A four-session short course exploring the way we actually engage with and interpret the Bible – Leaders’ Notes

*Background:* this course comes out of the work of the Anglican Communion’s *Bible in the Life of the Church (BILC)* project. Some of the suggested exercises in the course were designed by the project and ‘road-tested’ within it. Other resources are suggested that might follow on from this course. Much of the material was also used as a two-day workshop with lay and clergy leaders in the Anglican Churches in Hong Kong and the Philippines who then went on to use the material with groups in their congregations.

The aim of the course.

To look intentionally at the processes and influences – often unexplored – that we use or that affect the way we engage with and interpret Scripture.

It is offered here as a four-session course with each session requiring approximately 90 minutes. Each session has the following:

- **Background material** that might be needed by the group
- **Leader’s Notes** – italicised
- **Suggested outline** which can be adapted to the needs of particular groups
- **Before the next Session:** outlines what participants might do in preparation.
- **Taking things further:** outlines other resources available from the project.

*Background material for the leader giving background to the whole course:*

*Deep engagement, fresh discovery: the Bible in the life of the Anglican Communion* - The Report of the ‘Bible in the Life of the Church’ project

Two extracts from the Report are reproduced in the Appendices at the end of this course outline

[The full Report is available in hard-copy form from the Anglican Communion Office - [http://shop.anglicancommunion.org/](http://shop.anglicancommunion.org/)  
It is also available electronically on the Anglican Communion website: [www.aco.org/index.cfm](http://www.aco.org/index.cfm) and follow the links]
Session 1 – Where are we starting from?

**Background materials:** – Personal Influences on the way we approach the Bible. [Appendix 1 at the end of these notes – pages 10-13]. Participants will need their own copy.

**Leader’s Notes:** Whatever the nature of the group – an existing one or one specially formed to undertake this short course – it would be good to spend some time getting to know one another. A simple ‘ice-breaking’ exercise might be this one from South Africa:

Participants had to ‘catch a taxi’ i.e. they had a very short period of time with each person in the group. In South Africa the ‘taxi’ is a kind of community mini-bus that people get on and off but will always greet the people they meet. Ask the group to move around and do three things:

(i) introduce themselves
(ii) share their favourite Bible verse
(iii) talk about why they were present on the course and what expectations they had

**Suggested outline**

**Exercise 1 – Personal Influences on the way we approach the Bible**

This exercise starts with the questionnaire which participants are asked to answer. You may need to stress that there are no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers. Give participants up to 15-20 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

In 2’s ask participants to share some of the answers they gave to the questions with the other person. You may wish to give 5-6 minutes to each person asking them to share only those parts of their answers they are happy to share.

Together as a group, explore these two questions:

- What surprised me about the answers I gave to these questions?
- What surprised me about the answers the other person gave to these questions?

**Leader’s Notes:** The purpose of this discussion is to bring to a conscious level some influences on the way we approach the Bible that are assumed by each of us as soon as we open its pages. None of us comes to Scripture with an ‘open mind’ or no pre-suppositions. This does not make our approach right or wrong but it does mean that we do not always acknowledge these as we seek to listen to how Scripture speak to us.
**Suggested outline**

**Exercise 2 – what are the key principles in the way we engage with and interpret Scripture?**

For this exercise you will need a large sheet of paper [flip chart] and some pens.

Ask the group to think about how they go about interpreting the Bible when they either read it or hear it read. What principles do they bring to bear on this process?

- How do they go about ‘hearing’ what Scripture might be saying for today?
- How do they approach writings that are at least just under 2000 years old?
- How do they go about making sense of a library of different types of literature?

Give participants up to 10 minutes to think of how they would answer this question for themselves before bringing the group together to report on their thoughts.

**Leader’s Notes:** As background to this part of the session you may wish to look at Appendix 2 - Extract 1 at the end of these notes on pages 14 and 15. This is from the BILC project. *What the Anglican Communion has said about the Bible 2 – themes and principles*. This will give an idea of the kind of principles the project has been exploring.

Ask the group to share their answers to these questions and to help one another refine them into a list of principles. This may take a little time and require some hard listening to one another. As you come towards a final list it might be helpful to ask the group what overall picture emerges from the list. You may wish to ask one of the group to take away the final list and produce copies for each participant.

We will return to this list in Session 4.

