Background and Introduction – the survey, by means of a questionnaire, was used as part of the Bible in the Life of the Church (BILC) project. Its aim was to give a picture of how ‘ordinary Christians’ in a number of parts of the Communion view and use the Bible. These guidance notes contain suggestions of how as a province, diocese or parish you might wish to use the questionnaire and the issues it is seeking to identify as a means of deepening the nature of our engagement with Scripture.

What we are primarily looking at with this exercise is the process of our engagement rather than the end product or fruits of our study. In theology speak this is called hermeneutics – “the science and methodology of interpreting texts, especially the books of the Bible”.

Resources needed for the course:

- Copies of the BILC Survey questionnaire for each participant – in the ‘Other papers’ section of the further materials
- Copies of the Personal influences on reading the Bible questionnaire for each participant – in the ‘Tools’ section of the further materials

The BILC survey questionnaire needs to be completed by those wishing to participate in the course between Sessions 1 and 2. You can have them ready to give out at the end of the first session. The questionnaire takes approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. The Survey, as it will print off from this file, is the one we used during the BILC project so some of the information on the first page will not apply to what you are doing.

As a background to this course you might find it helpful to read Section 3[b] of the projects’ Final Report and the longer paper outlining the findings of the Survey that can be found in the ‘Additional materials’ section at the end of this section.

---

1 By ‘ordinary Christian’ the project means those with no claim to any formal theological education.
Session 1 – recognising the influences on the way each one of us reads Scripture

*Leaders notes:* We come to Scripture with all kinds of personal influences on the way we read and hear what is written there. Often we take these influences for granted but they act as lenses through which we engage with the Scripture and lenses can magnify what we see but they can also blur our vision.

The exercise *Personal influences on reading the Bible* is a way of attempting to identify some of these influences and thereby be more conscious of their effects on the way we read Scripture. The exercise is offered as a way of both identifying these influences but also of sharing some of our story in relation to Scripture with others in the group.

Suggested outline for the session:

- Introduce the exercise possibly by sharing some of the personal influences in your life
- Give everyone the questionnaire asking participants to fill in but stressing the words in the second paragraph, “you will not be asked to share anything that you do not want to!” This is likely to need 15-20 minutes to allow people time to think through these questions
- Ask the group to form 2’s or 3’s and for each person to share some of the most significant influences they identified. Give each person 5 minutes [one of the others or the other to act as time keeper and let them know when they have 1 minute left]. The other/s are simply asked to listen. Then after each person has spoken get the group to see if there are common influences or very different ones.
- After about 10-15 minutes ask the groups to share particularly the answers to the ‘Looking back’ and ‘Looking forward’ sections. This could well need 15 minutes.
- Finally, bring the whole group together and start to look for common threads and things that surprised people in doing the exercise then, perhaps using a flip chart to record the answers, ask the group for any response to the last question about things they might want to change to become a more adequate reader of the Bible. *Keep these answers so they can be looked at again in Session 4.*
- End the session with a time of quiet reflection on what emerges and an opportunity to seal these changes in quiet prayer before closing the session formally in prayer.
- Finally, just before participants leave give them a copy of the Survey questionnaire asking them to fill it in during the week and return with it to the next session. Suggest they find a time when they can give an unhurried 15-20 minutes to the task and not to return to it once they have completed it.
Session 2 – what is the text saying to us?

Leaders notes: For this session and the next you will need participants to have their completed questionnaires available. For this session you will need Section 1 – the Bible passage and the two sets of questions.

This Section of the questionnaire was seeking to identify where the attention of the reader was directed as they heard or read the passage. There are three areas of focus identified in the questions – these are perhaps best summed up in question 7 in the second set of questions:

- Did they focus on the world of the original writer (his mind, his context and the response of those who first read or heard the story)?
- Did they focus on the world of the story (this was based on the writer’s own historical world the story also invited us to imagine a new world of God’s Kingdom)? or
- Did they focus on the world of the contemporary reader who is a follower of Jesus today?

[See some illustrations of the significance of these different areas of focus in the box at the end of this session’s notes]

Both sets of questions ‘force’ an answer on one of these areas of focus that, to some, will have felt difficult or even unfair to choose. What it is seeking to illustrate is that when we read Scripture we are being presented with all three of these areas of focus and we have to somehow hold them all together. This session is seeking to tease out that issue and how we therefore approach Scripture.

Suggested outline for the session:

- Read the passage together twice leaving a space between the two readings so people can reflect on it. Use different translations if participants have brought their own Bibles.
- Ask the group to form 2’s or 3’s and look in their Survey questionnaire at the first set of questions in Section 1. Tell them it does not matter how they answered them when they originally filled in the questionnaire. Ask them now to identify the two questions they found easiest to answer straight away and the two that were the most difficult. Why were they easy or difficult? Give the 2’s and 3’s up to 15 minutes for this exercise.
- While people are still in these 2’s or 3’s ask them to turn to the next set of eight questions that ‘forced’ a choice of an answer. Again, ask them to explore the same question as before – the two they found easiest to answer, the two they found most difficult. Why were they easy or difficult? Give the 2’s or 3’s a further 15 minutes for this exercise.
- Bring the small groups back into plenary and go around seeing which questions were easy and which difficult. Is there agreement or did different people find different questions easy or difficult? What challenges does this raise for the way we read Scripture?
- At this point it might be important that you, as leader, offer some insights into the 3 different areas of focus that we might have as we read Scripture. Perhaps question 7 in the second set of questions is a good starting point. This might already have emerged in the small groups and/or in the reporting
back and discussion in the large group. But the practical questions from the point of view of the processes we use to engage with Scripture are:

- Do we recognise that there are three areas of focus?
- How is each area of focus enriching the reader?
- Does it matter that we recognise and identify these three areas?
- If it does matter, how do we hold each of these areas together as we ready and understand Scripture?

