I. Members Present:

Chair: The Rev. Dr. Robert MacSwain (University of the South)

Regional Representatives: The Rev. Dr. Ellen Bradshaw Aitken (McGill University); The Rev. Stacy Alan (Brent House, the Episcopal Campus Ministry at the University of Chicago); The Rev. Dr. John Goldingay (Fuller Theological Seminary); Dr. Willis Jenkins (Yale Divinity School); The Rev. Dr. Grant LeMarquand (Trinity School for Ministry); The Rt. Rev. Mark MacDonald (Anglican Church of Canada); and Dr. Marion Taylor (Wycliffe College, Toronto).

Absent: The Rev. Dr. Kortright Davis (Howard University)

II. Stated Concerns and Comments About the Project (summarized from all present members of the Group without attempting to identify or harmonize differences):

- The geographical distribution of the Anglican Communion is not really represented in the six Regional Groups. Does this reflect a certain “social construction” of the Communion—i.e., those with whom we want to work? Also, in regard to the North American group itself, we’re all English-speaking—what about Hispanic/Latino or Francophone Anglicans/Episcopalians?
- Whose agenda is this project supposed to serve? We (that is, the Communion more broadly as well as in North America more specifically) are all across the board on the topic of the function and interpretation of Scripture. The people who (for whatever reason) are not in this discussion are those who have not been primarily shaped by modernism.
- It’s difficult to defend the 5th Mark of Mission from Scripture if you are looking for a proof-text rather than the grand narrative. But we (in North America) face a crisis of Biblical literacy, not just in our wider post-Christian culture, but even with seminary students who buy their first Bible a week before starting their Master of Divinity course. The grand narrative is completely lost in the wider culture, and increasingly in the Church.
- The whole idea that there are multiple levels of meaning of Scripture has also been lost, by both “liberals” and “conservatives”—both reduce the text to a single univocal meaning.
- There are issues of mutual trust: some people in North America feel that they are not being respected by the Communion, and so are hesitant to participate in the project.
- Despite the given impression that the section on Scripture in The Windsor Report has been received without controversy, the Anglican Association of Biblical
Scholars recently discussed *The Windsor Report*’s understanding and treatment of Scripture (with Tom Wright present at the meeting), and was highly critical of it.

- The very attempt to “apply” the text of Scripture to some contemporary problem is perhaps itself problematic. E.g., monastics don’t apply the text—they live in it.
- In light of the current situation in the Anglican Communion, what precisely is “the Church” supposed to refer to—i.e., in “The Bible in the Life of the Church.” What construction of this concept/group is operative in the minds of those who are running this project?
- We’re all academics and leaders, and thus not necessary representative of the laity.
- Hard to focus on the hermeneutics when the substantive issues are so important.
- Undergraduate students wanted to engage with Scripture, but not with the specific questions provided. Specific readings from Scripture were obviously selected with a purpose, but it not always obvious to the goals or focus of the case study.
- There was nothing explicitly about *liturgy* in this project, but for many if not most Anglicans the primary engagement of Scripture is through liturgy and preaching, not through formal or intentional Bible-study.
- Our approach to the Bible is deeply in flux. Contemporary undergraduate students are aware of the history of harmful interpretation of Scripture, and don’t know how to appropriate it.
- Most people in North American and European culture are used to treating the Bible as something you can only use productively when you apply it to your previously formed conclusions: not to get clarity on contested issues. What was interesting about this project was not asking “how is this authoritative,” but “how is Scripture authoritative.” (Thus, an implicit view of Scripture that this project might bring to the surface?)
- Our personal stories indicate our experience of the transformative power of the text. Perhaps a better question than the *authority* of the text is the *power* of the text. Or, the authority of Scripture as it functions in *community*.
- Both using the Bible as a weapon and “de-fanging” it are unforgivable and blasphemous.
- The same thing that keeps contemporary North American/European people from seeing what’s in the Bible keeps them from seeing what’s in the world (e.g., the ecological crisis)—the same cultural captivity and alienation blinds them to both of these realities. We have lost the capacity (or the time) to hear what certain people (e.g., indigenous culture-groups) are trying to say.

### III. Summaries of Specific Local Engagements with Case Study 1:

**Ellen Bradshaw Aitken (Montréal, Canada)**

Preliminary questions: First, what are the implications for this project if we start from the perspective of *hearing* scripture, rather than *reading* it, and doing so in a liturgical context? That approach would arguably better reflect the “Bible in the life of the Church.” Such liturgically-contextualized texts have associations—e.g., hearing a lesson in conjunction with a specific
collect—leading to a general vision of the cosmos. Second, what is the implicit hermeneutical method of the given case study? For example, what’s all this about “culture”—isn’t Scripture (also) “culture”? Frustration with the fourth question (“What is the Spirit saying to the Church”)—too simplistic, too direct a view of revelation. Likewise, to properly understand a text like the one from 2 Peter we need more contextual background—we need something coming between just our personal experience and the text. In short, although Ellen and Mark MacDonald may agree on the importance of engaging the text in the context of communal worship, her approach is very different to the one expressed by Mark (see below). We need to recognize that contemporary cosmology has led to a new context for Christian eschatology (Kathryn Tanner).

**Stacy Alan (Chicago, USA)**

Previously developed what she calls the “Mosaic Project” with her students as a method to engage the Biblical text: (1) pick a text to discuss; (2) ask the question, “How does it resonate with me?”; (3) bring in an artifact that has some connection to the text for you (art, music, poem, video, etc.); and then (4) share this artifact with the group. This communal engagement with both the text and an “external associated object” made students feel safe and comfortable to approach the text. This approach has an obvious hermeneutical implication, in that it helps people understand the text. But it also allows them to explore the world of the text, not just “problem solving” but experiencing it, even in its troubling or terrifying aspects. She will apply this approach to the case study and report the results.

