

Mind the Gap! Reflections on the “Bible in the Life of the Church” Project

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The Challenge

It is no secret that the Anglican Communion has been living under considerable strain for over a decade. As with most complex relational situations, we must deal with more than just the presenting issue of how we understand homosexuality. Other areas of belief and behavior are being “fought out” in this debate, and while many in the Communion recognize this fact, we have not come to a consensus as to exactly what these underlying issues are. Over time it has become clear, however, that our understanding of the place of the Bible in the life of the church is one of these issues.

As we have grappled with the challenges raised by the sexuality debate within the Communion, and as people on all sides talk about how they have come to their particular conclusions, we see one element that has repeatedly recurred in their thinking: the Bible is important to them. For example, for those on the “conservative” wing of the church passages like Romans 1:18–32 are seen as offering clear teaching on the incompatibility of same-sex relationships with Christian profession. On the other hand, those of a more “liberal” theological stance suggest that this passage is far less clear about today’s context, as it is rooted in a Hellenistic society that viewed homosexuality very differently. Both perspectives take Scripture seriously, so it seems clear that we are all engaging with, interpreting, and using the Bible in different ways in our desire to seek its wisdom on the way we should live and behave but, in the process, are coming to differing conclusions.

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The Project

In an attempt to understand these differences better, the Anglican Communion decided in 2009 to embark on a project seeking an answer to the question: “How do we actually engage with and interpret the Bible in the Anglican Communion?”¹ The overall aims of the project are:

- to explore how we, as Anglicans, actually use the Bible by sharing experiences of using the Bible to explore two major contemporary issues;
- to distil and develop from these explorations the principles of Anglican hermeneutics;
- to produce resource materials for use at all levels of Christian education;
- to provide a guide to significant literature on this topic;
- to offer a report and make recommendations to ACC-15.

The project is designed to run up to the next meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC) in late 2012, so at present it is at the half-way stage.²

The Process

In deciding on a process for undertaking this task, the project’s Steering Group rejected a method often used in the past to ascertain an answer to this kind of question, which was to write to every primate in the Communion asking how they, in their province, engage with and interpret the Bible. Had we done that, in all probability, the primate would have asked a respected biblical scholar to draft a response, to which the primate and other provincial leaders would have added their names. We would then have a detailed account of how different parts of the Communion *believe they should* engage with and interpret the Bible, but we would not know what was happening in practice across the Communion.

¹ The resolution that provided the mandate for the “Bible in the Life of the Church” project was passed at ACC-14. The full wording can be found at: <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/communion/acc/meetings/acc14/resolutions.cfm#s6>.

² Fuller details of the project can also be found on the Anglican Communion website at: <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/theological/bible/index.cfm>.

In order to try to get in touch with how ordinary Anglicans *actually* engage with and interpret the Bible, the Steering Group decided to design a process in which groups of Anglicans would engage with Scripture and then reflect on how they approached and undertook the task. Two specific case study scriptural engagements have been set up in order to offer the raw materials needed to reflect on the ways we actually engage with and interpret the Bible. In doing this we wanted to ensure that the project engaged with a good cross-section of the Communion both geographically and theologically, and that the engagement took place in areas where there were likely to be differences of opinion, but along lines that were perhaps different from those exposed by the debates on sexuality, since the differences exposed by the sexuality debate are so emotive in many places across the Communion. The Steering Group felt that using human sexuality or human relationships as a case study topic might hinder the project's ability to reflect on the ways those involved actually went about engaging and interpreting Scripture. In other words, the emotions surrounding the topic would get in the way of the hermeneutical task.

The project has attempted to ensure a basic geographical spread by creating six Regional Groups—based in East Africa, South Africa, South-East Asia, North America, Australia, and Britain—that would spearhead the explorations in their area. Due to financial constraints, we limited ourselves to six groups that could take a series of regional snapshots. We also invited a small number of other people to join the project's Steering Group, and they brought experiences of working with groups in Sudan, Cuba, and New Zealand. To this we have also added a number of User Groups, which are comprised of people from anywhere within the Communion who, having shown an interest in what we are trying to do, asked if they could be involved by undertaking the biblical engagement outlined in the case studies and then report back on how they went about it. At this midpoint we have had in excess of 350 people across the Communion involved in the project and reporting back to us either through the Regional Groups or directly to the Steering Group.

