Bible in the Life of the Church project

Report from Australia – 1 - 2010

If I were to sum up this past year here it would have be something like – “Apart from a few committed people, Australian Anglicans don’t seem that interested in the Fifth Mark of Mission – and when they are, they struggle to use the Bible in working with the issues involved.”

So what brings me to such a conclusion? Partly it is a consequence of the ‘tyranny of distance’ that characterises national life, reinforced by the theological factionism among Anglicans – not only Sydney vs the rest, but increasingly across the metropolitan dioceses. Most regional ones are more coherent – they have to be! – but have few resources, and are dominated by decade-long drought.

But I needs give some account of my stewardship.

Regional group

The year began wth a meeting in January of a Regional Group made of eight Anglicans (five clergy, three lay, including a representative from Ridley and Trinity), recruited in the period following the Steering Group meeting at St Andrew’s House. The best thing about the meeting was people’s response to the Brueggemann exercise (emailed in and shared beforehand). Some realizations emerged, as follows:

- Family Bible reading, where experienced, had been helpful (no-one had found it ‘literalist’). But this is a tradition largely been left behind a generation back: the late 1950s - cf the Graham Crusades - were recalled as a time when society and church last felt ‘stable’.

- For those who grew up without such Bible knowledge, a good deal of contact in Sunday School and teenage years was programmatic, and did not encourage personal use.

- Encounters with the wider worlds of university / work / life challenges had mixed outcomes, from deeper / more integrated learning (e.g. through solid EU lectures, EFM, cell groups, being a Christian in isolated circumstances) through to struggle and stress.

- Theological education was experienced as giving a positive appreciation for the scriptures along with dealing with the tension between ‘head’ and ‘heart’. It was also recognized that the latter issue was related to people’s socialization, personality, culture-preferences etc.

As regards current Christian life / work, the parish priests noted that they rarely had the chance to hear others preach or use the scriptures. Several participants struggled with how to use the scriptures with their (grand)children – the dominance of ‘story-books’ rather than the scriptures themselves was one issue named.

The major shifts which have come about in Australian society since the mid-20th century – wars, the Depression, ‘teenage’ culture, colour TV, internet etc. – along with the steady shifting apart of church and society, have created widespread biblical illiteracy, and a growing gap between ‘thoughtful’ theology and ‘popular-faith’ Christianity. One conclusion drawn was that the Bible is not used a lot in many reflections on environmental issues, or somewhat simplistically if it were!

For a number of reasons, the group has not met again face-to-face, but email exchanges have continued, and an excellent article on ‘Christian Positions in Environmental Theology’ (attached) by member Richard Gijsbers continues to be developed: though this considers issues wider than how the Bible is used, the latter question is implicit in each of the seven positions outlined.

Three particular outcomes have resulted from Regional Group members’ contact:
a) **Fifth Mark of Mission survey**

A form was drafted and finalised via the Group to provide an easy way of gaining basic data on sermons / studies / discussions about the Fifth Mark (attached – this included the scripture passages prepared by the Steering Group.) Copies were sent to each Anglican college involved in preparing people for ministry (ordained, women’s and youth work) with a person letter to each Principal. The largest college, Moore, declined to participate on the grounds that their students – who are required to know and use the Bible far more than anywhere else – were too busy to have this additional task. All the others acknowledged the letter, one pointing to the work it had done with its diocese already (Canberra & Goulburn) and the others making positive noises.

I spoke to the project and survey at a joint gathering of Ridley and Trinity ordinands for field education, and both staff responsible have been positive and encouraging. So far so good – but the response rate was lower than I’d hoped (even though each college was offered $40 per student per semester to encourage response!).

One non-college response pointed me to a 1998 article in the Catholic magazine *Inform* on ‘Five Ways Australian Catholics use the Bible’ (reviewing a book of that name by Michael Trainor, a well-known RC educator/theologian here). Another found reading the passages helpful, but was puzzled because they could not find the Song of the Three in their Bible, which put them off. Summarising the responses received, my conclusion is that the Bible does not get much use when attention is given to matters or ecology - Genesis 1 and Romans 8 were the only texts mentioned.

b) **National and diocesan papers, magazine coverage, studies etc.**

Canberra & Goulburn, which includes the national capital as well as wide areas of south-east NSW, is the most active Australian diocese in this area, along with Perth. Its diocesan until recently was Bishop George Browning, who chairs the Anglican Communion Environmental Network.