**John Goldingay (Pasadena, California, USA)**

Convened a group of Fuller Seminary students comprised of both Episcopalians and those who have left the Episcopal Church to join another Anglican province. However, those differences did not seem to matter for this project—i.e., their theological and ecclesial differences were irrelevant when it came to engaging with these texts and questions. See the attached document for the results of their sessions. The practical implications of the study were summarized as follows: “Consume less, travel less, use less energy; Grow our own food; Cut the size of all churches to 100 to cut travel; turn the parking lot into a vegetable garden; Eat less meat, even be vegetarian; stop having church BBQs; Align ourselves with ecological reality – for instance, not building in flood plains or in chaparral areas because flood and fire are part of the ecosystem; Get experience of cultures that have not gone as far astray as us; Lower our standard of living; The church’s job is not merely to engage in advocacy but to be an alternative community, modeling what living with creation means so as to attract the world.”

**Willis Jenkins (New Haven, Connecticut, USA)**
Engaged 7 Episcopalians he has taught (or taught with) at Yale Divinity School, who are now involved in sustainability issues, in an e-mail conversation and kept it focused on the 5th Mark of Mission, not the Anglican Communion background. He also added specific questions of his own which led to their various responses. His additional questions were as follows: “How do these scriptures illustrate or complicate that [mark of] mission? Maybe you have preached one of these? Heard some verse of it used in cultural reference to caring or not-caring? Think that it confuses or suppresses Christian response to the mission? How do you think these or any scriptures are used in the best part of the everyday life of the church’s renewing mission?” And his concluding reflections included the following: “I wonder if we should think about how Anglicans present scripture in self-conscious readings for the 5th Mark, or how scripture shapes all the ways we think about our world and its distresses, or how scripture could renew our interest in the world around us, or how scripture figures in our debates with our neighbors. What does it mean to read scripture in public in an era of global problems facing a pluralist public? How to read scripture for and from within a common life that is meaningfully witnessing to the goodness of creation or God’s love for all creatures?” See attached document for more detail.

Grant LeMarquand (Ambridge, Pennsylvania, USA)

Brought the project with its Biblical texts and questions to the conclusion of a class he was teaching on Bible and Mission. The class raised very similar questions to those listed in Section II above. E.g., an African student asked, “Are they going to tell us that the problem is that Africans are primitives who don’t know how to read the Bible?” Grant next intends to bring this project to a parish group, but as it specifically relates to God, creation, and the church. He showed the Regional Group a video from the Canadian singer and activist Bruce Cockburn—“If a tree falls”—about clear-cutting rainforests. This brought home the message that a rainforest is not just trees (and their consequences for our air and temperature and rainfall), but it is also all of the animals who live there. Grant then asked how much of a lead or lens would he need to give to the parish group. Does the Bible have the power as the Word of God to speak prophetically to people and cause them to change, or do our prior assumptions and practices determine the outcome / interpretation? What do we do with our experts in all this?

Mark MacDonald (Canadian Indigenous Bishop)

Stressed that it is important to understand the common approach and attitude of Indigenous Peoples: in the Navajo conception, for example, Truth is seen as a mountain with multiple angles and perspective; you can only see it properly from a minimum of four sides. Sacred truth—that is, about the universe and about God’s relation to creation—needs all four directions. It has a necessary complexity that implies an interpretive humility. This approach to truth is also applied to Scripture. There is a truth inherent in these sacred words, but you can’t
speak about it or engage with it respectfully and adequately without all four directions. Hence, if and when First Nation people engage in these conversations, they are careful not to respond to quickly. When it comes to scripture, many communities practice this in the structure of their gatherings. They begin by reading the text three times and, with each reading a question is asked: (1) what stands out for you, (2) what do you hear God saying, (3) what is God calling us to do? It is believed that God is present when you engage the text, God is actively involved and speaks when the community engages with the text. Mark said that he has 30 years’ experience of what his people would say about these specific texts, but asking them to “study” and discuss these texts outside a communal worship gathering would be foreign to them. He proposed that Western education—i.e., the context that creates the very concept of “bible study”—is a detriment to people’s capacity to see sacred truth and divine presence in Scripture, as we have been educated out of believing that God is present and speaks to God’s people. We need not a method but an attitude.

Marion Taylor (Toronto, Canada)

Regularly leads a small-group Bible study in an Anglican congregation (the Church of the Resurrection in Toronto) composed of twelve people who meet before the Sunday morning service. It includes parents with small children (mostly in their 30s and 40s), with very diverse backgrounds, professions and educations. They spent 8 weeks on the assigned texts and questions, 1 set per week. They got lost in some texts, and a clear contrast emerged between those with theological education and those without. Certain words became topics of discussion. For example, in Genesis, what precisely does “dominion” mean, with the literal sense contrasted with other senses, etc. The inclusion of the apocryphal Song of the Three Young Men caused some consternation, and led to discussions about Biblical canon and authorship. After engaging with the texts, people said, “Yes, this theme is more important [in Scripture] than we thought.” A good study that raised lots of issues. To bring a text into conversation with a principle was a new experience for them. Why don’t we know more about these five marks of mission?

