

Gathering Together To Read The Bible Matters!

Reflections of the work of the Regional Group in United Kingdom

(Background: The UK Regional Group has 'met' in a variety of ways – face to face, by E mail and other electronic forms. It observed different groups as they engaged with Scripture through the Case Studies that explored the Fifth and Fourth Marks of Mission. This Reflection comes from those observations.)

There's something about reading the Bible together. That seems to be the experience of those UK Anglicans who gathered to engage with the Scriptural text – to attend to it, and to allow it to attend to them. As part of the BILC project, a number of groups (*some pre-existing, some formed specially for the process*) gathered to read the Scriptures together, to engage with them and to share their experiences in so doing. The experience was appreciated by almost everyone involved, with the groups generating a real excitement as they interacted with the suggested passages and pondered the given questions accordingly.

Participants were surprised by what they encountered; passages such as the Song of the Three Young Men or Numbers 27 - texts that their tradition or experience had never previously taken them to - were laid before them, to challenge and excite them. They found the Bible to be a source for mission, for evangelism, for pastoral work and for worship. But most significantly, they found that engaging with the Bible informed day-to-day living – it enabled connections to be made to their context and their life. Thus whether it was testing responses to matters of economic justice in the light of the Occupy London sit-ins or raising questions of responding to environmental matters in the knowledge that creation is 'good', readers found energizing and challenging connections to be made. Thus the consensus is that Anglicans want to read the Bible – and want to do so together. Gathering together to read the Bible matters – whether in small groups, whether in Sunday worship, whether rehearsed in song, or outworked in daily life.

Two particular incidences are perhaps worthy of further reflection to give a flavour of the findings. One group surmised that the Bible studies on the Fifth Mark of Mission had made them “realize how little they knew about the Bible and about the world. They were surprised how much creation comes up in the Bible.” The fact that this group expressed their lack of knowledge about the Bible is perhaps not unsurprising, and reflects, one might say, an on-going process that all of us wish to know the Scriptures more, and that we are on the journey together. But the reference to knowing more about the world is arguably more intriguing. The suggestion – and it comes from other sources too – is that Anglican readers were excited by the way the Bible opens up understanding of the world, the world around them which they inhabit. The group affirmed that 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.”

In another instance, a mixed-gender group were enthused by the encouragement to consider the two contrasting female figures of Acts 16:11-24 – Lydia, the (*named*), free successful businesswoman and the unnamed slave girl exploited as a fortune-teller. Being encouraged to read the two (*successive*) narratives in tandem, but with particular attention to the female figures, opened the groups thinking as to how they engaged with the portrait. Lydia became the church-planter, an encouraging figure who modelled engagement with the business world alongside hosting a church in her household. The slave-girl became an encouragement to turn their attention to those presently exploited within society – and what happened to her (*and to those today*) when they are no longer useful/valuable as a moneymaking resource? Who was the slave-girl in their context? Whilst some may dissent from the interpretation the group offered of the text, and the shape that their conversation took, the interesting point remains – the text is a source for action, a source for discovery and excitement, enabling them to make connections for discipleship and mission. Hence it would be good to encourage people to gather more with those who might read differently from themselves; as one participant ventured: “engaging with 'like-minded' people means that we are not taken beyond our comfort zone into a place where we can experience new understandings.”

The project has shown that reading the Bible is not an easy task. Making connections to our own context can be relatively straightforward – we know our context and the issues that encompass it. But the world behind the text – the context of the text, so to speak – can remain a source of anxiety, with participants commonly hesitant as regards the text's original world-view and location. Bridging the respective worlds of the text and contemporary life is thus problematic; readers either just jumped the gap (*and 'fell'*), or recognized the gap but didn't see the value in seeking to traverse it. As with other parts of the Communion, the 'gaps' involved in reading the Bible remain present and need to be 'minded' ...

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