Four national Anglican bodies have contributed to Fifth Mark issues:

(NB: ‘Commissions’ are permanent, ‘Working Groups’ have a fixed-term life.)

*Environment Working Group:*

Established in 2002, and chaired by Bp Browning, this produced the excellent *Green by Grace*, accepted General Synod 2004. The 2007 Synod passed a ‘Protection of the Environment Canon’. No specific reference is made in this to the Bible – it is a policy / action document. In moving its acceptance, Bp Browning said ‘The science is settled ... the theology is settled ... the morality is settled’, and I think this sums up pretty well where Australian Anglicans are at. (It is now up to each diocese to accept the Canon, and several have done so.)

*Green by Grace* starts by citing the five Marks of Mission, followed by a brief discussion of Genesis 1.26ff, responding to Lynn White etc., and Romans 8. It is perhaps distinctive in affirming strongly that authentic Christian responses to climate changes must hinge around our participation in God’s grace: if our action is seen as merely a human rescue effort for an endangered creation, greater problems later are likely to arise. After describing particular challenges in the Australasia-Pacific region, *Green by Grace* ties classic NT texts about Christian life to our response to God’s call. The emphases on grace and the NT may well be due to positive input from Sydney members, some of whose laity are key professionals in the field – but they are very welcome, whatever their source.

But *Green by Grace* is not as well known as it deserves, and in Sydney the sense among many Anglicans is that only evangelism really ‘counts’. As Liturgy Commission secretary, I had to draw attention to the fact that the document had disappeared from the national website …

APBA was commended soon after its authorisation by non-Anglican liturgists for its sensitivity to creation / environmental issues, though this was not (in my memory) a particular emphasis in its preparation – it was simply part of the air we breathe!

The Commission has been steadily releasing resources related to the environment in the years since, yet finding it quite difficult know just exactly what churches are looking for (assuaging guilt? praying in an ideology?), and in the process realising the difficulties in using the Bible in this area. It has been hugely helped by the detailed knowledge of the scriptures of two members, one of whom (Elizabeth Smith) can also draft quickly and effectively. As well as the ‘obvious’ texts Genesis 1-2, Romans 8 and Colossians 1, the Commission has increasingly used the Psalms (including laments) in this work.

Doctrine Commission:

The Commission prepared a set of essays on environmental issues, published in the May 2010 issue of St Mark’s Review. Each is followed by discussion questions.

The essays discuss key biblical passages / themes: ‘subdue or rule’ creation; sabbath; Johannine literature (Dorothy Lee, on the Reference Group); Romans 8; being human in creation; eucharistic ecology; Augustine and ecology; Christ and creation; Trinity and ecology. All are professional and well-footnoted, and all conclude that humankind bears the large responsibility for creation’s despoiling and that active and thoughtful response is part of Christian obedience to God – but the nuanced uses of scripture seen here would seem to be well beyond what the average Anglican does. It is interesting that three of the four biblical essays come from Sydney members, while the ‘theological’ ones are by others, whose ‘churchmanship’ ranges from evangelical to broad.

Public Affairs Commission:

In February 2009 this group prepared a paper, ‘Key issues for Australi’s future in the global context’, which has been distributed to dioceses. The main issues it takes up mostly relate to the Fifth Mark – population growth, biodiversity, greenhouse emissions, social impact of environmental issues, global security and justice: in each case close attention is given to context, supportive documentation is supplied and Action recommendations are made. The whole is preceded by brief ‘Theological Considerations’ citing a speech at Lambeth 2008 deemed to give sufficient basis for its recommendations: the Bible is not used.

Grafton Diocese (regional coastal NSW) has taken also taken an sustained interest: it is set in Australia’s most ‘green’ region, and former diocesan, Bishop Philip Huggins, has had a long-term interest. Grafton has an active Environment Commission, two of whose members produced a first-rate report in 2006 on what is happening in England, leading to a user-friendly 60-page Guidebook for parish use. This has sections on land, water, waste, energy and transport, in each case concluding with an Audit template, and links to websites. But … the only scriptural text referred to is Genesis 1, the vast preponderance of content being good practical advice.