IV. Examples of Methodology Within the Regional Group

- Stacy’s “mosaic” approach
- Mark’s First Nations’ approach
- Marion’s canonical criticism
- Ellen’s critical-feminist approach
- Not present (?): Hermeneutic of rejection / charismatic / Ignatian / lectio divina…

V. Emerging Principles of Biblical Interpretation
• Contrast between academic (scholarly / critical) approaches to Scripture and non-academic approaches
• Assumption that the Bible is properly read in community
• Breadth of Anglicanism has been heard in our group: Reformed, Anglo-Catholic, evangelical, feminist…
• Contested place of “culture” (as a singular concept, and its relation to Scripture)
• Place of the received interpretations of these texts in the tradition
• Implications of multiple levels of meaning
• Role of scholars / experts/ “elders”
• Read Scripture to challenge our perspectives, not just affirm them
• What happens when Scripture is read or heard? Place of contact / encounter
• Don’t just describe the Bible in human terms: how are we addressed by God in Scripture?
• Need to approach Scripture with caution and humility: not “the Bible clearly states…” but rather “it seems to me that…”. God’s communication through Scripture is ambiguous, complex, difficult to grasp, obscure, and parabolic ACCORDING TO SCRIPTURE ITSELF. The teaching of Scripture is clear enough on many levels—clear enough to give our lives for, but not clear enough to take someone else’s life.
• Creative tension between directness of encounter through the Biblical text and the whole world of the worship experience—music, architecture, liturgy, sacrament.
• Why do we read scripture? To solve our problems? To cultivate holiness? To live in the glory of God? Our “problems” are in part culturally-constructed or contextually-determined. To even conceive of the earth as an object of human management is inconceivable outside a contemporary setting.
• Recognize and identify the canon within the canon.

VI. Second Case Study: Brainstorming Possible Themes

• NOT HUMAN SEXUALITY
• Second coming / final judgment / day of the Lord / four last things
• How to die well
• Poverty
• Violence
• Authority
• The cursing psalms
• A specific text: Philemon, The Sermon on the Mount…
• How God speaks to us and how we hear God
• More intentional use of Brueggemann Exercise
• Slavery (cf. 19th century debates)
• The difficulty of understanding Scripture (as attested in Scripture itself)
• Legal material (cf. poverty, violence, Council of Jerusalem…)

Robert MacSwain
“The Bible in the Life of the Church”
North American Regional Group: Report 2
The School of Theology, University of the South, Sewanee, Tennessee, USA
13-14 January 2012

I. Participants

Chair: The Rev. Dr. Robert MacSwain (University of the South)

Members Present: The Rev. Stacy Alan (Brent House: The Episcopal Campus Ministry of the University of Chicago), The Rev. Dr. Joseph Crockett (American Bible Society—visitor), The Rev. Dr. John Goldingay (Fuller Theological Seminary), Mr. Stephen Lyon (Project Coordinator—visitor), The Rev. Dr. Myron Penner (Christ Church, Edmundson, Alberta), The Rev. Dr. Carolyn Sharp (Yale University Divinity School), Dr. Marion Taylor (Wycliffe College, Toronto)

Absent: The Rev. Dr. Ellen Bradshaw Aitken (McGill University), The Rev. Dr. Grant LeMarquand (Trinity School of Ministry), The Rev. Dr. Kortright Davis (Howard University Divinity School), The Rt. Rev. Mark Macdonald (Anglican Church of Canada).

II. Reports from North America on Case Study 2

Stacy Alan (USA):

She continued Case Study 2 with the same ‘Mosaic Project’ strategy as before: University of Chicago students, both undergraduates and postgraduates, were given a Scripture text ahead of time, were asked to bring an artifact (a piece of music, art, text, video…) and then discuss how / why that artifact relates to the text and illuminates it for them. Some of the students involved had never before done Bible study, or were afraid of Bible study, or alienated by Bible study. These university students are extremely diverse: straight, gay, bisexual, transgender, liberal, evangelical, Jewish, atheist, ambivalent—but all very smart, very well-educated, mostly white, with English as their first-language. In the safe environment of Brent House, this led to intense engagement with the biblical texts of the second case study.

Alan noted that many of her students are afraid to engage with Scripture because they fear it is going to confirm what the fundamentalists say after all, that it will undermine their deepest convictions. But she also notes that others were from more conservative backgrounds and thus more familiar with the Bible. In general, the students were able to engage the primary text, as text. After all, that is what they are being trained to do at the university. But to get to the theological meta-questions—that is, what does it mean to say that this is a sacred text, or our normative text, or that God speaks to us through this text?—was more difficult.
Alan’s participation led to self-reflection, asking herself, ‘Where am I being called as a pastor to this community in light of our involvement in this project?’ The fear of engaging with Scripture is palpable in her context, not least among Episcopal priests who won’t engage the text from the pulpit. This fear and reluctance indicates the widespread ‘de-sacralization’ of the biblical text; but perhaps also allows for the post-modern ‘de-contextualization’ of the text: that is, here is a text that stands alone before me, so how do I respond to it? Having read Ellen Aitken’s article in Anglican Theological Review, Alan sought for a metaphor that describes how we engage critically with the biblical text while still being faithful to it, and proposed that it is like dealing with a difficult family member, one who makes us angry, but with whom we still remain in relationship, who is part of our narrative, and from whom we can still receive wisdom. She also noted that in contemporary North America, the Christian Church has now has great competition for ‘meaning-making,’ and much of it comes from popular culture. Important things are going on outside and around the Church, including unexpected engagements with Scripture, that we need to take account of.

