Report 1 – August 2010

GENERAL DESCRIPTION
The Seminar “The Bible and the Environment” was convened as the first annual Leadership Seminar for members of the Theological Education Commission of the Episcopal Church of Sudan (ECS). The Commission is composed of the principals of the five theological colleges of ECS and is chaired by Bishop Hilary Garang Deng (Malakal) with his deputy, Bishop Peter Munde (Yambio); it meets each July for two days of business. This year the business meeting was followed by the three-day Seminar, which was conceived by partners at Duke Divinity School as an opportunity for the theological educators to engage in shared theological reflection, for the enhancement of their educational ministries. Since this year’s pilot program was extremely well received by all participants, we expect it to be an annual event, organized by Dr Ellen Davis and the Revd Dr Jo Bailey Wells. The topic, “The Bible and the Environment,” was chosen because this pilot program also functioned as a unit within the project, The Bible in the Life of the Church, commissioned by the Anglican Consultative Council and directed by the Anglican Communion Office (ACO), for which Davis serves as a theological consultant. Groups throughout the Anglican Communion have been asked to work on “The Bible and the Environment” during the current year. Funding for the Leadership Seminar was provided through a grant from the Evangelical Education Society in the amount of $4,982; the ACO intends to cover additional costs, which total US $1,898.87. An expense report is appended.

FORMAT
The program was designed to keep participants actively engaged in conversations throughout the three days, and this goal seems to have been fully met. Each day began with Morning Prayer, followed by a light breakfast; lunch was eaten in community; we concluded with Evening Prayer and dinner. Although there was no explicit demand for attendance at all events, there were strikingly few absences from any of them, except for reason of illness.

The Seminar itself was designed as a series of small-group discussions, most of which were focused on one or more biblical texts (see the attached syllabus). These discussions (an hour or less in length) were followed by plenary discussions, led by Ellen Davis. There were no lectures. The syllabus (attached) was followed quite closely, with two minor exceptions: sessions were somewhat abbreviated to allow for later start times and longer breaks (a cultural mandate!), and discussion of the Song of the Three Young Men was eliminated from the final session, since it does not function as Scripture for ECS.

The discussion format worked very well, as many participants commented. The opportunity for educators themselves to think together was one they greatly valued; several also commented on how the Seminar would influence their own teaching. Musa Al Gadi, Principal of Shokai Bible
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Training Institute in Khartoum, said: “Most of us stand in front of our students and pour out information like water into empty cups. But you started by drawing out what was already in our minds; now I realize that I need to work with what is already in the minds of my students.” Sapana Adiir, Principal of Renk Theological College, observed: “Three days ago, I would have said I knew the Bible well. Now I see how difficult it is to interpret even the first two chapters. These three days could change the way students all over Sudan read the Bible.”

Participants
18 to 22 members of ECS (and a few guests) were actively engaged in each of the 6 study sessions, which began Wednesday evening and concluded with midday eucharist and lunch on Saturday. The majority of the participants came from Juba Diocese, but there were representatives (mostly priests, with a few bishops and lay persons) also from Khartoum (1), Bor (5), Mundri (2), Yambio (1), Renk (2), and Twic East (4). Four of the five theological colleges were represented (absent only Bishop Allison College, currently in exile in Arua, Uganda). In view of the facts that the rains had just begun, making road travel very difficult, and that surgery and illness prevented Bishop Hilary and the Secretary of the Commission from sending invitations to the Seminar or even the Commission meeting itself until a very late hour, the attendance from outside Juba was excellent. Moreover, we had as many people as we could accommodate in a seminar format, and the level of engagement could not have been improved upon. Guests included Mr. John Foster of Salisbury Diocese, who oversees the ECS-Salisbury Link, a cooperative relationship of some 40 years’ standing; Dr Peter Morris of the Diocese of North Carolina, a public health physician who has worked with ECS since 2007; Dr Jason Byassee and Revd Darriel Harris of Duke Divinity School; and Canon Trevor and Mrs. Tina Stubbs, missionaries from Salisbury Diocese who have supervised the reconstruction and reopening of Bishop Gwynne College in Juba since February 2009.

