

What issues lie behind the BILC project and initiative?

At its commencement the BILC project in 2009 the Anglican Communion website introduced the initiative in the following way:

“While it may be true to say that this project came into existence because of some of the present challenges within the Anglican Communion – more of which in a moment – the place of the Bible in the life of those churches that make up the Communion has always been crucial. In 2003 a Primates’ Pastoral letter to the Communion spoke of a ‘distinctive Anglican approach to theological study’ recognised not only in our worship and liturgical life but also in ‘our attention to Scripture read in the light of tradition’. So it is not surprising that the way Scripture is read and the use that is made of it in the life of the Church are in many ways the nub of debates and discussions about a range of theological issues.”

In a number of the controversies that the Anglican Communion is facing today e.g. questions of sexuality, women’s ministry within the Church, our attitudes to other religions etc., the reality is that underneath such ‘presenting issues’, the key matter for discussion is the attitude to biblical authority and the nature of biblical hermeneutics.

The revolution in biblical studies of the last 40 years, with traditional historical-critical methods being challenged by techniques of reading the Bible that claim to draw on the insights of ‘reader response criticism’ and/or ‘experiential Bible study’, still needs to be properly reflected on and absorbed into the life of the Church. In some circles and contexts these recently popularised methodologies have been called into service to invalidate critical study of the Bible – although that would not necessarily have been the aim of those who originally developed these techniques.

Ideally biblical study needs to take seriously ‘the world of the text’, ‘the world behind the text’ and ‘the world in front of the text’ and enable all three ‘worlds’ to continue a dialogue with each other. Yet this dialogue seems to be quite difficult to sustain, and in most cases one ‘world’ seems to predominate.

Another feature of recent biblical scholarship has been interest in the ‘whole’ – how a particular biblical book should be read in its entirety, or even the question of the nature and function of canon. However, the reality is that rarely does this understanding of the ‘whole’ get drawn upon when the Bible is called into service for the life of the Church, which still engages to a considerable degree in ‘proof-texting’. To take seriously a ‘holistic’ hermeneutic of the Bible is an ongoing task for theological education. It is to address such issues that the Anglican Communion is developing this project.

However, as we have said, while recent tensions within the Anglican Communion have had clear presenting issues there is also a deeper and less obvious underlying ones: one of which is the way we handle the Bible. The 2004 Windsor Report identified this in sections 61 and 62.

The current crisis thus constitutes a call to the whole Anglican Communion to re-evaluate the ways in which we have read, heard, studied and digested scripture. We can no longer be content to drop random texts into arguments, imagining that the point is thereby proved, or indeed to sweep away sections of the New Testament as irrelevant to today’s world, imagining that problems are thereby solved. We need mature study, wise and prayerful discussion, and a joint commitment to hearing and obeying God as he speaks in scripture, to discovering more of the Jesus Christ to whom all authority is committed, and to



being open to the fresh wind of the Spirit who inspired scripture in the first place. If our present difficulties force us to read and learn together from scripture in new ways, they will not have been without profit.

A mention of scripture today can sometimes seem actually divisive, so aware are we of the bewildering range of available interpretative strategies and results. This is tragic, since, as with the Spirit who inspired scripture, we should expect that the Bible would be a means of unity, not division. In fact, our shared reading of scripture across boundaries of culture, region and tradition ought to be the central feature of our common life, guiding us together into an appropriately rich and diverse unity by leading us forward from entrenched positions into fresh appreciation of the riches of the gospel as articulated in the scriptures. This is characteristically and appropriately accomplished through the various ministries of the Church, not least the next of the bonds of unity now to be considered.

The Bible in the Life of the Church project was born out of these tensions, and its purpose is very much in line with the call of the Windsor Report to “re-evaluate the ways in which we have read, heard, studied and digested scripture”; but it seeks to go further. It not only looks back in terms of ‘re-evaluation’ but will also look at how we actually use the Bible now by exploring scripture together and reflecting on the experience. Out of this it will also provide educational resources that might enable us to do this better.

