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## PREFACE

The efforts of many people have gone into developing *In Dialogue With Scripture* and making it one of the "best-sellers" in our Church. Thousands of copies of the original text were distributed in 1986 and 1988. When the greatly expanded version was printed in the fall of 1992, it sold out in a matter of months and was reprinted in the spring of 1993. This version is again updated with over 100 new resources, particularly in the electronic medium.

The issue of sexual misconduct has dominated religious news in the past year, making all of us more aware of the potential for abuse of the power given a leader. This chapter on establishing and maintaining interpersonal boundaries in groups provides straightforward suggestions on recognizing physical, emotional, and sexual abuses, on how to avoid violating boundaries, and on what to do if the leader or a group member engages in behaviors that are inappropriate, offensive, or illegal.

It is important to find ways to establish and maintain appropriate boundaries in the Christian community without becoming judgmental, punitive, or afraid of normal human interaction. The chapter in this book is designed for leaders of Bible study groups, but could be used for group leaders in any context. The Christian community as a whole will need to identify appropriate boundaries and boundary violations and to develop responsible ways for the community to respond to those violations. We need to create a norm of justice and healing for those who have been hurt, honest confrontation and mercy for the perpetrators, and reconciliation for the community. This is best done by raising the consciousness and inviting the participation of the whole people of God into a process where we are all accountable to one another for how we live together as a community.

Finally, I am heartened by the news I receive from around the country of a renewed interest in studying the Scriptures. Many dioceses have given a copy of this resource to every congregation, and several have held one-day workshops to introduce it; at each of these, some 80 to 100 people have come to spend a Saturday learning how to lead a small group in studying the Bible.

I believe we are seeing a significant trend whereby more and more people are seeking community in a small-group context. In a world in which everyone seems to be changing jobs and cities, in which families are scattered or nonexistent, and in which life seems to become busier and more alienating, there is a hunger for community and a search for meaning. Small groups of Christians gathered to "study and share, pray and care" for one another become an important, even vital part of a Christian's well-being. *In Dialogue With Scripture* is just one of many resources that can help your congregation develop small groups to build community and help people find themselves, each other, and God in the midst of an ever-changing world.

*The Rev. Linda L. Grenz, Coordinator*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Christians are a story-formed people. At the basis of every community, there are stories of how people acted in times of crisis, learned how to get along with each other in times of tranquility, and lived the values and beliefs that form the core assumptions that enable the community to survive. Those stories shape the identity, mission, political structure, and cultural perspective through which every member perceives what is real and what is valuable.

As Christians, we are shaped by the Story contained in Scripture. We hear the stories of Israel's liberation and struggles to respond to God, and the stories of Jesus Christ's ministry; we come to share a common language and perspective that helps us to recognize God's presence in current history and to identify how we can participate in the continual unfolding of God in history.

In a Scripture-formed community, people of diverse backgrounds are welcomed to share the common story. There are opportunities for them to learn the story of Scripture and the story of the community as it has struggled to remain faithful to God, and there are opportunities for them to share their perspective on the Story that comes from their different cultural backgrounds. These opportunities come in the form of dialogues between the issues and concerns of life and the challenges and assurances of Scripture. This dialogue occurs in the context of intimate vulnerability—a place where people are willing to share their feelings and concerns and accept other people's realities and concerns. The outcome of this dialogue is the possibility of encountering a new or re-affirmed sense of God's loving relationship with us and a new or renewed sense of what God is calling us to do in our immediate community and the world. Surrounding and under girding the dialogue, the community gathers to celebrate what God has done, is doing, and will continue to do through the Word made Flesh and the flesh of our daily lives becoming the new manifestation of God's word in the world.

To be a Scripture-formed community we need to:

- begin all our activities with prayer and Scripture;
- use methods that help us understand and respect the scriptural story, that put the story into dialogue with the world, that increase our understanding and respect for our own experience and the issues confronting us, and that help us act in ways that will aid us as individuals and as a community to become more of what we are called to be;
- welcome and sanction diversity, living into the conflicts that develop as a way of becoming clearer about who we are as the people of God; and,
- develop communities of intimate vulnerability.

How do we foster a Scripture-formed community in the Episcopal Church? Parish educators often find the Episcopal Church lacking in resources similar to those listed by publishing

houses associated with other denominations. Many parish education leaders want resources that provide people with a systematic study of the whole Bible, as well as studies of lectionary texts or short introductory courses.

The temptation, of course, is to try to produce the "perfect" Episcopal program. Instead, it seems far more practical to offer a way of approaching Scripture that lays the groundwork for a Scripture-formed community. Also, the church needs to provide a way for Christian educators to judge the many programs on the market and decide which may be useful for a systematic study of the Bible. Finally, it needs to provide guidelines for helping educators develop their own congregational resources.

This resource brings together the best of two earlier works, *In Dialogue* and *Scripture Conversations*, in order to offer an Episcopal approach to Bible study that respects both the text and the life experiences people bring to their encounter with the text. The hope is that with this resource in hand, people will be able to answer: What's available for Bible study that fits the needs of our parish? What guidelines are there for developing our own program of study? and How can we foster a Scripture-formed community?

*In Dialogue With Scripture* is arranged in four sections. It begins with a series of **articles**, the first of which can be used as background material for a leader or for members of a Bible study group. The remaining articles include reflection questions and can be used as the basis for a discussion about studying the Scriptures. The second section on **planning** includes suggestions on starting groups, promoting programs, and leading groups; this section can be used by leaders of Bible study groups or any other group leader. The third section includes a number of **methods** of Bible study. It is expected that groups and/or leaders will select a method and photocopy these pages for each group member to have as the group learns an approach. The last section includes over 100 reviews of **resources**: programs, books, videos, and computer resources. The articles, methods, and reviews can be copied and used in committees or groups. This resource is intended to be used by clergy, Christian education staff, or group leaders to select appropriate resources for study groups, Church school, education programs for youth or adults, or ministries in specific setting (e.g., nursing homes). Individuals and groups may use the methods and articles.

# Articles

# THE BIBLE AND THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*by Joseph P. Russell and John Vogelsang<sup>1</sup>*

## THE ROLE OF SCRIPTURE IN THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The Episcopal Church is a biblical church. *The Book of Common Prayer* is the key that opens up Scripture for the Episcopalian. The Word of God is the center and focal point of the Daily Office. The two-year Daily Office Lectionary provides for daily course readings from the Bible, plus a seven-week course reading of the psalms. The Office also includes a series of biblical canticles, or hymns, which are said or sung at each service. The Ministry of the Word at the Holy Eucharist consists of a psalm and readings from the Hebrew Bible, Wisdom literature, Epistles and Gospels in a three-year lectionary cycle. A person who attends daily and weekly services would hear most of the Bible read aloud over a two-year period.

*The Book of Common Prayer* roots the Episcopalian in the biblical experience of God's salvation. In addition to the lessons and psalms read at every service, the rites of Episcopal worship are significantly influenced by Scripture. At every service of the Holy Eucharist, the sweep of the salvation narrative set forth in Scripture is recalled in the Great Thanksgiving:

*Holy and gracious Father; in your infinite love you made us for yourself; and, when we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death, you, in your mercy, sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal son, to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to you, the God and Father of all. (BCP, p. 362)*

Many of the hymns we sing provide another experience of Scripture in our worship. Moreover, the architecture and furnishings of some Episcopal buildings reflect the biblical story in a host of visual forms that call us together into sacred space.

Our Church places priority on the Word of God. One of Thomas Cranmer's primary concerns was to make the liturgy and the Bible available in the language of the people. His beautiful collect is heard on the Sunday closest to November 16, at the end of the liturgical year, a year in which we have heard, week after week, the biblical writings proclaimed, prayed, sung, and praised:

*Blessed Lord, who caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ. (BCP, p. 236)*

The Articles of Religion (a document which we Episcopalians accept as one expression of



the basic principles of our theological understanding within a particular historical and political context), clearly sets forth the primacy of Scripture:

*Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. (Article VI)*

Both deacons and priests at ordination are required to declare that they "believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation" promise to "be diligent in the reading and study of the Holy Scriptures." Bishops are "called to be one with the apostles in proclaiming Christ's resurrection and interpreting the Gospel"; they pledge to be "faithful in prayer, and in the study of Holy Scriptures, that you may have the mind of Christ." (BCP, pp. 532, 518)

There is a growing interest in Bible reading and study, stemming in part from the revision of the liturgy in the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Episcopal churches. The revised rites of all three churches place far more emphasis on the reading of Scripture than the former rites did.

Christian education a generation ago emphasized doctrine or life application of the Christian faith; the emphasis today centers most often on looking to the biblical narrative and finding the meaning for our life in today's world. For example, oppressed people in Third World (also known as the "Two Thirds World") countries gather in "basic Christian communities" for Bible study that leads to a radical reorientation of their identity as God's people. Parishioners meet in neighborhood house churches and apply the Proper texts for Sunday's Eucharist to what is happening in their lives at the moment. Everywhere, Christian women are discovering a new sense of identity as they look again at biblical texts indicating that women as well as men are made in the image and likeness of God. On the African continent, the Anglican Church is experiencing a growth and enthusiasm reminiscent of the New Testament Church, as thousands embrace the Gospel and find their identity in the ancient biblical story—a story that unites many diverse peoples through a common spiritual ancestry.

## **THE EPISCOPAL STYLE OF HEARING THE WORD**

An Episcopalian is most apt to hear Scripture within the context of the liturgy. During major liturgical seasons of the church year, all three readings and the psalm express a similar theme or focus. During the Sundays after Pentecost and Epiphany, the Epistles follow their own independent sequential course, while the Hebrew Bible text and the Gospel illuminate each other. Thus we hear Scripture in the context of worship and in the framework of a lectionary that has been designed with the liturgical requirements of the church in mind.

If someone were to ask us to do a word association exercise and then reads from the second chapter of Joel, our Prayer Book trained minds will immediately think, "Ash Wednesday" because the passage from Joel has been read as the first lesson at the Eucharist on that day in the Episcopal Church for generations.

*'Yet even now,' says the Lord, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your clothing.'*

*-Joel 2.12–13a*

When we read about Jesus' baptism, we place it in the context of the season of Epiphany. When we read Matthew 2:1–12, the story of the Magi, we may think of the three wise men by name—Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar—and picture them traveling over "field and fountain, moor and mountain" as the hymn "We Three Kings of Orient Are" depicts them. When we hear the great words of Isaiah that are appointed for Christmas, those passages carry with them the whole weight of that feast. Thus, the liturgical context of a lesson often influences our perception of that portion of the biblical record.

Directions in the Prayer Book encourage us to pause and be quiet after the first and second lessons. In silence we can let the story engage us. We reflect upon what is said and take a moment to recall God's loving relationship with us. After the Gospel reading, we hear the preacher's proclamation of the Good News and can begin the process of constructing our own response to that relationship. That process will continue through the rest of the liturgy until we are prepared to go forth and carry out God's mission in the world.

What the Church chooses *not* to read in public worship also shapes the way we relate to Scripture. For example, the Church has made the decision that Paul's words about women covering their heads at prayer (I Cor. 11:5–6) are not appropriate directives for us today by the simple expedient of not including that particular part of I Corinthians in either the Sunday Eucharist or the Daily Office lectionary set forth in *The Book of Common Prayer*. The provisions in the Torah that apply to slave ownership are obviously ignored by the Church (e.g. Lev. 25:44) as are many other positions in the Bible no longer considered appropriate. The lectionary of the church provides us with an outline of what the church considers relevant for the church today.

The Prayer Book includes great passages of Scripture, but some of those passages have been adapted to fit into a liturgical context. The most obvious example of this practice of adaptation is the Lord's Prayer. As we look at the Lord's Prayer as it is found in the Gospel according to Luke (11:2–4) and compare it with that found in the Gospel of Matthew (6:9–13), we see that the Matthew version has been extended, perhaps reflecting a liturgical development in the life of the early church. The Lord's Prayer as found in *The Book of Common Prayer* has been developed further for liturgical use and includes the doxology at the end of the prayer as a fitting conclusion to this prayer taught to us by Jesus.

*The Book of Common Prayer* represents the rich tradition of our people. It is the map that guides us on our journey through the Bible. It is the repository that measures out the riches of the Word in digestible portions week by week, season by season.

Though the Bible carries tremendous authority and power in the Episcopal Church, tradition and reason join the Bible as the common mind of how the Church is formed. How

Episcopalians interpret the scriptural text over the years is essential for us to understand, and the Prayer Book is a major source of that tradition. For example, if we want to know what the Episcopal Church believes about marriage, we will first look at the marriage rite in the Prayer Book. There we will find Scripture passages that have been chosen to be read in the context of the rite. We should also look at the canons of the Church as they inform us about our tradition. The tradition of the Church expressed in the canons carries a far more liberal attitude about divorce than is found in the words attributed to Jesus in Mark 10:1–12. Thus, to understand the Episcopal attitude about marriage, divorce and remarriage, we must look to the Scripture lessons chosen to be included in the Book of Common Prayer and then to the canons of the Church as they have been formed over the years by a succession of General Conventions. Scripture and tradition form two principles which we use to shape our minds as Christians of Anglican heritage.

A third principle which informs our faith as Episcopalians is the gift of reason. We are not limited to the printed word but to the reality of an evolving Word through which God can speak with immediacy to the present age. The Holy Spirit grants us the gift of inspiration (the spirit within: `in-spiration'), which guides us in reasoning out new understandings in an ever-changing society. Frederick Borsch reminds us in his article "All Things Necessary for Salvation":

*It must also again be recognized that the Bible has always to be interpreted through reason and Christian experience before it can be known as revelation. It is not a question of whether this should be done. We all do. The questions have to do with how consciously and faithfully it will be done.<sup>2</sup>*

The interpretive reasoning process takes place among the people who form the community that is God's church. God does not call us as individuals to live in isolation, but as part of the worldwide community of people who struggle together to live the implications of an evolving revelation. The Scripture is read by the "us" of the gathered community, not by the "I" of a lone individual seeking understanding. The moment Jesus spoke, his words were interpreted and given application to the situation at hand. By the time the words of Jesus were written down and shared as the authoritative revelation of God, the Church's reasoned interpretation already was accepted as an integral part of the revelation. That organic process continues in every generation. The Word of God is not static. It lives. And the incarnation of God in Christ proclaims this fact to the world.

Paul made use of his reason as he promulgated rules dealing with divorce in the seventh chapter of I Corinthians. First, he used Jesus' words (scriptural authority) as his basis for guidance: "To the married I give the charge, not I but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband." (I Cor 7:10) Paul goes on to make new rules for the Church based on his own reason: "To the rest I say, not the Lord . . .but if the unbelieving partner desires to separate, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound." (I Cor 7:12,15) The tradition of the Church has further modified our attitude about divorce and remarriage, and our God-given gift of reason will continue to shape how we interpret Scripture and tradition in every age.

## BIBLE STUDY: DIALOGUE AND QUESTIONS

Keeping Scripture, tradition and reason in balance. Bible study for Episcopalians is exactly that: Bible *study*. Verna Dozier states in her *Equipping the Saints*:

*Studying the Bible is hard work. It takes the commitment of a lifetime. No work, however, is more important for the laos, the People of God. The Bible recalls our past, undergirds our present, and shapes our future.*<sup>3</sup>

A Bible study session involves—as a first step—looking at the historical, literary, and theological settings of the text. It means asking questions about the meaning of the words, the cultural context in which the words were written and the understanding that the original hearers may have had. After a disciplined look at the text, the next question is: "What does this text mean for Christians today?" We must allow the Word of God to raise questions in us. "What is the good news for us—and what is the "bad news" in our lives that prompts us to repentance and conversion?" At this point, we let the text speak to our current situations. We take the metaphors and images from Scripture and let them enter into our consciousness.

Our feelings are important in this part of the study. We must be open to the unexpected emotion welling up within us as we let a textual phrase pass in review before our mind's eye.

The Bible is the story of a people, not merely of a person. The text belongs to the people of God called forth in covenant. Thus we must always approach the text with the community in mind. Though Scripture touches us personally as it calls for a personal response from us, it must always be seen in the social context. We are not only dealing with a private religious quest but with a public witness for God's righteousness and justice. The arena of discipleship is, therefore, social ethics, not simply personal behavior—however important personal behavior may be. What is the text saying to the political life of the nation and the world? How does the text speak to the ethics of business, medicine and law? What are the international issues raised for us as a biblical people?

An important principle of Bible study is this: Two people in dialogue over the text bring twice the potential for discovery that the single person working alone does. Group study can enhance the discovery process as members of the group share insights and questions. If one does study alone, one can be joined by commentaries, Bible dictionaries, atlases and other printed resources and still be in dialogue with others who have wrestled with the text.

Jesus came out of a rabbinic tradition that was and is far more interested in raising questions about Scripture than in answering questions. Bible students in the Jewish tradition are taught to argue with the text, with each other, and with the tradition of scriptural interpretation. Stories are often used as a means of discovering deeper meaning in the text. Ask a rabbi a question, and you are apt to hear a story that will leave you with more questions than you had before you started. This is certainly the method of Jesus' Bible teaching. In Luke 10:25–37 Jesus responds to a lawyer's question about how to inherit eternal life with, "What is written in the law?" The lawyer draws upon Deuteronomy and Leviticus. He then asks Jesus for an interpretation of the word "neighbor." Jesus responds with the parable of the Good

Samaritan, a parable that ends with another question directed to the lawyer. When our Bible study attempts to put a lid on truth, we have left Bible study and have turned to indoctrination and opinion, using the Bible as a support for our own agendas.

Alan Jones, Dean of Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, quotes the ancient rabbis and the second-century Christian theologian Origen to point up the need for profound, rather than simplistic, Bible study:

*There is a wonderful passage in Origen where he quotes a Hebrew scholar as saying that the Holy Scriptures are like a large house with many, many rooms and that outside each door there is a key . . .but it is the wrong key! And to find the right keys that will open the doors, that's a great and arduous task of struggling and being stretched by Scripture. The rabbis said that every word of the Torah has 600,000 faces. Every word, not each chapter or every verse, but every word has 600,000 faces; that is, layers of meaning or entrances, one for each of the children of Israel who stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Each face is turned to only one of them. He alone can see it and decipher it. Each person has his own unique access to revelation. And that means that when I read Scripture I can't read Scripture on my own. I won't know what it means without you. And I suggest that what we can't do alone we can do together. There is openness and glory to Scripture, and I find that I believe more about the Bible and not less than the fundamentalist.<sup>4</sup>*

## **WHAT IS THE BIBLE?**

The Bible is the story of how the people of faith understood and responded to a God who acts in history. Therefore, each book of the Bible is a record of what a particular people at a particular time wanted to say about their experience of God. There are several types or genres of biblical literature. They are listed and described briefly in alphabetical order:

### **APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE**

Apocalyptic literature arose during the period of about 200 B.C. to 100 A.D. and includes such writings as the Book of Daniel and the Revelation to John. A prominent feature of apocalyptic literature is the belief in two opposing cosmic forces, God and Satan. In apocalyptic literature, God will act to overthrow the reign of Satan and bring a new, perfect and eternal age to the faithful. These writings are filled with vivid images and allegorical references. Because biblical apocalyptic literature came into being during times of intense persecution, the images and allegories served as a secret code, keeping the meaning of the writings hidden from the persecutors. Apocalyptic literature gives oppressed people a way to express hope in the face of suffering. The present turmoil, the writers point out, is merely a precursor of God's triumphant victory, which is even now in its early dawning.

### **EPISTLE**

Paul and other early church leaders wrote epistles to the many diverse communities of

Christians. These letters contain statements of belief and set out guidelines for life as the Church of Christ. Paul's letters, for example, were specific responses to some particular controversy in the Christian community or to a situation that called for guidance and healing. The Epistles provide us with insights into the problems various congregations faced and how Paul and other leaders acted with the authority of the apostles as they dealt with a growing diversity of belief and practice in the early church.

## **GOSPEL**

The Gospels are a distinct literary genre developed by the writer of the Gospel of Mark and refined by the writers of the other three Gospels. The word "gospel" comes from the Old English word meaning "good news." Thus, the Gospel According to Mark means "the good news according to Mark." In this case, the good news that Mark proclaims is that in Jesus of Nazareth God acted in history and creation. For Mark, the coming of Jesus was the dawning of the new age, the beginning of the reign or kingdom of God. Like Mark, each of the other Gospels proclaims the "good news" in its own way and from a particular perspective or point of view.

## **HISTORY**

The great sweep of Israel's history is recorded in the Hebrew Bible beginning with Exodus and continuing through Nehemiah. As with all historical writing, the biblical record of Israel's history is interpretive—a theological history relating Israel's perception of God's work in the world as that perception grew and developed over a thousand-year period.

In similar fashion, the Book of Acts in the New Testament is a theological history outlining the growth of the church from the time of Christ's resurrection. Thus Acts is history written in Gospel form—proclaiming Christ's continuing work following the resurrection as the infant Church grew and developed in the power of the Holy Spirit.

## **LAW**

The Torah (or Pentateuch—the first five books of Hebrew Scripture) contains the body of law which guided the people of Israel and still influences Jewish life to this day. The Torah contains some 613 commandments (300 "Thou shalt not's" and 313 "Thou shalt's") governing ritual practice and ethical behavior.

According to Jewish Law, responding to God necessitates a response to one's neighbor. Jesus quoted directly from the Torah when he stated the "Summary of the Law:" "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as your self.'" (Mark 12:29–30) The commandments of the Torah form the covenant between God and Israel. They evolved as a response to God's call to Israel to be holy as God is holy and they give practical expression to the concept of loving God and loving one's neighbor.

The New Testament contains elements of law, as well. We can see an example of this in the

passages quoted from I Corinthians above: "To the married I give charge, not I but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband." (I Cor 7:10) and "To the rest I say, not the Lord . . .but if the unbelieving partner desires to separate, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound." (I Cor 7:12, 15)

## LITURGY

Liturgy is the formal, prescribed worship of the church. The word "liturgy" comes from the Greek word *leiturgia* which means "the work of the people." Liturgy, therefore, is our work in God's service. *The Book of Common Prayer* contains the liturgy of the Episcopal Church. The prayer book of Israel and New Testament people is embedded in the biblical literature. Psalms 15 and 24, for example, are liturgies prescribed for the entrance of pilgrims into the Temple at festival times. Exodus 12 contains the liturgy for keeping the Passover. In the New Testament, the Book of the Revelation to John and the First Letter of Peter contain extensive liturgical texts which grew out of the worship life of the first-century Church.

## MYTH

Myths [Greek: *mythos*] are stories which establish and express a people's world view and which provide structure and meaning in their lives. Myths give a sense of identity and purpose as they provide a way of approaching the paradoxes of life. Generally, myths are highly poetic and imaginative stories that express a collective memory or vision of the world, contain deep truth for the community, and shape the consciousness of each succeeding generation. Etiological Myths explain the origins of natural phenomena, nations, tribal customs and taboos.

The book of Genesis provides Christians with mythic accounts of their origins. These stories paint the picture of a world that is sacred because God made it, sustains it, and calls it into a relationship with its creator. The mythic accounts in Genesis present a world view or pictorial conception of the cosmos common to both Jews and Christians.

It is important to remember that these stories express truth of a depth and complexity impossible to convey in any other manner. Thus, they shape our understanding of what it means to be human in a universe created by a God who is infinitely Other and yet intimately similar.

## PARABLES

Most parables function as just the reverse of myths. Instead of helping establish a world view, a parable is a short narrative that subverts or shatters a too restrictive world view and calls the listeners to struggle for a more comprehensive and efficient concept of reality. The parable turns truth upside down so that the listeners can move into a new awareness of God's graciousness and truth in their lives. Jesus made extensive use of parables as he attempted to break through the entrenched cultural and religious views of his time with the radical good news of God's reign entering the world.