One unexpected and noteworthy participant was Mrs. Mary Aluel, a hymn composer whose work was learned and sung by many Sudanese Christians through the two decades of genocidal war that ended in 2004. Her songs continue to be widely used, and we heard several of them at a large worship service in Juba. Although Aluel is primarily an artist rather than an academic (she does not hold a post at a theological college or engage in regular teaching), she has five years of formal theological training (in Kenya) and thus ranks as an important and creative theologian within the Sudanese church.

Focus and Content of the Discussions
Discussion focused on two kinds of questions: exegetical (What is the meaning of these texts?) and hermeneutical (What principles are we applying as interpreters?). As the (attached) syllabus indicates, hermeneutical questions were the explicit focus of discussion at the first and the final sessions; the other sessions were exegetical discussions of seven biblical texts, which had been chosen by the Steering Committee for the ACO’s project in connection with the theme, “The Bible and the Environment.” In the comments that follow I note some highlights of the discussion, especially points that bear on the question central to the ACO’s project, The Bible in the Life of the Church, namely, “How do Anglicans read the Bible for the purposes of moral discernment and guidance?”
Hermeneutical principles that were explicitly and often repeatedly articulated by members of ECS include the following:

- The quality of one’s Christian life is a major factor in reading the Bible well.
- We read the Bible in personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and we seek him in the Scriptures. So, for example, when we discussed the prominence of seed in Genesis 1, people noted that seed holds the promise of future life and is therefore an important symbol of Jesus Christ, the seed of a restored humanity.
- The Bible should be read as a whole, with one part commenting on other parts. Ellen Davis noted that this principle features prominently in Anglican preaching and poetry of the seventeenth century (e.g., George Herbert’s “Holy Scriptures II”). On this same point, Joseph Taban Lasuba (New Bishop Gwynne College) contrasted contemporary Anglican preaching with a Reformed (“Presbyterian”) style of verse-by-verse exegesis.
- The Bible is the best commentary on itself, and biblical scholarship should be read critically and selectively, according to how far it accords with the basic presuppositions of biblical faith. For example, commentators who exclude the possibility of miracles a priori should not be trusted. Closely related to this is the following principle, that…
- The Bible is trustworthy and is given for the sake of guidance and encouragement (although it may also condemn us). In contrast to the West, no hermeneutic of suspicion has thus far emerged among Sudanese Christians.
- Studying the biblical texts in Hebrew and Greek is very important, but that opportunity is not yet widely available in Sudan. As speakers of multiple languages, Sudanis are sensitive to the connotations and semantic ranges of particular words, and it was encouraging to see that as the Seminar went on, people began to pay attention to the implication of words even in translation. E.g., when Col. 1.6 speaks of the gospel “bearing fruit” throughout the word, is this a conscious echo of Genesis 1, which seems to be the theological base for the whole chapter? (Parenthetically, on this trip I heard two sermons that cited Hebrew words from the text and developed them thematically, so as to offer genuine theological insight with rhetorical power; one was a Bishop’s cathedral sermon, the other a meditation for the staff of the ECS Provincial Office at their weekly devotion.)
- Some element of inspiration is at work in the interpretation of Scripture, which is not wholly different from the inspiration of the biblical writers themselves. There is a strong sense that we participate in the biblical story through teaching and preaching, song and prayer, which leads to a highly interactive mode of interpretation, akin to rabbinic midrash. This leads to the next point….

Another hermeneutical principle was implicit throughout, namely that the Bible is read in contemporary context. When Davis identified it explicitly, all agreed that it is operative. The Bible is constantly related to many aspects of Sudanese life: social, economic, and political history (especially the recent experience of war), African Traditional Religion, the natural world and the rich relationship with it which has been characteristic of village life through the generations. One of the important findings of the session was the extent to which traditional practices are congruent with the values that the Bible upholds. For example, humans are meant to have a genuine relationship with animals (as inferred from Adam’s naming of the animals in Genesis 2), a value that was much better honored by non-Christians in the village than it is now by Christians in the city (where, for instance, donkeys are worked without sufficient care).
People spoke with great sensitivity about the problem of disharmony between people and animals that Genesis represents as an effect of “the fall”: How can we live in harmony with snakes, scorpions, and (especially) the Nile leopard? Many participants knew stories of snakes allowing themselves to be used as pillows by people fleeing into the bush during the war, but they said that would no longer happen, that snakes are again fearful of people. Bishop Hilary of Malakal said that when they have a rat infestation in their house, the first thing they do is pray that they may see any disharmony in their immediate social world – and then they stop up the holes! We had a rich discussion of the way that a bull’s name may be appropriated for its owner in African Traditional Religion, at first casually and then formally, after the animal is sacrificed – a strong affirmation of the relationship between human and non-human creatures.