**Before the next session** ask participants to read the following Bible passages: Nehemiah 13, Galatians 3:23-29 and 1 Timothy 2:1-15
**Taking things further:** if the group wish to explore further the principles that emerge from statements the Anglican Communion has already made about the place of Scripture in its life then the following resources from the BILC project might be of interest:

- What the Anglican Communion has said about the Bible 1 – extracts from Communion documents
- What the Anglican Communion has said about the Bible 2 – themes and principles that emerge
Session 2 – Engaging with Scripture

**Background material:** You may need to take one or two Bibles with you to the session in case some participants have not brought one. It might be useful to have different translations.

Copies of Appendix 2 – Extract 2 for each participant to be given out at the end of the session.

**Leader’s Notes:** This week the exercise for the group will be to explore together the three passages given to participants at the previous session (at least 45 minutes for this part of the exercise) and then reflect on the way Scripture was engaged with and interpreted (at least 30 minutes). You may wish to ask one or two members of the group to take the role of ‘observers’ for Part 2 of this exercise. If you do then you will need to inform the group of what is going to happen before you start the exercise and brief the ‘observers’. Look at the outline for Exercise 3, Part 2 for details of what the ‘observers’ are helping to facilitate.

**Suggested outline**

**Exercise 3, Part 1 – Bible engagement**

Nehemiah 13

Read the passage through as a group, possibly twice using different versions, and then explore the following questions:

1. Why is marrying “women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab” (v. 23) viewed as such a threat to the Jews?
2. Contrast this with the story of “Ruth the Moabite,” the ancestor of King David.
3. What is the significance of the fact that the Old Testament includes both stories?

Galatians 3:23-29 and 1 Timothy 2:1-15

Read these passages through and then explore the following questions:

1. (How) can we reconcile these two theological statements from Paul?
2. If men and women “are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28), then how does/should that manifest itself in the church?

**Leader’s Notes:** Once sufficient time has been given to these questions the focus of the group is going to shift from the engagement itself – the Bible Study – to the way it happened – the process of engagement. It might be helpful to take a 5-minute break before commencing on Part 2.
**Exercise 3, Part 2 – Reflecting on our Bible engagement**

If you have asked members of the group to observe the first part of the exercise then start by asking them to share what they saw happening. If you decide not to have observers then ask the group as a whole to reflect on these kinds of questions:

- Which questions did the group find most helpful to them, and why?
- Were links made with people’s lives and what has happened to them?
- Were there disagreements with the passage? How did the group handle this?
- Were Biblical passages not on the ‘suggested passages’ list mentioned during the study? How did they come up?
- What energised the group?

A good summary question might be:

Thinking about what you have just done, what were you seeking to do as you engaged with the Bible, and why were you doing it?

One of the group might be asked to write a summary of what has come out of the discussion so that it can be used in the final session.

**Before the next session:** ask each participant to read through Appendix 2 – Extract 2 at the end of these notes on pages 16 and 17 before the next session.

**Taking things further:** if the group have enjoyed engaging with the Bible in a way that consciously looks at the processes used then the following resources from the BILC project might be of interest. They are both in the “Additional material” section under *Bible Study outlines*.

- And it was good
- Economic Justice
Session 3 – ‘Mind the gap’

**Background material:** A couple of copies of Appendix 2 – Extract 2 for anyone who was not at the last session or who forgot their paper.

**Leader’s Notes:** One of the conclusions that the Bible in the Life of the Church project came to was that there was often a ‘gap’ between the way we say we engage with and interpret the Bible and what we actually do in practice. The Report itself describes it this way:

> Across the Communion there is evidence of ‘gaps’ between what might be called the ‘received wisdom’ of the Church in relation to our engagement with and interpretation of Scripture and what actually happens in practice.

The Regional Reflections and more particularly the Regional Reports from which they are drawn show that the way Anglicans actually engage with and interpret the Bible might not always be the way we say we should or aspire to do so. Following the first Case Study, the Steering Group identified a number of these possible ‘gaps’ as captured in the November 2010 meeting notes. These are summarised in Appendix 2 – Extract 2

**Suggested outline:**

Summarise for the group three particular groups of ‘gaps’ that were identified by the Steering Group outlined in the Extract 2 from the Report.

- Between the ‘academy’ and the ‘pew’, between the ‘scholar’ and the ‘ordinary Christian’ (The term ‘ordinary Christian’ is used in this Report to describe those who lay no claim to any formal theological education or training.) How do we draw on the insights of the academy or scholar in a way that those in the pew both understand and are enriched in their Christian living? (Clergy who have academic training sometimes find it difficult to bridge this gap, and find themselves stuck uneasily in the middle.)