Myron Penner (Canada):

Christ Church is one of two larger Anglican parishes in mid-town Edmonton. It has an ‘old money’ origin, but now the neighbourhood is becoming more ethnically-diverse, with single-parent families, etc., and the parish is starting to look like the area around it. It could be described as ‘liberal-minded’ but not ‘progressive’. The parish is divided over the issue of same-sex relationships, but the topic generally does not come up. There is a growing group of young adults.

Prior to this project, there was no organized Bible study in the parish. A 72-year-old man told Penner he thought it was a wonderful idea, as he never studied the Bible before! Penner formed two groups, one which met mid-week and one on Sunday afternoon. He had about 30 regular participants in total, with ages ranging from late 40s to 70s. They used the provided project syllabus as a template. In general, Penner found a high level of biblical illiteracy—most had never done a Bible study before—combined with a high level of liberal arts education. This made for excellent discussions, and those who participated had a very positive response to the project.

Penner provided basic background information into biblical genre, context, etc. The groups focused on the narrative voice of the text. Generally people were quite surprised at what they found, and how relevant the texts were for present day. The women mostly found the gender-related texts empowering to women: when you looked at the text and what it was doing, the plight of women in a patriarchal society was highlighted sympathetically. In the economic justice texts the groups were very surprised at how central this was to God’s concerns in the Bible, and how difficult it would be to practice the biblical teachings. ‘We would have to completely reorder our society!’ In general, Christians do not practice the radical commitment to social justice in the texts. This led to serious conviction, but also a sense that they did not know what to do with this.

Penner’s reflections on the study: There was a little bit of push-back about the built-in conclusions or outcomes of the study’s combination of selected texts and provided questions, but not much. These biblical texts in the liturgy and lectionary are baffling; people can’t understand them. They enjoyed getting into the texts. But they also experienced a fundamental tension, at least in this Anglican context: that is, in their minds, the Church ‘is the priest,’ the priest does the work and tells the people what to believe about the Bible, etc. The laity are not trained or encouraged how to think about these things: everything we do on Sunday tells them they don’t matter. So in this study they are now asked to think for themselves, but they have never been asked to do so before. Average Anglicans in Canada don’t read Scripture. What passes for ‘The Bible in the Life of the Church’ consists of a homily that may or may not be connected to the lectionary readings. Citing Charles Taylor’s concept of the ‘breach of naivety,’ Penner stated that most Canadian Anglicans seem unable to get to Ricoeur’s ‘second naivety’: that is, they are firmly stuck in modernity, and thus can’t accept the text as it is, but have to refer it to background knowledge, secondary literature, expert opinion, etc.

Carolyn Sharp (USA):

Sharp held her study group at St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church in New Haven, Connecticut. This is a very small African American parish in a poor and crime-ridden urban neighbourhood. Her group consisted of 8-10 African American and Afro Caribbean women, mostly between 40 and 70 years of age; Sharp was the only white member of the group, and one of the youngest. Sharp noted that the various biblical narratives were seen with immediacy and prophetic accuracy as speaking directly to the reality of these women’s lives. On the other hand, any knowledge of and curiosity regarding the historical context of these narratives seemed completely absent. Sharp commented that she needs to think more deeply about that, and to ponder why it is the case. She noted the great disjunction between her race, class, education, and professional experience and that of the other women in the group, but also how they grew close together over the course of the study: these various barriers were overcome in the context of common Christian identity and shared study of Scripture.

Briefly, some of the texts: In the story and Judah and Tamar, the theme of women’s reliance on men who do not contribute was relevant to some of the members of the group. In regard to Proverbs 31, the group ‘claimed’ the valorous woman: they ‘knew’ her and invoked living and dead grandmothers and matriarchs as examples of this way of life. In regard to the stories from Ezra and Nehemiah, Sharp observed that avoiding the historical context and authorial intent can create an ‘artificial naturalness’ not a ‘real naturalness’—sometimes these texts are about someone else’s life, not about our life! Likewise, in regard to Ruth, Sharp dissents from the consensus reading and instead reads the subtext as a satire on David and David’s lineage. Ruth is a ‘scheming Moabite’ who seduces and finagles her way into taking Judah’s stuff, David is thus an outsider. However, in the context of this Bible study she did not feel free to share that reading, as it was so contrary to the other women’s understanding of Ruth, which was important to them as an example of a single woman who beats the odds to achieve stability and security. Sharp wondered if this was a failure of courage on her part, or pastorally
appropriate.

Sharp then shared three personal convictions about encountering the Word of God in the Bible:

1) We dare not reduce Scriptural meaning to content alone (and cannot reduce Scripture to a canon-within-a-canon);
2) We have to resist complacency and smugness in our interpretations;
3) We should be dissatisfied with texts of ‘orientation’ (Brueggemann) and more compelled by texts of ‘disorientation’ and ‘re-orientation’—that is, Scripture presents a constant challenge to us for continual reformation (cf. 2 above).