Several members of the Seminar said that this set of questions, about the theological significance of our relationship with the non-human world, is one they had never before encountered, and that it is of crucial importance, especially in the post-war (God willing!) years. People noted that many habits of caring for the earth and other living creatures have been lost. ECS is giving much attention to agricultural training throughout the country, and I spoke about the dangers associated with the industrial-scale farming (toxic chemical inputs, genetically modified seed, economic destruction of local agricultural economies), which is now poised to advance rapidly in Sudan. One member of the Seminar, Dr Peter Morris, reported on his meeting with Lise Grande, Deputy General for the UN in Sudan, who said that church representation “at the table” is crucial to the protection of poor farmers in this time of economic transition.

**Future Plans for the Leadership Seminar**
As noted above, the Leadership Seminar is intended to be a yearly event, held each year in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Theological Education Commission. In 2011, the Seminar will be led by the Revd Dr Jo Bailey Wells (Duke Divinity School). The topic is “African Biblical Interpretation in the Academy and for the Church,” and we expect to have as a special guest presenter Dr Bungishabaku Katho, founder and President of Shalom University of Bunia, Congo. Dr Katho is an Old Testament scholar who works consciously at the intersection of historical scholarship and contextual interpretation in African context. Moreover, he has successfully founded a Christian university in a conflict-ridden region. For both these reasons, he seems to be the ideal person to work with teachers and scholars in Sudan at this time. Invitations to the Seminar will be strategically issued to a few people and institutions outside the Theological Education Commission whose participation is essential in planning for a Christian university in Juba.
The Bible in the Life of the Sudanese Church, 2010/11
A report submitted to the Anglican Communion Office by Ellen F. Davis
Amos Ragan Kearns Distinguished Professor of Bible and Practical Theology
Duke Divinity School

Report 2 – August 2011

This report reflects work done in the course of five intensive sessions of Bible study and discussion held at three different locations in Southern Sudan between May 2010 and July 2011. Each session was from two to five days in length and focused on one of the topics selected for the Bible in the Life of the Church (here, BLC) project: “Bible and the Environment” (2010) and “Transforming Unjust Social [Economic and Gender] Structures” (2011). Most of the sessions on these topics were led by Ellen F. Davis and Jo Bailey Wells, who since 2004 and 2006 (respectively) have regularly engaged in teaching short courses on theological topics, under the auspices of the Episcopal Church of Sudan. The work reported here is unique, in that it represents the only fully cross-regional study sessions in the BLC project. Davis is a lay member of The Episcopal Church and Wells is a priest in the Church of England; both serve on the faculty of Duke University Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina, USA. Most other participants in the discussions are lay and ordained members of the Episcopal Church of Sudan (henceforth, ECS); one four-day session attended by about 30 participants included members of ECS and the Presbyterian Church of Sudan, in approximately equal numbers.

We discovered that the BLC project has special pertinence in this time and place of acute social change, just as the newest nation in the world, the Republic of Southern Sudan, is emerging. Its significance is epitomized in the observation of the Rt Revd Hilary Garang Atem Awer, Bishop of Malakal, who commented: “Our society was destroyed through nearly fifty years of war; our traditional cultures are mostly lost. If we do not have Scripture as a moral guide, then we have no alternative to everyone doing the thing that seems to them good right now.” Compare the summary remark of the Deuteronomistic Historian: “And there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 17:6. 21:25).