Parables call into question every assumption we have about life. They are carefully crafted to upset and surprise the listeners so that they are forced either to compromise the impact of the story or to deal with a new revelation of God's activity in the world.

The Bible contains a few parables that are actually exemplary stories whose purpose is to explain an idea or offer a specific message. Examples of this kind of parable are the parable of the sheepfold (Luke 10:1–6) and the parable of the lost sheep (Matthew 18:12–14).

## **POETRY**

The poetry of the Bible presents a concentrated awareness of personal and communal experiences of God. The Book of Psalms is the most obvious source of biblical poetry, but this form of literature is found throughout the Bible. The Gospel of John, for instance, makes extensive use of poetry as a way of expressing the theological implications of Jesus' actions. Some biblical poems are the texts of hymns used in the Temple, the king's court, the synagogue, and the first-century church. Historic incidents have inspired much of the poetry in the Bible while other poems deal with the personal struggle of the writer. In addition, the Song of Songs (the Songs of Solomon) is an anthology of love songs. In fact, some scholars believe that the earliest writing in the Hebrew Bible may have been Miriam's song, "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider has he thrown into the sea." (Exodus 15:21)

## **PROPHETIC LITERATURE**

The great prophets of the Hebrew Bible are, in a sense, theological commentators who analyze events in light of how they perceive God acting in history. Their analysis of the past and present allows the prophets to speak of the future, e.g., "the nation will fall because the people continually turn away from the covenant."

Another aspect of the prophetic message, however, is the good news that God will restore a remnant of the people and bring in a new Exodus. Ultimately, the vision of the great prophets is that all the nations would recognize Yahweh and worship God on the holy mountain of Jerusalem. In order for that to happen, they saw the need for radical reform of individual and especially corporate behavior. So they described and called people to a vision of social justice which included concrete manifestations (eg. the cancellation of all debts every seven years) and metaphorical images ("justice will flow like waters").

Though frequent references are made to persons who were recognized as having the gifts of prophecy, there is not a genre of writing in the New Testament that can be described as prophetic. The New Testament prophets are people gifted with insight regarding how God is acting or is about to act in a given situation.

## **WISDOM LITERATURE**

The genre of biblical writing known as wisdom literature expresses knowledge about life that has been tested by experience and accepted by a particular culture as important for



survival. The wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible deals with the individual's quest for fulfillment in contrast with the bulk of Hebrew writings, which deal with the relationship between God and the people of Israel. On the one hand, the Book of Proverbs is a collection of wise sayings—the simplest form of wisdom writing. The Book of Job, on the other hand, is a sophisticated treatment of human suffering and deals with the anguished questions which come flooding to the surface as one faces tribulation in life.

## **RESPONDING TO THE STORY**

As a record of a people's response, the Bible demands our response as Christians to God's action in our daily lives. To help us formulate that response the Bible offers examples of what others did and said through its historical accounts, the wisdom literature, the prophetic sayings, the Gospels, and other types of writings.

We could respond to those examples by taking them as rules and answers. Too often the Bible has been used this way: if we have a problem, we turn to a certain passage and find the answer. The Bible, however, is a record of a people's response, and calls us not to an automatic acquiescence—but to a freely considered choice.

We must understand the biblical examples in their historical context and weigh them with the realities of our own time and situation. Episcopalians typically do this through reason informed by the tradition of the Church. The Bible does not tell us what to do. Rather, the Bible tells us who we are: creatures of God who have been set free to respond to God's loving relationship with us. We study other people's responses to that relationship in order to decide how we will make our own personal response. We have no guarantee that we will respond correctly—even if we follow exactly what we read in the Bible. We do have a guarantee, however, that God loves us and desires a relationship with us. Through Bible study, self-examination and a response to God, we acknowledge and nurture our role in the loving relationship we have with God.

God is not static in the biblical texts. It is very important to realize that the Bible is the record of an *evolving* understanding of God as Israel's experience with God deepened over generations. Each new turn in Israel's history revealed a new understanding of their covenant relationship with God. At the Sea of Reeds (Red Sea) our biblical ancestors understood God as a liberator, the One who led them from oppression to freedom. During the height of Israel's experience as a great nation, they perceived God as a powerful national God, the One who defeated Israel's enemies and raised up its kings and generals. During their experience of exile in Babylon, God's mercy and compassion for all people became evident to them and the people of the covenant began to understand that God is known in weakness and suffering as well as in power and glory. In Jesus of Nazareth, God became the One who shared life intimately with all people. Thus, God could be known "in the flesh" of human life and in the struggle for wholeness and social justice.

At times the evolving biblical experiences of God seem contradictory. For instance the metaphors used to describe God in the Bible include female as well as male terms. God is neither male nor female. Yet, God can be known in ways that relate to our feelings about

being male and female human beings, for the experience of God includes the full spectrum of human relationships. Similarly, the warlike God perceived and experienced by Joshua seems to contradict our image of the healing and compassionate God revealed in Jesus. But, the Bible calls us to place ourselves in the midst of the widest possible human experience so that we may know God at work in every aspect of social and individual history and thus continue an ever-deepening relationship with God.

## THE STORY OF OUR TRIBE

It is also important that we understand Scripture as being our "tribal story." Frederick Borsch says that the Bible is "the common community lore of Christianity."<sup>5</sup> "People find an identity and gain a sense of sharing together through the stories that they have in common."<sup>6</sup> The Bible is our common language and story. To the extent that we become full members of the Christian community we share "a body of sayings, stories and symbol which are the fundamental lore of Christianity . . . wherever one goes there is found among Christians this bond and therefore this sense of community."<sup>7</sup> Stanley Hauerwas in *A Community of Character* says that the story of Scripture and tradition shapes us for our primary task: "The primary task of the Church is to be itself—that is, a people who have been shaped by a story that provides them with the skills for negotiating the dangers of this existence, trusting in God's promise of redemption."<sup>8</sup>

The Bible is not just a simplistic "rule book" outlining the right way to live; it is the underlying story that provides us with our identity as God's people.

The salvation story found in the Bible is summarized for Episcopalians each time we celebrate the Eucharist. The Eucharistic Prayers from *The Book of Common Prayer* call us to remember the sweep of the salvation narrative in microcosm—the Eucharistic act. That each of the Eucharistic Prayers embodies the salvation narrative illustrates how important that narrative is in the formation of our conscious understanding of who we are called to be as God's people.

Verna Dozier outlines the salvation narrative in this way:

*Very briefly, the Bible is the record of God the Creator calling into being a people whose life together would be a witness to the world of the redeeming power of the love of God. The first Israel was chosen, not because of any greatness they had to offer but because God loved them. They were to remember their story and tell it to their children and talk about it day in and day out. Like the first Israel, the New Israel, the Christian Church, "once no people but now God's people—a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation." The first Israel remembered an exodus from slavery and deliverance at the Red Sea. The new Israel celebrates being called out of darkness into the marvelous light, deliverance by the mighty act of God in Christ. The rise and fall of the Hebrew kingdoms, the struggles of the Remnant, the concerns of the prophets, the collapse of the nation, the advent of Jesus of Nazareth, the response of the early Christian communities—all these are the acts in the*

*drama of redemption that is the Bible. No part of the Story stands by itself. Every verse, every chapter, every book must be studied against the backdrop of the total story.*<sup>9</sup>

Dozier's definition of sin is being faithless to the vision that God has given us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in the whole scriptural narrative. "Say to all the congregation of the people of Israel, `You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy.'" (Leviticus 19:2) That is the vision for Israel—a vision which becomes our vision in Christ.

What it means to be holy is spoken by the prophets and lived out in Jesus of Nazareth. The struggle to live our own lives of holiness is what the Christian pilgrimage is all about. Straying from the vision or failing to measure our lives by the measuring rod of holiness is our sin as a people.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What were your early experiences with and understandings of the Bible? How has your understanding of the Bible changed over time?
- What is your understanding of the authority of Scripture and the role of tradition and reason in your decision-making? Do you see the Bible as containing the specific answers to all our questions and issues, or is it more than "just a simplistic rule book"?
- What is your experience of the difference between reading and interpreting the Bible alone versus in a group? What is the role of the Christian community (past and present) in interpreting or communicating God's Word to us?

### Footnotes

1. This article is a revision of the original text of *In Dialogue, An Episcopal Guide for Adult Bible Study* by Russell and Vogelsang, 1986 and 1988. Russell is Assistant to the Bishop for Christian Education in the Diocese of Ohio; Vogelsang is an independent consultant who formerly served as Adult Education Officer at the Episcopal Church Center; both are authors and editors of various articles and books.
2. Frederick Borsch, *Anglicanism and the Bible* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1984), p. 220
3. Verna Dozier, *Equipping the Saints* (Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1981), p. 1.
4. Alan Jones, "Liturgy and Spirituality," *Catacomb Cassettes* (Atlanta: Episcopal Radio/TV Foundation. 1983).

5. Frederick Borsch, *Introducing the Lessons of the Church Year* (New York: Seabury Press, 1983), p. 5.
6. Borsch, p. 4.
7. Borsch, p. 5.
8. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (South Bend: Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 10.
9. Dozier, op.cit., p. 2.

## IMAGES OF COMMUNITY IN SCRIPTURE

*by Verna Dozier<sup>10</sup>*

As I reflected on the images of community in Scripture, it seemed to me that there were five characteristics that marked them: a Scripture community is a community with a memory; with a ritual life that keeps the memories fresh; with a passion for justice; with a commitment to love; and with a mission.

First, a Scripture community is a community with a memory. As a prelude to giving the children of Israel the commandments that will structure their life, set them apart from all other people and bind them to God in a special way, the record reads that God directed Moses to remind the people, "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to myself." (Ex. 19:4)

The community has a cultic memory. Deep in that memory is some event in which they all shared either by actual participation in it or by being brought into it. Israel had great memories of a founding father who responded to a radical call. Now the Lord had said to Abraham, "Go from your country, and your kindred, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." (Gen. 12:1)

The memory is not all glorious. Scoundrels and cowards, cheats and liars were all a part of the history that shaped the Hebrew people, that brought them to the last of their founding fathers and into slavery in Egypt. They remembered it all, as part of God's great plan. They considered it all as a part of God's being for them: when in the bright hours one of their own was second only to the Pharaoh in power; when in a dark and awesome night of terror and death, God delivered them; and when they crossed over into the promised land. In song and story, they remembered the events that shaped them and made them a unique people. A community has to have a memory.

The community of the New Testament had a memory, too. They had all the memory of the first Israel, and their continuing story. As in times past, the ancient Hebrews heard the naming. Now the New Israel had heard it: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness, into his marvelous light." (1 Peter 2:9)

The memory has to be kept right. A Scripture community is a community with a ritual life that keeps the memory fresh. "When your children ask you in time to come, 'What is the meaning of the decrees and the statues, and the ordinances which the Lord our God has commanded you?' Then you shall say to your children, 'We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. . .the Lord commanded us to observe all these statues. . . If we diligently observe this entire commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us, we will be in the right.'" (Deut. 6:20, 24a, 25) It is this way, on Friday evening, the gathering of the family for Shabbat, the ritual meal, the Sabbath prayers, the remembering. And each year, it is this way on the sacred observance of

Passover, keeping fresh the memory of that awesome night when the angel passed over Egypt, and spared the houses where the blood of a lamb was sprinkled over the lintel of the door. Jesus of Nazareth kept this ritual. That last night at supper lying with the twelve, the chosen band, Jesus with the law complying, kept the feast its rights demand.

St. Paul writes "For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said `This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying `This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'" (1 Cor. 11:23 - 25) This is the earliest record we have that less than thirty years after Jesus' death, the Christian community had a ritual life that kept fresh the memory of God's mighty act in Jesus, the Christ.

## **JUSTICE, LOVE, AND MISSION**

A Scripture community has a passion for justice. It is intensely interesting, that in our religious life, we have talked much about love, but little about justice. Justice is the most fundamental concept in the Old Testament and is almost ignored in our study of Scripture. Justice is about life in community. We are more individually-minded than community-minded. Religion for many of us is very individualized, private, and personal. We wax eloquent about love and say not a word about justice. Love without justice is sentimentality.

The Hebrew Scriptures are rooted in justice. Micah's vision of all people sitting under their own vine and fig trees and no one making them afraid, is deeply rooted in Hebrew community. How strong this idea was is illustrated by the remarkable story of David and Nathan. David was the great and powerful king of Israel. Uriah was only his vassal. But when David took Uriah's wife and had Uriah killed to cover up his violation of the covenant life, the fiery prophet Nathan, the embodiment of Israel's commitment to justice, stormed into the palace and called down the judgment of God on David. And David bowed down before him.

Ancient Israel understood God as a God of Justice. The New Israel, if it follows its Lord, has the same understanding. Jesus' inaugural sermon, as reported by Luke (Lk 4:18-19), declares he has come to preach good news to the poor; proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to set at liberty those who are oppressed; and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. That acceptable year was the ancient year of Jubilee, when everything was to be turned right side up, and every thing would start over—equal. "Justice", I heard Walter Brueggemann say, "is finding out what belongs to whom, and seeing that they get it back."

A Scripture community has a commitment to love. The great commandments Jesus quoted to a young lawyer, "Thou shall love the Lord thy God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all mind, and with all your strength. And your neighbor as yourself," was right out of his tradition. Every rabbi would have answered in the same manner. In the 13th

chapter of 1st Corinthians, (verses 4–7), Paul speaks for the New Testament Church a description of love that has never been surpassed "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth." I love Phillip's translation of that verse, "Love does not gloat over statistics of evil." (Phillips, *Letters to Young Churches*, 1953) It occurs to me, Scripture communities could be bad news for the six o'clock news.

Last of all, Scripture communities are communities with a mission. They speak a new word to the world: the message of how God intended the world to be. Isaiah had a vision of Israel fulfilling her high callings, living as the people of God she was called to be, a light to lighten the Gentiles. "For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." When the shadow of the cross was darkening upon him, and his little band was again missing the point, Jesus gathered them about him and patiently explained the witness they were to make of their life as the Lord before them. "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be a slave of all." (Mark 10:42 - 44)

I think Scripture communities can change the world. I also think that you should be warned that Scripture communities can shake up the even, complacent, tenor of your lives.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Remember the communities of the church of which you have been a part. How many of these characteristics did they have:

- a memory
- a ritual life that keeps the memories fresh
- a passion for justice
- a commitment to love
- a mission

Did they have other characteristics that you consider equally important. What are they?

### Footnotes

- 10 Dozier is author of *The Authority of the Laity*, *The Calling of the Laity*, and *Equipping the Saints: A Method of Bible Study*; this article was part of the Scriptural Conversation Project, see "Scriptural Conversation Approach" under "A Collection

of Short Methods.”



## OUR STORY AND THE STORY

*By Carmen Guerrero*<sup>11</sup>

The story of the people of God did not end with the closing of the canon that comprises what we know as Holy Scripture. As long as there continues to be a people who believe in God, The Story also continues; and because we are a group of people who do indeed believe in God, our story and The Story also continue. It is important, however, for us to realize that our story is just as sacred as the stories we read about in Scripture because The Story is not over. God was with the people then, and God is with us today.

I believe that the telling of our stories is what makes us real to each other, thus the sacredness of them, both corporately and individually; this telling and sharing make us go from being a "no people" to being "the people of God." I am reminded of three persons in Scripture, Isaiah, Paul, and John of Patmos, whose story has made me become more real to myself and to others. The stories of these three persons have also allowed me to provide space for the people with whom I "live and move and have my being" to become real as well, or, better yet, to become human for me.

The first person is Isaiah. As I read his story in Isaiah 6:1-9, the passage calls to my mind the reality of a person who truly came into being as a person of God while in the temple, or said another way, "while in the church." Strange as it may sometimes seem, we can often find ourselves very involved in church and yet not quite the real people of God. The wonder of God is that even with all this involvement of church, and even in the midst of that reality, God comes to us and makes us real persons whose identity is based on a real God.

I'm reminded of Isaiah's words, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips." (Isaiah 6:5) Then he goes on to say, "my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts." This is what has made him real, the fact that he has been able to connect who he is, "a man of unclean lips, [living among] a people of unclean lips," to who God is. He has made the connection between his story and The Story— "my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts," and, therefore, reality enters his life.

Another person who has had a tremendous impact on my story and then on my becoming real is Paul. I refer to the account of his conversion as found in the Book of Acts 22:3–21, especially his words in verse 6, "While I was on my way and approaching Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone about me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul...'" He heard God calling his name. This profoundly speaks to me of a person "on the road," a person attempting to be something, attempting to do something. In the midst of that journey God enters in and presents a new way of being, a new way of doing, that not only transforms Paul but also has profound implications for the transformation of others, as well. Paul's words to the Lord were, "What shall I do, Lord?" And the response, "Get up and go to Damascus..." While we are in the middle of our journey, God comes to us and says, "get up and go." He calls us into being real people who will have an effect in the real world in which we live.

Then there is John, yet another person whose story has had quite an impact on my life as he is described in Rev. 1:9–20. "I John, your brother, who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus." Here is someone in exile. I think there are times in all of our lives when we feel as if we are in exile, either because of situations we have created ourselves or because of situations created by others. These are the times when we say to ourselves, "My existence as I am is not acceptable." For whatever reason and, therefore, in order for God to make my story and thus my life real, God approaches me in these times of exile. This is what I see happening to John. That is why his story has such power for me.

## **BIBLE COMMUNITIES AND OUR COMMUNITY**

May I repeat again, the telling of our stories is what makes us real to ourselves and to each other. It is also what needs to be at the core of forming community. However, I think that there are certain principles that need to be looked at as we begin this storytelling. These principles begin to be operative as community begins to form, and I would like to highlight some of them. Sometimes we are aware of these principles and sometimes we are not. One community I know of became aware of these principles or "clues" of community formation as they entered into the process of telling their story through the study of Scripture.

First, let me say that sometimes I think what we have in Scripture is basically a variety of perspectives of the different communities as they learn to walk with their God. The Gospels, for example, can be seen as basically stories told by the community, whereas the letters from Paul are responses to communities. This, of course, is not confined to the New Testament; I also see in the Old Testament stories of a people's interpretations of the meaning of community as they attempt to walk with their God.

Therefore, the next story I tell you will be from the perspective of yet another community and their understanding of the Good News, the people of Santa Fe Episcopal Church in San Antonio, Texas. I also like to think of them as the "Santa Fe community of interpretation" because, just as Isaiah, Paul, and John entered into a conversation with their God, so the congregation of Santa Fe entered into a conversation with their God—and with Scripture, radically affecting their life and the lives of those in the community in which the church is located.

This little church was on the verge of being closed down for all sorts of reasons. However, some time ago, they began their journey back to life and in the process learned, and are still learning, about becoming real and becoming community. This journey began when they gathered in an attempt to be the church. They did not realize that they each brought with them a bag, or a "whole carload" of understanding of what being the church meant.

Some people believed that the church was an institution—that people were basically relational and societal and their response to the world should be as an institution. Others saw themselves as community, as the people of God, and for them this meant that they needed to stress the idea of interrelationships and of fellowship. This was a high priority for them.

Mutual support and reconciliation were important aspects of being the Church.

For some, to be the church meant to be a herald. They believed that they must proclaim the message of Jesus, must share the Good News, because people need to receive God's message. Then there was a group that saw themselves as the servants of sinners—to those in prison and to those in pain. They felt that their call was to heal the wounded, and they had a radical commitment to the world. Therefore, programs like the food bank and the clothes closet began to arise.

As a result of these conversations about being the church in this community, one of the first things that happened was that the members of the congregation began to realize that each of them had a different *pre-understanding* of what it meant to be church. Therefore, they began to study Scripture in an effort to discover who they were and in the process found that they had brought with them many pre-understandings. They brought with them many assumptions about the nature of reality (in this case reality about being the church). They discovered that these pre-understandings had been shaped by their personal history, by their biases, their culture, and all the social systems in which they functioned, especially the language they spoke.

The congregation of Santa Fe happens to be predominantly Hispanic. However, I don't believe that it matters what the ethnic makeup of the group is; the important thing is that we realize that who we are as a people, including the language we speak and how we use that language, is a part of our process of identifying ourselves. I believe that our culture is the expression of our spiritual life, and that it helps determine in a unique way our relationship with nature, with God, with other people, and with social structures. So, one of the things that the Santa Fe congregation began to discover was that through their language and their way of using it, they were also expressing their soul. They began to see that their manner of expression was deeply rooted in their psychological and spiritual makeup and therefore influenced the telling of their story, and affected profoundly the way they connected their story with The Story.

## **HOLIDAY DIVERSE UNDERSTANDING**

Another principle or "clue," which is what I often call these characteristics of community building, with which this congregation was confronted were their initial understandings. *Initial understandings* are different from *pre-understandings* in that they are essentially responses at first glance. The Santa Fe congregation discovered that they usually had a first impression of people, and of things, and that this first impression influenced their understandings of them. These instinctive first responses were, of course, very much colored by their pre-understandings. As they began to discuss this dynamic, they found that one of the best ways to uncover presuppositions was to discuss their initial understandings in a group and reflect together on the diversity of their experience.

This is how the Santa Fe people were able to connect what they were bringing with them to how they responded when they confronted each other for the first time—or when they confronted Scripture for the first time. These new understandings, contributed to the

formation of community among them. They were interpreting everything being presented to them, whether they were aware of it or not. And their interpretation was based on what they were brought with them and on how they encountered what was being presented to them. In this case it was Scripture study, study that helped them understand the meaning of their world and how this understanding was connected to discovering their own identity in that world.

All that the Santa Fe group *pre-understood* about themselves, about Scripture, about the church, and about God now was being called into question. Through the study of Scripture they began to "hear on another's horizon"; they began to see new dimensions of life and the world. This aspect of their becoming community was done, and had to be done, intentionally if they were to be able to hear from another's point of view, because in order to hear from another's world, one has to be intentional. As they explored this aspect of community formation, the Santa Fe congregation discovered that "no other voice speaks with the set of meaning identical in every respect to my own meanings." They also discovered that if the things they were discovering about perception were true for them, they must be true of others. That Santa Fe congregation then began to explore the possibility that they couldn't presume to believe that everyone was thinking the way they were. This was the most difficult step in the process.

One of the women in the congregation was sent out to Women in Mission and Ministry (WIMM)<sup>12</sup> meetings in various parts of the country. She went to South Dakota and listened to stories about the Native Americans and their sufferings and concluded, "We have suffered that way." Then she went to another meeting in West Virginia, where she listened to the plight of the coal miners and she concluded, "We have suffered that way." Finally, she went to San Francisco, and she listened to the pains and the sufferings of gay and lesbian people and she concluded, "We have suffered that way." She began to have an inkling of the possibility that when we listen to others on their own horizon we discover that their stories and our stories are connected. She discovered that although others spoke with entirely different sets of meanings, they still could address our own sets of meaning. She began to see that there are connections between our story, the stories of others and The Story as found in Scripture.

Another man in our congregation went for some training in community organization, and he began to see how the stories of others across the country about organizing for community change might be connected to our story. He began to make connections between their sets of meaning and ours, and discovered that although there were differences, if he listened long enough there were also similarities.

Another very important event that occurred within the community of Santa Fe was the meeting of the World Council of Churches in San Antonio in 1989. We hosted an aborigine couple from Australia and a young woman from Nigeria. Meeting people from such diverse parts of the world was one of the most powerful experiences for us because in order to understand them, we had to listen to them on their horizons. We had to listen to what often appeared to us to be absurdities, when in reality they shared with us a different way of looking at life and a different way of attempting to find meaning. One of these encounters

included the young woman from Nigeria who came to our Sunday morning service dressed in the traditional clothes of her people and sang one of the most beautiful songs we had ever heard. Although we did not understand the words, it really touched our souls. We could somehow relate to her because we, too, sing in a foreign language—Spanish—in this English-speaking country. Her song touched us because we were willing to leave ourselves open to hearing God in it.