The metropolitan Dioceses (Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne, Sydney and Perth – the latter hosting the GS Working Group) have likewise taken interest in the issues for some years. Each has an Environment Committee / Commission making policy recommendations and producing study material (largely prepared by theological college staff, PG students and professionals in the area). Across the national church, particular parishes have taken up the topic, usually because the parish priest or key parishioners see it as a burning issue.

The Registry where I am based in a regional diocese, receives all our diocesan papers: each has been checked for articles related to the Fifth Mark of Mission or using scripture. The metropolitan
monthlies (except Sydney) and most of the regional monthlies (seven dioceses have quarterlies or less) printed an article from myself about the project. But little else on the Fifth Mark has been in them beyond short reports on practical action: climate change this has been a fading issue this year – it was near absent in the 2010 federal election, partly due to sustained querying of global warming in the Murdoch press, partly due to the first average winter rains for over a decade and then spring floods in eastern Australia.

My article in the diocesan papers drew a few positive comments, though people from several regional dioceses agreed to be correspondents. The following two articles are typical of diocesan input in 2010:

*Anglican Encounter* (Newcastle diocese – NSW regional): ‘Care of the Earth’ front page brief article, with two short ‘practical action’ pieces inside: Genesis 1 is alluded to, Ps 104 ‘Response’ and Col 1.16 are cited, but no actual use is made of the Bible beyond these ‘support’ quotations.

*Anglican News* (Canberra & Goulburn – Canberra and NSW regional) reported the appointment of a new Chair for their Diocesan Commission for the Environment. While this indicated a continued pro-active stance by that diocese, no mention was made of the Bible.

**In sum, most Australian theological/biblical work on the Fifth Mark was done a decade or more ago – most Anglicans would agree with Bp Browning that ‘the theology is settled’, and the issue is how rather than whether to proceed.** But it is worth observing that more recently, the emphasis has swung in the ‘higher level’ academic documentation towards seeing ecological action in the light of the new creation (the long-term influence of eschatology in Sydney, plus that of Pannenberg and NT Wright?) as well as our being accountable to God for the present one (the motif more commonly seen in parish-level material).

This said, that most Australian Anglicans believe we must engage in practical action would seem to be a viewpoint driven as much by general theological/spiritual perspectives derived from broad community consensus as from specific biblical teaching. Those who identify as ‘evangelical’ – embracing a wider range of politics than a generation back – are more likely to be shaped by biblical data, the main effect being in seeing the Fifth Mark of Mission more definitely to evangelism, because of the need to face (especially corporate) sin.

The very success of awakening Anglican Christian awareness to ecological concerns has thus perhaps taken the edge off actual use of the scriptures in relation to this issue.

**c) ISCAST weekend**

The best thing to happen this year, however, has come from the initiative of Richard Gijsbers, whom I had asked to join the Regional Group knowing his long-term struggle with being a forester and Christian (as evidenced by his paper). He is closely involved with ISCAST (the Institute for the Study of Christianity in an Age of Science and Technology – website www.iscast.org.au).

Some ISCAST leaders – who include several Anglican lay professionals along with other Christians, including a UCA theologian and a Baptist minister – saw great promise in the project. They have organised a weekend (October 29-31) on ‘The use and abuse of the Bible in science and technology’, with Professor Gareth Jones (Otago University) as keynote speaker, and a wide range of submitted papers. My role was to be a correspondent member, and arrange scripture readings to be read before each session, and then a Sunday Service of the Word. I will be able to report on this weekend at the Steering Group meeting in November in Durban.
Looking ahead

In the midst of this, however, there has been increasing interest in our next topic – gay issues. This was in part due to 2010 being a General Synod year (at which Clare Amos was present), and the expectation that this topic might figure on the agenda (as far as I know, it did not).

At the diocesan level, few if any synods would pass a ‘non-conservative’ motion on gay issues, but few are likely to support a ‘traditional’ one either, though Sydney takes an official ‘no gays’ line for clergy. On the ‘progressive’ side, a local branch of Changing Attitudes began in 2008, based in Melbourne. The group asked for papers to be written on various scripture passages – but though I understand some have been prepared, they have not as yet been loaded on its website.

As with the Fifth Mark, in previous years studies have been prepared on homosexuality, with close attention to the scriptures, especially in Faithfulness and Fellowship: essays from the Doctrine Commission, with a separate Study Guide (2001); Homosexuality and the Bible was the topic of the Moore College lectures a few years back; and a collection of 2005 lectures at Ridley College, Whose Homosexuality? Which Authority? was published by ATF in 2006.