Settings, Participants, Topics
The five sessions were held in several different towns, and they varied also with respect to institutional settings and constituencies, as noted here:

1. In July 2010, more than twenty principals, teachers, and bishops – the members of the Theological Education Commission, representing four different theological colleges and Bible schools of ECS – along with some lay evangelists, a prominent liturgical songwriter (Mary Alueel) and a few guests from the UK and the US, met at New Bishop Gwynne Theological College (Juba) for two full days, to discuss “Bible and the Environment.” Led by Ellen Davis, this was the first meeting of what we expect to be an annual Leadership Seminar for theological educators in ECS.

2. In May 2011, an interdenominational group of 27 students (primarily Anglican, but also Roman Catholic and Presbyterian) at Renk Theological College in Upper Nile State met in an intensive course for five full days. The group of women and men discussed two interrelated topics: “Transforming Unjust Economic Structures” and “Biblical Guidance for Prayer.” Discussions of the former were led by Ellen Davis, of the latter by Revd Dr Samuel Hamilton-
Poore of San Francisco Theological Seminary (Presbyterian Church USA). The joint course constituted a part of Renk’s curriculum for the Certificate in Theology. We concluded with a shorter workshop (1.5 days) for 42 pastors and students on a different topic, Healing in Community. That workshop was refined and more successfully presented in Malakal (see further comments in #4 below).

3. In May 2011, forty members of the Mothers’ Union met for five sessions (2-3 hours each) at St Matthew’s Cathedral in Renk Town, to discuss the topic, “Transforming Unjust Gender Structures.” These discussions were led by the Revd Ann Humphreys Copp of the Diocese of Maryland, as the first event in the new “Women for Women Initiative,” which links women leaders in The Episcopal Church (and we hope, eventually, the Church of England) with those in the Episcopal Church of Sudan.

4. In June 2011, about thirty pastors and lay leaders of ECS and the Presbyterian Church of Sudan met at St Luke’s Cathedral/Church in Malakal (Upper Nile State) for four full days to discuss two different topics. For two days we discussed “Transforming Unjust Economic Structures” (specifically including the subtopic, “Women and Economics”), with Davis and Hamilton-Poore leading sessions that focused on text study and prayer. Since our teaching team included Dr. Peter J. Morris, who is both a public health physician and a theologian, we then moved to a topic not designated by the BLC project, namely “Healing in Community: The Physical Body and the Body of Christ.” For this latter topic we included at least one text designated by the BLC Steering Committee, 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 (on eucharist and economic injustice). More significantly, we found that the earlier discussions of economic structures and women’s participation in the healthy social body informed our study of healing. The topic of healing within the body of the church has particular cogency and urgency in Malakal, where there had recently been intense factional violence, fed in part by longstanding tensions and sometimes violence between tribes and denominations, especially Nuer (Presbyterian) and Dinka (ECS). The event of the two groups studying Scripture together, with the ECS Bishop and the Presbyterian Moderator offering public greetings in each other’s churches, was regarded as something that could not have happened under other circumstances. The fact that we were an interdenominational team of teachers was held up as a sign of hope for church unity.

5. In July 2011, the members of the ECS Theological Education Commission met in Juba for a week, for the second annual Leadership Seminar (see #1 above). Jo Bailey Wells led two days of discussions on the topic, “Transforming Unjust Gender Structures.” Nine provincial and diocesan colleges were represented among the twenty-one participants, most of them principals or deans-of-students.

FORMAT

With the exception of #3 (the Mothers’ Union in Renk), each of the workshops met for several full days in succession, beginning and ending with devotions, with lunch eaten in community. In every case we found that the number of participants held steady or grew throughout the workshop.

Each workshop was designed as a series of small-group discussions, most of which were focused on one or two biblical texts. The text was introduced by the leader, with key issues and references explained. Questions were provided to guide the small-group discussions, which ranged in length from 20 minutes to an hour (for two texts); these were followed by plenary discussions. There were no formal lectures. This discussion format worked very well, as many
participants commented. Some of the theological educators commented on how the experience would influence their own teaching. Musa Elgardi, Principal of Shokai Bible Training Institute in Khartoum, said to Ellen Davis: “Most of us stand in front of our students and pour out information like water into empty cups. But you started by drawing out what was already in our minds; now I realize that I need to work with what is already in the minds of my students.” Sapana Adiir, Principal of Renk Theological College, observed: “Three days ago, I would have said I knew the Bible well. Now I see how difficult it is to interpret even the first two chapters. These three days could change the way students all over Sudan read the Bible.” Jo Bailey Wells comments: “I felt some resistance to the small group/open sharing even among theological educators; they wanted me to give the ‘right’ answers to the questions I had set for the groups. This attitude may be a big limiting factor for the Bible in the Life of the Church in Africa, not least because those who deliver the answers sometimes do so authoritatively yet not knowledgeably.”