- Between seeking meaning from individual verses or passages of Scripture and how these speak to and are spoken to by other parts of Scripture. In a similar vein the ‘gap’ between the use we make of more ‘popular’ or accessible parts of Scripture (e.g. the Gospels) and those parts that are forgotten or ignored (e.g. parts of the prophets or Revelation).

- Between the ‘fruits’ of our engagement – what we believe the passage is saying – and the process of that engagement – the tools we might use to discern these fruits and be fed by them.

If you have ever travelled on the London Underground system in Great Britain you will have heard or read on the platform the phrase “mind the gap”. To ‘mind’ something, in English, means both ‘to take care’ as in not
falling between the train and the platform and ‘to look after, to nurture’ as in a ‘child-minder’ or ‘minding the store’.

**Leader’s notes:** the group may need to spend some time helping one another understand the nature of these ‘gaps’ and the way they might show themselves in the life of your church. The questions below might take you into this discussion that is aimed at looking at the way we both bridge these ‘gaps’ but also ‘nurture them’ as they are important.

**Exercise 4 – how do we ‘mind’ these gaps?**

Then, as a group, explore the following questions:

1. Do you recognise these ‘gaps’? Can you give examples of where you have experienced them?
2. Do these ‘gaps’ matter? If so, in what way?
3. Are there other ‘gaps’ not mentioned here that might be important in the way we engage with Scripture?
4. If we are to ‘mind the gap’, in both senses of the word, what might this mean for the Church and the way it goes about engaging more deeply with the Bible?
5. Can you suggest how we might take this discussion about the ‘gaps’ into the life of the Church in:
   - Preaching
   - Bible Study/small groups
   - Personal Bible engagement

One of the group might be asked to write a summary of what has come out of the discussion so that it can be used in next week’s session.
Session 4 – Where do we go from here?

**Background material:** The list of principles from Session 1; the observations from Session 2; and the summary of the ‘gaps’ discussion from Session 3.

Sheets of blank paper and pens.

**Leader’s notes:** This session aims to bring together what the group have explored in the last three sessions. Start by looking back at Sessions 1-3 asking participants to summarise what has happened and raise any questions they might be struggling with.

**Suggested outline**

**Exercise 5 – where do we go from here?**

To begin this exercise remind the group of the aim of this short course - to look intentionally at the processes and influences – often unexplored – that we us or that affect the way we engage with and interpret Scripture.

Give each participant a blank piece of paper and ask them to fold it in half. On one side of the paper ask everyone to jot down their answer to the question:

*What have I learned about the way that I engage with the Bible?*

Give 10 minutes for each person to answer and then ask participants to share in 2’s. As in Session 1 you may wish to give 5-6 minutes to each person asking them to share only those parts of their answers they are happy to share.

Together, as a group, begin to pull together the responses to this question.

After sufficient time for developing the answers that emerge ask them on the other side of the paper to jot down their answer to the question:

*What do we, as a Church, need to do in response to what we have learned?*

Give 10 minutes for each person to answer and then ask participants to share in 2’s. As in Session 1 you may wish to give 5-6 minutes to each person asking them to share only those parts of their answers they are happy to share.

Together, as a group, begin to pull together the responses to this question. You may also need to explore with the group how the responses might be acted up on.
**Taking things further:** the Final Report of the BILC project points to other resources that the group might wish to explore either together or within the wider life of the Church.

- h+ Course
- Course on survey questionnaire
Appendices – material for use within the Sessions

Appendix 1: Personal influences on reading the Bible

Each one of us brings to our reading of the Bible all the influences of our personal history. This exercise is designed to help us identify what these influences are and the effect they may have on the way we read and understand the Bible.

The questions below are to help you identify these influences so that you can share some of the answers with others. You will not be asked to share anything that you do not want to!

First encounters
What were my first encounters with the Bible? Where did I first hear it read? By whom?

Was there a Bible in my home? Who read it? When?

How was the Bible viewed in my home?

What was my own attitude towards the Bible?

When did I own my first copy of the Bible? In what language, translation and version?
Church history and the Bible
Where and when did I first go to church? What denomination?

How was the Bible used at church? Who read it?

In what language was the Bible read? Is this my mother tongue?

Formal study of the Bible
Do I, or have I ever, participated in a Bible study group?

What influence has that study had on the way I now read the Bible?