We are working on the assumption that the diversity the Regional Groups represented, coupled with the experiences of Sudan, Cuba, and New Zealand and those of the various “user groups,” will act as a reasonably representative sample of the Communion as a whole. If this assumption is correct, then they offer us a picture from which we might be able to draw more general conclusions that can be addressed

to the Communion as a whole. The people involved in these explorations also represent the broad spectrum of theological positions held within the Communion, from conservative, Evangelical positions in relation to Scripture to what might be described as liberal or radical.

The Case Studies

The Steering Group has chosen as the major topics for the case studies two themes that are at the heart of the church's understanding of its mission to the world, as that mission is articulated by the Anglican Consultative Council's "Five Marks of Mission."³ The fifth mark was chosen for Case Study 1: "to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth"; and the fourth mark is the topic for Case Study 2: "to seek to transform unjust structures of society".

We decided to choose these particular Marks of Mission for a number of reasons: First, we wanted both the topics and the expressions of those topics to be uncontentious, in the sense that they were agreed aspects of the church's mission. The Anglican Communion has embraced these Five Marks at various points in its recent life, and many provinces use them as guiding lights for their mission strategies. So, they are seen as familiar ground across the Communion. Second, we wanted topics that were likely to elicit differences of opinion that were sharp but not necessarily linked to any obvious theological position. Safeguarding creation has very different resonances and urgency for the island communities of Polynesia, Melanesia, and Papua New Guinea, for example, than it does for those of us resident in the United Kingdom. Third, we wanted topics that could draw on a wide range of biblical writings, including both Testaments and all genres of biblical literature. Fourth, having decided to take our topics from the Marks of Mission, we chose two of the least explored marks because we wanted themes that might take participants into what the Steering Group believed would be less familiar areas of biblical exploration. A survey in preparation for the 2008 Lambeth Conference showed that

³ The Five Marks of Mission were formally adopted by the Communion at ACC-6 and ACC-8. They are: "(1) To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom; (2) To teach, baptize, and nurture new believers; (3) To respond to human need by loving service; (4) To seek to transform unjust structures of society; (5) To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth." A fuller description of the marks can be found at: <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/mission/fivemarks.cfm>.

levels of engagement with the Marks of Mission diminished from the first to the fifth, so we chose the last two marks for our project.

The Raw Material

In order to ensure that each Regional Group, any smaller groups they may create, and all of the User Groups were working on similar scriptural material in each case study, the Steering Group suggested a number of key core texts. For Case Study 1 these texts were: Genesis 1–2; Jeremiah 4:11–31; Psalm 104; Song of the Three Young Men 23–68; Mark 4:1–41; Romans 8:12–27; Colossians 1:3–29; and 2 Peter 3:1–13. With these passages we posed a number of questions in four sections:

- (1) Questions about the texts and the Creator and creation
What do the texts say about the relationship between Creator and creation? The relationship of human beings to the rest of creation?
- (2) Questions about the texts and ethical challenges
What ethical questions do the texts raise? How might they inform our decision-making in relation to the fifth Mark of Mission?
- (3) Questions about the texts and context
What cultural issues inform the texts?
- (4) Questions about the texts and response
What is the Spirit saying to the churches through this text?

Under each of these headings further questions were offered to tease out responses and interpretation in each area.

While the Steering Group hoped the groups taking part in the project would engage with Scripture through these questions, we also wanted to find ways of observing the processes used and to identify what emerged from the discussions.⁴ At this stage we were unsure exactly how the groups would do this in such a way that would enable us, for example, to compare and contrast what was happening in East Africa with what was happening in Australia. In order to get some initial feedback on this aspect of the project, the Steering Group suggested

⁴ The Case Study 1 study notes outline the texts chosen and the questions that groups would seek to answer in the light of these Scriptures. For more details, see the downloads at: <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/theological/bible/docs/index.cfm>.

that participating groups take up one of two possible approaches: either the group would ask an observer to sit in on the study, or the group itself—after the engagement/study section—would reflect on how they went about it. To help them do this, the Steering Group suggested a number of questions. For the independent observer, we suggested these questions:

Overview of the engagement process: What Bible versions were used? Was the engagement with or without study notes? Did people bring Bibles? What were the methods of engagement—was it corporate engagement or was someone “telling” others? How much use was made of the fruits of scholarship (genre of text, cultural context)? What was the effect of language on translation?

Observations throughout the engagement: Was there evidence of examples of behavior relating to inter-scriptural awareness—the range of diversity of biblical material and relationship with other texts? Was there evidence of an interplay between Scripture and personal experience? Were there any overt disagreements with Scripture? How did the group handle these?

For participants who wished to reflect on the engagement processes themselves, we suggested these questions:

In what ways did you engage with the Bible? How far did the texts act as transformative and how far as consolidatory? Thinking about what you have just done, what were you doing with the Bible, and why were you doing it?

