1. The U.K. Regional Group
The group’s work has mainly focused on enabling the bible study process that was worked out at the London meeting in Dec 09. We have had a variety of groups running in various parts of the country (Oxford, London, Birmingham, Warwick, West Country), with a particular orientation to Birmingham (as this is where the group has been located, and where the group’s “contacts” and relationships are strongest). We have also used the studies in other less formal sessions, with ordinands and PhD students in biblical studies. Anecdotal feedback, as well as the outcome of the studies themselves, has been that people very much enjoyed the study group experience. It is a good thing!

Practically speaking, we made two decisions:

- To alter the introductory text of the studies: initial explorations suggested, for example, that few people had heard of the five marks of mission of the AC, so that needed some explanation and clarification. Indeed, some groups queried why they were focusing on the 5th mark, and not the other four.

- To separate the roles of group leader and group observer, and to give separate “scripts” and/or questions for each to follow. It was felt too difficult an exercise for one person to fulfill both roles.

We also placed a website ([http://www.anglicanbible.blogspot.com/](http://www.anglicanbible.blogspot.com/)) to solicit feedback particularly from sources not known to us (and with some quite provocative opening statements!), though the take up on this has been disappointingly minimal. We also used the Church House’s Adult Educators Network to publicize the process, and this yielded some more interest. The exercise worked best, however, at a relational level – i.e. through encouraging people we were already in contact with in some form.

What have we found?
At this stage, at least, we have struggled to discern too many common features in how Anglicans have been reading, or at least many aspects in which Anglicans are particularly distinctive. If anything, the nature of the exercise has revealed that groups/readers tended to operate in a variety of ways, but ones very much driven by the interests/foci of the respective groups. In terms of the questions posed of the reading process for the observer’s consideration, we found diversity in experience. Some groups, for example, were pre-existent ones, with many years of being gathered together; others were deliberately formed for the project experience (though, interestingly, some expressed an interest in continuing to meet in this fashion having had their tastes whetted). Some groups had a minister present – and the minister did tend to be looked to for “professional” advice – whilst others lacked any expert influence. Different Bible versions were used across the groups (NIV, NRSV, Jerusalem Bible, AV – a number of people brought the text on an electronic device), though interestingly, there was no instance where just one version prevailed.

Some groups had study notes – or at least the group leader referred to them – but they do not seem to have been a core component of the process. This may, though, have
been a result of how we steered the exercise, namely that the material we were providing for the exercise was sufficient for the task.

Broadly speaking, the way the groups read reflected their particular constituency. A group from one church known for its interest in social justice and political matters read together in that light – environmental matters and issues (as much as the text itself) were a key part of their discussion. Another (very evangelical) group seemed to want to find answers from the text that would sit within their particular theological constituency, whilst a group with a particularly strong academic background consequently brought a more “academic” (perhaps scientific?) engagement to the text.

At the same time, people did generally want to use the text to inform life and decisions. Although they may have approached and dealt with it in a variety of ways, one gets the sense that, for all, (some form of) engagement with the text was a useful exercise. Feedback from one group is of interest: “They did not want an academic approach or any theological answers to their questions but they did want to read the bible together … and link it to their daily lives and experiences.” All those who led groups have remarked as to how much the participants seemed to enjoy or be energized by the process.

Other notable findings:

- There is little, to no, awareness of the text of the Apocrypha, at least within the Anglican churches we considered. This was also the case for those theological/ministerial students with which we worked. The text had to be supplied to participants, and the context/content of the Song of the Three Young Men explained. Where given the choice, there was no group who chose to read this text.

- A number of people did take up the 2 Peter reading. However, it is notable that it was only really the group of biblical scholars who noted the tension between this text and others in the list. Indeed, generally speaking, the readers were reluctant to put the text with which they were working into conversation with other biblical texts (though were quite happy to put it into conversation with events and experiences).

- Anecdotal feedback suggested that where there was interest in Anglican Communion concerns, congregations were pleased to take up the study group mantle. Conversely, in places where Anglican self-identity is less visible, enthusiasm for the task was less strong.

- The issue itself – green/environmental concerns – was key to the success of the process. As a “relevant” or contemporary issue, it seems to have given some “energy” to the reading exercise; indeed, in 1 or 2 groups, the feedback returned was more geared to environmental questions than hermeneutical ones.

What limitations did we have?

- We haven’t really engaged with “young” people, particularly those under 18. This needs some further thought/investigation.

- The majority of the reading groups were all-white; the groups need to represent more of the multi-ethnic nature of the Anglican church in England particularly.
2. Issues
Several issues have emerged as follows:

- It has been interesting to see how the topic of the use of the Bible has come up in other areas, beyond the immediate scope of BiLC. There does seem to be a general ecclesial concern to take the Bible seriously – in whatever fashion; the BibleFresh initiative, for example (http://www.biblefresh.com/), seems to be asking related questions, albeit in more trans-denominational terms.

- We have yet to uncover here a *distinctive* Anglican hermeneutic, or at least we have noted a variety of ways in which people seem to read. This raises questions about stage 2 of the project – how does one apply a hermeneutic to another issue when there is no obvious agreement as to what that hermeneutic is?

- At the time of writing, there seems to be an emerging group of Anglican Biblical Scholars group in Ireland, who may want to be using the BiLC material (I referred to BiLC in a piece written for the CofI journal, *Source*). What support might we offer them?

3. Where do we go next?
Two areas seem to be worthy of further thought:

- Much is happening in the U.K. in relation to 2011 and the 400th anniversary of the KJV. Various events are occurring at a parish, diocesan, national and international level to celebrate the anniversary (SBL International is London that year, for example), and it seems like an obvious place of convergence for BiLC interests.

