

USING THE BIBLE IN CHRISTIAN MINISTRY – MARGARET COOLING

Margaret Cooling is a freelance trainer and writer and a part-time lecturer at the University of Gloucestershire. She works in the areas of teaching and learning and using the creative arts to communicate Christianity. She has written or co-written over 40 books.

FOR CHRISTIANS, THE BIBLE IS A MAJOR RESOURCE FOR SHAPING LIFE AND MINISTRY.

However, use of the Bible in Christian ministry is something that we tend to take for granted rather than examine in detail. In the busyness of ministry few of us have the leisure to think about whether there are other, more creative, ways of using it. But, without that reflection on practice, we can find ourselves adopting approaches that are predictable and safe, but less imaginative than we really aspire to.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

A joint research project between Bible Society and Cardiff University was created to investigate the use of the Bible in pastoral practice. The term 'pastoral' was understood to cover the breadth of Christian ministry and the project covered areas as diverse as listening ministry, the authority of the Bible and faith at work.

The project involved both scholars of international repute and Bible practitioners from across the spectrum of Christian denominations. As the project sought to promote good practice, the research started by exploring how practitioners used the Bible in their Christian ministry in order to identify the good practice that was already happening. To promote good practice is not to desire to make everyone's practice the same. To do that would ignore the complexity of pastoral situations and the richness that human diversity brings. Promoting good practice was understood more in terms of encouraging practitioners to reflect on their practice and to stimulate thought and consequent action.

The field research was undertaken between 2002–2003 and surveyed people from a range of Christian denominations and traditions. It was not a comprehensive survey; it was rather a series of 'snapshots' of current practice. These are some of the findings from those 'snapshots':¹

1. One of the most important findings was that there was little evidence of reflection on practice. This may be a consequence of the pressures of pastoral ministry, but may also be caused by society's valuing of activism or possibly even an unconscious sense of guilt concerning the lack of use of the Bible and consequent unwillingness to face the issue. It was this lack of reflection that led to the decision to publish a workbook on using the Bible in Christian ministry.²
2. No single dominant approach emerged, even among people from the same denomination. Even evangelicals, with their high view of Scripture, differed in the way they used the Bible.
3. Differences in Bible use between the Christian traditions tended to relate to people's view of biblical inspiration and authority. Gender issues and the needs and faith position of the person who was receiving ministry were also significant factors.
4. Most practitioners (80 per cent of respondents) used the Bible in pastoral contexts but did not necessarily read from it or even have one present. Oral communication of text was sometimes used instead. Using the written text was, however, sacrosanct for a minority – mostly very conservative evangelicals – who

would always read from it and often leave a portion of Scripture with people after a pastoral situation.

5. The printed book, rather than electronic versions, was still the most popular form of text.

6. The pragmatic rather than the theological shaped most people's practice. There was a clear preference for 'what works' in their Bible use.

7. There was variety of method used, with the less conservative using storytelling, drama, music, art and text messaging. On the whole, the practices adopted were the 'tried and tested' and fairly predictable.

8. For some, pastoral practice was a shared activity, either in team ministry or by linking with other clerics.

9. A common reported practice was to choose the passage before a pastoral encounter and only change it if the Spirit led people to do so.

10. A few abandoned the Bible completely and relied on approaches drawn from psychological and sociological disciplines.

11. The impression was given, though not articulated, that in the heat of Christian ministry critical approaches to the Bible were abandoned in favour of using the Bible to comfort or challenge without the restrictions of scholarly interpretation.

DRAWING CONCLUSIONS – SOME CONSIDERATIONS

As with any survey, it is advisable to be careful about conclusions to be drawn from it. The survey was not meant to be comprehensive and participants may not have found it easy to articulate what they really thought and felt. Furthermore, when it comes to encouraging best practice, there is the question of who decides what is best. Is it the academics or the practitioners? A related question is how the criteria for best practice are to be determined? Is it what most practitioners do? Is best practice the latest practice or even the most effective? Below are some of the indications of 'best practice' suggested by the respondents to the survey:

1. Practitioners recognised the need to use scholarship to inform their use of the Bible. Alongside this some also talked of the work of the Spirit and insight and intuition borne of experience.

2. The Bible must be presented as relevant and meaningful in a way that engages with modern culture.

3. The faith community has a role in determining how the Bible is to be used; use is not always decided by an individual. For example, pastoral teams can work together on this question.

4. The Bible should be used with sensitivity and integrity, respecting people's freedom. People need space to reflect on Bible passages used with them in pastoral encounters.

5. The Bible is not there just to be studied or to be used for moral guidance; it has a role in spiritually forming people and deepening their life with God.

6. The use of the Bible should not create dependency on experts like clergy.

People need equipping with the skills to use the Bible for themselves.