John Goldingay (USA)

Goldingay continued his approach from Case Study 1 and did the second case study with Fuller Seminary students. Fuller is the largest evangelical Protestant seminary in North America, with approximately 4300 students in multiple degree programmes and various sites. For his group, Goldingay again convened a number of Anglican students, some of whom belong to the Episcopal Church and others of whom belong to other Anglican churches, whether based in North America or not. As a general comment, Goldingay stated that Hans Frei’s *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (1974) is a seminal text for understanding our culture’s relation to Scripture. What follows are some comments made by students in his group, initially reported without commentary:

- The Bible tells stories about a cultural context that is patriarchal; the women can be treated as objects. But the stories portray women often working within the system and sometimes subverting that culture. A number of the passages testify to the inventiveness and resourcefulness of the women and to the responsibility they exercise. There’s no downplaying of the patriarchy or even agonizing over it; it’s just the way it is.
- We have to be wary of assuming that the values of our culture are necessarily right because we are ‘obviously enlightened.’ We are then in danger of being stuck in our own value system. It is when the Bible presumes attitudes that are different from ours that it becomes interesting and important, not merely when it validates attitudes that we are inclined to take anyway.
- Why does Genesis 38 come where it does? It is part of a wider story and a key aspect of its significance is that it shows how Judah is a flawed character. This would speak to the later clan of Judah. Such considerations draw our attention to the fact that we are interested in the story for different reasons from those that led to its being told and included in Genesis. Our approaching it because of our interest in gender questions is not wrong, but we need to be wary of absolutizing our agenda.
- The Tamar story shows how sexual abuse bleeds out; its effects are not confined to the immediate victim. The presence of the story helps us recognize its reality (e.g., in church life) and thus to deal with these issues—except that in practice we often operate in light of the dictum the story quotes = ‘Don’t tell anyone!’ It also helps us to sympathize with people who have had shameful things happen to them. The story humanizes the Bible; the Bible helps us face how people actually are. There are few new sins. But the trouble is we don’t read the Bible, and
particularly stories of this kind.

- The contrast between Galatians 3 and 1 Timothy 2 raises sharply questions about how we deal with Scriptures we like and Scriptures we don’t like. Is Galatians radical and universal and does it therefore give us a basis for effectively ignoring 1 Timothy? Do we maximize the significance of Paul’s speaking in terms of ‘I do not permit”—that is, is he saying what he does, but not implying that everyone must, or is Paul not someone who would underplay the significance of his view in this way, so that he expects people to follow his example?
- Do we read too much into Galatians passage because it can be made to support our views? Or does the stress in 1 Timothy on one God and one mediator imply that it also sees itself as radical and universal? In this connection note also the way it quotes scripture to support its point, though the way it quotes scripture raises problems in itself.
- Given that 1 Timothy is in Scripture, what do we learn from it? How do we treat it as having authority? How do we submit to it? (We assume that the possibility that it was not written by Paul doesn’t make much difference to this question.) Is it because it models the need to be adaptable, not to insist on being radical when it would cause too much trouble in a social context? Does this approach help us with the question of taking different attitudes to same-sex relations in (e.g.) the West and Africa?
- Or do we simply say it’s wrong? More than one of us have heard Episcopalian preachers simply say that the text they were presented with by the lectionary is wrong. Can we make such a statement without having turned ourselves into the authority?

Goldingay concluded that his evangelical Anglican / Episcopal students are aware of the ‘problems’ in the texts, but are not pushing against them. In regard to the language of ‘submission’ to Scripture, he wondered aloud whether Fuller students renegotiate their understanding of biblical authority over the course of their studies: that is, do they gradually adjust what it means for them to ‘submit to the authority of the Bible’?

**Marion Taylor (Canada)**

As with Case Study 1, Taylor continued Case Study 2 with her regular, pre-existing Bible study group that meets before the Sunday service in her evangelical Anglican parish in Toronto. The group consists of 16-20 people: they are well-educated, committed Christians, 1/3 of whom are cradle Anglicans, and the rest are converts from more conservative denominations and ‘very glad to be Anglican’. Here are some summaries of their engagement with the texts.

**Proverbs 31:** The group discussed the passage’s possible authorship, genre, and structure as an acrostic poem. But is it descriptive or prescriptive? Based on previous engagement with the text, is it oppressive or inspiring? The answer is that it is liberating for some and not for others: one woman in the group was inspired by it to start a day-care business to help support her family. Some men suggested that this passage is not necessarily limited to women, but could depict the wise ‘person’. Perhaps she is Lady Wisdom settled down in her house? But some women noted that there is no room here for mistakes. Men who
were comfortable in their own skin could safely identify with Lady Wisdom. But the text has been used oppressively, and often by women oppressing other women. Taylor noted that theological education does make a difference to how the biblical text is read. On the other hand, another group of older women had a negative reaction to the text, and did not feel compelled to wrestle with it. Their experience trumps the text.

Genesis 38: Not read previously or well-known to most of the group. Tamar was failed by the system. She was powerless and a victim, and so she was forced to take action. Should a person lie to survive? Today we judge prostitutes. We rarely ask: why they do what they do? Tamar was committed to follow through on her role to achieve her end, which was disturbing, but then she was ‘more righteous’ than Judah. This led to discussion of contemporary prostitution and the structural aspect of sin: unjust structures leading to sinful situations.

Numbers 27 and 36: These were hard texts to study in this setting—they seemed embedded in a culture that seemed so distant. Some felt it worthwhile to figure out their relevance for today, others seemed a bit overwhelmed and felt that did not have the tools to understand these texts. Again, however, there seemed to be some modern parallels with prostitutes and pimps, gays and lesbians.

Matthew 15 and the story of the Canaanite woman: Taylor reported that at this point she was frustrated at being asked to read this text through the lens of unjust gender structures. Is this story about gender? Isn’t it about the outsider and the covenant? There was some push-back from the group as well: they wanted to talk about other New Testament texts that provided a different context, not just about gender.

