

Reflective Bible Studies

- an underused power-tool in OD

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I was really worried. I thought my co-facilitator, Francis, was taking this Bible study stuff a bit far. After all there was a lot of training to cover. We had a lot of knowledge to get across and outputs to deliver. Yet some of these Bible studies were taking up the best part of a whole day! But through this experience with the Anglican Church in DRC, I learnt that well-facilitated Biblical reflection can be critical in change processes with churches. Reflective Bible studies proved pivotal in changing prevailing negative attitudes and beliefs. They may be the reason for such a difference in so short a time. I ask myself, do we use the Bible enough in OD? And do we use it in an appropriate and empowering way?

The ENP Process – Ensemble Nous Pouvons

In April 2007 a provincial conference of the Anglican church in DRC identified the need for the church to embrace a more holistic vision for the role of church in society. They wanted the church to be more relevant to community needs at the grassroots. The programme started in three dioceses with plans to extend it across the province.

The process of ENP (Ensemble Nous Pouvons) seeks to build reconciliation between communities and ethnic groups through mobilising villages and small community groups to do small projects and acts of kindness. At the core of this programme is helping communities to become aware of their own resources and using them to make a positive difference to their livelihoods. Integral to this approach is spiritual reflection on God's plan for the environment, for communities and for the church. This programme is as much a spiritual journey and process as it is practical development.

The ENP process has involved a number of different inputs which include an exchange visit to Kenya, a series of workshops and monitoring and support visits to each of the dioceses. Together with a Kenyan facilitator, Francis Njoroge, I was asked to facilitate one of these workshops.

Where did the Bible fit?

We believed (Francis perhaps more than me!) that Bible studies can be a key trigger for helping individuals and groups within churches think about how they can help themselves with what they have got and also work together with other groups in the community.

Some key studies that congregations found helpful were the stories of: Elisha, the widow and the jars of oil, the feeding of the 5000 and the raising of Lazarus.

These passages helped them think about what resources they had and how they could use them for the benefit of the church and the community.

We did not use the Bible in the traditional 'workshop' way, whereby someone reads a passage and gives participants a thought for the day. Instead we used the Bible more interactively. This helped participants read the Bible for themselves and gain fresh insights from familiar passages. The Bible challenged prevailing attitudes of fatalism and helped individuals see their potential before God and his plans for them. The Bible studies also communicated important community development concepts of sustainability, participation, empowerment and stewardship of resources in a language and form that was accessible and familiar.

The Bible and Cycles of learning

Interactive Bible studies offer a new way of learning. This is in contrast to the top-down way in which most congregations have been taught as children in school and as adults in church. The strength of this is that individuals through the Bible study gain skills of reflection, group discussion and analysis. The key steps are listed below:

1. Reading the Bible for yourself
2. Sharing your observations with others in the group
3. Drawing conclusions together as a group and sharing it with others
4. Listening and learning from other groups as they present their reflections

The four steps above represent four cycles of learning. As each member of the congregation goes through each cycle of learning their understanding of the issues and reflection of how the passage relates to their own experience deepens. In a number of communities visited, several individuals highlighted the fact that they had grown in confidence

in speaking in public and discussing issues because of their experience in small group Bible studies.

Attitude and belief change

The Bible studies go to the core of challenging individuals' beliefs about themselves and their relationship to God. Many individuals held strong beliefs around fatalism (It's God's will). They feel they can't do anything for themselves. This in turn encourages passive behaviour and dependence on others. Senior church leaders highlight this as a key barrier to helping churches do things for themselves. They also highlighted that in the Congolese context this is often referred to as paternalism and makes the churches reliant on outside assistance or look to the meagre funds of the dioceses. This diagram illustrates this contrast in attitude change.

Participants highlight how the Bible studies have played a key role in giving a sense of hope and fresh belief in what people can do for themselves with God's help. As one said:

"ENP is a strategy which invites us to unite together for change and makes us leave the deep sleep in which we found ourselves. The Bible studies have shown us that time, human beings, manure, the land... are resources which have not been sufficiently used, and that amongst the causes of poverty the following should be noted: ignorance, neglect, bad teaching of certain missionaries."

Implications of this experience for OD:

So what implications does this have for us as OD facilitators, supporters or leaders of Christian organisations?

Clearly we need to recognise the importance of context in this story. This experience took place in an Anglican Church context in the DRC where people tend to respond to what the Bible says. It may be different in other countries or even denominations where the Bible is interpreted differently and is given less weight.

We also accept that the Bible can be misused. It can be used by people without integrity like a hammer to bash people with. An important way to mitigate this risk therefore, is to pose open questions that are carefully phrased and to use the Bible interactively for self-discovery.

Using the Bible more in OD

This experience shows that an appropriate approach to Biblical reflection speaks to the values and attitudes in churches (and Christian organisations) that ultimately determine their behaviour. This is obviously critical for OD.

I usually limit Biblical reflection to half-hour slots at the beginning of each day of a workshop. This tends to be in the form of a presentation, not self-discovery. I have underplayed Biblical reflection in OD work.

Instead we tend to leap into more cerebral activity, using OD tools such as SWOT analysis. We address the mental aspects of organisational change and underplay the emotional and spiritual dimensions. This may be a reflection of our time-orientation in Europe. We tend to fix limited time-slots for activities. We want to get things done quickly and not stay with reflection. No wonder I found it hard to stay with a Bible study for almost a whole day.

There are good resources for using the Bible in OD. Take a look at 'Celebrating the Journey of Change with God' highlighted in the January 2010 letter. This uses the Exodus story to help an organisation deal with a change process. See also 'The Exodus Story' and Bengt's Best Bible Bits from April 2009.

Inspire and involve church leaders

The success of ENP is largely down to the senior leadership of the Anglican church (the archbishop and bishops) seeing this as a key resource for developing the province. Through visiting similar initiatives in Tanzania and Kenya they were inspired to push the process in their own countries.

The archbishop is now insisting that ENP is more a philosophy than a programme. Having said that he is also insistent that he wants all his bishops to visit ENP initiatives and gather stories of change. The bishops have been involved in identifying who the community facilitators are and have made a commitment to following them up and recognising them at major church events such as the annual synod. The bishops have encouraged all the facilitators to demonstrate the ENP philosophy in their own homes by doing things such as improving farming methods and organising local initiatives to improve livelihoods.

By supporting ENP, the Bishops are helping a cultural change to begin in the church. The huge challenges in this must not be under-estimated.

Older clergy feel threatened, donors are frustrated by the slow progress, communities are distracted by the offer of free handouts from other NGOs.

But real progress is being made. It is seen in changes in church structure. There are also changes in the style of preaching. Some church leaders are moving away from lecturing congregations to helping them explore significant questions. This offers exciting potential for adult learning and behaviour change.

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Reconciliation through reflection – an eight-day Bible study

Francis was involved in a similar programme in Nigeria. There it took eight days to get through one Bible study on the Good Samaritan! It was debated from many different perspectives. It involved a series of dramas by the participants, thinking through different contexts as they read the passage. The end result of this was that they went to visit a tribal group which were as an outcast group in the Nigerian tribal system. They were the tribe that was called on to bury bodies and other lowly tasks. As a result of this Bible study the participants sat and shared meals with this tribe. This had a huge impact in helping two divided churches come together, bridging a previously problem of prejudice.