Conflicts and the Bible
Was there a time when I became aware that the Bible did not “speak” to me? or when I felt the message of the Bible was not relevant to my life? What were the circumstances?
My identity and the Bible
Does my ethnicity, gender, social class, education, culture influence my reading of the Bible? How?

Life crises and the Bible
Was there a time in my life when I went through a major crisis and the Bible was a resource to me? What was that time?

How did I use the Bible?

How has my use of the Bible at that time continued to shape the way I read it today?

Present relationship to the Bible
When and where and how frequently do I read the Bible today?

In what translation/version?

Do I read with the assistance of study guides/commentaries?
What role do the sermons I hear play on my interpretation of the Bible?

How do I view the Bible today?

Do I use the Bible as a source of divine guidance? How? In what circumstances?

What influences the way I read the Bible today?

**Looking back**
Can I identify common threads in my relationship to the Bible?

Where have there been changes in my relationship to the Bible?

**Looking forward**
As I review this exercise, what has surprised me?

As I become aware of the influences on my reading of the Bible, is there anything I might want to change so that I become a more adequate reader of the Bible?
Additional material: Case Studies/Hong Kong & Philippine workshop

Appendix 2 – extracts from the BILC Report: Deep Engagement; Fresh Discovery

Extract 1 – pages 40-42 of the report

What the Anglican Communion has said about the Bible

The question, “What does the Anglican Communion think or believe about this or that?” is not an easy one to answer. There is no ‘fount of all wisdom’ either in a person (not even the Archbishop of Canterbury) or a body (not even the Lambeth Conference). Perhaps the best way of answering the question is to look at what the Communion has said through its ‘official documents’ in the past. If you were to do this in relation to what place the Communion sees Scripture occupying in its life you will find a great deal has been said.

The BILC project has produced two documents:
1. What the Communion has said about the Bible 1 – extracts:

A series of extracts from certain foundational documents (e.g., the 39 Articles of Religion) and other ‘official documents’ of the Anglican Communion (e.g., Lambeth Conference resolutions, Anglican Communion reports, extracts from reports of ecumenical dialogues and other significant documents). Some are offered with a short commentary placing the extract in context, but generally without comment.

2. What the Communion has said about the Bible 2 – themes and principles:

This document seeks to achieve two things. First it asks what themes emerge when you look at the above documents as a whole. In other words, does the ‘mind’ of the Communion begin to emerge from a constancy of message that foundational and official documents offer? Secondly, from these themes can we distil principles that might guide us, as a Communion, as we seek to interpret the Bible? These themes and principles take us two steps beyond the documents themselves but possibly offer a way forward as Anglicans seek to guide our life, as a Communion, in the light of Scripture. This document thus marks a shift from the primarily descriptive concerns of the Regional Groups to a more prescriptive mode which is offered as a guide to our discussions.

The Steering Group identified 10 themes and in the longer document each is illustrated from several of the foundational and official documents.

1. Anglicans accord Scripture a central place in the life of the Church.
2. Anglicans value biblical scholarship while acknowledging that Scripture must also be read within the context of the Church’s practice in order for us to hear its fullest meaning.
3. Anglicans experience the Word of the living God through the words of Scripture as we participate in liturgy and worship.
4. Anglicans recognise that the application of Scripture to complex issues requires serious study and prayer.
5. Anglicans recognise that there is a healthy and necessary diversity of views on the interpretation of Scripture but that such diversity exists within limits.
6. Anglicans recognise that both the original contexts in which biblical texts were written and the contemporary cultural contexts in which they are heard are important to the way we read Scripture.
7. Anglicans recognise that Scripture ‘reads’ us as we read the Bible.
8. Anglicans recognise that we hold a great deal in common on these issues with our ecumenical partners.
9. Anglicans recognise that the dynamic interplay between Scripture, reason and tradition constitutes a classic Anglican way of viewing and approaching Scripture.
10. Anglicans recognise that every generation has to approach anew the task of engaging with and interpreting Scripture.

So as we engage with Scripture, as Anglicans, mindful of all that the Church has learned and taught, are there principles we can follow in this process? How do we seek to listen to what Scripture says?