The reports on what happened both in terms of biblical engagement and interpretation and in terms of the observations of the processes used were compiled by the Regional Group coordinators or the User Group leaders and sent to the project coordinator for the Steering Group to consider. The coordinators of these groups met with three consultants and Anglican Communion Office staff in November 2010 to hear about the nature of these regional engagements and to discern any common threads that were emerging from the work so far.

The Halfway Stage: Emerging Themes

As I write this in early 2011 we are only at the halfway point in the project. Each Regional Group has undertaken a series of explorations

on Case Study 1 as outlined above and participants or observers have reflected on what they observed going on in these groups—the process of engagement. As the Steering Group put all these reports together we identified a number of common themes emerging about the way those involved in the project actually engaged with and interpreted Scripture. While these observations are not empirically proven, they nevertheless raise interesting (possibly also troubling) and important (possibly vital) issues for the church, especially if the Bible is to be seen as central to the church’s way of dealing with controversy. Our task now, as a Steering Group, is to test out these observations more methodically as part of the work we are planning for Case Study 2.

The themes identified by the Steering Group in their evaluation of the observations point to what might be called “gaps” between what is actually happening when we engage with the Bible and what we think we are doing. In other words, gaps exist between what might be seen as the “perceived wisdom of how we *should* do our hermeneutics” and the way we might actually be doing it. From the flip chart musings of the Steering Group, we first identified these gaps in the following ways, and then gathered them into two groups:

- *Gap between the academy (scholar/expert) and the pew (ordinary reader): What is the place of the seminary in this gap?*
 - Gap between the fruits of study and clarity about the process of study, between mechanics and results—hermeneutical methodologies;
 - Gap between gaining our insights from Scripture and “other sources”;
 - Gap between the particular and the whole as far as Scripture is concerned;
 - Gaps created by different pedagogical methodologies;
 - Gap between the preference for different hermeneutical horizons.
- *Gap between what we say (espoused theory) and what we do (theory in practice)*
 - Gap between “once studied” (“sorted”) and continual learning;
 - Gap that speaks of the relationship between “the rock from which we are hewn” (personally or corporately) and the “now” of our journey, and the importance of both;

- Gap between issues/topics/understandings for which we automatically would use the Scriptures and those for which we do not draw on its insights;
- Gap between reading communities;
- Gap between the canon of Scripture and the Scripture encountered;

The Steering Group saw the first set as gaps that the church, as an institution, has a responsibility to address in the way it teaches the people of God to engage with and interpret Scripture. The second set was seen as being of more relevance to the personal reader. Having said this, there is considerable overlap, both between the two sets and among the individual gaps themselves. If these gaps point to failures in our hermeneutical task, then we need to note that they exist and find ways in which we might address them. I use “if” advisedly, as the observations from which this list was derived might not be universally applicable or confirmed in the second part of the project. So, in all that follows I seek to explore the identified gaps through questions and offer the particular observations that gave rise to them.

Gaps Addressed to the Church

Those gaps addressed to the church might be summed up by the question: “Are there presently gaps between the academy and the pew?” Or to put it more bluntly: “Can those trained in the academy make their learning relevant to those in the pew?”

The report from Australia, in summarizing what the Anglican Church there had already published on environmental issues (the subject matter for Case Study 1), offered the following comment:

The essays discuss key biblical passages/themes: “subdue or rule” creation, Sabbath, being human in creation, etc. All are professional and well footnoted, and all conclude that humankind bears the large responsibility for creation’s despoiling and that active and thoughtful response is part of Christian obedience to God—*but the nuanced uses of Scripture seen here would seem to be well beyond what the average Anglican does.* [emphasis added]

This comment raised the question of whether there is there, more generally, a gap between our understanding of the fruits of study—what the Bible is saying to the reader—and the process of study—the

hermeneutical tools used to discover these fruits. These tools are clearly being used, especially by those with theological training, but are they employed with enough explanation so they can be received with understanding? One of the Sudanese participants, a principal of a training institute, commented that “most of us [the staff at the institute] stand in front of our students and pour out information like water into empty cups.” If that is the model of teaching imbibed during training, then what modes of teaching are transferred to the congregational ministry? This raised the question as to whether the hermeneutical tools the church has at its disposal are so much a part of the life of the academy that we forget or do not feel the need consciously to explain them to those in the pew.