To review this discussion, the Santa Fe congregation discovered that no other voice spoke with the same identical set of meanings in every respect to our own meanings. We understand that other people had the same experience; so this understanding helped us begin to accept the fact that we could hear others from their own worlds, although this "hearing" would always be a challenging and difficult process.

## WELCOMING THE STRANGENESS

Thomas Kuhn, educator and author of *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, says that the strangeness of a text or of another person is what provokes us to interpretation. He goes on to say that when reading the words of an important thinker (or when conversing with one another, I would add), we need to look first for the apparent absurdities and to ask ourselves how a sensible person could have written this, could think this way, or as in the case of the couple from Australia, could dress in what seems to be, through the eyes of our culture, such an odd way. When we find the answer, when the situation begins to make sense, we may find that the more central ideas, passages, thoughts, words, the ones that we previously thought we understood, have really changed their meaning.

This is the sort of thing that this community of Santa Fe was being called into, not necessarily by going down a list of things, but by entering into the process of dialogue with Scripture and dialogue with each other, by entering into what I call real *conversations*. We are learning to listen to each other on each person's own horizon, knowing that we come into every situation, whether it is to study Scripture, to build community, to see what it means to become the church, to have guests from other parts of the world, that we come into these situations with *pre-understandings*. We are in a particular context, and we enter into another's context which contains its own pre-understandings. It is in this kind of exchange that we ask questions of others and allow them to ask questions of us. We question, and we are questioned. We give answers, and we listen to answers. This type of conversation is very powerful because we must listen openly and be "open" to engage it. This kind of exchange never leaves us untouched. It grants that the other point of view might be the correct one. It was here that this community found another principle of building community: the idea that *something else might be the case*.

If we are to know what it means to be the church, it is important for us to understand what having this knowledge could mean to us. If we are to know what Scripture is about, it is important to know what *difference* it makes. If we are to know what it means to be community, it is important to know what difference it would make if we were a community. If we want to know Christ, we must know what difference that connection would make for

and in our lives and the lives of those around us.

Another thing that the congregation of Santa Fe discovered was that their understanding had come out of a *community experience*. They had struggled together, they had questioned each other, they had supported each other, and, sometimes, had abandoned each other, but they had done it *in community*.

The community of Santa Fe discovered that real conversation always put them at risk. They never emerged from real conversation in the same state as when they entered into it. In the process of forming community, some discovered that they needed to change and others discovered that they had a lot more to offer than they had ever imagined. For example, we entered into conversation with I Corinthians for about a year. As a result of this experience of Scripture, one woman discovered that if we were all part of the body of Christ, then this meant that her mother was also a part of that body and the relationship between her and her mother was definitely going to change. Another discovered that she truly was the temple of the Holy Spirit and that what she did to herself and about herself mattered to God.

All that I have been attempting to share with you is what I have experienced as what begins to happen when people dare to enter into conversation that puts them at risk, conversation that helps them to become community: where they struggle together; where they ask questions and they are questioned; where they offer answers, and they listen to answers. This is part of what happened and indeed is still happening with a congregation that dared to enter into the possibility of becoming community. The struggles continue, the conversations continue, the questions continue, but the people of the Santa Fe congregation are on their way to forming community.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What is the story of your community?
- What has helped and what has hindered its functioning as a community?
- What role have you played? What would you like to do in creating the future story of your community?

### Footnotes:

- 11 Guerrero serves as Hispanic Missioner in the Diocese of Los Angeles; this article was part of the Scriptural Conversation Project, see “Scriptural Conversation Approach” under “A Collection of Short Methods.”
- 12 WIMM is an office in the Partnership Unit at the Episcopal Church Center. It convenes representatives of women's organizations in a Council for Women's Ministries (CWM) which are the meetings described in this paragraph.

# SCRIPTURE CONVERSATION AND THE DYNAMICS OF POWER IN MULTICULTURAL COMMUNITY

by Eric Law<sup>13</sup>

I learned how to lead Bible study with the cultural assumptions and values of the white English-speaking middle class. The method involved asking a series of questions coupled with an experiential exercise. The purpose of the exercise was to help the group go deeper into the meaning of the text at hand. I did not realize how culture-bound this method was until I facilitated a Bible study for a Chinese-speaking group. Everything I learned about group process and facilitating dialogue around Scripture did not work. I asked for volunteers to participate in an experimental exercise. No one volunteered. As a result, I did all the explaining about what the text meant to me.

I discovered another problem with my leadership style when I encountered multicultural groups. The white members of the group participated fully and shared their insights and thoughts freely, while the persons of color in the group sat and listened. The more I tried to include them, the worse it got. These experiences forced me to explore and understand cultural differences, and how they affect the way we share our understanding and interpretation of Scripture. As I explored the subject further, I discovered that, not only did cultural differences affect the group process, they also affected the group's interpretation of Scripture.

In this article, I want to take one cultural variable and discuss its significance for how people from different cultures interact with Scripture. Furthermore, I will explore how this cultural variable affects the process in which people share their insights and interpretation of Scripture.

Geert Hofstede, in *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*, reported the results of a research project that involved exploring "the differences in thinking and social action that exist between members of 40 different modern nations." He identified "four main dimensions along which dominant value systems in the 40 countries can be ordered and which affect human thinking, organizations, and institutions in predictable ways."<sup>14</sup> One of the dimensions he called "Power Distance" describes the different understanding of inequality across cultures.

Power Distance is defined as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations accept that power is distributed unequally."<sup>15</sup> People in High Power Distance cultures accept inequality as part of their reality. "As such, superiors consider their subordinates to be different from themselves and vice versa. High power distance cultures see power as a basic fact in society, and stress coercive or referent power."<sup>16</sup> People in Low Power Distance cultures are divided into two groups: 1) the middle and upper classes believe that people should be equal and power should only be used legitimately and fairly or by experts and 2) the lower class and less educated who, like the people in the high power distance cultures, accept inequality as part of their reality.<sup>17</sup>

## CHRISTIANS AND POWER RELATIONSHIPS

Before I discuss this cultural variable, I want to explore what the Christian Scripture has to say about power and inequality. Another way of thinking about my approach is that I have presented two extreme contexts in which inequality is understood; now I am presenting how inequality is understood in a third context: the Christian Scripture. The following passage provides examples of how Jesus addresses inequality in his time.

*And (Jesus) lifted up his eyes on his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours in the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. . . .But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. . . .Woe to you, when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets. (Luke 6:20–26)*

Jesus tells a parable (Luke 16:19–30) that deepens the meaning of the above passage with the images of the afterlife for the rich and the poor. What can a rich and powerful person do to undo this predicament? The following is what Jesus tells a ruler who comes to ask him, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

*Jesus said to him, 'There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich."(Luke 18:22–23).*

Notice the contrast between how the poor and the rich are addressed. Those who have prestige and wealth are challenged. They have the additional responsibility of giving up and redistributing their wealth and power. But the poor and oppressed, do not have to do anything. They are simply blessed. The scribes and the Pharisees are people with power and prestige in the Jewish community. The following is what Jesus says concerning them:

*'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will*



*be exalted. (Matthew 23:1–12).*

Here Jesus goes further in saying that those who serve and humble themselves are the greatest. This is the opposite of what being great and honored meant in most societies. This passage also points out that in the community of Christ, there is to be even distribution of power among people. The only one who has more power is God in heaven. Even so, God becomes human through Jesus Christ who exemplifies the greatness in serving and in being powerless on the cross.

After reading both the description of Power Distance and what the Christian Scripture says about inequality, I concluded that the Gospels favor the Low Power Distance cultures. However, after further reflection, I realize that this conclusion is influenced by my American ethnocentricity. The Gospel does not favor either kind of culture. On the contrary, it challenges both because it condemns uneven distribution of wealth, power and prestige among all people, and not just the middle class. In this sense, for the high power distance cultures, the Gospel challenges the elite minority, who has the political and economic control, to distribute its power and wealth to the middle and lower working class majority. For the low power distance cultures, the Gospel also challenges its upper class to distribute their wealth to the middle and lower working class majority. The Gospel further challenges its middle class who believes it should have equal power with others to redistribute their power and wealth with its lower class. In other words, the Gospel favors the concept of low power distance as it applies to everybody, not just the middle class as it is understood in Hofstede's description of the low power distance cultures.

*Then afterward*

*I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;  
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
your old men shall dream dreams,  
and your young men shall see visions.  
Even on the male and female slaves,  
in those days, I will pour out my spirit.*

*(Joel 2:28-29)*

This same passage is quoted in Acts 2:17–18 as the prophecy for Pentecost which marked the beginning of the Christian church. The ability to prophesy, dream dreams, have visions were limited to the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets in Judaism. Needless to say, these constituted a very small number of privileged men who had direct connection with God. Joel's prophecy, which came true in Pentecost, clearly describes low power distance across the class, age and sex boundaries.

## **POWER IN A GROUP SETTING**

To me, it is very clear that the scriptural passages concerning power and class say very different things to the high and low power-distance cultures. Depending on the cultural contexts of the group and the facilitator, the scriptural conversation can be very different in

both content and process. Therefore, it is very important for a group facilitator to determine where one is on the continuum between high and low power distance. That is, what is one's understanding of inequality and how it influences the way one behaves and interacts with others. Secondly, when one is in a multicultural situation, one needs to know where the people are on this power distance continuum. If everyone has a low power distance understanding of power, then it is business as usual. Everything one knows about group process will be helpful here, because everyone believes that they are equal to each other, unless there are "experts" in the room. A good leader is someone who facilitates the group to do what they need to accomplish. People will expect to volunteer their thoughts, feelings and talents. Decisions will be made by consensus.

If everybody in the group including the facilitator has a high power distance understanding of authority, someone will have to take charge. If no one takes on this role, nothing will get done. Good leadership in this setting means someone who is sensitive to the needs and talents of everyone in the group. The concept of "invitation" becomes very important here because no one will volunteer. The role of the leader has to be more directive. The leader needs to invite people to offer their ideas and services. Setting up an environment in which people can mutually invite each other to participate is a good strategy to avoid the pitfall of the group's being dominated by a few authoritarian persons.

What happens when one has a mixed group, say, half the group is high power distance and the other low power distance? Remember that this does not just happen in culturally mixed groups; it can also happen in a mixed class group. This is the usual pattern: from the perspective of the low power distance group members, they participate in the group as they always do and talk when they have something to say. Soon they realize others are not participating. Therefore, with all good intentions, they try to include them by giving subtle and sometimes not so subtle hints. The more they try, the more the high power distance group resists. As a result, any decision that is made will not be owned by the high power distance group even though they appear to consent to it. Then, the high power distance group is blamed for not participating.

The high power distance group expects an authoritative leader to tell them what to do. They hear people talking without being invited to talk first. They assume that those people have lots of power and authority, so they let them talk. Then, the low power distance group starts hinting that they should be talking too. The high power distance group cannot because they believe that they do not have the power to talk as individuals. "Besides, if they really want my opinion, why don't they come out and ask me? Apparently, I am not smart enough." As time goes on, they feel more and more inadequate. "And then they made a decision without asking me to contribute or do anything. I must be worthless."

What is happening is that the low power distance group, by behaving naturally, are being perceived as the superiors by the high power distance group and are given power over them. When we understand this cultural variable on both sides, the encounter becomes an unjust situation where one group is dominating the other. In an ethnocentric way, most low power distance groups believe that inequality can be countered by simply physically including the powerless and the disadvantaged. The assumption is that everyone is from low power

distance cultures and can participate "fully" like themselves. When a church organization is confronted with not having the "proper" ethnic representation, a typical response is, "We invited them; they came once and didn't participate. Then they stopped coming. Can't say we didn't try!" Busing in the early seventies is based on this ethnocentric way of doing justice. On the contrary, this kind of action actually creates more unjust situations such as the one I have described.

Justice in a multicultural setting has to be redefined in an ethno-relative way. This means to first learn and understand how the people involved perceive their sense of power. Based on this knowledge, create an environment that allows people to interact with equal power. In other words, low power distance people need to see that they are perceived as powerful and need to give up power in order to truly be equal. High power distance people need to know that they are valued as equals. In theological terms, in a multicultural setting, persons from low power distance culture need to make the decision to bear the cross so that they can be resurrected in the new creation where everyone is equal. Persons from high power distance cultures need not to choose the cross because by being themselves they are powerless and therefore, on the cross. What they need is to know that they are blessed and will be resurrected to new life of empowerment.

## **FINDING OUR POWER IDENTITY IN SCRIPTURE**

The spirituality of the cross and the resurrection are crucial for multicultural leaders in the church. They not only have to understand them, they also have to learn when to teach them appropriately with different cultural groups. Teaching a low power distance group to "bear the cross" is very appropriate in a multicultural setting. In fact, western Christianity has emphasized this aspect of the Gospel for centuries. Most English-speaking white congregations have a very extensive Lenten program but very little Easter celebration. However, teaching a high power distance group about bearing the cross first is inappropriate. That is to teach poor persons that they have to sell all their possession and give them to the poor. You do not have to choose the cross when you are on the cross already. Instead, we should be teaching blessedness and celebrating Easter with high power distance, cultural groups. One need not wonder why Hispanic cultures have fantastic celebrations in their religious life. Liberation theology, which emphasizes God's favor for and liberation of the oppressed, supports this kind of "blessedness" spirituality for the powerless. In other words, the low power distance persons have to choose the cross before they are resurrected together as equals with the high power persons.

It is very dangerous to teach blessedness spirituality to those who have power. I was in a retreat on scriptural meditation through dance. One of the leaders described the story of Exodus and asked us to identify with being enslaved, and to create a dance that would move us from slavery into freedom. I looked around the room and saw that the majority of the group was white American, and I could not go along with this request. As the group discussed this issue further, I realized I was reacting to the inappropriateness of a group of white Americans, who were perceived to have power and wealth by the non-white communities, identifying with slavery. They should be identifying with Pharaoh and his army. They should be getting in touch with how it feels to be affected by the plagues and be

drowned in the Red Sea. When the oppressors identify themselves as victims, it is dangerous. The story of Exodus is about God's liberating Israelites who were oppressed and in slavery. From the point of view of the oppressed, God is on their side; they are blessed as long as they remain faithful to God. Out of this blessedness, they are able to live through the ordeal of the wilderness and have strength to enter Canaan, the promised land.

The early American settlers had suffered religious persecution in Europe. It is understandable for them to think of America as the promised land. However, they were from low power distance cultures and when they encountered the American Indians, in this cross-cultural situation, they were perceived as powerful people. In this situation, we have a powerful group who believed they are victims and mistakenly believed that they had the right to claim this land. The result was the genocide of Native Americans. This is a case of how dangerous it is for the powerful to take on the spirituality of the oppressed and the powerless. If they realized that they were perceived as powerful, then they might have identified with powerful Pharaoh instead of the oppressed Israelites, and the history of North America might have been totally different.

Pharaoh and the Israelites are parts of the Exodus story. Choosing the cross and the resurrection are parts of the salvation story of the Gospel. Depending on the cultural context of the readers and the context of the multicultural situation, the same scriptural story may challenge, support, affirm, motivate, or even put down different people. In other words, if scriptural conversation is shared among people from different cultures, people from one cultural context will be able to hear how people from a different cultural context interact with the same scriptural story. Imagine a group having a conversation about the Exodus story, and half of the group identifies with Pharaoh and the other half identifies with the Israelites. The story will be richer as a result. Different points of view are explored. Perhaps, reconciliation may begin to happen between the powerful and the powerless. In this sense, scriptural conversation in a multi-cultural community can help us see a more "complete" scriptural story.

My presentation is based on just one cultural variable. There are other cultural variables crucial to the understanding of cultural differences—for example, individual/collective, the level at which cultures tolerate uncertainty, and the roles of men and women in different culture, just to name a few. The reader may read more about these different variables in the books I cited in this article.

In a scriptural conversation, a facilitator needs to learn to distinguish the cultural contexts of the participants and the cultural context of the scriptural passage being studied. Because of their different cultural contexts, the readers can interact very differently with different parts of the Scripture. In fact, they can have entirely different interpretations. Therefore, the facilitator needs to maintain an environment where different interpretations and insights based on the cultural contexts of the participants may be accepted.

## **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

➤ Who are the cultural groups within your congregation? What has been your experience in

working with different cultural groups?

- Where have you seen the dynamics of high power distance and low power distance operating in a group in which you participated? How did those dynamics affect the groups' functioning?
- How can understanding these dynamics help you improve your group leadership and group participation skills? What will you do differently in a group?

### Footnotes

13. Law is a priest in the Diocese of Los Angeles. He does training and consulting for multicultural organizations and developments. This article was part of the Scriptural Conversation Project, see “Scriptural Conversation Approach” under “A Collection of Short Methods.”
14. Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences—International Differences in Work - Related Values*, abridged ed. (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1987), p. 11.
15. G. Hofstede and M. Bond, "Hofstede's culture dimensions: An independent validation using Rokeach's value survey," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 15 (1984), p.419.
16. William B. Gudykunst & Stella Ting-Toomey, *Cultural and Interpersonal Communication*, (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1988), p. 46. *Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 15 (1984), p. 419.
17. Hofstede, op. cit., pp. 76–80.

# IMAGES OF COMMUNITY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

by Michael Wyatt<sup>18</sup>

Three areas present themselves for examination: the early Christian communities *as* Scripture, *in* Scripture, and *of* Scripture. Three questions guide us: 1) What does Christian Scripture as a whole tell us about the early Christian communities that produced the texts? How is the variety of understandings present among the early Christians expressed as Scripture? 2) What do specific books and passages of the New Testament tell us about the communities described in Scripture? What can we learn about the community described and about the community implied in the text. 3) What do specific passages tell us about the relationship of these communities to Scripture? How do we see the early Christian communities being shaped and influenced through their interactions with Hebrew texts to become communities of Scripture?

## COMMUNITIES AS SCRIPTURE

*Appreciating the variety of Christian experience arising out of crisis that is expressed as Scripture.*

Unlike the Hebrew Scripture, which evolved over millennia, Christian Scripture erupts in the span of a single lifetime, roughly seventy years. Like Hebrew Scripture, it is precipitated and shaped by crises.

Two major crises generate the bulk of these writings. The first crisis is the crucifixion and resurrection of the Christ, the breaking off of Jesus' earthly leadership. The second crisis is the epidemic of conversions, the breaking off of Jewish criteria and "quality control."

I am focusing on initial formative crises. I am not minimizing the profound crisis of the delayed return of Christ at the end of the age, which orients the concerns of the later texts, such as the pastoral Epistles. However, that was not the primal trauma of the community, and as such is less useful to us here.

The perceived interruption of Jesus' ministry is underscored by the absence of any written work by the founder of the community. No pre-eminent text exists, therefore. We have no foundational code, nothing from the man himself. This means that everything is attributed, relayed, interpreted, passed on.

The direct texts we do have, primarily in the form of letters, are a response to the runaway conversions. They are reactive, urgent, polemical, circumstantial. They are not at all systematic, but attempts to provide interpretations of the received (and lived) Good News in distinct circumstances. It is obvious that Paul wanted a reasonable consistency—the allegiance was to one Lord, after all—but he hardly pressed for uniformity, even in his own thought.

In both cases of response to the formative crises, then, the early Christians, under a variety

of circumstances and with differently sensed urgency, attempted to render an account of their perception of the Good News: this kaleidoscope of articulations is Christian Scripture. Particularly as Christians (we might even say because we are Christians), we have no summary, no code, no single foundation. We have, instead, a variety of accounts of a variety of experiences, all circling around a central person: Jesus. The texts we consider holy are alleged to be about a common transforming encounter, and they proclaim the subsequent allegiance it effected. This is the arrangement of Christian Scripture itself. The records of this variety present themselves as Scripture to us.

**This has two implications:**

First, our faith is always between the lines, as it were. All the books of Christian Scripture are like moving beams of light, which intersect our experience at various moments and then move on again. What we glimpse at those intersections is the silhouette of the Good News. As we attempt to express our faith, we stand always between the texts, in the spaces between the accounts of others, listening for congruence, whether theirs with each other or ours with them.

Second, multiplicity of interpretation and variety of interpretive symbols are the origin of Christianity as a religion. Although every writer of Christian Scripture might agree that "Jesus is Lord," not all would mean precisely the same thing in saying it. The debates over meaning flow from the source itself, and if that source sanctifies anything, it sanctifies *this* bounty.

All this suggests greater care, not less. Any too simple formulation shortchanges us. I recall a rather opinionated and historically minded young man who was advocating a Zealot Jesus, hiding out in the hills, criticizing the hierarchy, working miracles as a deliberate subversion of the social order. When this young man was asked about passages in the New Testament that might counter his vision, he briskly dismissed them with, "Oh, well, I'm not a Pauline Christian." Any too one-sided a formulation leaves us, not only to one side of the tradition, but engages only one side of our existence. This state of affairs renders faith, as a stance of the entire person and as an embracing of the entire person, impossible.

Our guiding formula is not "anything goes," as if any interpretation were acceptable, merely determined by personal taste. It is more likely to be "everything must go." This does not mean that nothing can be believed, but that everything must be tested. "Everything must go" means that all presuppositions and inherited formulations must be inventoried and put on sale, to discover which are viable. "Everything must go" means that a life boat in danger of swamping must weigh everything it carries and ask what is placing its survival at risk, what is superfluous, and what is essential: we must keep faith afloat and alive. Nothing, in other words, is given privileged position within Scripture. Every insight is tested against sections and books other than the one out of which it arose. No phrases and passages may be bracketed off, for reverence or scorn, as if we already knew what they meant or as if their meanings were lost to us permanently.

For our own practice, this means flexibility and openness to comparative and topical study

of Christian Scripture. Hearing and conversing with the Gospels must be balanced with the same approach to the Epistles. Questions about sacraments or healing or prayer must be asked of several texts at once, if the richness of the Christian experience is to be received.

## COMMUNITIES IN SCRIPTURE

*Looking at specific books and passages within the New Testament in order to understand the communities that produced the texts.*

Looking now, not at the general overview of Christian Scripture, but at the texts themselves, we explore the notions of community *in* Scripture. At this point, we approach specific texts with a double question: what can we learn about the community described and about the community implied in the text? We ask the text, then, what it accomplishes by certain stories, by certain juxtapositions of themes and images, by certain forms of argumentation. Again, what can we see between the lines?

We must leave behind the modern idea of the superiority of dispassionately observed facts and impersonal accounts, which are our scientific standards. The writers of antiquity, including Biblical authors, thought of the world as unreliable and decaying. They did not believe the surest path to truth was to glean data from the physical world, however sensibly conducted the investigation might be. Truth by their definition was immutable, therefore not of this world. Truth informed but transcended our shadowy images: we could only know it through intuition or revelation.

The biblical authors wrote not to give a factual account of significant events, but to demonstrate the truth of them, the unalterable meaning contained and manifested in those events. What Jesus had come down to reveal, they wrote to proclaim. The true identity and life of the community was "hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). They wrote to persuade. The author of the Gospel of John, for example, says in conclusion that he could have told us much more, but he told us this, so that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ.

In other words, this scriptural material is already heavily contaminated by a viewpoint—and this is a shared communal viewpoint. All these passages were written in particular contexts, reinforcing specific values, for concrete communities. Skilled writers use their community's own values to establish the points they wish to make. Arguments cannot be based on values foreign to the group one is hoping to persuade or exhort; nor would a group keep a letter or document foreign to its own ethos.

