

The Bible: Learning from Beyond Ourselves

Reflections of the work Hong Kong and the Philippines

(Background: the BILC project did not have the financial resources to have Regional Groups in all areas of the Communion. South East Asia was one of the 'missing' areas so we decided to hold workshops in Hong Kong and the Philippines for clergy and lay leaders who would then facilitate groups themselves and report back on what they observed. This reflection comes out of that process. In the 'read further' section you can find the full reports and an outline of the original workshops as an example of how we might more deeply engage with Scripture in these contexts.)

It was clear from the reports from parishes in Hong Kong that the Scriptures play a central part in the lives of participants. Also, that participants were enormously excited by the new vistas on what the Scriptures have to say about important public social issues opened by the project's methodology:

Despite the limitation of time and manpower, [the project provided] a good chance for whole province of Anglican Church in Hong Kong to have a reflection on how we interpret and use the Bible. It is also a valuable opportunity for the church members and the lay-leaders to grasp the ideas of the Five Marks of Mission of the Anglican Communion. Through the engagement with the whole project, we have broadened our horizons and opened our eyes with a much wider periscope. This may shift the focus of our primary concern of our faith from sole interest of oneself to the global interest of the creation and the social injustice.

However, the methodology of the project exposed challenges for the participants in their encounters with the Scriptures. Focusing initially on Hong Kong, these challenges were of three kinds: first, the challenge to a cultural tendency to listen passively to a leader expounding the Scriptures rather than to be engaged as equal participants with the leader:

The majority of lay people in the Province of Hong Kong expect the leader of the church to provide guidance for them for reading the meaning out from the Bible and for them to follow ...; throughout the project, we have discovered that the mindsets of the church members in Hong Kong Anglican Church are rather authoritative(ly) oriented.

Second, participants were challenged to explore how their contemporary worldview was supported or confronted by the Scriptures. Discussions of gender issues, based on the Fourth Mark of Mission revealed how many questions participants discovered about their own wrestling with gender issues in the workplace:

They tried to understand the passages of Galatians 3:23-29 and 1 Timothy 2:1-15 in terms of the historical and cultural understanding of the genders. Yet, there is no clear indication of the understanding of the social status of females in the 1st century Greco-Roman world. They tend to jump into the contemporary way of claiming the equality of male and female from the point of view of recent theological understanding of the biblical passages. At the same time, they try to compare the passages of 1 Timothy with that of Genesis 3 so that they may conclude that in the Bible even in the period of the Old Testament, male and female are created to be equal. To a certain extent, in our knowledge of some recent academic methods of biblical interpretation, this jump is a bit too big and there should be a huge gap to be filled up. Moreover, as most the members are in their 30s, they are working people and they tend to apply the equality of the genders into working places. It seems that they are still facing some kind of injustice derived from the unjust gender structure within our modern society of Hong Kong.

Third, participants were challenged by the Bible studies offered by the project to ask questions of their cultural tendency to listen respectfully to different opinions: on the one hand, they saw that this tendency fitted well with the project's intention of enabling readers of Scripture to explore different understandings of Scripture; but on the other hand, they realized that real engagement was often limited or even prevented by the prevailing cultural politeness:

The reports show that over 95% participants are willing to listen to the other with different opinions. Dialogue and discussion are shown and some groups can come up with a common conclusion. Generally the participants respect each other and are so polite that they do not criticize those with different opinions.

This theme of "learning from beyond ourselves" lay behind the fact that the Philippine participants took their involvement in the project very seriously. Their report explains their awareness of the Scriptures as a 'sacred text', used by God to address their lives through "encouragement, challenge, and reprimand". It goes on to express the excitement of encountering the Scriptures together when they reported their own willingness "to be surprised, given new insights and discover new passages". The report also noted the impact of the project in arousing a new interest in the Scriptures: "some have indicated they want to study the Bible more, and spend more time on the Bible as they learn the valuable lessons that they can use in their lives". Action plans were reported to put this desire into effect and a final note of appreciation expressed: "The Bible in the Life of the Church project has been a blessing to the Episcopal Church in the Philippines. It is a seed planted in the midst of a religious people who knew the authority and importance of the Bible, and now start to see the application of the Bible's truth in their lives".