**Fresh Readings, Surprising Outcomes**

Each discussion focused on two or three kinds of inquiry: often tracing in detail the historical background, story line, and/or theological reasoning in the biblical text; sometimes practicing prayerful reading of the text (Prof. Hamilton-Poore introduced the practice of *lectio divina*, which was used on several occasions); and always asking how a given text might speak to and for the Sudanese church at this time. Not surprisingly, the theological students (at Renk) were the most self-conscious about distinguishing between historical context and contemporary context of appropriation, and about the kind of controls that are appropriate. (So, for instance, can the debt slavery reflected in Deuteronomy 15 be correlated with the kinds of enslavement African Sudanis experienced in recent decades, not only by Sudanese Arabs but even by members of their own tribes and families?)

Somewhat more surprising to both the Sudanis and the Westerners was the extent to which these several ways of approaching the text yielded something that the Sudanese readers judged to be completely new, namely a slow probing reading that reveals multiple kinds of meaning. One theological student in Renk pointed to the difference between receiving information (repeating the image of water poured into empty cups) *about* the Bible and “ruminating” on particular texts (an image offered by Samuel Hamilton-Poore, which was readily embraced by interpreters well versed in the ways of cattle!). Although all of them had previously considered the Bible to be the point of orientation for their faith, the Sudanis repeatedly exclaimed at their discoveries of precise points of connection between their experience and the experience of the biblical audience. Through this way of reading they found that the Bible enables them to think theologically about aspects of their experience that they had never previously considered in that light. For example, while most Sudanis are far more aware of and immediately connected to their physical and natural environment than are most Westerners, none of them had ever heard a sermon that touched on this or been helped to think of this as a theological concern. Yet they recognized (more readily than their Western counterparts) that this is a matter of crucial importance, especially in the emerging post-war (God willing!) culture, in which many traditional practices of caring for the earth and other living creatures have been lost.

Again, they appreciated an integrative mode of reading that that drew together spiritual, economic, and social dimensions of meaning, so they could see for the first time that a social and
economic statement such as Deuteronomy 15, Ezekiel 27 or Revelation (these latter on the maritime trade of Tyre and imperial Rome, respectively) is at the same time a theological statement. Although they felt that they were just starting to learn how to read in this way, it became evident that the Sudanese readers have an interpretive advantage over Westerners, once they are encouraged to draw such connections, since their traditional social and economic structures resemble at many points those reflected in the biblical text. For instance, when we discussed the story of the daughters of Zelophehad, the five sisters who challenge Moses to go against custom and permit them to inherit their dead father’s land (Numbers 27), both women and men instantly saw what was at stake, including the complexity that the Bible takes up in its second installment of the story (Numbers 36): Will the tribal lands be diminished if the women decide to marry? This led to a vigorous discussion of how their own tribes handle such situations in rural settings. (Land in towns is controlled by government regulations.) Among the Dinka and other South Sudanese tribes, the twin values of women’s economic rights and the integrity of tribal lands are safeguarded by the practice of endogamy.