A single example of how we might probe a passage for evidence of the community that is its matrix might suffice. What can be gleaned from the story of the embassy sent by the imprisoned John the Baptist to Jesus (Mt. 11: 2–6, or Lk. 7: 18–23)? On the narrative level, John has, for whatever reason, become uncertain about Jesus as Messiah. Jesus' response is to send John, as reassurance, a demonstration of Messianic fulfillment. Historically, this possibility reflects the tension between the followers of Jesus and the followers of John the Baptist; the story is recalled and retold to demonstrate the superiority of Jesus. Or it might offer the early Christians some hints for an apologetic approach to use with skeptical, even



hostile, Jewish neighbors: the action is Messianic (an acting out of allusions to Isaiah), and the moment ends with a warning about "taking offense."

Once these statements have been made, we are ready to ask questions about the community's internal life. What purpose might this story serve? The authoritative answer, placed in Jesus' own mouth, is to give credence to the lives being changed within the congregation, coupled with a warning to take no offense at the means by which these changes are taking place, especially when, in extravagance, the End squanders himself as means.

Briefly, we might envision a community that expected miraculous transformations in the lives of its members, that looked primarily for miracles that had the warrant of Scripture, that held Scripture as its discerning lens, that believed communal life and activity, not isolated dogmatic pronouncements, to be the ultimate proof of Messianic presence, that recognized the authority of each person to confirm the events interpreted through the lens of Scripture by his or her allegiance to the community and its Lord, and finally that realized one interpretation might be "scandal" and so warned each person against jealousy and despair and any temptation to turn the evidence of faith into a stumbling block.

This brief sketch describes a community that is relatively uniform in Christian Scripture. Mark 9 offers a different account, for example, of very similar concerns, as do Paul's letters to Corinth.

For our own practice, this suggests a "suspicious" reading of Scripture, one that tries to read between the lines. Although the passage used here is brief, longer sections of text function best, since they allow the tensions within the text, and therefore within the community, to surface. We might ask what kind of community would benefit from hearing these stories or sayings? We might ask about its principal concerns, its structure, its patterns of relationship, its constituency, its modes of decision-making, its values. We might ask how that community continues in us.

## COMMUNITIES OF SCRIPTURE

*How the early Christian communities were formed out of the Hebrew Scriptures and the events of their lives were interpreted in light of the Hebrew Scriptures.*

The final question is what evidence have we of communal use of sacred texts within the communities whose records constitute Christian Scripture. How were they communities of Scripture?

It is Christian Scripture more than anything else that weds us indissolubly to Hebrew Scripture. The early Christians had no other sacred texts. Their own writings are commentaries on the "law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms" (Lk. 24:44).

In their use of Hebrew Scripture, the authors of Christian Scripture demonstrate how to be a scriptural community. Their conversations with Scripture—and with each other in the

context of Scripture—extend Scripture, not only in terms of its application, but actually in the transformations of its perceived content. This extension of Scripture goes on to become Scripture for future generations. Any process of open interaction with Scripture continues what started in the early Church.

Deep familiarity with Scripture is required for the associations to be made. What can sometimes seem to be proof-exting is more likely to be a process of sacred allusions in which a text, as it is recalled, informs the interpretation of an event. This process is not unlike any situation in which we "make connections" in order to reflect on event at a deeper or wider level. Even though in written form it appears mechanical, as a living process it is actually organic and flexible. Used in this way, as we see Hebrew Scripture used in the Gospels and Epistles, Scripture can be both an interpretive tool and a formative influence, since given understandings will shape future responses.

**Two further points may be suggested about early Christians and their relationship with Scripture:**

First, Scripture was believed to hold such power that its authority was neither confined by nor to those whose sacred text it was. The people of the early Christian era, with an acute sense of the world as decaying, respected all texts of antiquity; those thought to be more ancient, and therefore closer to the ultimate "source," were considered purer and were more valued. In other words, respect for Hebrew Scripture was a given; even non-Jewish Christian writers could quote them with respect and confidence as "true."

Second, in their usage, what gave Scripture its power was its ability to interpret events. So much authority was attributed to Scripture that this interpretive power was understood as predictive, if only one had the right key. This is not to deny the ethical strata of Hebrew Scripture. However, early Christian use of Hebrew Scripture does not focus on the search for answers to ethical questions. Even more significantly, when ethical injunctions from Hebrew Scripture are quoted in the Gospels, they are usually presented as somehow insufficient, as something to move beyond. And Paul's attack on the Law, his rejection of its determinative role, shaped all subsequent Christianity. The dominant role given to Hebrew Scripture, a role already at work within Hebrew Scripture itself, is this power to provide warrants for disconcerting events, the attribution of prophecy. The early Christians turned to Hebrew Scripture for assistance in interpreting the events of Jesus' life (and by extension the lives of his followers), and they understood this interpretation as prediction. The "innovative doctrine" of resurrection and incarnation, the catastrophe of the crucifixion, all were problematic. They required the proof of ancient texts to confirm their credibility. The informative power of the encounter with Scripture, with the traditional covenant, becomes the lens through which to look at the event.

However, this use of Hebrew Scripture must not be understood as a mechanical process, arising from the applications of certain techniques to the text alone. The transformative power of the encounter with Christ, with the New Creation, becomes the lens through which to look at the text.

At their most dynamic, the early Christians, in their encounter with Hebrew Scripture, forged a deep partnership between the events that demand interpretation and the texts capable of interpreting them. This partnership can only be brought about by a deep familiarity with and a deep commitment to *both* the event and the text. This seems to have been true for the early Christians. I suggest that it must be true for us today as we try to establish scriptural communities. Profound loyalty both to the events of our lives and to the texts of our tradition is essential.

Perhaps no section of Christian Scripture illustrates this dialectic more vividly than the Passion narrative. This was, by any account, a catastrophic event. At some point, perhaps after prayer and study, perhaps by intuitions and unaccountable juxtapositions, in every case most probably in the conversations of the community, the interpretation of the Paschal event was accomplished by the use of Hebrew Scripture. The story of the Passion could then be retold in the light of these interpreting passages, could, in other words, be retold *as* the *Paschal* event. (The traditional formula to do this is "this was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet. . ." but we should not overlook the use of borrowed details from the early texts.) Finally, the Hebrew Scripture that was used became itself reinterpreted, and that reinterpretation became attributed to the Hebrew text as prophecy.

Even in our age, when the moral and causal attributions of "prophecy" have been scrubbed off the Hebrew texts, an aesthetic and affective patina remains: can any Christian hear Psalm 22 ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me") and not think of the crucifixion?

## **THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN BIBLICAL TEXT AND COMMUNICAL EVENTS**

This dialectic is still one (but only one) of the primary approaches to the dialogue between text and event. Let's trace its movement, bearing in mind that any schematization will appear more rigid than the lived practice actually is. Either text or event may be a starting place.

We start with texts embedded in the matrix of tradition, routinely heard, undistinguished. Some new event occurs, or somehow we receive a common event in a new way, and from the depths of our experience, a disruptive summons is issued to the texts we take for granted. The disruption can be violent enough to render the tradition temporarily inadequate. At this point, as we try to assimilate the event, certain phrases or images from the tradition might hover in our memory; if they can be caught, they can be traced back to their textual source, like threads to a fabric. Once this context is located and explored, we can begin to ask if it fits the event, in order to help us interpret it. If so, that application of the text to the event can become an interpretation of the event, even helping us recall and retell the event. In the final move, we attach to the text we used for the interpretation of the event a renewed attribution of wisdom and life-giving power.

On the other hand, we start with events embedded in the matrix of experience, routinely acted, undistinguished. Some new text is heard, or somehow we hear a common text in a new way; and from the depths of our tradition, a disruptive summons is issued to us and to events we take for granted. The disruption can be violent enough to render our experience

temporarily inadequate.

At this point, as we try to assimilate the text, certain sayings or behaviors from our experience might hover in our memory; if they can be caught, they can be traced back to their source in the events of our lives, often a time-consuming, delicate process. Once this lived context is located and explored, perhaps not as a single event but as a pattern of behavior, we can begin to ask if it fits the text, in order to appropriate the text or to reinterpret it. If so, the application of the event to the text can become a reappropriation, perhaps even a transformation, of the text. In the final move, our account of the events in our lives is informed by the tradition, and transformative of the tradition, in a new and deeper way.

I have been speaking of the affirmative mutual interpretive power of texts and events, in which meaning is established and confirmed positively. Some conversations end in judgement, even condemnation, of text or event. These exchanges are also, ultimately, moments of affirmation. They are the call to return and to be accountable, an inverse statement of the worth and importance of what stands as condemned, whether event or text.

**One final crucial point must be made.**

For the early Christians, a transformative event stood between the telling of the story and the story told. The Gospels were written after the resurrection was experienced; they were not written while Jesus stood among his followers. In the long run, it was the resurrection, not the crucifixion, that somehow spurred the conversation with Hebrew Scripture. In that light, however it altered their understanding of their lives and their context, the early Christians saw the transformative power of their own experience and the new interpretive power of those texts. In that light, both the events of their lives and the received texts took on passionate intensity.

For our own practice, I suggest that for us also the resurrection, whatever we understand it to be, stands between these texts and our conversation with them. Our appropriation of the transformative events in our lives, however we have experienced them, however evanescent they might seem, stand between the story told in the tradition and our telling of the story in our own experience. Each, perceived, can quicken the other. New life or new creation, however we receive it, recognizes itself and dialogues with itself both in daily life and in Scripture. In that light, in that power, we hear the authority of both Scripture and experience as they enter into conversation with each other.

## **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

- How does your community interpret and use Scripture?
- How does Scripture influence and form your community?

Footnote:

18. Wyatt coordinates the Multicultural Ministry Development Program at the School for Deacons in the Diocese of California and is working on his doctorate from Emory University.

## VALUING DIVERSITY

*By Linda L. Grenz*

One of the identifying characteristics of Anglicanism is that we hold together varying and often divergent viewpoints. For example, over the years we have validated both high church and low church styles of worship even while the proponents of each have often been critical of the other's perspective. High Church Anglicans advocated "Catholic" worship and theology (e.g., weekly Eucharists, use of incense, chanting)—they were often vilified as "idol worshippers" (because of the statues in their churches). On the other hand, High Church Anglicans often felt that Low Church Anglicans (who emphasized biblical preaching, Morning Prayer, and a more evangelical theology) were not "true" members of the faith. There was a time when the animosity between the two groups was so extreme that High and Low Church proponents often could not worship together or even talk to one another without severe conflict and even the threat of violence.

Today we have incorporated strong elements of both reform and catholic traditions in our worship and theology. Sometimes we have even created elegant paradoxes by putting together two totally antithetical statements into one: "The body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life [transubstantiation theology]. Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed on him in thy heart by faith, with thanksgiving [Zwinglian memorial theology]."<sup>20</sup> Over time, the diversity which was the source of conflict enriched the Anglican tradition even while the separate identities remained.

The strength of the Church can also be its weakness. So the Anglican Church is often criticized for being "wishy washy" and never taking a clear stand on important issues or defining the "correct" biblical interpretation. The danger in our Anglican tradition is that we can use it to avoid defining a clear position at times when we may need to do so. The strength of our Anglican style is our ability to see the value in diverse and divergent perspectives and our ability to draw out the best of each. To do this, we need to respect each other's perspective and have the humility that comes from accepting that our own particular understanding is only partially true.

There are many forces both in the church and in our society that pull us toward abandoning this particular aspect of Anglicanism. In the study of Scripture there are voices that demand that we accept the interpretation of one of many groups: evangelicals, conservatives, liberals, traditionalists, liberation theologians, feminists, fundamentalists, etc. Proponents of each group often assert that they alone hold the only correct perspective or interpretation.

There are, of course, great variations of opinion within each of these different groups and there is always danger in trying to label people. One of the dangers is that once someone is safely "labeled," one does not really need to listen to that person or group. One *assumes* that one knows what that person or group thinks. And, since their viewpoint is different from one's own, one often assumes that it has little or no value.<sup>21</sup>

There is, in Bible study and in all of life, the temptation to give in to labeling and dismissing others views and contributions. It makes life easier. Our group can see the Scriptures from our perspective, and we don't need to struggle with the issues raised by perspectives that may be different from, opposed to, perhaps even decidedly repugnant to us. We can simply claim that anything other than our perspective is "heresy" (a position that is, in itself, rather heretical since omniscience is a divine rather than human attribute).

## **OUR IMPERFECT KNOWLEDGE OF TRUTH**

One difficulty with claiming only one true interpretation is that truth is not one-dimensional; it is multifaceted. It might be envisioned as a large gem in our midst. You, who sit opposite from me, can describe what you see: a facet of the gem that faces North and reflects blues and greens. I, on the other hand, can describe what I see: a facet that faces South and reflects reds and oranges.

Neither of us will be entirely wrong. And neither of us will be entirely right. We will be describing what we see and our respective descriptions may, in fact, be relatively accurate. But we each see the gem from a different place. Even in combining both of our viewpoints we do not see the total picture; there are still more facets to the gem that we do not see and cannot describe. For that we will need to depend on the voices of others who sit around this huge gem in our midst, and we must listen carefully to capture a glimpse of what we imagine they are seeing.

Paul is quite right when he says that "now we see through a glass darkly." Knowing and being able to describe the totality of God's truth is not possible for any one individual or even group. We, as God's people, continue to discover anew who God is and how God acts. That is an infinitely complex experience and reality.

All of the perspectives and experiences of all of God's people have something valuable to bring to that discernment process. The various theological perspectives identify and lift up before the Church perspectives that are important for us to hear and often to integrate into the whole. That doesn't mean that "anything goes"—that everyone's interpretation will be accepted by the Church as true. The Church has and still does define some beliefs as "heresy." Nor does it mean that we cannot or should not proclaim that which we believe to be true. It simply means we need to be humble. Humble enough to listen to our companions on the way. Humble enough to understand that even our deepest held viewpoints are only part of the truth.

*God* is true—not our understandings of God. How we as individuals and as the Christian community understand and experience God may, and often does, change. It changes because we do only "see through a glass darkly." It changes because we are always seeking and learning new things. It changes because we are human, and therefore limited. We are *not* God, perfect in our knowledge!

All the different theological perspectives and groups have important contributions to make

to our individual and corporate dialogue with Scripture. We can learn and grow by listening with love and by being authentic about who we are—neither "insisting on our own way" (1 Cor. 13:5) nor accepting other's interpretations merely because they insist on it. If we can learn to value the diversity within our community, we can better hear and respond to the authentic word of God in the Scriptures and value the diversity present in the life of God's people recorded in the Bible and experienced throughout the history of the Christian community.

In the midst of our conflicts and the resultant anxiety about schisms, heresies and ambiguities, there is a tendency, consciously or unconsciously, to seek security in a particular theology, group or its leaders. In the Episcopal Church we tend to establish organizations, produce newsletters, and issue declarations, resolutions and proclamations; we work diligently to gather adherents to the particular perspective of our organization or network. In the process many people unwittingly end up giving primary authority to a group or its leaders.

## **THE PRIMACY OF SCRIPTURAL AUTHORITY**

In Bible study, the primary (although not sole) authority must be the Scriptures. Authority, in Anglicanism, finds its source in God but is distributed among "Scripture, Tradition, Creeds, the Ministry of Word and Sacraments, the witness of the saints, and the consensus fidelium which is the continuing experience of the Holy Spirit through His faithful people in the Church."<sup>22</sup>

"The Bible is not the sole authority in the Church, but it is the norm against which all things are measured; within the distributed authority, it is . . . the first among equals."<sup>23</sup>

The importance of Scripture as a source of authority makes serious engagement with the Scriptures even more urgent.<sup>24</sup> In this work we are fortunate, for there are many tools available to help us understand the words, the context, the people and the underlying message of a passage, chapter or book. We can study the texts in Greek or Hebrew or compare various translations to shed light on what the Scripture passage means.<sup>25</sup> We can ask questions about the meaning of words, the reason a story might have been told; we can ask whether a passage was written as a description of an actual event (history) or as a way to convey a message (a story, a myth, a parable, a poem).

Commentaries give the thoughts of biblical researchers who use historical criticism to examine the texts. They ask questions such as: "What did this passage mean to its original hearers?" "What did the writer intend it to mean?" and "What incident or situation prompted the writing of the passage?" Historical-critical research and other methods of modern biblical scholarship as well as archeological research have given us a great wealth of information about various Bible passages.

All of these tools can help us gain understanding. But tradition and reason also play a part. We need to respect the authority of the Christian community—both that now gathered and as it has existed over the centuries. We do not interpret Scripture alone; often we do not



even listen to Scriptures alone. We hear the Scriptures, over and over again, in the context of corporate worship and our understanding of those Scriptures is influenced by our experience of them in that context. One of the reasons to study the Scripture in a group is to avoid the trap of a totally personal interpretation untempered by the discipline of being in relationship with other Christians. As we seek to understand and interpret Scripture, we need the perspectives of others in the group, the wisdom acquired over the centuries, the knowledge of biblical scholarship and the influence of the rhythm of corporate worship.

There are boundaries on how one interprets Scripture. Individually and corporately we can and do push against those boundaries, defining and redefining them at various times in history. That process of exploration is good and helpful. It can become problematic if the only perspective we accept is that which is "new," modern, or "outside" the accepted boundaries. It can also become problematic when we only accept the interpretation which is promoted by one group or was developed 300 or 1300 years ago but may no longer be appropriate today, given current research or knowledge. We need to explore, but to explore with humility—pushing the boundaries while honoring the authority both of the community to which we are accountable and the community of the faithful in years past.

## **THE COST OF LISTENING**

Finally, and most importantly, we need to sit back and let the Scriptures speak for themselves. We have available to us the analysis and research, commentaries and interpretations and the opinions of everyone around us—and it is easy for all of those voices to drown out of voice of the Scriptures themselves. Somewhere in the midst of all of our study and dialogue, we need to be still and just listen, to listen and hear the Scripture passage as if we were hearing it for the very first time. We need to be still and listen, to hear what echoes in our hearts and minds and souls, to see what images emerge or feel what feelings arise within us. We need to listen for God's word to each of us. We need to become part of the biblical story and let the biblical story become part of us.

The strength of many other Christian traditions is that they have held up a clearly defined way of seeing God and understanding of what that means for daily living. The authority of the Christian community (or denomination) in those traditions is much stronger—the individual or local group is discouraged from any interpretation that does not fit that defined by their group or denomination. That approach provides clarity and rescues one from ambiguity. But that strength has a weakness as well—for the particular way of seeing things defined by a given group of Christians *cannot* contain all of who God is or how God interacts with us.

The strength that the Anglican tradition has brought to the Christian community is our tradition of valuing diversity, crafting a "via media" and even creating paradox by holding together opposing theologies and perspectives. That tradition is, at times, a real struggle. But it is a struggle worth undertaking as we seek to discern God's word; and it is our gift to the wider church. As Dr. Elizabeth Templeton (Presbyterian) said to the Anglican bishops gathered at Lambeth in 1988:

*I have been constantly struck by the best generosity of your recurrent insistence that across parties, camps, styles and dogmas, you have need of one another. Both internally and in relation to (others), you have been consistently unclassifiable . . . I feel sad that you are under some pressure to renounce this remarkable openness of being, to tighten up the structures of dogma, ministry and pastoral discipline to align definitively either with the lions or with the hens. For I find your costly openness a gift to the other churches and a gift to the world.<sup>26</sup>*

*The Story of Anglicanism*, the video series from which Dr. Templeton is quoted above, identifies ours as an heritage that is biblical, liturgical, and pastoral with

*a spirit of inclusivity and openness to change, an ability to maintain communion despite disagreements and a willingness to work things out over time; a cherishing of creation, a respect for individual insight, a spirituality which is incarnational and sacramental. These are the gifts which we hold in trust for the future of a truly universal church.<sup>27</sup>*

So, you are invited to enter the Anglican way and share in this "costly openness"—to encounter the Scriptures in the context of the Christian community gathered in worship, in study and in dialogue, honoring the theological perspective and life experience of your companions on the way. Experience the power of the Scriptures in the context of worship. Use the tools of modern scholarship to help inform your understanding. Seek to know the boundaries set by the Tradition. Listen to hear that which others understand and value (even if you disagree with them). And open yourself to having all of that inform your own dialogue with the Scriptures when you step back and let the Scriptures speak to the silence in your heart. And be prepared. For in the midst of that hard, sometimes painful, struggle, you will be surprised by God—a God who often comes to us when we least expect it and in ways we cannot imagine.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What different theologies or perspectives are present in your group, your congregation?
- What is the gift each brings to your work together?
- What is the cost you experience as the price of our "costly openness"? What is the cost of not being open?

### Footnotes:

19. Grenz, a priest in the Diocese of Delaware, serves as the Coordinator for Adult Education and Leadership Development at the Episcopal Church Center.

20. BCP, p.338
  
21. This article addresses theological diversity, but most of what is said here can be applied to racial, ethnic, cultural, gender and lifestyle diversity as well. See preceding articles which address some of these issues directly.
  
22. The 1948 Lambeth Conference statement on "The Anglican Communion," (London:SPCK, 1948), pp. 84-85.
  
23. "Philip Culbertson, "Known, Knower, and Knowing: The Authority of Scripture in the Episcopal Church" in the *Anglican Theological Review*, Spring 1992. Culbertson is a member of the faculty of the School of Theology of the University of the South, Sewanee, Tennessee. His article is an excellent in depth, scholarly treatment of this subject.
  
24. The authority of Scripture is discussed in detail in *The Bible's Authority in Today's Church*, which contains four papers commissioned by the House of Bishops for discussion in September 1992, a chapter on the history of the church's approach to the authority of Scripture, and a leader's guide to facilitate study in congregations. The book is available from Trinity Press International, (800) 421-8874, or Episcopal Parish Services, (212) 661-1253 (ask for part no. 56-9318; \$13.00 plus shipping and handling).
  
25. The General Convention authorizes translations of the Bible for use in the Episcopal Church. All translations and especially paraphrased versions of the Bible are strongly influenced by specific theologies. Currently approved translations are listed in the Resources section p. 129.
  
26. The Story of Anglicanism; Part 3, Creating a Global Family; Cathedral films and video, P.O. Box 4029, Westlake Village, CA 91359.
  
27. op cit.

# Planning

## KNOWING YOUR AUDIENCE

As Christians we share the biblical story so that we may understand our heritage and respond to God working in history. When considering any approach or program, we need to recognize that children, youth, and adults of different ages have different concerns that influence what they look for in the story and how they respond to it.

### CHILDREN

Children want to belong to a community where they feel safe. Only when they are in an environment which they consider a place of safety and trust may they venture out to make contact with others and learn how to fit into larger social spheres. This need for a safe and trustworthy community manifests itself in a desire to know the stories of the community and an eagerness to understand what makes the community unique. In order for children to have an environment that will support their social and spiritual development, they will need to:

- learn the ways, traditions, rules and customs of the community
- be nurtured in their relationship with God and with the community
- be encouraged to have hope in a future for themselves and the community
- develop trust in themselves and others
- learn the story of our people and God's continual loving relationship with us
- hear the examples of the various ways people choose to live out their relationship with God
- be encouraged to make associations between what they hear and what is happening in their own lives

### BIBLE STUDY WITH CHILDREN<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the ages, the storyteller has performed the important function of handing down society's traditions, history, and vision of life to each generation. The stories we hear play an important role in shaping our lives.

*Parents are the most important storytellers, for they are the ones who whisper and sing stories into their children's ears and consciousness. The children remember those stories because they were told to them with deep love and feeling. Each story is a gift given and received. Values and visions are shaped in the sacredness of that story . . . The Church has been the steward of the stories that shape our consciousness as a people—stories that give life its shape and meaning.<sup>2</sup>*

Our primary purpose in sharing the Bible with children is to invite them into the experience

of sharing and responding to the great biblical stories. These are the stories that over time shape their understanding of how God is present in their lives. If they feel God's love for them in a moment of fear, it will be in no small part because they have heard the stories or heard the psalms that speak of God's power to save. ("The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want." Psalm 23:1) They will know the importance of their baptism as they hear stories that reflect the power of Covenant in the lives of the biblical people. Sharing the great stories of the Bible is a crucially important part of the formation experience for child and adult alike. Hearing and responding to the stories told to them in the education setting prepares the children to hear the story proclaimed and celebrated when the Church gathers to worship.