End the session by reading the passage again aloud and slowly asking each member to ‘listen’ with as wide a focus as possible.

**Examples of the significance of the different areas of focus:**

- In the passage in the questionnaire [Mark 9:14-29] a belief in evil spirits would have been widespread and more straightforwardly acceptable to a 1st century audience than to a modern one.
- What difference does it make to read the story of the Pharisee and the Publican [Luke 18:9-14] through the eyes of a 1st century audience who may have help Pharisees in high regard compared to 21st century Christian audiences who come to the story having been taught to despise Pharisees?
- There are variations in the Gospels that highlight the difference between focus 1 and 2 - eg. Why is the time of the Last Supper different in the first three Gospels from when it happens in John? Why does the Jesus of John speak entirely differently from the Jesus of the other Gospels?
Session 3 – what kind of text are we reading?

Leaders notes: For this session you will explore Sections 2 and 3 of the Survey questionnaire. These questions seek to explore the nature of Scripture in terms of what people believe the Bible to be (Section 2) and the way we understand the 'stories' it records (Section 3). This session is likely to raise some of the most difficult questions for the group especially if there is a range of answers to the questions posed.

As the person leading the group you may want to have given some thought to the following issues that are likely to come up in discussion:

- What are the different genres of literature in Scripture and do we engage with them in different ways? For example poetry, history, letters, prophecy etc.
- What do we mean when we speak of the Bible as authoritative, trustworthy, reliable and holy?
- What might we mean by using different words to describe the narrative sections of Scripture? For example, fiction, story, truth.

This session is seeking to tease out some of these questions that often, ‘ordinary Christians’ are not encouraged to ask.

Suggested outline for the session:

- If you feel that this session might be uncomfortable for some of your group it might be good to acknowledge this at the start, pointing out that the aim of the course, as a whole, is to explore our processes of engagement and sometimes that will take us out of our personal comfort zones.
- Ask the group to form 2’s or 3’s and look at the questions in Section 2. Ask them now to identify those questions where they have put a ring round either strongly agree’ or ‘strongly disagree’. Get them to compare their responses with the other/s and where there are differences try to explain their strength of belief. Give the 2’s and 3’s up to 15 minutes for this exercise.
- While people are still in these 2’s or 3’s ask them to turn to Section 3 and do the same exercise in relation to those they would answer as ‘definitely happened’ and ‘definitely a story’. Get them to compare their responses with the other/s and where there are differences try to explain their strength of belief. Give the 2’s and 3’s up to 15 minutes for this exercise.
- Bring the small groups back into plenary and go around seeing how different 2’s and 3’s responded to these questions. Is there agreement or did people answer differently? What challenges does this raise for the way we read Scripture especially in Church or in a group?
- After a reasonable time for open discussion ask the whole group which questions in both sections they answered as ‘not certain’. Again, is there agreement or is it clear that different questions are raised for different people?
- At this point it might be appropriate and helpful if you, as leader, say something about both different genres of literature in Scripture and about the way we might use words like story or fiction.
The practical questions from the point of view of the processes we use to engage with Scripture are:
- Does it matter if we do not all share the same beliefs about the Bible?
- How do we listen more carefully to those whose beliefs differ from our own so that we can understand them better?
- What is the most helpful language to use when we talk about the ‘stories’ within Scripture?

Before ending the session you may want to ask the group to suggest a passage of Scripture that you can study together in Session 4 – read through the guidance notes for the Session so you can suggest the type of passage the group could explore to put into practice what they have been learning.

End the session by having a time of quiet for 5 minutes. During that quiet suggest to the group that they identify one positive thing they have discovered in someone else’s view of Scripture that is markedly different from their own and to thank God for this person and the insight.
Session 4 – from theory to practice

Leaders' notes: This session provides an opportunity to put into practice what has come up in the course so far by having a Bible study together. The group has been exploring different aspects of the way we engage with Scripture that can be applied in this study. The suggestion is that you undertake a study and then reflect on the processes you used.

The passage used for the original questionnaire – Mark 9:14-29 – was chosen for a number of reason:
- It was a story about Jesus [as opposed to teaching by Jesus]
- Jesus and his disciples were central to the plot [we as disciples might learn from them]
- It was about healing [easy for us to understand]
- It was miraculous [how do we understand miracles today?]
- It raised other questions that occur as we read a first century document in the twenty first century.

So for this session, choose another story from the Gospels with similar attributes and to study that as a group.

Suggested outline for the session: it might be helpful to begin the Bible study by reading this passage aloud twice, in different versions, with a break of 2 minutes in between and then asking these three questions:

- What do you think the Gospel writer was trying to say in the way he wrote the story?
- How do you think the people in the story were affected by the events that took place?
- What do you think the story has to say to us, the reader, today in our situation?

At the end of the Bible study look again at the answers you recorded at the end of Session 1. How do people feel about these now that you have reached the end of the short course?

Finally, ask each group member to think about the following question:

- What is the most important thing that I have learned over the past four sessions so that we can read the Bible together in a better way?

Invite the group to share their answers – if they wish to – and allow them to be heard and received before closing the session with a time of quiet reflection and a prayer.

Finally, if you wish to take this exploration further you might look at holding a course based on the Bible Society’s h+ course (see Section 4a in the BILC Final Report) or look at other resources in Sections 4c and 4d of the Report.