We are all well aware that there is no shortage of texts on this topic – to what extent they reflect grass-roots Anglican opinion and biblical usage it is hard to say! But then that is what our work is about.

Charles Sherlock

Bible in the Life of the Church project

Australian Anglicans and the Bible – a reflection

Report 2 - 2012

A somewhat generalised overview

Major shifts have come about in Australian society since the mid-20th century: the Depression, successive wars – as Australians have fought in WW2, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, East Timor and now Afghanistan – the emergence of ‘teenage’ sub-cultures, ongoing large-scale immigration, the revival of indigenous communities, colour TV, the internet, mobile phones etc. The Catholic-Protestant sectarianism which scarred the nation until the 1960s has faded away, but partly as church and society have shifted steadily apart over the past half-century. Widespread biblical illiteracy, and a growing gap between ‘thoughtful’ theology and ‘popular-faith’ Christianity, has been the outcome. This sad claim (now a commonplace observation in both the general and Christian media) is supported by the work done on the Project in 2009-2011, though evidence is also given of high capacity for effective and informed use of the scriptures among theologically-informed Australian Anglicans (both clergy and laypeople).

Australian Anglicans generally hear the scriptures in much the same way as other Anglicans, through the Sunday lectionary.\textsuperscript{1} Since 1977 this has been based on the ‘Three-

\textsuperscript{1} An overview of the Australian Anglican liturgical scene, including the distinctive influence of the Diocese of Sydney, can be found in Charles Sherlock, ‘The Anglican Church of Australia’, Oxford Companion to the Book of Common Prayer (Oxford; OUP, 2006) pp 324-332.
Year’ system coming out of Vatican II, revised in 1995 along the lines of the Revised
Common Lectionary. Educational materials which support these readings range from local
authors’ commentaries – especially on the Gospels – to special Lent and Advent studies
produced by mission agencies. The extent to which the public reading of the scriptures
engages people’s living as Christians is hard to assess, but interest levels appear to be
high, and the standard of reading aloud is generally good.

The major exception to this pattern today is most congregations in the Diocese of Sydney,
and others elsewhere whose leaders identify the parish concerned as ‘evangelical’. In
these, usual practice is ‘Bible teaching’ from a sequential reading of a biblical book. Done
well, this method has the clear benefit of congregations becoming more informed as to the
content and application of the scriptures; its weaknesses can include an overly didactic
ethos, over-emphasis on the epistles, and setting aside the rhythm of the Christian year.

At the personal level, many Australian Anglican clergy and some lay people use the Daily
Lectionary issued annually by the national publisher, Broughton Books. This covers the
New Testament each year in full, and the Old Testament (except for genealogies and some
cultic regulations) and Apocrypha over two years; the Psalter is read on a two-month
cycle. Many Anglicans – especially laypeople of evangelical conviction – use daily reading
notes such as from Scripture Union, Every Day with Jesus and the like. During Lent, a
significant proportion of parishioners will engage in group Bible studies, though in most
parishes this typically involves less than half of regular worshippers. It must be
acknowledged that many regular worshippers do not encounter the scriptures apart from
hearing them in Sunday worship.

2010 – The Fifth Mark of Mission and the use of the Bible
[see Report 1]

2011 – The Fourth Mark of Mission and the use of the Bible

The theological field placement exercise was again offered, but received insufficient
responses to draw conclusions. This, together with the scan of diocesan papers revealed
similar conclusions to those found in 2010, namely that social action for justice is widely
seen as a necessary expression of God’s mission. In 2011, this area of mission was
dominated by ongoing concerns about Commonwealth Government policies on asylum
seekers, and at state level, immediate and systemic responses to the disastrous triple
floods in Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia. Yet beyond the ‘obvious’ Bible
passages from Micah 6 and Luke 4, little appeal was made to the scriptures directly.

So as to test ordination candidates’ attitudes to and use of the scriptures, a day-long day
was held in Melbourne in February. This drew around 60% of Victorian ordinands (with
another 20% giving solid excuses), with good representation from both Ridley and Trinity,
and roughly equal numbers of men and women. A show of hands revealed that about a
third had grown up in a Christian household, a third came to faith as adults and a third
experienced beginnings somewhere in between.