If this Christian formation experience is to take root in the child, we will share the Bible stories in much the way we share family stories. We will tell the stories with enthusiasm and excitement because these are the stories we have inherited from our biblical ancestors. They are the stories that help us understand how we can know and respond to the power and presence of God in our lives.

*Note that we are still not using the story to teach with. We are using it as a means of helping people discover God's truth for themselves. If we look at what Jesus said and did as recorded in the Gospels, we will see that this is the approach he consistently used as he related to people. When the rich man asked a question, Jesus responded with a story or question of his own. We have much to learn from this method. The Bible is the story of God's people; it is not a textbook on right behavior and response. Jesus told stories to shake the foundations of his hearers! He deliberately threw them off base to deepen their thinking, even though many people turned away from him because they wanted textbook answers. Our tendency to want neatly packaged answers is very human, but we must not make the Bible a tool for learning; it is rather our source for learning.<sup>3</sup>*

Avoid using the Bible merely as a textbook that teaches about the Christian faith. See it instead as a book that invites the child into the Christian faith community. Avoid sharing Bible stories as a way of illustrating principles. Let the Bible stories stand on their own. Tell the story for the sake of the story and believe that the story itself has the power to inform and transform the hearer.

As children grow in maturity, they will need to move more deeply into Bible study that will help them feel at home with the Bible as the book they will live with for the rest of their lives. They will discover the kinds of literature found in the Bible, how to find their way around in the Bible, the unfolding history of the biblical people, and a host of other discoveries about the Bible. Gradually they may begin to explore biblical texts using adaptations of the variety of methods described in this book.

Shown below is a brief summary of one Bible study method as outlined by Dorothy Jean Furnish in her book *Experiencing the Bible With Children*. This method of Bible study has the potential for a wide variety of applications explained in her book. This method is described by Kate Gillooly who serves in the Christian Education Office of the Diocese of

Ohio.

## **ADOLESCENTS**

Adolescents wish to retain their association with their community and, at the same time, explore different groups, different stories, and different identities. They want to gain approval while questioning the legitimacy of those who would give them approval. They need to perform their social roles, but they also want to differentiate themselves as individuals who choose and create their own roles. They feel acutely the tension between individual and group identity. In order for adolescents and young adults to grow and mature in their identity and sense of self-worth as God's children, they need to:

- remind themselves of the story and begin to learn critically to analyze the passages
- explore and make choices
- question authority
- take responsibility for a place in the social system
- see how their own experiences give both meaning to and, at the same time, challenge the biblical passage
- discern what the passage may be calling them to do and decide how they will respond.

## **BIBLE STUDY WITH ADOLESCENTS<sup>4</sup>**

When it comes to thinking about and planning for Bible study with youth, we are caught on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, many parents and other concerned adults plead for significant study of the Bible almost as though it were some magic elixir that would guarantee that their children would grow up strong, healthy, and safe from the dangers of their world. On the other hand, many of us (youth and adult alike) have experienced the Bible as a foreign entity full of strange names, endless begats, and unintelligible rules: boring. Nevertheless, when we take both adolescence and Holy Writ seriously and allow ourselves to be challenged by the vitality of each, the combination can become a powerful, graceful, transfiguring experience for all.

What is it that makes Bible study such a "natural" for adolescents? Adolescence is a time of vulnerability. Young people are faced with life-changing decisions and events almost daily. In comparison to the other ages of human existence, they are perhaps most aware of the far-reaching effects of their decisions. Youth live daily with such urgent questions as: Who am I? Who am I not? Am I acceptable? Do I fit? What is my place in this world? Who shall I become? Where am I going? These are the same kinds of questions that people live with in the Bible—within the context of God's will and passion for God's own children.

Just as they push out the edges of their self-understanding, so too do many adolescents push

the edges of community configurations. They are newly able to see the larger societal structures and critique the brokenness therein. Many have a fierce idealism that sees the urgency in changing the status quo. Many yearn to make a difference in the world around them. (Many also need to hear the challenge to attend to issues other than their self-centered concerns!) The Bible is filled with stories that give us glimpses of God's reign; images of what might be were we to live in community as God intends; examples of those who would change their community with all the possibilities for grace and probability of danger entailed in such change.

In short, adolescents are living with the raw existential questions of self and community sounding loud and clear and urgent. The stories of the Bible also wrestle with such fundamental questions in the context of divine presence. Youth possess a unique combination of naivete and worldliness that needs to be listened to as well as ministered to. This unique combination finds perhaps its greatest parallel in the Bible; not only do the people of the Bible share this naive worldliness, but the narration itself has a worldly naivete that echoes in contemporary adolescence.

Processes of Bible study that respect the adolescent person and adolescent worldview are an integral piece of listening, ministering, and nurturing community. "Bible study" is an unfortunate combination of words. It implies that something static will be examined. It conjures up images of microscopes, categorizing, memorizing, and shelving. It sounds like something someone else thinks I should learn, even though I can see no connection with my life concerns. The essence of Bible study with and by youth might better be defined as conversations with our Biblical ancestors. There is so much that is invigorating, encouraging, challenging and exciting about these people when we take time to listen hard and between the lines. But how might we do this?

Guided meditations grown out of Scriptural events are a wonderful way for youth to experience the Bible as lively, interesting, and engaging. These are especially appropriate for introspective, transitional youth. The writer/giver of the meditation must prepare their words carefully. A guided meditation offers people the opportunity to enter into a story and experience it "first hand." These work most effectively when the presenter can accomplish two things. First, the story needs to be claimed fully by the presenter—one cannot lead others where one has not gone! Secondly, the presenter must be able to let go of all self-consciousness and act as mere conveyor of the experience (the Pauline image of broken vessels is most helpful here). As youth experience guided meditations, they will also be able to prepare and present guided meditations.

Another method for drawing out the ancestral voices in the "first-person" is through dramatic renderings. Drama works best when the actor enters the persona of the one they portray. In the work of listening to the things said and unsaid in the text, each person may also come to hear God's voice in their own living today. The presenting of these dramatic renderings to a larger audience is an important aspect of the learning experience. The larger community needs to listen seriously to both adolescent imagery and Biblical reality; this is an opportunity to honor both.



Biblical conversations have increased significance when they are connected with an actual ministry. Some of the best have occurred when youth are preparing for such community service projects as vacation Bible school, soup kitchens, building projects, or any of the vast array of possibilities in one's own community.

A final caution. When we engage in "Bible study" with youth, especially when the larger community has demanded the same, it is tempting to do those things which are measurable: making sure folks know all the books of the Bible (in order); memorizing such 'goodies' as the Ten Commandments; remembering what is where and who was when, etc. These are not the appropriate pieces of study for adolescents—besides, that's why we have tables of contents, indices, Bible concordances, dictionaries, and commentaries. Make the tools available, but more importantly, introduce the people to one another. When the energy and vitality of our youth combines in conversation with the energy and vitality of our ancestors, no one will ever be the same!

## **ADULTS**

Adults want to live in the security of the identity they have formed and the social position they have obtained while continuing their emotional, spiritual and intellectual growth. They value being individuals, and they value solidarity with others, intimacy, and the freedom of giving up control to let God be God. They need to transform themselves and society and to recognize the need to be close to what is different. Adults need to:

- continue growing and struggling
- tolerate ambiguity and paradox
- explore their inner world to be more in touch with what experiences they share with others
- question all images and formulations of self and society in order to act out of a faith in a loving relationship with God
- refine the critical skills they may have learned and challenge the biblical text with their own experience
- explore the social implications of the biblical message and, at the same time
- be open to the calls for conversion and transformation contained in the passage.

## **BIBLE STUDY WITH "BABY BOOMERS" AND "BUSTERS"<sup>5</sup>**

A unique phenomena occurred in the United States between 1946 and 1964—there was a greater increase in the birth rate during that time than ever before, resulting in a population called the "baby boomers." The large size of this group in a capitalistic society meant that their needs dominated the marketplace. In addition, they were raised in a time of

unprecedented economic growth. The result is a generation who grew up with the expectation that they would always be the center of attention and that they would continue to benefit from the increase in economic status they witnessed in their parents' lives throughout their childhood.

Unlike previous generations, the baby boomers did not return to church when they started having babies. They move frequently and may attend church, but they are slow to join a church. This is one of the major reasons for declining church memberships in all denominations, including the more conservative ones.

Baby boomers are more likely to be biblically "illiterate" than previous generations and the tougher economic times has added to a natural tendency to search for meaning as they enter their middle adult years. So, Bible study can be appealing and helpful to them. If you plan to reach this age group, there are several considerations to keep in mind. One is that they tend not to make long term commitments, so short (4 to 6 week) courses are more appealing, at least initially, than two or three year programs. They are used to and expect a variety of options. Several smaller groups of different types will be more appealing than one large group.

Boomers eventually will move toward longer term commitments, but usually after having started with shorter commitments and gradually increasing their commitment level. Long term studies can meet their need for community, especially if the meetings are held in their neighborhoods at times that fit their schedules.

If you want to reach the boomers, plan to advertise your programs and give more details about each program than you normally would. Boomers want to know the expectations for and benefits of participating. Provide child care or encourage the group to make arrangements for child care. Include dinner for group members (and their families) as a way to build community; since they eat out a great deal, they are often willing to pay for it and appreciate not having to take the time to plan a meal.

About 20 percent of the boomers are neo-traditionalists; they will bring a perspective that is often more conservative than that of many Episcopalians. On the other hand, most boomers have a global perspective and the vast majority of boomers will have non-traditional lifestyles. For example, only 6 percent of all families in the United States are made up of an at-home mother, a father and children. Boomers are likely to be part of dual-career couples, single (about 50 percent of all adults); cohabiting with someone of the same or opposite sex; a single parent by death, divorce or by choice, etc. Unlike the common perception of boomers, they are not "Yuppies"; only 6–8 percent of all boomers fit that description. Most boomers are working class—middle- or low-income earners. However, they do tend to have a self-fulfillment ethic (vs. the self-denial ethic of earlier generations). Two strong values they hold are that life is intrinsically valuable—to be lived fully and enjoyed—and that life is meant to be emotionally expressive.

These less traditional values and lifestyles may be disturbing to older members. If it is combined with an anti-institutional, anti-authority perspective it may be even harder for

some to accept. If it is combined with the neo-traditional conservatism, it can be quite confusing. It is important to welcome these middle and young adults and to encourage people to listen to them, get to know them as individuals and to accept and value the diverse gifts they bring.

Bible study programs that include time for people to make the connections to their personal life and tell their own stories are likely to work with the boomer age group. Including a global perspective and providing the basics (i.e., a simple overview of the Bible or the book to be studied before beginning the in-depth work) is also helpful. Many boomers are looking for stability and a sense of connectedness, for meaning and for fellowship. They can benefit from relationships with older faith mentors. A Bible study group can be an excellent place to provide this. Older members of a congregation can be valuable faith mentors, foster grandparents (since biological grandparents often live far away) and anchors of stability for the boomers.

The generation that follows the boomers, here called "Baby Busters", is known by various names but has no generally agreed upon name. They are *much* smaller in numbers, and while they share some characteristics with the boomers, they are also quite different. They have come into young adulthood during harder economic times and have always lived in the shadow of the huge boomer generation. As they come into adulthood, they face a limited job market—the boomers already have and are likely to hold most of the good jobs for the rest of their lives. There are few slots for advancement now, and there will be fewer later. They already have and will continue to need to fight for their place in the sun. As a result, they tend to be assertive and sometimes angry.

They share the boomer's self-fulfillment ethic but their needs are different. On the whole, they are economically poorer than previous generations at that age, so providing inexpensive (or free) meals and childcare becomes even more important. Make a conscious effort to reach out to and include them in groups and in group leadership. Many of the approaches appropriate for the boomers will help in reaching the busters. What is important is to remember that it is tempting to focus entirely on the large boomer population and forget about this smaller group. Unfortunately, that reinforces their status in the larger society and makes them feel more alienated from the church.

### **BIBLE STUDY WITH MIDDLE AND OLDER ADULTS**

We often lump together everyone from about 35 to 90+ years of age, as if they were all alike. Just like the boomers and busters have specific characteristics and needs (see above), other ages within the adult age range have particular needs.

Middle adults often go through a "mid-life" crisis—much discussed in the popular press. The issues they confront are very real—Who am I? Have I accomplished what I set out to do in life? What do I want to do with the rest of my life? Am I living the kind of life I really want to live, or have I "fallen into a rut" that I don't really like? Often children are growing up and leaving home, forcing the parents to realign their life direction and seek new meaning and purpose. Some have adult children who have returned home again, perhaps

which a small child, requiring yet another readjustment. Many middle adults will have gone through or will be facing divorce, loss of a job, serious illness or death of one or both parents, etc. All of these life crises will impact what people bring to the Scriptures and what they will seek from their study of the Scriptures.

Some people will find it helpful to be in a small group made up of individual in similar life situations. The pain, confusion and difficulties they are facing is readily understood by other group members and studying the Scriptures together can be a time of mutual support and nurture. Others will prefer to be in a group with people who are not in their situation. For them a mixed group provides a welcome relief from focusing on the stressful situation and allows them to see that there is life beyond divorce, or joblessness, or whatever.

The best way to decide how to structure groups to best meet the needs of adults is to ask them what they want and need. If the resultant groups are too small, recruit group members from the community and/or see if you can develop a partnership with a neighboring congregation (Episcopal or ecumenical).

The same principle applies to older adults. Do not assume that people in their sixties and seventies will have the same needs and concerns as people in their eighties and nineties. Newly retired people are facing the issues of adjusting to retirement and the questions of: Who am I? and What do I want to do with the rest of my life? They are often eager to learn, ready to explore new directions and seeking new ways to serve and to use the gifts and skills they have developed over a lifetime. Like the mid-life crisis folk, they can find studying the Scriptures a way to find new meaning and a new sense of direction in life.

In this day of longevity, people in their sixties are often finishing a time of caring for parents in their nineties who have or are about to die. Many of them have adult children with them and may be raising grandchildren or great grandchildren. While some may face some physical limitations, many will be leading very active lives.

People in their eighties and nineties often are physically limited and may need transportation to a group meeting or may want to participate in a group which merits where they are living. Be aware of issues such as meeting places that are accessible or convenient for them, transportation, and resources that may meet special needs (e.g., large print Bibles and materials, recorded Scriptures, etc.). Again, make no assumptions; ask them what they want and need. Build Bible study programs according to the needs of the people in your congregation.

The important point to remember is that older adults do not stop growing or learning; they do not stop having an important role in and contribution to the life of the congregation. Like most other people, most older adults will want to study the Scriptures and learn from them. Help them identify resources and groups that will enable them to do that. And help the congregation use the gifts and skills of older adults to enhance your and their life and ministry.

Footnotes:

1. by Joseph P. Russell
2. Joseph P. Russell, *Sharing Our Biblical Story*, Morehouse-Barlow, 1979, 1988; p. 9.
3. *Op. cit.*
4. Jan Wood, M.Div., is the Diocesan Youth and Education Minister in the Diocese of El Camino Real.
5. The information in this section is based on a program developed by Kirk McNeill and Robert Paul of the General Board of Discipleship of The United Methodist Church

## **CRITERIA FOR CHOOSING A BIBLE STUDY**

There are three basic criteria that could guide a Christian educator through the wide variety of available methods and programs for Bible study.

### **1. The Bible study calls us to formulate our own understanding of the text.**

- a. We ask questions of the text.
- b. We learn how to place the text in its historical, literary, and theological settings.
- c. We consider different interpretations of the text.
- d. We interpret the text with the help of other sources, including the Book of Common Prayer and the canons of the church.

### **2. The Bible study calls us to a dialogue in community.**

- a. The readings challenge our concepts of ourselves and society and make us question the beliefs and practices of our community.
- b. We have opportunities to respond to the text and to discuss our responses with others.
- c. We connect the text to our own lives.
- d. We analyze the situation in which we live.

### **3. The Bible study calls us to act.**

- a. We discern what we could do to make our individual and communal life reflect more clearly the love of God.
- b. We make our own decisions about what we will do.
- c. We plan how to carry out effectively our decision to act.

Before you select a specific method, you will need to give some consideration to your group, the local context and the goal(s) you wish to achieve. The specific method or resource you choose needs to be selected with needs of your particular group in mind. Consider such things as: the expectations (hoped-for outcomes) and fears or concerns of group members, the history of the group (new or ongoing, long-term or short-term), the theological and/or sociopolitical orientation of the group, the reading and educational level of group members, the level of biblical and theological background, etc. You also need to agree beforehand if the group wishes to be challenged to grow and, if so, in what way. For example, some programs are academically challenging and require a commitment of time and effort on the part of students and leaders. Some programs ask people to be personally

open and vulnerable. Some present challenging new information or perspectives.

People need to understand these factors before a group begins; they need to be prepared to be challenged to grow in these ways. Some challenges may not be helpful to some people or groups, or they may be too challenging at a particular time of a person's life. For example, a person undergoing severe personal stress and inner conflict may find a method that asks for personal vulnerability to be too threatening or that person may begin using the group as a therapy group. The group leader needs to help such persons find an appropriate therapeutic setting. Likewise, some people find the information presented or the perspective of the group so disturbing that it is causing them undue upset or their discomfort dominates the life of the group to the point where their discomfort becomes the focus rather than the Scriptures.

In such cases, it might best to help those persons find another, less disturbing setting or ask that they discuss their concerns with someone outside of the group (e.g., the parish priest, a theologically trained lay person, a counselor, etc.). The leader needs to be sensitive to these types of situations and not assume that all groups are for all people or that it is the leader's responsibility to handle every group member. Vulnerability and disagreement are both healthy in a group, but both can be problematic for some individuals in a group.

On the other hand, challenge—both on the personal and intellectual level—is good and can be a real opportunity for growth. It is important to support and encourage people in their struggles to become more vulnerable or to grapple with new perspectives, new information, new ways of learning. It is often helpful to communicate a sense that all of us are on a journey together, that exploration can be both painful and joyful at times and that the group's function is to provide a safe place for people to explore. Most people who feel accepted and valued in a group will be able to handle differences in opinion and personal openness once an atmosphere of trust is established.

## **EXPLORING FAITH MATURITY**

One problem with successful small groups is that they often become closed to new members, and the group members get stuck—becoming smug and satisfied with their way of doing things, the dominant perspective in the group and their definition of what constitutes a good Christian. When that goes too far, the group and its members stop growing in their faith journey.

The Search Institute has conducted a study of six major protestant denominations and have produced self-study guides for youth and adults that enable group members to do a regular assessment of how they are doing in their faith development. The guides include a 38-item questionnaire that individuals fill out and self-score. Each of the eight marks of faith are discussed separately with discussion/reflection questions included at the end of each section. It is set up with a leader's guide to be done as six one-hour sessions or can be adapted to be part of an ongoing Bible study group.

Based on surveys of hundreds of adults, interviews with theological scholars and reviews of

literature in psychology and religion, the instrument measures an individual's integration of eight core dimensions of faith:

- 1) Trusts in God's saving grace and believes firmly in the humanity and divinity of Jesus.
- 2) Experiences a sense of personal well-being, security and peace.
- 3) Integrates faith and life, seeing work, family, social relationships and political choices as part of one's religion.
- 4) Seeks spiritual growth through study, reflection, prayer and discussion with others.
- 5) Seeks to be part of a community of believers in which people give witness to their faith and support and nourish one another.
- 6) Holds life-affirming values, including commitment to racial and gender equality, affirmation of cultural and religious diversity and a personal sense of responsibility for the welfare of others.
- 7) Advocates social and global change to bring about greater social justice.
- 8) Serves humanity, consistently and passionately, through acts of love and justice.

The study and self-assessment identify four faith types:

- 1) **Integrated faith**—a Christian who experiences both a life-transforming relationship to a loving God and a consistent devotion to serving others; this represents a high level of faith maturity.
- 2) **Vertical faith**—a Christian who has a life-transforming relationship to a loving God but doesn't have a consistent devotion to serving others.
- 3) **Horizontal faith**—a Christian who is consistently devoted to serving others, but doesn't have a life-transforming relationship to a loving God.
- 4) **Undeveloped faith**—a Christian who doesn't strongly express his or her faith either by devotion to serving others or to a life-transforming relationship to a loving God.

Among all adults, 36 percent are in the undeveloped faith category, 10 percent are in the vertical faith category, 22 percent in the horizontal; only 32 percent of all adults fall into the integrated faith category. A similar analysis of youth identifies 64 percent in the undeveloped faith category, 6 percent in the vertical category, 19 percent in the horizontal and 11 percent in the integrated faith category. Faith maturity among youth tends to go up and down during their teen years, with little overall change from grade 7 to grade 12.

Detailed analysis is given in an overall report for those who wish to study that information.



The self-study guides are most useful for helping groups assess where individual member may need to grow. Programs, supplementary materials or activities can then be included in the group's life to assist in developing members' faith maturity.

The Search Institute study found that Christian education was the most important aspect of congregational life for helping people of all ages grow in their faith. The Bible was listed by 77 percent of adults and 64 percent of youth as one of the top ten areas of learning in which they are "interested" or "very interested"; for adults, it was at the top of the list of ten areas.

NOTE: All of the above information, much of it in direct quotation, is taken from the following materials. For complete information and copies of the self-assessment or congregational inventory contact the Search Institute.

## STARTING A BIBLE STUDY GROUP

Small groups of Christians gathered to reflect on and pray with the Scriptures are highly effective in nurturing faith formation and in bringing new people into a congregation. How groups are started, leaders selected and supported and how the group life is developed can increase that effectiveness.

Starting a new group requires more than just putting an announcement in the bulletin. It is helpful to identify and invite specific people to attend (in person, by phone or via a handwritten note). Starting a new group with a potluck supper (preferably in the leader's or priest's home) and some time to get acquainted a couple of nights before the first session is often helpful, especially in a large church or when there are newcomers in the group. Lent is often a good time to launch a new group—the Lenten season is the time of highest church attendance.

Don't forget to send an announcement to your local newspaper (especially in a small community) or include the group topic in a newspaper ad. You may also be able to obtain a public service announcement on a local radio station. Read the religious news page in your paper and listen to the radio to see what kind of story they use. Write up your announcement as a story that fits what you saw or heard. Take the time to get to know the religious news writer/editor and the radio station person responsible for making broadcast decisions. Ask him or her what they want and how you can help them. Take careful notes and give the information they want in the form they want. Follow up with a thank you note when they use your story.

Although we have often used the term "Bible study" in this text, many people are not attracted to the term. It often generates a sense of guilt ("I should know more about the Bible than I do") and fear ("My ignorance will be exposed; I'll feel stupid"). It is those feelings that cause adults, in particular, to avoid Bible study. Some have found it helpful to use expressions such as: study of the Bible, scriptural conversations, dialogue with the Scriptures, engaging the Scriptures, studying the Bible or learning more about the Bible when promoting a Bible study program. These expressions are less likely to elicit an automatic negative response (which comes out of an emotional base and/or previous experience). The other important point to communicate is that no prior knowledge is expected, that no one will be embarrassed by being asked questions to demonstrate their knowledge or lack of knowledge of the Bible. In other words, it is important to communicate (and then create) that this will be a safe experience in which everyone can learn and grow together.

Promote your program in several different ways; gather a small group to think of ideas and try any and all that sound feasible and reasonable. Bulletin and newsletter announcements, buttons and balloons, flyers and brochures, cartoon, quizzes or stories as bulletin inserts or handouts, in depth newsletter articles, coffee hour or lunch presentations, announcements in church, registration table with samples of the materials available, posters, banners or bulletin boards, a brief sample session after church, a video shown after the service (several are identified in the Resource section as appropriate for introducing a program), direct mail

letters or postcards, etc. Use the methods that best fit your context, but use more than one method.