Taylor then offered five points of reflection / response to the project:

1) Theological education makes a difference to how you interpret Scripture, especially the ‘texts of terror’ and gender-related texts;
2) Previous teaching and preaching makes a difference;
3) A life-experience of injustice makes a difference to how one responds to texts about injustice;
4) A faith-stance makes a difference: have to wrestle with it, can’t just throw it out;
5) Lectionaries limit most Anglicans’ engagement with Scripture.

Taylor also raised a concern about the stated contrast in Ellen Aitken’s article (see note 1 above) between instrumentality and mystery. For Taylor, ‘instrumentality’ is not a bad thing, it’s rather part of her DNA, how she relates to and uses Scripture: she expects the Scriptures to speak and respond. She then asked a general question: What is the subtext of the project? Is there a canon-within-the-canon operative here? You can’t take a single text about unjust gender on its own structures without looking at the entire teaching of the Bible on gender justice. Stephen Lyon replied that this conversation about the selection of texts and questions for the project is very important to report back to the Steering Committee—such selections do inevitably impose a framework on the texts that influences the way people read them (like section headings in printed Bibles). Thus, if all the biblical texts are presented as basically false or problematic and held up to criticism,
then the capacity of the texts to challenge our various cultures is undermined.

III. Presentation from Joseph Crockett of the American Bible Society²

Scripture-engagement is the current mission of the ABS. Beyond the Society’s original commitment to translate and distribute Bibles as widely as possible, we are now seeking to encourage people around the world to interact with the Scriptures, in various ways and through various media. Hence the ABS’s interest in the Anglican Communion’s ‘Bible in the Life of the Church’ project. According to Paul Connerton, ‘control of a society’s memory largely conditions the hierarchy of power.’ There are many people in the Anglican Communion who recognize the reality of these words!

Several questions drive our investigation of Bible engagement. They are:
- How is meaning made?
- How are texts read?
- How is meaning mediated?
- How are change and meaning nurtured and sustained?

Further and deeper questions behind or embedded in the above questions include, but may not be limited to the following:
- What does it mean ‘to know?’
- How is knowing related to meaning making? To reading texts?
- How is individual agency understood?
- How is individual agency related to social order in meaning making processes?
- How is social context conceptualized?
- How is social context related to individuals’ meaning making?

Several assumptions can be identified as informing the directions and influencing the interpretations and outcomes of our efforts. Included among these assumptions are:
- Our experience of the present is significantly shaped by our knowledge of the past.
- Meanings of the words, signs, and symbols we use to describe our views of reality—and ultimate reality—are not inherent in the objects or subjects we seek to examine.
- Terms, concepts, signs and symbols we use to communicate are socially constructed artifacts that have developed over time through interactions in particular cultures and contexts.
- Our claims and accounts of the world are legitimated and sustained not by objectivity, but through social processes.
- A commitment to affirming ‘otherness’ requires an exodus of all forms and practices of hegemony: theological, biblical, political, economic, social, cultural, and so forth.

We hypothesize and initially set out to understand how six elements are correlated with Bible engagement activities that contribute to the acquisition and development of learned

² This is an abbreviated version of the paper the Rev. Dr. Crockett presented to us.
memories that are transformative. They are:

- Practical
- Participatory
- Culturally situated
- Inter-confessional
- Global
- Interdisciplinary

Bible engagement focuses on our present contexts, and equally on the way audiences in our present contexts access the Scriptures. Bible engagement listens to and learns from many disciplines of study. Otherness is irreducibly particular, universality is illusionary. Meaning is not transmitted, it is reconstructed. In regard to the current project, we need to widen the empirical studies beyond liturgy and intentional Bible study.

IV. Collective Conversation on Project, Case Studies, etc.

Did the Bible study lead productively to discussion of contemporary issues of unjust economic and gender issues? Yes! Did those insights lead to action? Action is already underway. But the questions of the study do not themselves lead to action—the next step is not there in this Bible study. There should be another set of questions, and another set of texts that show change in the Bible itself—that is, models of transformation.

What are we engaging the Bible for? What is it that changes us? One answer: transformation over time of the imagination. What type of change are we talking about? Are we talking about conversion—and what do we mean by conversion? We believe that Scripture does change and inform our ethics.

What is Scripture for? It tells us who Jesus is; and it also made him who he was. Only the Bible can tell us this story. But these answers, true as they are, leave out theological doctrines such as revelation and the authority and inspiration of Scripture. Such doctrines spell out the significance of what Scripture is and is for. But even they still leave out the question of what Scripture does. We are the people of Jesus, and the people of the Book, and what is the relation between these two identities? Is it about the God who speaks or the speech of God? We can’t leave out these theological and ecclesial issues. God continues to speak through this text—and not just about Jesus. We have experienced God speaking to us through this text. The text interrogates us. As a meaning-making artifact, this is experientially deeper and more powerful than other alternatives. Doctrines are contextual; they are short-hands for the narrative (Hauerwas).

Again, referring back to the first meeting of the North American Regional Group in June 2010, should we talk about the ‘authority’ of the Bible or the ‘power’ of the Bible? Authority has to do with submission, power has to do with transformation. Power is inherent, the felt effects of which may earn authority and submission. Proposal: how about ‘Scripture’s authoritative power’? These are not peripheral questions, but essential and must be wrestled with—this is what observers of this project outside of Anglicanism will be looking for and wanting to know what we think about. Why do we read it, what
is it for, what does ‘Word of God’ mean?

V. Drafting of Final Regional Report to Steering Committee

[Rob MacSwain asked Stephen Lyon to chair this final session] Two things are needed from the point of view of the project: (1) the report from the different study groups, leading to the composite Regional Group report [that is, this current document]; and (2) what this regional group can offer to the project as a whole. What do we gathered here in Sewanee today want to place on the table for the Communion to consider?