Other observations raised the question of whether there was a gap between those issues or topics on which the church gained understanding from Scripture and those on which it relied more heavily (possibly exclusively) on other sources. Our care and concern for the environment is seen as important, for example, but in some places engaging with the Bible on the topic has not been central in our response. Again in the report from the Australian Regional Group, the writer surveys various articles stressing, in this context, the importance of our care of the environment in the mission of the church. He concludes that in many cases “the Bible is not used” or is “not used beyond ‘support’ quotations.” Are there issues or topics for which we, as a church, immediately go to Scripture (and possibly nowhere else) and others for which we do not? If that is the case, is there a danger of misusing the Bible as either a source of supportive proof texts or in a way that cuts it off from other sources of wisdom with which it might usefully be in conversation?

A third area in which we observed, in certain regions, a possible gap was between engaging with a particular passage of Scripture and both allowing that passage to speak to other passages and putting the passage in its larger biblical context. A number of reports suggested that although the questions posed by the Steering Group for Case Study 1 sought to explore the topic by drawing on insights from all the suggested core texts, the evidence seemed to suggest participants looked at each text in turn and did not put the texts in conversation with one another. However, the report from Sudan was clear that their understanding was that “the Bible should be read as a whole, with one part commenting on other parts.” This led the Steering Group to wonder whether the “lectionary tradition” of Anglicanism,

which brings a number of passages together to speak to one another, might be informing some of our study engagement.

We also observed that it seemed clear that different pedagogical approaches opened up new understandings in the engagement process. This was most clearly illustrated in situations where an “outsider,” particularly a cultural outsider, led the engagement process using methods that were unfamiliar to many participants. What is clearly taken for granted as an approach into scriptural engagement in one part of the Communion may be unknown or untried in another. One of the hopes of this project is that it will point to a variety of tried and tested methodologies for engaging with Scripture. If the project can achieve this, then it would help to highlight different approaches and allow a cross-fertilization of methods of biblical engagement and interpretation. These observations did raise the question as to whether, across the Communion, we are fully aware of the richness of different pedagogical approaches to engaging with the Bible.

The final observed gap in this first set that the institutional church might need to address was that created by the “preferred” hermeneutical horizons⁵ different “readers” brought to scriptural engagement. In short, the notion of hermeneutical horizons suggests that when we engage and seek to interpret Scripture we do so in the context of one of three horizons: the horizon of the *writer*, as the life and world of the person who wrote the text; the horizon of the *text*, as the characters or ideas it describes; and the horizon of the *reader*, as the context in which people encounter the Bible today. Studies of these “horizons” have noticed that the individual reader does not move easily between these three horizons and that each of us—perhaps unconsciously—has a preferred one.⁶ They have also noted that the level of understanding of these different horizons and their effect on the fruits of this engagement is also not always clear.

This lack of clarity is illustrated by a section of the North American report, in which one of their regional steering group members reported:

⁵ These comments on the idea of biblical horizons are drawn from work undertaken by Anthony C. Thiselton in *The Two Horizons* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1980) and *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (London: HarperCollins, 1992).

⁶ See Andrew Village, *The Bible and Lay People: An Empirical Approach to Ordinary Hermeneutics* (Aldershot & Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2007).

When First Nation people engage in these conversations [Bible engagement], they are careful not to respond too 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.

The report went on to say:

[This member] 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.

Is this an area where more explanation is needed between the academy and the pew? What interested the Steering Group was not primarily the differences between these horizons, but the fact that the preferences within a group engaging together might, if left unexamined, lead to the possibility of the group talking in very different ways about the same passage. This, of course, might well enrich the conversation if insights from text and author help the readers to interpret and apply the text to their context. However, without explanation of these horizons, people who inhabit the world of the author and the text may be inspired and fascinated but may not see that the texts has much to do with the rest of their lives. People who read their world in the text may be inspired to "go and do likewise," but may find that "likewise" is not a simple concept.

Gaps Addressed to the Reader

In addition to these observations concerning the institutional church, the Steering Group also identified possible gaps that might be addressed by the readers themselves. We felt that five were worthy of note. The first were statements or behaviors that seemed to suggest

that Scripture, once studied, could not hold anything new for us. The Australian report outlined what measures the Anglican Church there had taken to engage both theologically and practically with the kind of environmental issues summed up in the fifth Mark of Mission. A great deal has been achieved, but while moving the acceptance of one report it was stated, “The theology is settled!” This led to resistance to the project, as some invited participants did not see the point in “looking again” at the topic; they had “done this already” and so, from their point of view, it had been “sorted,” and further study was unnecessary. Do such statements contradict the view that the church is a community of learners continually seeking to grow in faith?