People today are highly mobile, and you cannot assume they will find your church or find out about it or the programs you offer unless you make an effort to reach them. Younger adults, for example, want more detailed information than previous generations. You need to tell them what you are offering, a description of the content, the length of the group meeting, how many meetings, the availability of childcare, etc. You also need to give directions to the church. If your church is not easy to find and identify, invest in signs that are easy to read while driving.

An excellent resource, *Parish Communication Kit: "Telling Your Story" brochures*, is available to help you develop an effective way to communicate your message. It is a series of 10 small booklets which give tips and pointers on a wide range of communication vehicles. Created by a consortium of denominations which included the Episcopal Church, the series is practical, easy to follow and congregation-based. Topics include:

- Telling Your Story With Bulletin Boards (#51-9134)
- Telling Your Story With Desktop Publishing (#51-9135)
- Telling Your Story With Direct Mail (#51-9136)
- Telling Your Story With Marketing (#51-9137)
- Telling Your Story With News Releases (#51-9138)
- Telling Your Story With Newsletters (#51-9129)
- Telling Your Story With Photography (#51-9139)
- Telling Your Story With Radio (#51-9140)
- Telling Your Story With Telephone Use (#51-9141)
- Telling Your Story With Videos in the Congregation (#51-9142)

Available for \$.25 each or \$2.50 for all 10 (#51-9143) from Episcopal Parish Services, 815 Second Avenue, New York NY 10017, (800) 223-2237; in New York State: (800) 321-2231, ext. 5416.

## **ONGOING BIBLE STUDY GROUPS**

Ongoing groups provide stability and community, especially in larger congregations where individuals often need to find a place where they are known in order to feel that they belong. These groups can meet on Sunday mornings or during the week; it is best if both options are

provided. It is important to evaluate an ongoing group periodically to assess if the current methods and materials meet the needs of group members. Ongoing groups usually are held together by using a multi-year program or are an affinity group that is held together by whatever makes them an affinity group (workplace ministry groups, age-specific groups, interest groups, task groups).

Many affinity groups use a variety of study methods and materials. Some choose materials related to their interest, task, or age. Others spend several months using one method and getting to know it well before moving on to another method. These groups usually use the Sunday lectionary lessons for their texts; some select books of the Bible to study in course. Changing the methods or materials periodically makes it easier to incorporate new members.

Most multi-year program groups will meet until the program is finished. If significant "dropouts" occur earlier, it may be helpful to reassess the use of that particular program. If a core group continues throughout the entire program, they often bond as a group and are reluctant to part once the end of the program comes. Careful preparation and planning far in advance of the end of the program can help ease the transition to another program or to a new group structure. Some group members may wish to lead new groups. Others will want to move on to something else. Often participants in multi-year Bible study programs are ready to take on significant ministries but cannot find ways to do that within their congregation. Unfortunately, many people conclude that the only way to sustain that which they have learned to value in this experience is to go to seminary and be ordained. It is important to help these program participants identify meaningful ways to use their knowledge, understanding, and renewed commitment to living a Christian life. Working with the adult catechumenate process and developing discipleship groups can be the next step for many of these participants.

## **DISCIPLESHIP GROUPS**

A number of Episcopal congregations have developed "home cell groups" (known by various names but here called "discipleship groups"). Discipleship groups often include study of the Scriptures as part of their time together. However, they are more than just a Bible study group.

Discipleship groups move beyond Bible study to the creation of a small group that functions as the primary place for faith formation and for reflection on and support for ministry in all aspects of one's life, and is the locus of pastoral care and prayer support. Small groups of 10 plus a leader and apprentice leader meet weekly or biweekly to "study and share, pray and care." These groups intentionally encourage growth by inviting new members to join. Once the group has reached a maximum size of 12, the apprentice leader and several members start a new group.

Participants in discipleship groups have discovered the power of small groups in building community, encouraging spiritual growth, and supporting members as they seek to fulfill their baptismal promises in their home life, on the jobs or at school, in their leisure time, in

community involvements, and in retirement. Congregations which have made a commitment to refocus their congregational life around small groups and their emphasis on members' individual and corporate ministries "in the world" have experienced a renewed spirit.

Forming and maintaining discipleship groups requires ongoing training for the group leaders and apprentice leaders, which is beyond the scope of this book. Resources currently are available from the Fuller Institute and some more fundamentalist or evangelical denominations. Several Episcopal congregations have developed resources which reflect Episcopal theology and style. The national church is in the process of adapting various materials and will have resources on discipleship groups as well as leadership-skills training materials available in 1994. For more information, contact the Adult Education and Leadership Development Office.

## **SHORT-TERM GROUPS**

Ongoing groups are often difficult for newcomers to join, so it is helpful to start new groups on a regular basis. Newcomers often look for people like themselves in age, relationship status, interest in the same issues, etc.; if a congregation is large enough, groups can be started which match newcomers and those not yet part of another group.

In smaller congregations, care needs to be taken to make space for new group members, or the Bible study group will end up being the same small group that always meets. You may conclude that others don't want to participate, when most likely they don't want to participate in that group which feels closed or filled. Start a new group after you have asked people about their needs and concerns and listened carefully to their responses. Try different methods or resources. Try a different group configuration. Instead of identifying your one ongoing group as an established group (e.g., "the adult-education group meets in the library") try identifying it as a series of groups by offering a series of different topics, each advertised, in essence, as a new group with a specific start and end date. This makes it possible for newcomers to join at the beginning of a "new" group.

Baby boomers (those born between 1946–1964) tend to respond best to short-term commitments. They are more likely to attend a group which is doing a four- or six-week study than one which asks for a three-year commitment or is "ongoing." It is also important to schedule groups at times when they can attend and to arrange for (or encourage the group to arrange for) childcare for those with children.

Short-term groups do not build the depth of relationship or the ongoing support of a Christian community. They require constant publicizing, recruitment of leaders, and identification of resources. However, they also provide variety and easy entry for newcomers. They are often the first step in someone's journey to a deeper faith; a positive experience in several short-term groups may lead the person to an ongoing neighborhood group where more significant relationships may be developed and the Scriptures and faith can be explored in greater depth.

Most important: Don't assume that people aren't attending a group because they aren't interested in Scripture or in education. They are. It may take some work to find out what interests them and how to best meet their needs.

## **LEADERS**

Select, train, and nurture group leaders with care. Leaders need to have group facilitation skills and commitment to the ministry of leadership more than expertise in the Bible or formal teaching (e.g., lecture) skills. It is best to pair inexperienced leaders with a mentor to support them in the beginning. Or start with an experienced leader and an apprentice in each group. After a while, the experienced leader takes a new group, and the apprentice takes over.

Once you have recruited your leaders, don't abandon them. It is important to establish a system of meeting regularly with the group leaders to see how things are going, discuss problems they are encountering, provide spiritual nurture in a group where they are not the leader, provide training they may need, and provide affirmation and prayer support for their ministry.

# **ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING APPROPRIATE BOUNDARIES**

*by Linda L. Grenz*

Because we live in a world where incidents of violence, hatred, and sexual misconduct are increasing, the Church has a particular responsibility to clarify and maintain ethical and emotional boundaries that make clear what is unacceptable behavior on the part of those called to positions of leadership. Leadership is a gift of the Spirit that can only be effectively exercised in an environment of trust. As the Gospel witness makes abundantly clear, "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded." (Luke 12:48)

Since trust is so fundamental to the well-being of the Christian community, Christian people have the right to expect that those they choose as leaders (both lay and ordained) understand and are committed to standards of behavior that are trustworthy. In receiving the sacrament of baptism, we enter into a sacred covenant in which we pledge to live lives that "seek and serve Christ in all persons," and to "respect the dignity of every human being." When this solemn trust is broken through some form of physical, emotional, or sexual misconduct or abuse, not only is someone's dignity diminished and their well-being seriously harmed, but also harm is done to the community of faith. Where there is no trust, there can be no community.<sup>6</sup>

One of the responsibilities that comes with the power given group leaders is to establish and maintain appropriate interpersonal boundaries. A boundary defines what is and is not appropriate or comfortable behavior. Boundaries are violated when someone says or does something that another person feels is offensive, frightening, disrespectful or injurious. A boundary violation can be verbal or physical.

## **PHYSICAL OR EMOTIONAL BOUNDARIES**

Some behavior, often done with children and seen by adults as "fun," is, in fact, abusive. Pushing or throwing someone into a pool, tossing a child into the air, even swinging a child by his or her arms can frighten and physically hurt a child. Physically disciplining a child may cause physical or emotional injury, offend the child's parent or guardian, and may make the disciplinarian liable to civil suit or prosecution under state child abuse laws.

Teasing someone or using a "nickname" that the person does not like can be painful; children and teenagers are especially vulnerable, as they often tease each other. It is important that adults not join in the teasing—or, on the other hand, to talk about children as if they weren't present—and that they help children learn how to establish boundaries and how to respect each other's boundaries. "Innocent" behaviors among children that are given tacit approval by adults can grow into not-so-innocent behaviors. Children who do not respect the boundaries of other children can become teenagers and adults who continue to tease, ridicule, tickle, punch, and jump on people; bigger and more powerful, their disrespect for other's boundaries becomes more dangerous.

With children or adults it is easy to misjudge either the physical impact of a "tap on the arm" or the emotional impact of being forced to do something the person fears or that causes him or her embarrassment. Often no one intends to harm another person by repeatedly urging them to sing or dance or participate in a game or answer a question. Sometimes this is done in the spirit of "good fun" to encourage participation. But pushing people to do that which embarrasses them is harmful. A simple norm to observe in all cases is "when in doubt, don't do it."

## **SEXUAL MISCONDUCT**

Members of small groups often experience love, acceptance, and support from each other, sometimes at a depth that is new to them. Group leaders are usually given considerable power. These conditions provide an environment for romantic and/or sexual feelings to develop among group members and the leader. Problems can and usually do develop when those feelings are acted on.

It is important for group leaders to both act appropriately and protect themselves from inappropriate behaviors or the appearance of impropriety. So, for example, never be with children or teenagers without another adult present. If someone always seems to come early to the group meeting and to stay late afterwards, ask someone else to stay with you so no one individual is with you alone. If the behavior persists, tell the person involved that this behavior is uncomfortable for you.

Following several guidelines will prevent most sexual misconduct: do not date any group member; never touch a group member sexually in any way; do not give prolonged hugs or call someone "honey," "babe," "sweetheart," etc.; do not make excessive or inappropriate comments about clothing or physical appearance. You never know someone's background; words and behaviors can trigger powerful painful memories for those with prior physical, emotional, or sexual abuse. Or they can be misunderstood or misinterpreted. Treat each group member with equal respect and dignity and avoid even the appearance of impropriety.

## **THE DYNAMICS OF TRANSFERENCE**

The group leader may become the focal point for group members' emotions, both negative and positive. Often this has nothing to do with who the leader is or what the leader has said or done. Members of groups sometimes project feelings from other relationships (often in the past) onto the group leader. So, for example, someone who had an authoritarian parent may perceive the group leader as being authoritarian, even when she is not acting in authoritarian ways. Or the group member may seek the love he did not receive from a parent or significant person in his life and so perceives the group leader as having a "special love" for him. A group member may become excessively angry or approval-seeking or may "fall in love" with the group leader. In many cases, these emotions are being "transferred" from another relationship.

It is best if the group leader can recognize and understand that people may be reacting to the



*role* rather than the *person in the role*. If someone's reactions to the leader seem to be disproportionate to the situation or don't match what is actually happening, it may be transference. Also, the leader may experience transference when the leader's feelings from another relationship are triggered by the dynamics in the group and transferred to a group member.

The leader needs to take care not to get "caught" into the other person's projection and, for example, begin fighting with the person who is angry or begin "parenting" the person who seeks parental approval. Listen to the anger and acknowledge it. Then invite the group to refocus on the passage or question being discussed. Rephrase approval-seeking questions directed to the leader and invite the group to respond to the issue raised by the question or comment. Avoid answering questions directed to the leader as the "expert" (parent figure), and don't support dependency by responding to repeated requests for rides, a loan of money or books, or extra time to talk after the meeting.

It is natural to want to be helpful, but be alert as the leader for repeated or increasingly demanding requests for specific "help" from you and you only. If you experience difficulty, seek the assistance of someone with experience and training in group leadership to help you reflect on your response to the situation on an ongoing basis. Having someone outside of the group help you reflect on your behavior often prevents troublesome situations from becoming serious.

## **HANDLING INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR**

Within the Christian community, it is everyone's responsibility to hold one another accountable for appropriate behaviors. Within a small group, the group leader especially is responsible to make sure that the group members respect each other's boundaries and to create an atmosphere in which each group member can feel safe. Failure to do so makes the leader and community accomplices to the inappropriate behavior.

Help prevent problems by asking the group to establish norms for how they will interact. Ask group members to identify behaviors they experience as offensive, frightening, or disrespectful, then ask the group to agree that they will respect those boundaries. This does not mean that everyone needs to agree that any given behavior is problematic to them. It means that out of respect for each other all will agree to avoid those behaviors. The group can add other behaviors as they arise and are agreed upon.

If someone says or does something that violates a boundary, the best way to respond is to tell that person directly using clear "I-statements." For example, you might say, "When you told the joke about such and such, I was offended. Please don't tell jokes like that again." If this does not stop the behavior, you may need to restate your feelings and add a consequence: "If you persist in telling such jokes, I will [insert whatever you have decided is a consequence you are willing to deliver]." If the behavior or comments are directed to another group member, you may also want to discuss the situation with that person and encourage him/her to speak to the offending person.

Normally, this process will take care of any serious problems. However, if you find someone who is adamant in continuing an offensive behavior, the group may need to ask that person to leave the group. You'll find it helpful to confer with an uninvolved clergy person or trained group leader to help identify other options before you do this, but if someone's behavior is so offensive that other group members cannot participate openly, freely, and in safety, then the offending person needs to experience a concrete consequence for his or her behavior. Christians often tolerate highly inappropriate behaviors on the assumption that this is "being nice to others." In many cases, this type of "being nice" is not helpful to anyone and may, in fact, lead to harmful behavior against current group members as well as others in the future.

It is important to understand that the one offended is the person who decides what is offensive to him or her. It does not matter if the offender or other group members agree. It does not matter if others have used that expression or told that joke or behaved in that way before with no consequences. What matters is that someone was offended.

The offender needs to apologize and commit to not repeating the offensive speech or behavior. If necessary, ask the person to clarify exactly what he or she found offensive. Trying to justify or explain the behavior only adds insult to injury; seek to understand that person's boundaries and make an honest effort to respect those boundaries, even if you do not agree with them.

The group leader has a special responsibility to ensure that any child or teenager who has been physically, emotionally or sexually abused receives appropriate care from professionals, even if the abuse was a one-time or limited encounter. You can help obtain such care by informing clergy, state child-protection services, police, doctor, lawyer, the child's parents, guardian, or teacher. Many professionals are required by law to report such abuse to the authorities; all adults have a moral obligation to protect those who are vulnerable.

A teenager or adult of any age who has been violated also needs to receive appropriate care. Remember that older adults are neglected or abused by caregivers and that even a mature adult is usually harmed in a romantic or sexual relationship with group leader (or teacher, pastoral-care giver, clergy person, etc.) and will need professional help to heal. The offender should never be involved in caring for the child, teenager, or adult he or she has violated, even if the offender is ordained or a professional in the field.

If the violation is between group members the leader's role is to support the offended or abused member, help him or her (and the group if it becomes a group issue) confront the perpetrator, help the perpetrator accept responsibility for his/her actions, and facilitate reconciliation. If the situation is fairly minor, you may be able to handle it yourself. However, if serious or criminal behavior is involved, always seek help. If you have any concerns about how to handle a given situation, seek the counsel of a trained person.

Please be aware of the difficulties caused by telling others about serious misconduct but requesting them to keep it confidential. The request for confidentiality may place them in

legal jeopardy (for example, if they are required to report child abuse). It may cause great anguish for those who may want to keep the confidence but also want to protect the person being abused or feel an obligation to intervene.

If your group is going to establish confidentiality as a norm, be clear that this means group members will not "gossip," but clarify that confidentiality does not mean keeping inappropriate secrets. You or others in the group may need to seek assistance if people discuss situations that are beyond the capabilities of the group and its leader. Even in a confidential environment, someone relating stories of abuse or harassment should be told that assistance is being sought and be invited to go with the leader or group member seeking the assistance.

It is not appropriate to use "confidentiality" or confession as a way to avoid taking responsibility for one's actions or to avoid intervening to stop abuse or misconduct. Other Christians are available to help offenders face the consequences of their actions or to help each other stop abusive behaviors. Asking them to "keep a secret" when that is inappropriate makes them an accomplice to the misconduct or abuse.

If someone chooses to make a sacramental confession in a situation with criminal or legal implications, remind them that absolution is given provided that both amends have been made and amendment of life has been begun. Making amends means taking responsibility for any legal or criminal consequences of one's actions *before* seeking absolution.

Often in the course of healthy group interaction, group members may talk about abuse or harassment that has occurred or is occurring in their lives outside of the group. The leader and group members need to take care not to play the therapist role. Listen to the person but avoid giving advice or moralizing. Affirming or reassuring him or her and helping the person find help if it is needed are appropriate group-leader roles.

Two guidelines are very important for a group in a situation of misconduct or abuse. One is that any complaint be taken seriously and dealt with promptly. The second is that you and the group do not get caught in keeping secrets. Most sexual misconduct becomes seriously harmful when the person receiving unwanted attention or abuse is ignored and when the behavior is kept secret. It is important for us, as Christians, to find ways to confront sexual misconduct and abuse in ways that quickly and firmly say "No, this behavior is not acceptable and will not be tolerated."

These situations are not opportunities to become moralistic or to indulge feelings of superiority. Excessive moralistic "preaching" often drives the perpetrator into deeper denial, away from accepting responsibility for his or her action and even away from the community in which they can be held accountable.

## **HANDLING A GROUP LEADER'S MISCONDUCT**

If the group leader (lay or ordained) engages in a romantic or sexual relationship with a group member or in any behavior that has criminal or civil consequences, the leader's

relationship with the group has been harmed. In many cases the leader may not be able to rebuild the trust the group placed in the leader. Repeated misconduct (sexual or otherwise) and major violations indicate a need to remove oneself or be removed from all leadership positions. This does not necessarily mean removing that person from the community. If at all possible the individual and community need to find ways to be reconciled and live together again. This may be extremely difficult, but repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation are part of being a Christian community.

Sometimes extra safeguards may need to be established. For example, known pedophiles (adults who have had sexual contact with children) and psychopaths/sociopaths (who do not know right from wrong and feel no guilt) need to be in a covenanted relationship with members of the larger community who will help them control their behaviors. This is difficult but can be done. The community has to make sure that the individual with uncontrollable behaviors (e.g., having sex with children/youth or pathological lying) always has someone with him or her while in the community, and that a significant number of people are able to be consistent in being absolutely honest with the person about his or her behavior while yet being accepting of the person. Pedophiles and sociopaths need this kind of "buddy system" to function appropriately in the community and to enable the community to be comfortable with and accepting of the person.

## RECONCILIATION

The assistance of an experienced group leader or a clergy person will be needed to help determine how to help the group members be reconciled. Recognize that reconciliation may be difficult, even impossible for some persons, and that it may take a very long time. Broken relationships, distrust, pain, and anger are consequences of violating boundaries. Skipping over, rushing through or denying the feelings will block healing and make any attempted reconciliation superficial.

It may be appropriate for the offender to participate in "The Reconciliation of a Penitent" (BCP, p. 447ff.) in the context of the group, but make sure that the offender, the group members, *and* the injured person are all ready to participate.<sup>7</sup> There is a danger of subtly pressuring the injured person to be reconciled to the offender because it makes everyone feel better. The injured person determines what he or she needs to heal and when he or she is ready for reconciliation. A trained lay person or clergy person who is not part of the group can assist the group and the leader in discussing the situation and assessing readiness for reconciliation.

The Christian community must provide clear boundaries ("This is not acceptable behavior"); enforce those boundaries ("You cannot be a leader" and "We will notify and cooperate fully with the authorities"); support the injured person in their healing; expect confession, making amends, and amendment of life of the offender; and develop ways of enabling the reconciliation of all persons involved. This process needs to be open, honest, and loving, and yet very serious. It will take time and tears. It will be painful for many. But it can be both healing for the community and individuals and also helpful for others to see how they too can acknowledge their sins, make amends, seek amendment of life and be forgiven.

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) The Church recognizes the sinfulness of all of us, the potential each of us has to break the relationship between ourselves and God, each other, and the creation—and even to break apart from our own being. The basic elements of the service for "The Reconciliation of a Penitent" are helpful in any situation.

**CONFESS OUR SIN:** Recognize and acknowledge honestly before God and other Christians what you have done; feel the guilt and sorrow that comes with seeing the pain you have caused; accept responsibility for your actions.

**MAKE AMENDS:** Do whatever you can to "make it right" for those impacted by your action; apologize, pay for therapy, or for pain and suffering; resign from a position of leadership; spend time in prison.

**SEEK AMENDMENT OF LIFE:** Do whatever is necessary to make sure that you do not repeat the behavior again; participate in therapy, join a self-help group; take medication; remove yourself from situations of temptation, change jobs, change your lifestyle.

**ACCEPT FORGIVENESS:** Receive forgiveness as a gift and rejoice in it; be healed; embrace wholeness; bear witness to God's love.

Whether the situation in your group is that of physical, emotional, or sexual misconduct, these four things provide the basic elements needed for reconciliation and wholeness.

## **GUIDELINES FOR LEADING GROUPS**

- 1) It is the leader's responsibility to ensure that the group is a safe place for all group members.
- 2) The leader's role is to help group members respect the integrity and privacy of each person both physically and emotionally.
- 3) The leader's job is to lead the group, not to take care of group members; the leader is not a counselor or therapist in this setting, even if the leader is a trained therapist.
- 4) The group needs to keep what is said in the group confidential. This does not mean keeping inappropriate secrets. If intervention or assistance is necessary, confidentiality means telling the person that you will seek help and whom you will speak to, and, preferably, taking the person with you.
- 5) If you do not know how to handle a situation, seek professional assistance.
- 6) Invite people to respond to questions but make it easy for people to "pass" on responding to any questions they choose not to address.

- 7) Do not allow any adult to be alone with a child or teenager; avoid even the appearance of propriety with either children or adults.
- 8) Avoid excessive or inappropriate comments about clothing or physical appearance.
- 9) It is not appropriate to tease someone, call them names or yell at someone, tell offensive jokes, use sarcasm, or insult someone.
- 10) It is not appropriate to physically discipline a child or even to touch or hold a child who doesn't want to be touched (except to gently restrain a child for safety reasons).
- 11) It is never appropriate to touch a member of a group sexually in any way.
- 12) It is not appropriate to date any group member, no matter who initiates it.
- 13) Prolonged hugs are not appropriate.
- 14) Calling someone "honey," "babe," "boy," etc. is not appropriate.
- 15) The person who is offended defines what is offensive; that person has a right to establish his or her own boundaries and have them respected by others. This includes children.
- 16) Encourage group members of all ages to say "no" clearly to anything said or done to them that they find abusive, offensive, frightening, demeaning, or disrespectful.

## **DEFINITION OF SEXUAL MISCONDUCT**

The following definitions of sexual misconduct are currently used by the Church Insurance Corporation. Violating these boundaries harms the people involved, may make you and the church liable for costly civil damages, or may even make you liable to criminal prosecution. It is useful to occasionally review these definitions to increase one's sensitivities to behaviors that may be inappropriate. A group leader, lay or ordained, is a volunteer mentor in a pastoral relationship with group member and thus is included in these definitions.