Two of the best known are the three-volume works by (Anglican) Peta Sherlock, Inside the Sunday
Gospels (Harper Collins) and (Roman Catholic) Frank Moloney, This is the Gospel of the Lord (St Paul’s).
The Anglican Board of Mission – Australia circulates Lent and Advent studies each year, written by a
wide range of Anglicans.

See Charles Sherlock, ‘Reading Decently and in Order’ included elsewhere in this volume.
In the morning, an hour was given, in college- and gender-mixed groups of three, for the Brueggemann exercise. Morning Prayer readings were taken from Genesis 38, Psalm 73 and Luke 6 (three of the nominated texts from the Steering Committee), used for small group reflection (facilitated by myself and a Regional Group member). Differently-membered groups then worked on either unjust economic or unjust gender structures; after lunch the other perspective was considered. Short plenary sessions before lunch and at the close drew out major responses. The day ‘worked’ in that it helped the diverse group of ordinands open up to one another, and appreciate that all take the scriptures seriously, whatever their theological viewpoint. All participants were later sent an evaluation / response form, and almost all returned this to the Coordinator.

At the end of the day, a few students commented to me that they were surprised that all present seemed to be onside re unjust economic structures, but less so on gender ones. In relation to attitudes towards and use of the Bible, these factors were seen as significant:

- the transition from their family or initial church community context to the wider church (e.g. through a youth camp, student ministry or even their field placement);
- mentors, church leaders and teachers;
- awareness of ‘battles’ about the scriptures and their interpretation (whether shifting people towards more ‘conservative’ or ‘progressive’ perspectives).

In moving among the groups, I and the other Regional Group member – who is involved in Melbourne’s field education theological reflection groups – sensed that the students were coming to realise (if they did not already) that the issues in relating biblical contexts to those of our day are more complex than is commonly presumed. Further, there was growing awareness that economic, gender and other structural issues cannot easily be disentangled. The day not only yielded useful data for the project, but eased some tensions and built bridges among the ordinands.

**Conclusion**

Australian Anglicans do not appear to be all that different from other parts of the English-speaking Commonion in relation to their use of the Bible. Those who have experienced formal theological education – which today includes significant numbers of lay people – are more nuanced in their use of the scriptures than others, and well aware of the issues surrounding their interpretation. Those Anglicans who identify with the evangelical tradition – most notably across Sydney diocese – are distinctive in giving ‘Bible teaching’ the highest priority in both their ecclesial and personal practice.

Before concluding, it is important to note that, prior to and during this project, a number of studies have been prepared by Australian Anglicans on the ecclesial status of GLBT Christians. Given the Australian context, these studies have included close attention to the scriptures. Four in particular should be noted:

*Faithfulness and Fellowship* is a collection of essays from the members of the Doctrine Commission, covering scriptural, theological and philosophical perspectives, prepared

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4 Melbourne has since the 1960s been the most positive Australian diocese in support for women to be ordained in Australia, and appointed a woman as one of its three regional bishops in 2008. In recent years, however, a small ‘conservative’ reaction has risen among some younger evangelical male clergy, and was represented on the day.
with the 2001 General Synod in view (these take place every three years); a separate Study Guide was later prepared and published by Broughton;

*Homosexuality and the Bible* was the topic of the 2003 Moore College lectures, with detailed analysis of the biblical passages, coming to ‘conservative’ conclusions;

*Whose Homosexuality? Which Authority?* (ATF, 2006) is a collection of lectures given (from diverse viewpoints) at Ridley College, with attention to key scriptural passages alongside experiential perspectives and scientific data;

*Five Uneasy Pieces* (ATF, 2011) consists of five essays paying close attention to particular biblical passages, written by Australian Anglican scholars open to a ‘progressive’ perspective. The Foreword is by Mr Justice Michael Kirby, Australia’s best-known High Court judge and life-long Sydney Anglican, who has been consistently open about his 42-year-long same-sex relationship.

To what extent these academic works reflect grass-roots Australian Anglican opinion and biblical usage it is hard to say! If Letters to the Editor and articles in the diocesan magazines are taken as evidence, then while we are a long way from resolution of the formal issues of same-sex blessing and ordination, significant numbers of congregations would appear to be ‘gay-friendly’ without becoming ideological.