One of the issues that the project has explored is the ways that the development of our faith, sometimes over many years, influence the ways we approach the Bible. Walter Brueggemann, in his introductory comments to *Redescribing Reality: What We Do When We Read the Bible*, outlines what he has been “learning about [his] own personal history with reference to the text and its interpretation” and encourages the reader “to reflect on how your own heritage, upbringing, religious and academic training, and mentors *have influenced your reading of Scripture*.”⁷ The project has used Professor Brueggemann’s template for mapping his own personal history to develop an exercise for others to use by turning it into a short, open-ended questionnaire reviewing various influences during different stages of the faith development journey.⁸ When this exercise has been used, it has had the effect of making conscious influences on our reading of the Bible that we often simply take for granted, such as the influence experienced now of the place of the Bible in our upbringing (or not); the influence of the denomination we were brought up in (or not); and the influence of the biblical teachers we might have had at seminary, school, or in the church.

From the reports the Steering Group reviewed last November, three gaps emerged in this area. The first was that since we all, as readers, carry with us these influences through which we engage with Scripture and do not always recognize them, we may struggle to know

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Redescribing Reality: What We Do When We Read the Bible* (London: SCM, 2009), xii (emphasis added). The book was first published in the United States under the title *A Pathway of Interpretation: The Old Testament for Pastors and Students* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2008).

⁸ The “Brueggemann Exercise” may be found at: [http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/theological/bible/docs/pdf/brueggemann_exercise\(A4\).pdf](http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/theological/bible/docs/pdf/brueggemann_exercise(A4).pdf).

when they are no longer helpful to the present. For example, we may draw on insights from previous engagement with a particular passage rather than listening to what that passage may be saying now. The second was that at the more personal “reader” level there was an observed gap between those issues or topics where we more readily turn to Scripture and those where we seem not to attempt draw on its insights. For example, in the report from Sudan it was reported that “questions about the theological significance of our relationship with the non-human world is one we have never encountered, and that it is of crucial importance, especially in the postwar (God willing!) years.” Sudan is a province within the Communion where biblical literacy is high and its place in the life of the church is central. Yet, in this example, the Bible was not seen as offering insights on an issue that is understood to be of “crucial importance.”

The third area where we observed a possible gap was in relation to the context in which engagement happens. If our engagement with Scripture is both a personal and communal activity, then the nature of the community within which we do this engagement is significant. For many “ordinary Anglicans” this community is a local congregation to which they may have belonged for a considerable time. Is there a danger that the community can become too safe and of a similar mind? Does engaging with “like-minded” people sometimes mean that we are not taken beyond our comfort zone into a place where we can experience new understandings?

The Steering Group recognized that in some ways these last three gaps state the obvious. But by stating them we wish to do two things. First, we need to acknowledge the effect that unconscious influences that we imbibe throughout our lives have on the way we act today, so that by acknowledging them we might find ways of making them more conscious. Second, we hope to challenge congregations, parishes, dioceses, and provinces to explore how they might engage with and interpret Scripture together in ways that might encourage people to step outside their comfort zones.

One final set of observations suggests that we engage with *a* canon of Scripture within *the* canon of Scripture. By selecting passages for each case study from all genres of Scripture we wished to take group members beyond what we thought might be the “familiar texts.” It was clear from many responses that, for some, they were engaging with parts of Scripture they had not encountered before. This observation relates to earlier comments on the use of the lectionary in our worship.

The aim of the lectionary is to ensure that, over time, considerable sections of Scripture are read publicly and are read not as isolated passages, but both in sequence (working through a gospel) and in relation to other passages. The use of the lectionary does raise the question, though, as to whether there are sections of the Bible we never or rarely encounter that limit our understanding of what Scripture might be saying to us.

If these observations are more than just isolated examples—a possibility we aim to test in the second phase of the project—then we would wish to pose the following question to all of us as “readers”: Do we have a responsibility to look at whether what we *do* in relation to handling the Bible is in keeping with what we *say we do*?

Project Part 2: Testing the Gaps

As we stand now at the halfway stage and begin the work of Case Study 2, we intend to continue the engagement-observation-reflection process as we explore what it means to “seek to transform the unjust structures of society.” At the same time, we also wish to test out the perceived gaps outlined above, as a way of confirming these observations and deepening our understanding of what they have to say to us about the Bible in the life of the Anglican Communion. At this stage the Steering Group is conscious that this project is very much a “work in progress” and, as it stands, begs many key questions. Our hope is that by November 2012 we might find some clarity that can offer the Anglican Communion useful insights into this important area of its life.