### **SEXUAL MISCONDUCT MEANS ANY:**

- a. sexual abuse or sexual molestation of any person, including but not limited to any sexual involvement or sexual contact with a person who is a minor or who is legally incompetent; or
- b. sexual harassment in a situation where there is an employment, mentor, or colleague relationship between the persons involved, including but not limited to sexually-oriented humor or language; questions or comments about sexual behavior or preference unrelated to employment qualifications; undesired physical contact; inappropriate comments about clothing or physical

appearance; or repeated requests for social engagements; or

- c. sexual exploitation, including but not limited to the development of or the attempt to develop a sexual relationship between a cleric, employee, or volunteer and a person with whom he/she has a pastoral relationship, whether or not there is apparent consent from the individual.

Footnotes:

6. Adapted from Policy and Guidelines on Sexual Misconduct, Diocese of Delaware.
7. A priest may participate in the service and pronounce absolution, or a deacon or lay person can offer the declaration of forgiveness.

## STARTING A GROUP SESSION

No matter which method you use, several basic principles of group leadership are useful. Make sure your meeting room is ready, preferably with chairs set in a circle (tables and chairs provided if your method requires people to juggle several books). Groups can meet in homes, work places, a restaurant (especially if they have a separate room for group meetings), hotel meeting rooms, such as the same places that the Rotary Club or Garden Club meet. Meet in places convenient for group members rather than assume that a Bible study group has to meet in a church building. Non-church settings are often more comfortable for newcomers, especially if they aren't church members. Gather supplies, including extra Bibles and other materials, beforehand. Unless group members all know each other very well, provide name tags and start by asking people to introduce themselves and perhaps tell what they hope to gain from the group sessions or what interested them about the announced topic.

It is usually expected and helpful to begin and/or end the group with prayer. Select appropriate prayers from the Book of Common Prayer,<sup>8</sup> or you or a group member can offer a spontaneous prayer. Or lead the group in a time of silence to become centered; a time to become aware of God's presence, to let go of distracting thoughts and to open oneself to hearing God in the Scriptures and in the words of each other. Close the centering time with a prayer or ask the group to pray the Lord's Prayer with you. Some groups develop a closing prayer form in which group members all participate (e.g., holding hands and offering spontaneous prayers). Group singing can also be a good closing ritual.

Select a form comfortable to you as a leader. If it is not a familiar form, introduce it to the group. Be sensitive to what seems to be comfortable to people. Be open to suggestions from group members. Share the leadership with group members.

Ask group members to help you facilitate the meeting. Encourage them to support each other in speaking for themselves (saying "I think . . ." rather than "Everyone knows . . .") and in listening carefully to each other (listening to hear rather than listening only enough to formulate an answer). Remind participants that silence and conflict can both be very helpful and need to be respected; it is important not to fill silence with words or end conflict by smoothing it over. Listening, asking questions to clarify, and then agreeing to think about and pray about differences rather than resolving them will help the group open up to the new ways in which God may be speaking.

During the first meeting, clarify any additional norms of group behavior (e.g., smoking, where restrooms and refreshments are and that people are to meet their own needs, etc.). Review these if new members join the group at a later point. Remember to welcome new members, ask everyone to introduce themselves, and then briefly review (for the entire group) what happened at the last meeting and what you will do today. Make sure newcomers have a Bible and any necessary materials. Try to incorporate them quickly but without calling unnecessary attention to them. Welcome is the operative word.

Before you begin the first session, review the process you are going to use with the group



and ask if they have any questions. It is best if you can either give them a printed copy of the process or write it on newsprint or a chalkboard so everyone can see it.<sup>9</sup> Explain that it may feel awkward to follow this particular way of Bible study until everyone is used to it. Assure them that there are many ways of doing Bible study and that this is just the one the group will be using for this time; another time another process may be used. If you have information about the method or the person who designed it, share that with the group. Encourage them to try the process wholeheartedly and join you in assessing its value after several weeks. Remember to ask for evaluative comments at the end of the group; you may wish to use a form or format such as the questions included at the front of this book.

Footnotes:

8. for example: Proper 28. p. 236, Second Sunday after Epiphany, p. 215, Proper 10, p. 231; when studying the Gospels: St. John, p. 238; St. Mark, p. 240, St. Matthew and St. Luke, p. 244; Collect III, p. 256 or the collect for education, p. 261. Other collects might fit particular passages or themes. You can also use The Prayers of the People or selections from the prayers and litanies given on pages 814 to 841.
9. Permission is granted to photocopy or duplicate methods outlined in this book for use in your small group.

**Models  
for Use  
with Small  
Groups  
Choosing  
a Method**

## CHOOSING A METHOD

This section contains methods for personal reflection and methods for text study, arranged by two different ways of approaching the scriptures that meet different needs and appeal to different people. The following may assist you in selecting the best methods for your group.

The **personal reflection** methods do not require any previous knowledge of the Bible or ability to use Bible commentaries. These methods put everyone on an equal basis, regardless of education level, knowledge, or understanding. Their focus is on personal experience, encouraging people to identify with the texts and find how the text speaks to them. In most of these methods the "style" is contemplative, allowing each participant to respond to the text without any discussion of what others have said. These methods are based on the conviction that "truth and grace rise most naturally out of the still, small voice within each of us and that only from this centered place in one's life can truth be uncovered and validated for one's unique journey."<sup>1</sup> Silence, ample time for reflection, brevity, and simplicity are important in these methods.

The personal reflection methods are helpful in groups unfamiliar with the Bible or in groups where there is great diversity in familiarity with the Bible. They would be helpful in a group where you have one or more persons who tend to "tell" others what they know (and thus may intimidate or discourage others from discovering for themselves). Groups with great diversity (e.g., a homeless person and a professor) have found these methods helpful in encouraging and valuing everyone's contribution.

The **text study** methods are more cognitive. They ask participants to search for information in commentaries, dictionaries, and the like. These methods are most helpful for those who prefer a more academic approach to the Scriptures.

It is often helpful to use both types of methods with the same group. New groups may wish to begin with one or two of the personal reflection methods, then move to one of the shorter text study methods and finally to an alternating pattern of a longer text study and a personal reflection methods. Some group may want to use two methods, one from each section.

Each method has been written in a step-by-step manner to provide maximum clarity to the group leader. However, you may wish to adapt methods as you become more familiar with them. Each method is designed to work in a specific way, and it is important that you adapt it without compromising the basic design, but you can try combining suggestions from various methods or substituting the wording from one method into another. It is, of course, possible that your adaptation will not work. If that happens, ask the group to help you identify what did not work and why and adjust your adaptation accordingly. Regular evaluation of your group process will help all participants identify how different methods work and which methods best meet their needs.

### Footnotes:

1. Linda Lormimier, Jacksonville, Florida, made contributions to this section.

# **Personal Reflection Methods**

# BASE COMMUNITY METHOD

Time: 1 1/2 - 2

hours

Many of the base communities in Latin America have Bible study as an important part of their life together. The two basic elements of the base community method are explication and application.<sup>2</sup>

This method is useful for groups committed to a specific social action issue (e.g., the environment). It is also useful in helping an ongoing group discern a common mission. Ongoing groups might use this method when the group becomes too inwardly focused.

## EXPLICATION

**STEP 1. Ask a group member to read** the passage.

**STEP 2. Invite the group to discuss** the political, social, and historical context of the text. Group members may want to read what comes before and after the text, look at a study Bible, or consult a commentary.

**STEP 3. Invite the group to listen** to text again with the context in mind; ask a different group member to reread the passage.

**STEP 4. Invite members to share** comments and reflections on the text.

## APPLICATION

**STEP 5. Invite the group to identify** the similarities and differences between the world of the text and their world.

**STEP 6. Invite group members to identify** the problems and issues in their common life which are raised by the discussion of the text. These problems should be ones shared by group members—issues in the neighborhood, community, region—rather than personal issues. Because this method calls a group to a common action (see Step 9), the group needs to identify common issues and concerns.

**STEP 7. Ask how the text may be relevant** to the group's reality. What does the text say to the group's issues, to the ways they are now responding to those issues, to the role of the Church in response to those issues?

**STEP 8. Invite the group to spend some time in prayer**, seeking God's guidance.

**STEP 9. Invite the group to decide** what action they will take in the problem area discussed. Set a time for follow-up so the group can report what has happened as a result of the action taken. If this is an ongoing group, do this report time before starting study of the next passage.

Footnotes:

2. Various authors have described the process: Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charisma and Power*; David Lockhead, *The Liberation of the Bible*; Sergio Torres and John Eagleson, *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities*.

## ORAL TRADITION METHOD

TIME = 1/2 – 1 HOUR

This method and variations on it have been used throughout many parts of the world. It is a variation on the base Christian community methods of South America.<sup>3</sup>

**STEP 1. Ask each person to share** his or her experience in the area of prayer since the previous session. (If this is a first session, begin with Step 2).

**STEP 2. Ask someone to read** the passage slowly. Before the reading, ask people to listen for the word or phrase that catches their attention.

**STEP 3. Ask participants to take a minute to recall and write down** the word or phrase that caught their attention. (2–3 minutes)

**STEP 4. Invite each person to say** the word or phrase with the group (no more than just a word or phrase).

**STEP 5. Ask someone else to read** the passage again (opposite sex of first reader).

**STEP 6. Invite participants to think/write** about: "Where does this passage touch my life, my community, our nation, our world today?" Invite them to think about all the people they encounter, not just those in their own "circle of friends." (3–5 minutes)

**STEP 7. Invite each person to share** these: "For me, . . ."

**STEP 8. Ask someone else to read** the passage out loud again.

**STEP 9. Ask participants to think/write** about: "From what I have heard and shared, what does God want me to do or be this week? How does God invite me to change?" (3–5 minutes)

**STEP 10. Invite each person to share** these: "For me, . . ." Explain that you will ask each person to pray for the person on their right, naming what they share in this step, so they will want to listen carefully and remember any specifics the person names.

**STEP 11. Ask each person to pray** for the person on their right, naming what was shared in Step 10, and to pray that prayer daily until the group meets again. (You may want to use a specific bidding prayer, especially at the beginning; for example, "Christ, may your blessing go with \_\_\_\_\_. Fill her/him with your love and grace.")

**Note:** In steps 3, 7, and 10, be brief. Do not elaborate, explain, or teach. That which is said is

offered to the center of the group. Others do not respond to or build on what is said as if they were in a discussion group.

Footnotes:

3. This method was published in *E-Share*, a publication of the Office of Evangelism Ministries, under the name "The African Method." Since its origins are not agreed upon (some say African; others, South American or U.S.A.), and since the name reinforces the concept of Africa as a single country rather than a huge continent with many countries and cultures, the Adult Education and Evangelism staff officers have decided to change the name.



## MISSION AWARENESS

*Use the lesson appointed for the day or select another Scripture text.*<sup>4</sup>

**STEP 1. Explain to the groups what they will be doing:** hearing the text read aloud three times with some questions for reflection after each reading. Make sure everyone has pencils and paper. Before the first reading ask the people to listen for what catches their attention: *words, phrases, images*.

**STEP 2. Ask someone to read the text aloud.**

**STEP 3. Ask the group members** to spend a couple of minutes in silence identifying and, if they wish, writing down the *words, phrases, or images* that catch their attention.

**STEP 4. Ask each person who chooses to, to say no more than one or two words, phrases or images** he or she has written. Ask the other members of the group to listen and not comment upon, question, or discuss what is said. Tell them to give everyone a chance to speak *once* and then to wait in silence. (If the group is unable to discipline itself to one word, quietly interrupt them asking them to limit their response to one word or phrase.

**STEP 5. Once the group has fallen silent, invite people to listen again** and this time to identify which *themes and concerns* they hear raised by the passage. Then ask another person to read the same text aloud for the second time.

**STEP 6. Ask group members to reflect silently and write down the themes and concerns** they hear in the passage. Give them a couple of minutes to do this.

**STEP 7. Ask each person to say what themes and concerns** he or she heard with the second reading of the text, without discussion or comments from other members of the group. Again, ask each person to speak *once* and then wait until the silence indicates that everyone in the room has finished.

**OPTIONAL:** If you have additional time, you may introduce a "voice from the tradition" by reading some material from a commentary before the third reading. Keep the reading relatively short, selecting paragraphs that describe the context of the passage, where it fits into the chapter, and any unique or uncommon words or concepts. Do not elaborate on or discuss the commentary. Just offer it as if the writer were just another voice in the group. At the end of the reading ask people to reflect in silence for a moment.

**STEP 8. Invite people to listen to the passage again; listen for what insights and challenges may arise** for them in the passage, and for how the passage *relates to issues* they are dealing with in their lives, both personally and communally. Ask another person to read the passage aloud for the third time.

**STEP 9.**After a period of silence, invite people to say what *insights* they have had and what *challenges* they have heard that relates to the issues they identified. Again, ask the other members to listen and not comment upon, question, or discuss what is said.

STEP 10. Close the group meeting with prayer.

Footnotes:

4. This is from *Global Education for Mission*, a guide for leaders of groups wishing to explore any global or local issue. GEM is available through Episcopal Parish Services (\$3.00, Part # 66-9014).

## IMAGINATIVE BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

TIME = 1–2 HOURS

The following method is outlined in Thomas Hoyt, Jr.'s article in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Cain Hope Felder (see Annotated Resources section). It was first recorded by Joseph Johnson, Jr., a biblical scholar and bishop in the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church who received it from his father. Hoyt points out that in black congregations the Scriptures "come to life through images used by the preacher."<sup>5</sup>

STEP 1. **Prepare** with devotion and prayer.

STEP 2. **Ask** someone to read the passage.

STEP 3. **Ask** the group to identify the stories that come before and after the passage to establish the context.

STEP 4. **Identify** the problems, issues, circumstances of the participants in the story.

STEP 5. **Ask** someone else to read the passage (preferably opposite sex of first reader).

STEP 6. **Ask** the group to identify the human and divine elements in the story.

STEP 7. **Invite the group members to imagine** they are the writer or participants in the story. Make sure all the roles are assumed by at least one person in the group (you can include inanimate objects as well as people—the well, the road, the rock, etc.). Invite the group to role-play the story or read the passage again while the group members imagine what they saw, heard, and felt as the role they assumed. Invite group members to share what they saw, heard, and felt.

STEP 8. **Ask the group to discuss:** "What special message does this passage bring to us for our healing and renewal? How is God calling us to respond?"

STEP 9. **Wait for God to speak;** end with a time of silence and a closing time of prayer.

### Footnotes:

5. Adapted from a description of the sermon preparation process in *Stony the Road We Trod* edited by Cain Hope Felder, copyright 1991 Augsburg Fortress (Code #2501;)

## DOROTHY FURNISH: A METHOD FOR CHILDREN

TIME = 1/2 – 1 HOUR

Following is a brief summary of one Bible study method as outlined by Dorothy Jean Furnish in her book *Experiencing the Bible With Children* (see Annotated Resources section). This method of Bible study has the potential for a wide variety of applications that are explained in her book.<sup>6</sup>

**STEP 1. "Feeling into the text."** Children better understand the story if they can experience the emotions felt by the people in the story. Furnish suggests such activities as having a parade to experience the enthusiasm felt by the crowds on Palm Sunday. These shared emotions create a bridge from the past of Bible times to the present.

**STEP 2. "Meeting with the text"** in exciting and involving ways. This is the part where we share the story with the children. There are a variety of ways to share the story, but there are advantages to having a storyteller share the story because it is a more personal approach. After telling the story, the narrator has the opportunity to discuss the story with the children and to build a relationship with the children, as well. Moreover, the children will hear the story in much the way it was heard in biblical times.

**STEP 3. "Responding out of the text."** There are four types of responses that might follow Step 2: feeling, thinking, acting and deciding. Responses to the text may vary from discussing the voices of the characters as portrayed in an audio tape dramatization of the story to choosing a service project as a result of what was learned from the story. Furnish states that dialogue can be an effective way for children to explore feelings and values after hearing a story. The conversation should not become a test for information, however. Other useful activities include dance, poetry, and role plays.

### Footnotes:

6. Method prepared by Kate Gillooly, Diocese of Ohio.

# WILLIAM COUNTRYMAN: FORMATION IN SALVATION HISTORY<sup>7</sup>

TIME = 1-1 1/2 HOURS

STEP 1. **Ask someone** to read the passage.

STEP 2. **Invite participants to respond** to the question: "What sort of material have we just heard?" (e.g., narrative? law? poetry? prophecy? visionary literature? practical advice?)

STEP 3. **Ask participants to identify** where this passage belongs in the great story of salvation as laid out, for example, in Eucharistic Prayer D.

STEP 4. **Invite another person to read the passage.**

STEP 5. **Ask the group to identify** how the situation presented in the passage is similar to and/or different from their situation and that of their community.

STEP 6. **Ask them to identify** ways in which this passage challenges their presuppositions or those of their community. Or, to put the question the other way around, ask them what in this passage seems crazy or pointless.

STEP 7. **Invite another person to read** the passage again.

STEP 8. **Go around the group** and invite each person to say what word of God they hear at this time in this passage for themselves and their community. Allow people the option of "passing" if they do not wish to respond to a particular question.

Close the group meeting with prayer.

## Footnotes:

7. Adapted from Countryman's article "Formation in Salvation History: How the Scriptures Form Christians" in *The Baptismal Mystery and the Catechumenate*; Michael Merriman, editor; Church Hymnal Corporation; pp. 69-70.

## LINDA L. GRENZ: THE QUESTIONS METHOD

TIME = 1-1 1/2 HOURS

STEP 1. **Set up the room** with chairs in a circle leaving one chair empty. Ask someone to read the passage.

STEP 2. **Invite participants to imagine** that they have never heard this passage before and they know nothing about the Bible or Christianity. Ask them to take a few minutes to write down all the questions that come to mind. In particular, ask them to identify what strikes them as crazy or odd; what doesn't make sense or what doesn't seem to fit.

STEP 3. **Go around the circle** and ask each person to add one question to the list until all the questions have been written on newsprint (or have each person add others' questions to their own list).

STEP 4. **Identify which question(s) are most burning** or would need to be addressed first. If you have a non-Christian inquirer present, rejoice and invite that person to identify the questions. If you do not have an inquirer, ask the group to imagine that someone who is not a Christian is sitting in the empty chair. What do you imagine that person would want addressed first?

STEP 5. **Take each question you have identified** and go around the circle inviting each person to say how he or she would respond to that question from a non-Christian. Consult concordances if needed. After each round of responses, invite anyone who wishes to take the non-Christian role temporarily to ask for clarification or ask additional questions. Then move on to the next question.

STEP 6. After the group has responded to all or most of the questions identified, **invite someone to read the passage again.**

STEP 7. **Ask participants to reflect in silence** and then say what they believe God, in this passage, is saying to them and their community.

*Close the group meeting with prayer.*

## **THEOLOGICAL BIBLE STUDY**

TIME = 45 MINUTES

STEP 1. Read the passage aloud.

STEP 2. Discuss what the passage tells us about God.

STEP 3. Read passage aloud a second time.

STEP 4. Discuss what the passage tells us about human beings (men, women and children, young and old, different races and different places) and the relationship between people.

STEP 5. Read passage aloud a third time.

STEP 6. Discuss what the passage tells us about the relationship between God and human beings. How might people living in different circumstances or in different cultures perceive the passage's message about the relationship between God and human beings? How does the passage call us (individually and corporately) to change?

STEP 7. Read the passage aloud, quietly, meditatively, as a closing prayer and/or leave a moment of silence, and then close the group meeting with prayer.

## **IN YOUR OWN WORDS**

TIME = 45 MINUTES

STEP 1. Read the text.

STEP 2. Working individually, write a synopsis of the text in your own words.

STEP 3. Share your synopsis and discuss it. What is the major theme of the passage that is expressed in each synopsis? What are the individual concerns that are expressed in each synopsis?

STEP 4. Reflect quietly on the following:

- a. What new possibilities does the passage open for me? For us?
- b. If I were to take seriously the words of my own synopsis, what would that mean for me? For us?

STEP 5. Share your reflections.

## **PARAPHRASE INTO ACTION**

TIME = 45 MINUTES

STEP 1. Read the text.

STEP 2. Draw a line down the middle of a piece of paper, making two columns. In the first column, write in your own words the key actions from the passage. In the second column describe how you could apply each of the actions in your own personal and/or corporate life (school, work, social, political, etc.).

STEP 3. Discuss what you have written.

## **MODERN APPLICATION**

TIME = 45 MINUTES

STEP 1. Read the text.

STEP 2. As a group, decide upon a modern situation that is similar to the biblical one.

STEP 3. Individually write how you imagine the modern situation unfolding, if it were a scene you were observing.

STEP 4. Discuss your different scenes. What do the scenes say about what is important for you in the passage? What do the scenes say about how the biblical passage can be applied to life today?

STEP 5. Individually identify a scene from your own life (personal, school, work, social or political) related to the scene you constructed.

STEP 6. Say how you will use what you have learned from the Bible passage.



**Text  
Study  
Methods**

## **ROLE-PLAY**

- STEP 1. Prepare with devotion and prayer.
- STEP 2. Ask someone to read the passage.
- STEP 3. Ask the group to identify the stories that come before and after the passage to establish the context.
- STEP 4. Identify the problems, issues, circumstances of the participants in the story.
- STEP 5. Ask someone else to read the passage (preferably opposite sex of first reader).
- STEP 6. Ask the group to identify the human and divine elements in the story
- STEP 7. Invite the group members to imagine they are the writer or participants in the story. make sure all the roles are assumed by at least one person in the group (you can include inanimate objects as well as people—the well, the road, the rock, etc.). Invite the group to role-play the story or read the passage again while the group members imagine what they saw, heard, and felt as the role they assumed. Invite group members to share what they saw, heard, and felt.
- Step 8. Ask the group to discuss: “What special message does this passage bring to us for our healing and renewal? How is God calling us to respond?”
- Step 9. Wait for God to speak; end with a time of silence and a closing time of prayer.

## VERNA DOZIER: EQUIPPING THE SAINTS

TIME = 1 1/2 – 2 HOURS

This method uses more than one translation and studies the Bible in significant segments—not verse by verse. Try to find several translations and encourage group member to bring one or more translations with them. Preferably each person will have at least two translations. You will also need at least one and preferably two or more commentaries. If a commentary or reflection by someone from another culture is available, it would be helpful to read as part of the discussion in Step 3. It would give one perspective on the passage that speaks to its meaning today; the group then would identify the passage's meaning for them.

If you want to know more about this method before using it, obtain a copy of Dozier's book *Equipping the Saints* or view a copy of one of the videos: "The Story of the Bible/How to Teach the Bible" or "Verna Dozier Looks at Luke" (see Annotated Resources section).

**STEP 1. Clarify what the passage is saying.** What do the words in the passage mean? Why do certain translations use different words? What do commentaries say about any obscurities in the passage? What nuances do the words have that may not be apparent in English?

**STEP 2. Clarify why the passage was preserved.** What was the significance of this passage to the community that preserved it? What were the issues they were dealing with at the time? How did this passage speak to those issues?

**STEP 3. Reflect on what the passage means for us today.** What is the passage calling to do?

*Close the group meeting with prayer.*

# WALTER WINK: TRANSFORMING BIBLE STUDY

TIME = 1 1/2 –2 HOURS

Walter Wink uses this method in his book *Transforming Bible Study*; it is also the basis of Patricia Van Ness's book *Transforming Bible Study with Children* (see Annotated Resources section). Both books would give additional help to the group leader.

This process requires careful planning and preparation by the group leader. The questions in steps 3 and 4 need to be thought out and formulated beforehand. If imaginative meditation is to be used, it needs to be developed before the meeting. If activities are planned, materials need to be obtained and set up. Someone inexperienced in doing this type of process may wish to seek a mentor to help design and guide the process until the group is used to it. Once it is familiar to everyone, group members can help plan and facilitate the process.