- Because there is so much current interest in the topic, the process of looking at it is actually demanding in terms of time and commitment. It feels such a large issue and that in some ways we are just scratching the surface!

David M Allen
The UK Group
Bible in the Life of the Church Report 2 - 2012

The UK Group struggled to operate in the aftermath of phase 1, so I took the decision to operate phase 2 with a more diverse network, and to distribute the study material to several networks and onwards through them. This not only increased the amount of material returned (though it still remained manageable), but it also enabled contacts with more targeted groups (for example, one composed of non-native UK members). As with phase 1, participants generally appreciated the invitation to ponder, and engage with these passages, particularly in being taken to parts of the biblical testimony with which they were previously unfamiliar (notably the Ezekiel 27 passage). There were also some helpful observations along the way, one group, for example, exploring in some detail as to whether they though Prov 31 is actually about wisdom as much as about gender.

Trying to synthesize the great diversity of material that has come back has not been straightforward (and some of it has come in late). One senses that the studies themselves were actually quite demanding – compared to phase 1 at least – and it has been more difficult to identify particular trends, partly because we gave people more textual choice with which to work. However, I would want to underline or draw out the following headlines:

- **Some passages seem just to have been avoided:** only one group actually chose to look at 1 Timothy 2 – it was almost as if they wanted to avoid any unnecessary confrontation that might have thereby arisen.

- **Responses from the groups were really quite animated:** This may be to do with the subject matter, or with the way the questions were framed, but group feedback was quite provocative (at least compared to phase 1). One group for example completely rejected the notion that Ps 73 had anything to say about prosperity teaching, and was pretty dismissive as a result (though I believe that some members in the group had loose connections with prosperity gospel thinking). One (very evangelical) group found the suggestion that Matt 15 is both “outrageous and offensive” to be, of itself, “outrageous”.

- **Economic issues appealed more than gender ones:** This was a very strong finding. It was almost as if people were uncomfortable engaging with gender issues, or did not feel that they were salient enough to address (a couple of readers notably averred, for example, that Matt 15:21-31 was about unjust race structures, rather than gender ones). Conversely, people generally felt that they could in some sense come together around the “economic” texts. It is notable that many of the studies were conducted against the backdrop of the Occupy London/St Paul’s demonstrations and the questions that these events raised. Likewise, debates in late 2011-early 2012 regarding city bonuses also gave a focus – or target? – for group discussion that was more energizing (or unifying?) than gender questions. In sum, one senses that the Jubilee campaign associations of Deut 15 felt “safer” places for the group to go together, in that it energized them in their discussion. One participant summarized their perspective: “the church needs to lead by example; when it is not generous with its resources or its attitudes to others it is hard to convince others that they should be.”

- **The tendency to “spiritualize” the text:** this was the case in several groups, particularly those from the charismatic wing. One (very educated) group summarized of Luke 6: “I think economics is very central to his [i.e. Jesus] vision. His focus isn’t on money, however, or possessions but on the results when we desire to follow Him and to become more like Him.”

- **More attention to the themes rather than verse-by-verse interaction:** this may be due to the open-ended questions posed, but people’s feedback tended not to allude to particular verses or details, but rather to grand aspirations or thinking.

- **Ecumenical reading happened** - or rather I could identify no particular denominational
focus or identity to the exercise. There was no evidence that people read consciously as “Anglicans”. Little, if any, associations were drawn with liturgy or public worship.

- **Little attention to the 4th mark of mission:** there was some, limited attempt to draw out mission implications from the texts (only, though, on economic, than gender, terms), but not a great deal, and with very little recognition of the missional mark itself and the structural aspect of that engagement (for one group, evangelism was actually the key missional response). This was particularly interesting for me in that I led some studies with students who had just completed a module on the five marks of mission…

_But perhaps more than anything else, the exercise (re-)confirmed the “mind the gap” exhortation framed from our last meeting._ This is the key finding and was borne out in two ways:

1) Generally speaking, groups often found it difficult to move between original context and contemporary application. Even relatively theologically erudite participants were quick to make the jump; for example, one fairly wealthy person – someone with Masters level theological training – observed of Mark 10 that “experiencing the kingdom of God will involve suffering. It will involve giving everything away, losing friendships or family, persecution” – but left it at that. There was still the sense that the Bible speaks direct to people in their own context, and one doesn’t have to do any “work” to get there (Maybe the “you” language of some of our questions points people in that direction).

2) Other groups were actually aware of the distance between the original context and their contemporary experience – but then did not have the time, energy or know how in order to make the move. They recognized the “situatedness” of the biblical text, but moved quickly therefore to reject any value or contribution on the part of the text, particularly in terms of gender issues. There was the awareness that something is not right – and that it’s not easy/straightforward to apply the text – but chose therefore simply not to “engage” with it. Subsequent feedback from one participant reflects this: “I think it’s helpful in this sort of study to start by considering some generalized issues around each topic that helps depict what the current world views are, contrasted by events recorded in the bible. I think we have a tendency to make a broad assumption that just because we reference a topic in the bible that fits our question theme, it has to be relevant – whereas there is no precedent to suggest that this has to be the case. … I think to ask deep questions as you are asking without considering the norms of the society represented is a mistake, because it pre-supposes that the situations recorded are transferrable to the modern day, where they may not be.” The person acknowledges the “problem” and the hesitancy is important, but the group then made no attempt to “bridge the gap”.

I write this in the midst of further Church of England exploration/discussion as to the nature of ministerial and lay training, which is itself a key challenge for theological education at a national level. However, I come away from phase 2 far more positive about the necessity for hermeneutical training. The exercise illustrated that (generally speaking), readers either just jumped the gap (and “fell”), or recognized the gap but didn’t see the value in seeking to traverse it. Reading the Bible, particularly around issues of justice, is (still) not an easy task…

_David M Allen_