A real longing was expressed for what we’ve done here to be heard by the other Regional Groups, and thus eventually by the entire Communion. It is important to put this material out there in order to provide the context that helps explain what we’ve said and done as North American provinces. Of course, all of our global regional contexts are diverse. This may be a moment for North American Anglicanism, in both Canada and the United States, to recognize and own its internal diversity. For example, Mark MacDonald’s voice and community, as summarized in the first report, really needs to be heard in the final project report—there still are indigenous voices in North American Anglicanism! Likewise for other ethnic groups.3

Widespread surprise has been recorded at how much people in the various groups enjoyed engaging with Scripture, especially those who had never done it before. There are Anglican parishes in North America like Marion Taylor’s where weekly Bible study is part of the DNA, and there are parishes like Myron Penner’s where it has never happened before. This is also part of our diversity.

We concluded by asking ourselves, ‘If you had the ear of the whole Anglican Communion, what would you want to say about the “Bible in the life of the Church”?’ The following responses were offered:

- In thinking about the Bible’s textual nature—that is, its very character as text—one member concluded that whether we like it or not, the mediation of meaning through words—with all the familiar issues of Jesus as a ‘character’ of Matthew vs. the ‘historical’ Jesus, etc.—all of this is unavoidable for Christian understandings of the Bible. If we have Scripture, hermeneutics is inevitable: we are in a fundamentally and inescapably hermeneutical situation as Christians.
- Another pointed out that our local North American groups are diverse enough to show that when people actually engage Scripture, transformative things happen: ‘Scripture is God’s Word and has transforming power in people’s lives. We need to keep encouraging Anglicans to read and study the Bible.’
- Another reminded us that we need to let our thinking be reshaped by Scripture—to not always assume that our answers and perspectives are right and/or biblical.
- Another said, ‘When we come to Scripture and listen for the voice of God, we are

3 Kortright Davis was unable to be present for our meeting, but he provided a short paper on biblical interpretation from an Anglican African / African American perspective that is included with the resources collected by the Bible project in the ‘Articles’ section on the memory stick.
dislocated, thrown out of joint: whenever we come to Scripture to hear from God, we also have to hear from each other."

- Another said, ‘I am a feminist progressive hyper-educated woman in Holy Orders with postmodern leanings, and I cherish Scripture as the living and fully authoritative Word of God that leads me daily to submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Please believe that both are true. And now please tell me who you are.’

- Another said, quite simply and sincerely, speaking on behalf of all North American Anglicans, both ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’: ‘We love Jesus, and we seek to hear his voice in the Scriptures.’

Robert MacSwain
Appendix:

‘Biblical Interpretation: Some Afro-Anglican Perspectives’
Kortright Davis, Howard University, USA

The most critical and essential factor involved in the Afro-Anglican approach to Biblical interpretation is the underlying understanding of the nature of GOD, as a basis of faith, and the meaning and appropriation of such a presumed nature into the historical narratives and existential expectations of daily living. This has all sorts of implications for Afros, especially for those who are deeply conscious of their particular experiences in the throes of countervailing personal and cultural circumstances and socio-religious paradoxes. What do these assertions really mean?

First, they mean that a basic approach to the meaning of GOD is driven inevitably by one’s social, cultural, historical, and existential location. For Afros, the nature of the God of the Bible has to be consistent and continuous from the Genesis motif right up to the contemporary times in which they live. All the manifestations of God’s activities and designs must in some way be understood as having meaning for them in their present situation. Their basic meaning is that God is unconditionally on the side of the poor and the oppressed, and that the God of justice, peace, and righteousness is incessantly creating and providing new ways of transforming forces of evil and dehumanization into divine catalysts for freedom and liberation. The Exodus saga is primordial; not just because of an escape from Egyptian captivity, but more especially because the God of Moses is an African God (viz. Burning Bush story), and that God is also made known in the New Exodus (Easter story), and is continuing to be made known in the innumerable little experiences of divine liberation and transformation.

Second, they mean that the God to whom the Bible seeks to bear witness is interminably seeking to be in a covenantal relationship with the people who wrote what is in the Bible, with those who transmitted the Bible, with those who have propagated the Bible (albeit with some imperfections and misrepresentations about the will and ways of God – slavery, women, dietary values, outsiders, etc.), and with those who would earnestly seek to find truth and salvation through a patient embrace of its messages. This forces on the Afro spirituality and hermeneutic an almost instinctual habit of listening to God through the Word, but with a ready dose of cultural suspicion towards those whose presumed exegesis might in fact be eisegetical enough to impose their own assumptions, and provide biblical justifications for so doing.

So in accepting the Christian affirmation that the Bible is the “Word of God”, Afros are constantly challenged to articulate and interpret very carefully what is the meaning of the word “of”, in a somewhat “Clintonesque” fashion! They assert that the term does not mean “God’s words”, as in ‘directly spoken by God’. (The slogan: God wrote it / I
believe it / That’s it! does not apply.) They also affirm that the human and cultural contexts out of which the biblical material springs are in some ways held captive by that contextual framework, thereby requiring that God’s liberating work is necessary and continuous in the reading of the Bible itself. They further recognize that in the origins of the various texts in the biblical collection there is predominantly a movement of the human word towards God, rather than a perception and reception of the divine word towards the human. But such a movement does not lessen the efficacy, or the divine revelatory value, of the sacred text. The text is, and remains, sacred because we Christians say that it is, and Afros fully embrace and respect its sanctity in many elaborately cultural, religious, and ritualistic forms – mixed with awe and wonder, and sometimes with fear and trembling. The physical text is sometimes treated like the Ark of the Covenant! In any case, the “Word of God” is for Afros synonymous with the “Word to God”, but, in the end, GOD is not defined by prepositions of any kind.