## **Ground rules for use of this method are as follows:**

**The text, not the leader, is the focus.** The leader poses questions that enable the participants to enter into dialogue with the meaning of the text at all levels.

**Everyone is invited to join the conversation.** Each member of the group has a different perspective to offer that will increase understanding of the text and its application.

**Everyone is equal before the text.** Both learned scholars and beginners have their own responses to the text.

**STEP 1. Take time for silent centering.** Participants quietly explore the anxieties and expectations they have brought with them. They examine how willing they are to let something new happen and whether they can be open to the spirit and to one another.

**STEP 2. Someone reads the passage from Scripture.**

**STEP 3. The leader asks prepared questions about the context of the text.** The questions are designed to help the group identify the critical issues in the text and to understand the text in its own right. For example, they might consider plucking on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1–8; Mark 2:23–28; Luke 6:1–5).

- a. What is the charge brought against Jesus? What significance do you attach to the fact that it is the disciples, not Jesus, who are accused? Is the issue religious or economic?
- b. What is Jesus' defense? Does it meet the Pharisees' objection? How does Matthew change it?
- c. Explain the absence (in Matthew and Luke) of verse 27 in Mark. What do you think is the original core of the narrative?

- d. What is the basis for action on the Sabbath? What was its purpose? Does Jesus make "man the measure of all things?" Does he make himself the measure? Why doesn't Jesus take up the comparison with David and conclude, "so the Son of David is lord even of the Sabbath?" Does Jesus appeal to his own authority or to a principle inherent in the situation? In the material that Matthew adds, is the appeal made to Jesus' authority or to a principle inherent in the situation?
- e. Is Jesus granting his followers license to do what they do? What attitude does Jesus take toward the Sabbath here?
- f. Who or what is the "son of man" here? Is it Jesus?
- g. What do you learn about Jesus here?

**STEP 4. The leader asks questions that help the group members explore the impact the text is making on them.** The group explores the linkages between the text and modern life. The leader may invite the group to enter imaginatively into one or more of the biblical characters and experience them in either their historical setting or in a modern context. The leader may ask the group to explore their emotional responses to the symbols and ideas; for example, the parable of the man with the withered hand (Mark 3:1–6; Matthew 12:9–14; Luke 6:6–11):

- a. The authorities do not understand Jesus' sense of justice in the scene. Why? At what point does the duty to comply with laws cease to be binding, in view of the need to help others or to oppose injustice? How is this liberating power manifesting itself in us today as we relate to the power structure of society?
- b. Now close your eyes and envision that you are:
  - 1) **Jesus** coming into the synagogue on the Sabbath. You know that your opponents are present. You see a man with a deformed hand sitting in the congregation. Even though he asks nothing from you, you call him over and ask him to stretch out his hand. Then you heal him. Your enemies leave to plot against you.
  - 2) **One of the Pharisees**, entering the synagogue right behind this Galilean rabbi, whom you distrust. You, too, see the crippled man. You know Jesus can heal him, but if he does, he will have broken the Sabbath law against work. Jesus reminds you that the importance of life supersedes the law and calls the man to him. The man exposes his crippled hand to Jesus, and Jesus makes it well in front of your eyes. You leave to plot against Jesus.
  - 3) **The crippled man**, sitting in the synagogue and waiting for the service to begin. Your withered and useless hand is resting in your lap. Because of your hand, you can't do heavy work. Life is difficult. There is a commotion at the door, and a stranger comes in—followed by a group of Pharisees. They begin talking about healing on the Sabbath, and suddenly the stranger turns to you and calls you over to the group. You go to him. "Stretch out your hand," he says, "and show us your crippled limb." And suddenly your

hand is no longer crippled.

- c. How did you feel as Jesus? As the Pharisee? As the crippled man? Which did you identify with most? Why?
- d. Why does Jesus make the man display his withered hand? Are there times when we have to reveal our wounded lives in order to be healed?

**STEP 5. The group explores how the text can be applied.** Through music, movement, painting, sculpting, written dialogue, and small group discussion, each person allows the broken aspects of his or her life to be called forth into healing. For example, using the withered hand passage, distribute a piece of clay to each person. Have each person make the withered part within him or herself. Share in the whole group or smaller groups.

*Close the group with prayer. The activity (like the one described above) may elicit emotions; a quiet time of prayer during which people are free to offer prayers aloud if they wish is helpful in facilitating the transition from the group experience to leaving.*

## BARBARA HALL: JOINING THE CONVERSATION

TIME = 1 1/2 – 2 HOURS

Hall's method is outlined in her book *Joining the Conversation* reviewed in the Annotated Resources section. This approach to biblical analysis takes into account the four layers of tradition and our own responses to the text. Four layers of tradition behind each Gospel text are:

- 1) Jesus' own words and actions,
- 2) the earliest telling and retelling of the stories about Jesus (oral tradition),
- 3) the beginnings of written collections of stories about Jesus, and,
- 4) the Gospels themselves.

The leader may find it helpful to read Hall's book, although this is not necessary. Participants need copies of the Bible or a copy of the Gospel parallels (a book that allows you to see the parallel texts in parallel columns on two facing pages of the book). After reading the text and the parallel passages, there are five steps to the analysis.

**STEP 1. Is there a common written source?** Search for a possible source that the writers shared. This will enable us to be in touch with the third type of tradition just beneath the Gospels, the collection of stories about Jesus.

- a. What is similar about the context of the passages?
- b. What is common to the passages?
- c. Construct a story that puts together the same elements.

**STEP 2. How was the story told orally?** We test the common story to see if it was a record of what was told and retold about Jesus (the oral tradition, the second level of tradition). To do this, we need to reconstruct the history of how the passage was told.

Does the story conform to the way similar stories were told at the time? For example, parables were an ancient oral teaching technique. They often move through a series of three motifs and are open-ended. If the story follows the form of oral tales, there is a good chance it is a written record of what people recalled that Jesus said.

**STEP 3. Did Jesus say this and how did he tell it?**

- a. Does a given report, saying, or parable appear in more than one ancient source known to us?
- b. Are the conditions presupposed in the story (economic, social, cultural, religious, political, linguistic) indigenous to Jesus' own time and situation?
- c. Is what is said in the passage distinct from both the Judaism of Jesus' time and the interests of the later church?
- d. Is the passage consistent with the most reliable information we have about Jesus? Is this language and/or behavior characteristic of Jesus?

**STEP 4. What have the Gospel writers done to the passage** and what would the original listeners have heard?

- a. How has the writer changed the passage?
- b. How do the changes reflect the writer's social, political, and theological perspectives?
- c. How would the original readers have responded?

**STEP 5. What is our response to the text?** Through poetry, dialogues, small group sharing, painting, etc., we can respond to the passage.

*Close the group meeting with prayer.*



# A BASIC CRITICAL-HISTORICAL APPROACH

TIME = 1 1/2 – 2 HOURS

STEP 1. **Read the text** in different translations.

STEP 2. **Decide what type of literature the text is** (parable, poetry, history, etc.; see "What is the Bible?" above). What does the type of literature say about the nature of the content? Is this a literal or a metaphorical statement?

STEP 3. **What is the historical situation?** Use a Bible dictionary and commentary to gain a perspective on

- the setting for the text
- the author
- the audience
- the author's intention
- the cultural and historical influences on the author

STEP 4. **How is the passage constructed?** Brainstorm the key words, symbols and images. Check for cross references to other passages. Discuss what each of the parts means to the text. Summarize the message of the text.

STEP 5. **What does the text say about life today?** What are some social and personal issues that relate to the text? How does the text give us a perspective on those contemporary issues?

STEP 6. **What have we learned and what do we plan to do?**

*Close the group meeting with prayer.*

## **WORDS TO LIFE**

TIME = 45 MINUTES

STEP 1. Read the text.

STEP 2. Brainstorm the key words and phrases.

STEP 3. Determine the intended meaning of the key words and phrases by consulting Bible dictionaries and commentaries.

STEP 4. Brainstorm the life questions that are related to each of the key words and phrases.

STEP 5. Discuss how the passage relates to those questions.

STEP 6. Discuss how the passage and the life questions relate to the current life of the community and each individual.

## **PERSPECTIVES**

TIME = 45 MINUTES

STEP 1. Read the text.

STEP 2. Reflect on the following questions:

- a. What is going on?
- b. Who is involved?
- c. What do those who are involved want?

STEP 3. Share your answers to the questions.

STEP 4. Put the passage in context. Read a Bible commentary to answer the following:

- a. What is the historical situation?
- b. What is the author's intention?
- c. What is the larger context for the passage?
- d. Who was the original audience for the passage?
- e. What are the main ideas of the passage?

STEP 5. Compare the context with the answers to the first series of questions:

- a. How much of what you said is your own concern brought to this passage?
- b. How much are the different perspectives in the group colored by each person's concerns?
- c. What do the passage and the commentary say to you about those concerns?

## **SCRIPTURE CONVERSATION APPROACH**

TIME = 1 1/2 – 2 HOURS

This method was developed out of experience of the participants who shared in the Scriptural Conversation Project, which involved a number of key leaders in the Episcopal Church between 1985 and 1990. Participants in the Project included: John Vogelsang, John Koenig, Verna Dozier, Minka Sprague, Joseph Russell, Betsy Greenman, Caryl Marsh, Frederick Borsch, Pat Sanders, Michael Wyatt, Edmundo Desueza, Thomas Downs, Lois Stephens, Roy Cederholm, Reid Isaac, Carolyn Dicer, Carmen Guerrero, Donna Morgan, and Eric Law. Bible institutes were held in 1987 and 1988; small group meetings in the next couple of years continued the dialogue and refined the concepts and method outlined here. The articles on pages 15 to 41 were also developed out of the ongoing work of this project. The following perspective and guidelines were developed out of this work.

### **PRINCIPLES OF SCRIPTURAL CONVERSATION**

When studying the Bible, one must always keep in mind that Scripture addresses people living in community. The Bible deals with politics, social ethics, justice, management-labor relations and all the other aspects of a life lived in God's world. Though the individual's quest for wholeness is certainly a concern of biblical writers, that personal quest is usually seen in the larger context of a community called to live out God's call for righteousness and compassionate justice. From a biblical perspective, God's concern is not centered on individual salvation, but rather on each individual being a part of the salvation of the universe which God created. While studying Scripture, therefore, the social context must always be seen as the point at which God's Word breaks into history and creation.

When studying the Bible, one must focus on the text and the group—not on the leader. A Bible study does not depend upon a theologically trained leader sharing knowledge about the biblical text. It does depend on a group of people willing to struggle with a text, using available resources, to come to an understanding of God's call for righteousness and compassionate justice.

Based on this theory and on the experience of the participants who shared in the Scriptural Conversation Project, a process for examining biblical texts was developed. The conversation starts with the participants' interacting directly with the text. People speak out of their immediate experience, feelings and ideas. There is dialogue between the text and the participants. At the next stage, the participants try to experience the text in its context. This is where we ask how the work of commentators enriches our understanding of the text. At the final stage, our present context is brought into the conversation. What does this text mean to us and how does it confront us with a need to change?

## **SOME OTHER KEY PRINCIPLES UNDERLIE THE METHOD DESCRIBED HERE:**

- 1. Scripture is best experienced when it is read aloud.** Instead of each person reading the Scripture passage silently, one or more people read all or sections of the text aloud to the group.
- 2. We prefer to use the daily office, the lectionary, or set out to read a whole book rather than choosing Scripture passages that speak to a theme.** In this way we are challenged by the text instead of finding Scripture that elucidates a pre-set agenda.
- 3. Dialogues with Scripture are conversations in groups,** preferably of from 4 to 12 people. While people benefit from reading Scripture on their own, people are more likely to encounter and be challenged by the text when it is part of the different perspectives being shared in the group. This is also how truth emerges. There is going to be conflict if we are intent upon dealing with the challenges we bring to each other and the challenges of the text. The conflict can help us in our struggle for truth as long as we are willing to keep the conversation going and avoid imposing our views on others.

## **THE BASIC PROCESS SCRIPTURAL CONVERSATION**

**STEP 1. Hear the passage read aloud** by someone in the group.

**STEP 2. There are questions** to elicit the *pre-understandings* (assumptions of how the world operates, about language and its meaning, God and human beings and their relationship, about what is right and what is wrong) that people bring to the passage and their initial *understandings*. Done first in quiet, then shared in the group without discussion: people do not question or comment on what others say. After each person speaks, there is silence until the next person is ready to speak.

**STEP 3. Hear the passage read by another person** with questions or a process to enable people to encounter the passage in its context and to bring their initial understandings into dialogue with the text.

**STEP 4. Hear the passage read again** by another person.

**STEP 5. There are questions**, reflected upon quietly at first and then shared in the group, to bring the initial understandings and the life situations of the people into dialogue with the text.

**STEP 6. Hear the passage read again** by another person.

STEP 7. A **question is posed** about what difference the conversation makes, or what the challenges are that arise from it. This is done quietly first, and then shared in the group.

STEP 8. **Close with reading the passage again, or with prayer.**

## **SEVERAL EXAMPLES WHICH ILLUSTRATE THE USE OF THIS METHOD WITH SPECIFIC PASSAGES**

The following illustrate various ways in which this method might be used with different passages. They can be used as outlined or serve as models you can use with the daily or weekly lectionary readings, passages you select or with a more formal program.

### **ISAIAH 61:1-11**

STEP 1. The text is read aloud.

STEP 2. Quiet reflection: "What images and scenes does the text call up for you?"

STEP 3. Group members share their images and scenes. Each person who chooses to describes his or her image or scene in a few brief words. Others listen without comment or discussion.

STEP 4. **The leader offers a few words about the context:**

The text is from Second Isaiah, who at the time of the exile and the return is attempting to restate the basic vision of compassion and justice grounded in worship of the one true God. Paul Hanson says, "the God-given state of *salem* experienced by the people living within the community defined by worship, righteousness and compassion was not to be limited to the inner life of this community, but was to be carried by the Servant people to all nations, for it was a salvation intended for the whole earth. . . Israel's unity was to be grounded in common acknowledgement of Yahweh as the only true God. Moreover, the whole people was to be drawn into a sacral vocation, a priesthood and a ministry dedicated to God's righteous and compassionate purpose in the world."<sup>8</sup> When the disciples of Second Isaiah returned from exile they found a society where: "(1) Rather than being guided by the early Yahwistic, egalitarian notion of a nation of priests. . . leadership was held firmly in the hands of the Zadokites [the royal priests]; (2) the universal vision of Israel's mission to the nations was replaced by a pragmatic program of domestic consolidation; (3) the cosmic vision of Yahweh's sovereignty was compromised by recognition of the sovereignty of the Persian emperor, even within the context of the official cult."<sup>9</sup>

STEP 5. The text is read aloud again.

STEP 6. The group reflects quietly for a few minutes; the leader opens the discussion in the group: "What are the concerns raised by this text?"

STEP 7.**Group discussion:** "Where in your current experience are those concerns most present?"

STEP 8. The group picks one of the situations mentioned in the previous discussion (Step 7).

**STEP 9. Analysis of the situation.**

The person who mentioned the situation describes what is happening. The group asks those of the following questions which seem appropriate for the situation: Who are the major individuals or groups or organizations in the situation? What do they value and need? What do they want to have happen in the situation? Who owns what? What decision-making power does each person or group have? Who controls the decision-making power? Who and what influences the major individuals or groups or organizations on the local, regional, national, and international level? If we were to make a change in the situation, where would we most likely gain access and be able to make a difference? What can you/we do?

STEP 10. The text is read aloud again.

STEP 11. Each person decides what he or she will do to bring about the change and/or support the person(s) working on the change.

STEP 12. Close the group meeting with prayer.

## **NEHEMIAH 5:1–19**

STEP 1. The text is read aloud.

STEP 2.**Open discussion:** "Who are the heroes in this story, and why do you consider them heroes?"

STEP 3. A few words about the text: The exiles have returned to repossess the promised land. Ezra and Nehemiah are part of the movement to re-establish the identity of the Israelites by rebuilding the temple and the city wall and by returning to a stricter interpretation of the rituals and traditions. Israel will be a pure people by excluding all those who are not Jewish: Jews may only marry Jews. The king is gone; the Royal House will be replaced by the Holy People. Nehemiah, who is a part of the established political group, has made loans and made use of fellow Jews just as the other nobles. He does hear the cry of the people and he does restore aspects of the early community—the prohibition against charging interest. He, though governor, lived a godly life free of the luxuries that come with the office. His response, however, is not to change the system but to make it work better.

STEP 4. The text is read aloud again.

**STEP 5. Open discussion:**

- "What are the needs of the people who are crying out?"
- "What is the response to their cry?"

The facilitator lists the key words and images from the discussion on newsprint.

**STEP 6. Open discussion:**

- "Who are the people who are crying out to us, and what do they need?"
- "How can we hear those voices better?"
- "What difference have we made as a group (organization)?"

People tell stories of responding to needs. The facilitator lists the key words and images from the discussion on newsprint.

**STEP 7. Open discussion:**

- "What are the connections between what we have named and what occurs in the Scripture text?"
- "What needs to be our focus as a group now?"
- "How can we better accomplish that focus?"

*Close the group meeting with prayer.*

## **SIRACH 44:1–14 (THE APOCRYPHA)**

STEP 1. The passage is read aloud.

STEP 2. What feelings, impressions, images does the passage call up for you?

**STEP 3. Some notes on the time when the passage was written:**

Written during Hellenistic rule, the Jews were experiencing themselves as exiles in their own land. Many priests were incorporating Hellenistic ideas and religion into Judaism. Some synagogues had become gymnasiums. The response was to find ways to keep holy and keep one's identity as a Jew. There were those who kept holy through ritual and law. Their life was centered around the synagogue. There were those who kept holy through household codes. And there were those who went off into the wilderness to repent the wilderness experience of the early Hebrews. Jesus, the son of Sirach, in Ecclesiasticus (the



Church's book) is calling the people back to their foundations. The Greeks offer reason as a guide for life; the Jews offer wisdom. True wisdom lies in Israel because of God's special preference. He is calling Israel to rediscover its identity.

STEP 4. Hear the passage from the point of view of a Jew during the Hellenistic period.

STEP 5. People share their experiences of the passage in the group.

STEP 6. What are the connections between all that you have heard and your lives?

STEP 7. Hear the passage again.

STEP 8. What are the challenges and calls for personal and communal action?

STEP 9. Closing prayer.

### **SIRACH 44:1–15 (THE APOCRYPHA)**

STEP 1. The whole group reads the passage aloud in one voice.

STEP 2. Whom would you praise and why?

STEP 3. The passage is read aloud by one person.

STEP 4. Silence.

STEP 5. What would you want to be remembered for?

STEP 6. Third reading aloud of the passage.

STEP 7. Silence.

STEP 8. What ideas, images, questions does the passage bring up for you?

STEP 9. Closing prayer.

### **PSALM 71:16–24**

STEP 1. The group reads the psalm aloud.

STEP 2. What in this psalm connects with a deep need in me? Or if not a need, what in this psalm resonates in my heart and soul?

STEP 3. The group reads the psalm silently to themselves.

STEP 4. What are the tensions or concerns that the psalmist seems to be addressing in this psalm? In what way do those tensions and concerns connect with my own life?

STEP 5. The psalm is read aloud.

STEP 6. What have I learned (relearned) about God? Or what new insights do I have about God? What have I learned (relearned) about myself? What does this psalm call me to do or be? Can I? Will I?

STEP 7. The psalm is read aloud as the closing prayer.

## **LEVITICUS 19:1–18**

STEP 1. The passage is read aloud verse by verse by members of the group.

STEP 2. What images, words, scenes come up for you and why?

STEP 3. **Some information about the passage:**

Leviticus was probably written in the early Post-Exilic period, when the Jewish upper class returned from Babylon to encounter the Jews who had stayed behind and adapted to many foreign customs. Other Jews had gone off to Egypt and mixed with the people and customs there. The author is reflecting on why they failed, while trying to recall the people to their identity. The author attempts to reconstruct the Mosaic period and present a program which the people should follow to claim everlasting possession of the land. Israel needs to reclaim itself as a special people with a special blessing from God.

STEP 4. Hear the passage again, imagining you are a Jew living in Post-Exilic times.

STEP 5. What did you experience hearing the passage from the perspective of a Post-Exilic Jew?

STEP 6. What are the themes and concerns that arise from your experience of the passage?

STEP 7. What are the connections of those themes and concerns to your life?

STEP 8. The passage is read aloud again.

STEP 9. What are the personal and communal calls and challenges?

STEP 10. Closing prayer.

## **PSALM 149**

STEP 1. The psalm is sung by the group.

STEP 2. What are the images and feelings called up for you as you hear the psalm?

STEP 3. The psalm is read by one person.

STEP 4. Why do you think this psalm was saved and made part of the canon? What does it have to do with community?

STEP 5. About the psalm: This is a psalm of praise. The psalms of praise tend to be about the deliverance of God's people from distress or praise for God's majesty and creative power. The psalms of praise exalt the power of God to create a just and compassionate reality by putting down the mighty and raising up the lowly and weak.

STEP 6. The psalm is read again by another person.

STEP 7. What are the connections between all that has been talked about and your life?

STEP 8. The psalm is read aloud again.

STEP 9. What are the calls and challenges?

STEP 10. Closing prayer.

## **PSALM 149**

STEP 1. The psalm is read aloud and the group is invited to picture themselves as a participant in what is happening.

STEP 2. Which words or actions described in the psalm speak to your heart?

STEP 3. The psalm is read aloud again.

STEP 4. What does this psalm reveal to us about God?

STEP 5. The psalm is read aloud again.

STEP 6. What does this reveal to us about humanity and our relationship to God and one another?

STEP 7. The psalm is read aloud again.

STEP 8. Let the psalm spark your imagination. It is a psalm of praise for God's goodness to Israel. Write your own sentence about God's goodness to us and share it in the group.

STEP 9. The psalm is read as a closing prayer.

## MATTHEW 5:1–12

STEP 1. The passage is read aloud.

STEP 2. What words, phrase, image, or feelings catch your attention?

STEP 3. Imagine yourself to be one of the following characters as you listen to the text again:

- **a child** being led to Jesus for him to place his hands on you (Matt. 19:13–15)
- **Peter** telling Jesus we have left everything to follow him (Matt. 19:16–30)
- **a worker** who waited 11 hours before being hired (Matt. 20:1–16)
- **the woman** who poured an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume on Jesus' head as he was reclining at table (Matt. 26:6–3)
- **the widow** who out of her poverty put into the temple treasury two very small copper coins (Mark 12:41–44)

STEP 4. The group shares what they experienced listening to the text as one of the characters.

STEP 5. Assume the character that contrasts with the one you originally chose and listen to the passage again:

- **if the child**, be a disciple rebuking the parent for bringing you to Jesus
- **if Peter**, then be the wealthy young man who comes to Jesus asking what he must do to be saved
- **if a worker**, then someone who worked the whole twelve hours
- **if the woman**, then a disciple who was indignant when she used the expensive perfume
- **if the widow**, then a rich person putting a large amount into the temple treasury

STEP 6. The group members share their experiences.

STEP 7. What are the connections to our lives?

STEP 8. The passage is read again.

STEP 9. What are we being invited to do, to change?

STEP 10. Closing prayer.

### **MATTHEW 5:38–48**

STEP 1. The passage is read aloud.

STEP 2. What captures your attention?

STEP 3. Listen to the passage again, this time from the perspective of a member of the crowd.

STEP 4. The group shares their experience of the passage.

STEP 5. The passage is read aloud again.

STEP 6. What are the themes and concerns and how do they connect with us today?

STEP 7. The passage is read aloud again.

STEP 8. What are we being called to make a part of our lives?

STEP 9. Closing prayer.

#### Footnotes:

8. Paul Hanson, *The People Called* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), pp. 254–255.
9. Hanson, *op. cit.*, p. 255