One text that generated energetic and imaginative discussion was Proverbs 31:10-31, the poem about “a mighty woman” (not “a capable wife,” as the standard translation misleadingly renders the opening phrase). This is the most extended biblical description of an ordinary (if exemplary) Israelite at work, and it is highly laudatory: she manages a complex farming household, invests wisely in arable land and cultivates it, earns a good income from marketing her handiwork for market, cares for the needy in the community, and is a wise, God-fearing teacher. My urbanized American students struggle to see anything admirable – let alone genuinely theological – in the depiction, even though this carefully crafted poem celebrates the woman with language (“strength and splendor, her clothing,” v. 25) that otherwise is used to describe Zion (Isa. 52:1) and even God (Psalm 93:1). By contrast, when I asked a group of pastors and lay leaders in Malakal if they knew anyone whose work resembles that of the mighty woman, an older priest stood up and pointed to Mary. Since 1993 she has been cultivating by hand a small plot of land two or three miles from town. In the famine that accompanied the war, she provided food for the poorest, fending off other soldiers who tried to take it for themselves. (Mary herself is a sergeant major in the army.) Even now, after the war, she tithes to the church the sorghum she raises. Other women in the room pointed to the needlework and beading they sell in the market. When the women of the Mothers’ Union in Renk were asked if they “open their hands to the poor,” as does the mighty woman, their answer at first was “No”; they are too poor to have anything to give. Then they realized that in fact they take food to those who are ill, in childbirth, elderly, or in some way unable to care for themselves. The passage inspired one younger pastor to the kind of creative interpretation that in rabbinic context would be called midrash. He commented that the woman is the most valuable member of the household, for whom a bridal gift of 100 cows is often made. This is one indication of how vital is her work to the economy of household and community, as the woman of Proverbs shows: like Eve, “the mother of all that lives,” she brings forth new life, including the life of trees and plants that she helps the fertile earth to yield.

Jo Bailey Wells notes that among the theological educators gathered in Juba, “our discussion of this text was the most lively and perhaps the most transformative. Many participants said it is standard to use Proverbs 31 to teach women about ‘Christian marriage,’ in preparation or even at the wedding ceremony itself. After our session they said that they realized this was too narrow, ‘for the figure of Wisdom should inspire us all.’ One pastor said he could now envision using
this passage to help men see how their work might better reflect the ways and wisdom of God, although many of his male counterparts laughed when he made that risky suggestion.”

Another especially rich experience was reading Paul’s teaching on the sacraments and the members of the body (1 Corinthians 11-12) in Malakal, a place where, as noted above, there is deep tension among Christians of different tribes and denominations. In our workshop on “Healing in Community,” we observed that Paul sees no benefit automatically conferred by the sacraments. Eucharist can do more harm than good, as it did in Corinth, where the rich indulged themselves and humiliated the poor with their lavish food and drink. Baptised Christians can murder sisters and brothers in Christ in the church, as they did in Rwanda; I cited Emmanuel Kolini, former Archbishop of Rwanda: “We baptized, but we did not teach.” We then engaged in an exercise, each of us quickly envisioning and listing ten groups that constitute members of the body of Christ. We shared our lists, to build up a picture of what the body of Christ looked like to us in that room, on that particular day. Then we asked ourselves: “Where is the body strong? Where is it weak? What are we doing now to strengthen the weak parts? What can we do in the next six months, with resources currently available to us?” From this came two resolutions (subsequently publicly announced) for immediate interdenominational action: ECS and PCOS will hold a joint pastors’ conference to study Bible and discuss common concerns, and ECS and Presbyterian women will begin a collaborative work of evangelism, going in teams from house to house within the town. Bishop Hilary of Malakal noted that this outcome stems from a completely different way of talking about sacraments between the two denominations and even within each, where discussion tends to focus on ritual matters such as how often eucharist/holy communion is celebrated.

**INTERPRETIVE PRACTICES AND PRINCIPLES**

The following eight hermeneutical principles have been distilled from many statements, both explicit and implicit, made at the various workshops. All of these inter-related principles were repeatedly articulated by members of the workshops and checked for accuracy and agreement by me and other discussion leaders:

1. *The quality of Christian life, both individual and corporate, is a major factor* in reading the Bible well. People spoke of praying in order to prepare themselves to read Scripture with understanding. Equally, reading the Bible well, both in private devotion and in community, is seen as essential for defining and strengthening Christian life. One woman, a lay leader in Malakal, commented memorably: “God speaks to me when I read the Bible; I speak to God when I pray.” Jo Bailey Wells adds that the underlying assumption here, that the Bible is centrally about God, is an “absolute given” among Sudanese Christians, unlike in the West, where the theological and theocentric interpretation of Scripture is one option among many.