The BILC project offers the following principles, derived not only from the above themes but also from regional research of current Anglican practice and contemporary Anglican hermeneutical insights. These are:

Principle 1: Christ is the living Word of God.
Principle 2: The Old Testament is the foundation of Christian Scripture.
Principle 3: The Bible is to be taken as a whole and has within it great depths of spiritual meaning.
Principle 4: There are many different literary genres in the Bible, which are to be distinguished carefully and consistently.
Principle 5: An accurate reading of the Bible is informed, not threatened, by sound historical and scientific understanding: the God who inspires Scripture as a true witness is the same God who created the world.
Principle 6: The Bible must be seen in the contexts of the world in which it was written and also brought into conversation or confrontation with our worlds in order to discern God’s will for us today.
Principle 7: We listen to the Scriptures with open hearts and attentive minds accepting their authority for our lives and expecting that we will be transformed and renewed by the continuing work of the Holy Spirit.
Appendix 2 – extracts from the BILC Report: Deep Engagement; Fresh Discovery

Extract 2 – pages 10-11 of the report

Broad Conclusions Drawn from the Regional Groups

These conclusions [drawn from the reports of the Regional groups within the project] may not be surprising simply as they are stated but the way they present themselves region by region does give us a window into worlds often very different from our own, thus adding colour to the general statements.

From the Regional Groups’ reporting the Steering Group concluded that:

1. **Across the Communion there is clear evidence of the impact made on the lives of our communities and individuals by engaging with Scripture.**

   The Regional Reflections in the next section of the Report offer snapshots of at least three kinds of impact:
   
   - finding Scripture speaking about issues that participants had never explored in it previously;
   - being directed to sections of Scripture which participants had never encountered before;
   - simply being involved, with others, in an exercise that encouraged and helped participants to engage with Scripture at a deeper level.

2. **Across the Communion there is a wonderful diversity of ways of what “engaging with and interpreting Scripture” looks like.**

   The Regional Reflections offer illustrations that ‘the way we read Scripture’ includes not only the meaning that comes from that reading but the very process of reading itself. For some, Scripture was seen to be ‘read’ in all the encounters of daily life - everyday exchanges in the street, in the house or the workplace are drawn on to interpret, explain and bring insight to whatever those conversing are facing. They know large sections of their Bible or had captured it in song; they ‘read’ it to one another in their own specific contexts. For others, the way Scripture is read is more formal - in the liturgy, in study groups or classes, in individual study. There are examples of approaches which mix these in the ‘additional material’ section below.

3. **Across the Communion it is clear that the context in which the engagement takes place generates further diversity in the approach to and application of Scripture.**

   The Regional Reflections all offer insights from observations of an engagement that had as its starting point the same issue and core Scripture passages. Yet each set of reflections have strong contextual elements that mark them out as different from one another. Even where the main facilitation is being offered from someone outside the context of the participants – notably in Southern Sudan – the reflections that emerge are deeply rooted in the place of engagement.
4. Across the Communion there is also evidence of ‘gaps’ between what might be called the ‘received wisdom’ of the Church in relation to our engagement with and interpretation of Scripture and what actually happens in practice.

The Regional Reflections and more particularly the Regional Reports from which they are drawn show that the way Anglicans actually engage with and interpret the Bible might not always be the way we say we should or aspire to do so. Following the first Case Study, the Steering Group identified a number of these possible ‘gaps’ as captured in the November 2010 meeting notes. Further work was done on this subsequently, and some of the resources identified are listed below this section of the Report.

Three particular groups of ‘gaps’ were identified by the Steering Group:

- Between the ‘academy’ and the ‘pew’, between the ‘scholar’ and the ‘ordinary Christian’. How do we draw on the insights of the academy or scholar in a way that those in the pew both understand and are enriched in their Christian living? (Clergy who have academic training often find it very difficult to bridge this gap, and find themselves stuck uneasily in the middle.)

- Between seeking meaning from individual verses or passages of Scripture and how these speak to and are spoken to by other parts of Scripture. In a similar vein the ‘gap’ between the use we make of more ‘popular’ or accessible parts of Scripture (e.g. the Gospels) and those parts that are forgotten or ignored (e.g. parts of the prophets or Revelation).

- Between the ‘fruits’ of our engagement – what we believe the passage is saying – and the ‘process’ of that engagement – the tools we might use to discern these fruits and be fed by them.

If you have ever travelled on the London Underground system in Great Britain you will have heard or read on the platform the phrase ‘mind the gap’. To ‘mind’ something, in English, means both ‘to take care’ as in not falling between the train and the platform and ‘to look after, to nurture’ as in a ‘child-minder’ or ‘minding the store’.

The Steering Group wishes to encourage greater discussion on what these ‘gaps’ might be saying to us. These ‘gaps’ need minding in both senses above; the resources listed below seek to help us do this in one way or another.