Third, they mean that as Afros strive to affirm and live into the fullness of their own humanity, they are faced with spiritual, cultural, socio-political, and historical challenges from which their own understanding of GOD cannot be excluded. At the very least, people of Afro descent and complexion are still distinguished in the global community as the only people whose claims to be fully human have not yet been universally accepted, let alone respected. (It really does not matter even if you are the President of the United States, and the Leader of the only super-power in the world!) So what it means to be human in such a climate of implicit / explicit negation can only be confronted spiritually by a radical embrace of the Biblical phrase “Image of God” (Genesis 1:27), and by a constant return to the meaning of John 10:10b – I am come that all may have life, and have it in all of its fullness. All this is coupled with a firm determination to declare whether or not God takes sides. In a climate where there is an almost arrogant assertion that God is on the side of those who make such a claim, Afros generally prefer to struggle with the right to make the claim that they are on “The Lord’s side”. It makes for better and more mature spiritual awakening for them, particularly when they hear of religious leaders (non-Afro) making the claim that God has already told them who is going to be the next President of the United States in 2013!

Fourth, they mean that since GOD is essentially mystery – completely devoid of any physical or material characteristics to which we can point – the claims that we make, the language that we use, the expectations we invoke, the experiences we describe, and even the moral judgments we prescribe, must all in some way be driven by that which is provisional on the one hand, and progressive on the other. Afros make the claim that “God is God all by himself” (gender-based usage not to be held indictable!). They also make the claim that GOD continues to be like a work in progress, for GOD is still in the business of self-disclosure, and is full of surprises – “moving in a mysterious way”. Afros can fully understand therefore, that the God of the Christians is not a Christian, that God is not even an Anglican (however much we might wish to think so!), and that God offers innumerable ways of coming to God, and hearing from God, of which Christians are not aware. Divine Inclusivity is in – Human Exclusion is out!!

This openness to allow God to be God is very much an essential part of the Afro
spirituality, and enables Afro-Anglicans to make common cause with all the other sectors of the Black religious experience and expressions, even if the variations of language and liturgy, or of theological discourse and moral persuasions, might sometimes pose some surmountable difficulties. In any event, Afros hold fast to the notions that what unites them in common cause for the liberation of the race is far more important than what threatens to separate and divide. A culturally enlightened spirituality that liberates notions of GOD from any sectional captivity, in addition to an allegiance to a hierarchy of moral values and collective strategic incentives for the naming and confronting of the common enemies of progress and freedom, all come together under a divinely inspired rubric. That rubric says that those who suffer for righteousness’ sake, and struggle for justice and human equality, are rooted and grounded in the Divine-human covenantal relationship to which the Bible bears witness, and really makes the Bible true. “The B-I-B-L-E, That’s the Book for me” they will often sing!!

Fifth, they mean that in the light of all that has been outlined above, certain givens are inherent and operative in the Afro-Anglican use and interpretation of the Bible. They may briefly be listed as follows: (i) The Bible is the Word of God; and God speaks to us in multiple ways through the reception and embrace of the sacred text. (ii) Scripture is a basic source of Christian Theology emerging from preliminary experiences of various faith traditions, which are also sources of Christian Theology. (iii) The Authority of the Bible is accepted as including its Moral, Spiritual, Liturgical, and Theological dimensions – all subject to the progressive revelation of God received through prayer, study, genuine research, and the transcendent voice of the sensus fidelium. (iv) The Authentication of the Biblical tradition is always an ongoing gift of grace that is brought together by a living and lively faith, a purposeful and purpose-filled process of reasoning, and an allegiance to the Gospel tradition, as empowered and sustained by God’s Spirit. (v) The Applicability of the Bible as the Word of God is central to the vitality of the Christian life, to the values of Christian witness, and the virtues of Christian engagement in the proclamation of God’s in-breaking Realm (Kingdom). (vi) Afro-Anglicans hold fast to the Bible as a source of Comfort, Counsel, Communication, Comprehension, Challenge, Compassion, and Community-building; but not as a tool for Conflict, Confrontation, and Condemnation. (vii) For Anglicans in general, and Afro-Anglicans in particular, the creative and imaginative use of Scripture in Word and Song, in Liturgical expressions of all kinds, in personal discourse and collective enquiry, in family discipline and public dialogue, in socio-political analysis and cultural critique, all render this Sacred Treasure an essential basis for human meaning, spiritual growth, moral guidance, and personal fulfillment.

In conclusion, these brief reflections on some of the perspectives involved in an Afro-Anglican Biblical interpretation are not meant to be exhaustive in any way, for they merely scratch the surface of all that goes on in the hearts, minds, lives, and gatherings of Afro-Anglicans for worship, work and witness. Afro-Anglicans may not be theologically astute and articulate to give full and methodical expression to what lies within their embrace and understanding of God’s Word in the Bible. But at the very least, they hold fast to the Anglican Collect by which they ask God for grace to “Read, Mark, Learn and inwardly digest” the sacred texts, so that by patient embrace they may hold fast to God’s
unchanging Truth. That Truth may come either from the text, or through the text, but always from God – from the One in whom they live, and move, and have their very being.