2. *The danger of “bad theology” is real* (some found the very notion of bad theology a new and useful discrimen), and identifying it requires critical discernment. Although Sudanese Christians are not yet tempted by some forms of bad theology prominent in the West and in other parts of Africa (e.g., the Prosperity Gospel), they recognize the need to read selectively biblical scholarship, both Western and African, judging the extent to which it accords with the basic presuppositions of biblical faith. For example, commentators who exclude the possibility of miracles a priori should not be trusted. Moreover, it was evident that the
participants in the workshops, including those without formal theological education, listened critically to us, the Western discussion leaders. At the conclusion of the workshop in Malakal, one woman expressed gratitude for the fact that all our points were supported directly by the text, even if the readings were not initially obvious: “If you had not brought us the Word, we would not have listened.” Closely related to this is the principle that…

3. The Bible is trustworthy and is given for the sake of guidance and encouragement, although it may also condemn us. In contrast to the West, no hermeneutic of suspicion directed to the biblical writers has thus far emerged among Sudanese Christians. On the contrary, both women and men found themselves challenged to new forms of faithful action by the passages we read. The women of the Mothers’ Union in Renk noted the contrast between social structures in which they are often subservient or “unseen,” and the prominence of women’s stories in the Bible. They recognized themselves in and were empowered by stories about women offering life-saving hospitality that opens the way for the emergence of prophetic action (1 Kings 17:8-16), and the spread of the gospel (Mark 1:29-31, Acts 16:13-15). Women in both Renk and Malakal noted that they are now beginning to assume the important role of evangelist (formerly filled by men) as they go out to villages and into prisons to share the Good News. In a different vein, Dr. Peter Morris found that a lecture on sound community health practices evoked little response and possibly some resistance in Renk. However, when he took a different approach in Malakal – working from inside the story of the birth of Moses and asking the women and men in Malakal what the community did to keep baby alive (actions mentioned included midwives, breast-feeding, and adopting children whose parents have died or cannot care for them) – it generated intense interest about how such actions might reduce the infant/young child mortality rate in their own country, which is the highest in the world.

4. The Bible should be read as a whole, with one part commenting on other parts; “the Bible is the best commentary on itself.” At the 2010 Leadership Seminar in Juba, Ellen Davis noted that this principle features prominently in Anglican preaching and poetry of the seventeenth century (e.g., George Herbert’s “Holy Scriptures II”). On this same point, Joseph Taban Lasuba, now Principal of New Bishop Gwynne College, contrasted contemporary Anglican preaching with a Reformed (“Presbyterian”) style of verse-by-verse exegesis. The practice of connecting one part of scripture to another seems to be deeply engrained if not instinctive for Sudanis; this is not surprising in a culture that maintains a high degree of orality, at least in its informal learning processes. Therefore they are very receptive to the formal methodology of inter-textuality, hearing echoes among biblical texts. So, for example, when Luke recounts that people came from “the coast of Tyre and Sidon” to hear Jesus’ teaching on the plain and to be healed of their diseases (Luke 6:17), he is showing the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy that “the coastlands wait for [the] teaching” of God’s faithful servant (Isa. 42:4). At the same time, Luke may be signaling that Tyre, that unassailable island power and acme of unjust wealth (as Isaiah and Ezekiel saw it), is now turning in all humility to the one true God. Similarly, the students of Renk Theological College expressed deep interest in a study of Revelation 18 that explored how John, imprisoned on Patmos, develops his picture of Rome’s collapse (“Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great…”) against the background of three “mythic statements”: 1. Ezekiel’s depiction of the sinking of the Tyre laden with its cargo of unjust gains, including slaves (Ezekiel 27-28), 2. repeated oracles against Babylon from
5. The Bible is read in contemporary context. We discovered the irony that despite the cultural disposition to orient toward the Bible, Sudanese students in formal educational settings are not always encouraged to see the connections between the Bible and their own lives. Even preaching often takes the form of moral instruction or political commentary rather than a careful explication of the Bible in relation to the life of the people. Nonetheless, once encouragement or permission was given to make this an explicit focus of critical biblical study, the connections drawn were multitudinous, precise, and highly creative. In every workshop, participants adeptly illumined the text by evoking various aspects of Sudanese life: social and economic systems, political history (especially the recent experience of war), familial practices, African Traditional Religions, the natural world and the rich relationship with it which has been characteristic of village life through the generations. One important finding of the session on Bible and the Environment particularly was the extent to which traditional practices are congruent with the values that the Bible upholds. For example, humans are meant to have a genuine relationship with animals (as inferred from Adam’s naming of the animals in Genesis 2), a value that was much better honored by non-Christians in the village than it is now by Christians in the city (where, for instance, donkeys are worked without sufficient care). People spoke with great sensitivity about the problem of disharmony between people and animals that Genesis represents as an effect of “the fall”: How can we live in harmony with snakes, scorpions, and (especially) the Nile leopard? Many participants knew stories of snakes allowing themselves to be used as pillows by people fleeing into the bush during the war, but they said that would no longer happen, that snakes are again fearful of people. Bishop Hilary of Malakal said that when they have a rat infestation in their house, the first thing they do is pray that they may see any disharmony in their immediate social world – and then they stop up the holes! We had an extended and energetic discussion of the way that a bull’s name may be appropriated for its owner in African Traditional Religion, at first casually and then formally, after the animal is sacrificed – a strong affirmation of the relationship between human and non-human creatures.

