who have gathered around the text over a sustained period is that serious engagement fosters mutual trust and respect, and frequently friendship, as well as offering a wider view of the dimensions of difference and disagreement. Thus it gives substance to the Anglican goal of a Communion united by “bonds of affection.”

**How should Anglicans read Scripture together across the Communion?**

Workshops where this has been tried in recent years suggest the following elements of an answer:

- Grounding study in prayer and seeking to foster friendship. Time for worship, small group conversation, plenary discussion, and also for silence and informal exchange all facilitate deep reflection. Meeting over several days or on multiple occasions is highly desirable.
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- Forming study groups that include both women and men. In some situations, it may be helpful for women in particular to have some meetings by themselves, or where women are the designated speakers.
- Opening discussion of the texts chiefly through questions for small-group work. The leader of the workshop may find it helpful to offer brief explanatory remarks and respond to questions and comments from small groups; lectures are not recommended.
- Attending to the details of the text in three different contexts: What does it say in its own literary and historical context? How does it read in the context of this local reading community? How does it read in contexts other than the one with which this group of readers is most familiar?
- Keeping all discussion close to the biblical text, and explaining how interpreters can responsibly draw inferences from it or perceive fruitful ambiguities.
- Using application as a test of validity for interpretations: Does the text guide and challenge the church toward faithful action that builds up the body in this place and time?
- Including non-Anglican participants, where possible, adds a further dimension to the study and "thickens" the awareness of context.

This statement is still seen as being in draft form so the group responsible for this part of the "Bible in the Life of the Church" project would welcome any comments on what you have just read. Our intention is that further insights can be built into what finally emerges from our work in the latter part of 2015.

Please feel free to respond directly to the person who sent this to you but would you also copy in on any response the Coordinator of the overall project, Stephen Lyon, so that he can ensure all the responses are fed into the work of this group. Stephen’s E mail is: stephen.lyon@anglicancommunion.org