6. Studying the biblical texts in Hebrew and Greek is very important and much desired, but that opportunity is not yet widely available in Sudan. As speakers of multiple languages, Sudanis are sensitive to the connotations and semantic ranges of particular words, and it was encouraging to see that as the Seminar went on, people began to pay attention to the implication of words even in translation. E.g., when Col. 1:6 speaks of the gospel “bearing fruit” throughout the word, is this a conscious echo of Genesis 1 – especially since Genesis 1 seems to provide the theological base for the Letter to the Colossians?

7. We read the Bible in personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and we seek him through Scripture, in both Testaments. So, for example, when we discussed the prominence of the word “seed” in Genesis 1, people noted that seed holds the promise of future life and is
therefore an important symbol of Jesus Christ, the seed of a restored humanity. In general, uses of symbolism by the biblical writers seem to be easily understood by Sudanis, and modes of symbolic modes of interpretation are not uncommon among them. They also readily embrace the notion that a given text may mean more than one thing.

8. Some element of inspiration is at work in the interpretation of Scripture, which is not wholly different from the inspiration of the biblical writers themselves. There is a strong sense that we participate in the biblical story through teaching and preaching, song and prayer, which leads to a highly interactive mode of interpretation. These last two principles would seem to point to an inherently Trinitarian concept of reading Scripture.

I note, somewhat to my own surprise, that I have encountered no resistance to historical critical concepts that are now standard in the West. So, for instance, when I suggested that Genesis 1 and 2 represent different traditions of the creation account, and that the book of Isaiah represents a strand of prophecy that developed over two centuries, they readily accepted these suggestions as compatible with their own experience of the coexistence of different tribal accounts of creation within Sudan, and the development and maintenance of traditions over a long period of time.

Fostering an Intercontinental Culture of Reading Scripture
When I lead workshops such as these, I often conclude by articulating my hope that our work is a step toward creating a genuinely intercontinental mode of reading Scripture, among Anglicans and more widely among Christians. Two summers of teaching in the Bible in the Life of the Church project have strengthened this hope and given me a clearer vision of some of the components of such a project. I conclude this report by listing those aspects of our shared study that seem most promising:

1. An approach grounded in prayer and seeking to foster friendship.
2. Study groups and leadership teams that include both men and women, although at times it may be beneficial for women in particular to have some meetings by themselves.
3. Where possible, including participants and/or leaders from more than one denomination.
4. Opening up the texts chiefly by asking questions, supplemented by brief (in most cases) explanatory remarks.
5. Keeping all discussion close to the biblical text, and explaining how interpreters can responsibly draw inferences from it, or perceive fruitful ambiguities.
6. Using application as a test of validity for our interpretations: Does the text guide and challenge the church toward faithful action that builds up the body in this place and time?