7. People need time to reflect on their use of the Bible.

More information about the research project can be found in an article by Ian Dickson.³ Information can also be found at www.cardiff.ac.uk/relig

THE OUTCOME THE PROJECT

The research project has led to the publication of three books. The first, *The Bible in Pastoral Practice*,⁴ is a wide-ranging, scholarly book with contributions from a number of academics working in this field and is designed for those studying or working in pastoral theology.

The second,⁵ *Holy Bible, Human Bible*, is a more 'popular' book for the general reader that looks at how the Bible will be heard today and the struggles those engaged in Christian ministry have interpreting Scripture in the context of modern culture.

The final book,⁶ *Using the Bible in Christian Ministry*, aims to translate some of the findings of the research and some of the material in the other books into an interactive workbook. This book is designed *primarily* for those in Christian ministry who have some familiarity with theology. Its units can be part of clergy professional development, but the book can also be used by individuals, groups or by clergy working to develop laypeople for specific pastoral ministries.

THE WORKBOOK

The workbook aims to help practitioners to reflect upon their use of the Bible and to raise their confidence in the use of the Scripture in day-to-day ministry. It intends to stimulate those who may have grown weary either with the Bible or their own use of Scripture, and to encourage those who may have lost confidence in the Bible. To do this, the workbook draws on the research literature and translates it into practical examples, thereby bringing together theory and practice.

WHAT DOES THE BOOK COVER?

The workbook covers the broad range of Christian ministry. It begins with units that help users to explore their current understanding of the Bible, pastoral practice and how the two might interact. The second section looks at key issues and how they affect ministry. These include the authority of the Bible, applying the Bible in contemporary culture and when the Bible makes faith difficult. This section also explores the metaphors we use for the Bible and the relationship between people, 'pastors' and the Bible.

The third and longest section offers the opportunity for the reader to examine the use of the Bible in a variety of practical contexts: pastoral visiting, small groups, youth and children's work, work and school, in public worship and private devotion, with the unchurched and through the arts. The concluding section guides the reader through what they have learned and helps them to plan how they can implement it.

LEARNING PRINCIPLES

The workbook is based on a number of principles that encourage learning:

1. *Active involvement aids learning:* We are more likely to learn when actively engaged and when we process information for ourselves. Information that is just regurgitated is less likely to be useful. The workbook is not designed just to be read. Throughout the book there are activities that are designed to help users engage with the ideas. There are activities for individuals and for groups.
2. *We draw on our experience in learning:* We do not learn in a vacuum; we view any new learning in light of our experience and what we already know. In the workbook readers are encouraged to bring their own experience to the book and to draw on it as a resource.
3. *Learning needs to be owned:* Owning our learning is, in the long term, more effective than just being told what to think. Thinking through issues demands close attention and is more likely to stimulate learning. In the workbook models and techniques are offered without being prescriptive so that readers can decide how these inform their own thinking and practice. Readers are encouraged to come to their own conclusions and then work out what that will mean in practice. This process aids the user in clarifying their views and helps them evaluate if their thinking and practice are in line with each other. This non-prescriptive approach makes the workbook appropriate for readers from a range of Christian traditions.
4. *Key questions help focus learning:* Each section starts with a key question that is relevant to Christian ministry. They give focus, purpose and shape to learning. At the end of each unit readers are asked to return to the key question and think about how they would now answer it as a means of evaluating their own learning.
5. *People need to be independent learners:* Giving people these tools for learning enables them to become independent in their use of the Bible. Activities in the workbook encourage the use of skills such as interpretation, evaluation and application.
6. *Learning needs to be relevant to our needs:* We tend to be more motivated to learn when the learning is relevant for our situation and needs. The workbook is flexible. Readers can create their own route through it, selecting units that will help them and thereby creating their own, customised learning experience.
7. *Reflection can help us consider what we are learning:* Reflective exercises are included throughout the workbook to help readers consider what they are learning and its implications. To get the most out of the workbook, it is suggested that readers keep a notebook as a reflective diary to record their learning experience.
8. *Learning for a practical purpose:* Most of us learn for a purpose – we learn because we need or want to find out something. That purpose is often practical. Throughout the workbook, theory is therefore translated into practice. For example, various views of Scripture are explored then the way in which they might affect different pastoral situations is worked through.

The books which have been developed from this project are offered to support those in Christian ministry in developing their use of the Bible in creative, theologically informed and eminently practical ways.

NOTES

1. A full account of the initial research can be found on the Cardiff University Website: www.cardiff.ac.uk/relig. See also www.biblesociety.org.uk/l3.php?id=303.

2. S Pattison, M Cooling and T Cooling, *Using the Bible in Christian Ministry: A Workbook* (London: Darton Longman and Todd).

2007).

3. I Dickson, 'The Bible in Pastoral Ministry: The Quest for Best Practice', *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 4.1, (2007).
4. P Ballard and SR Holmes (eds.), *The Bible in Pastoral Practice; Readings in the Place and Function of Scripture in the Church* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 2005).
5. G Oliver, *Holy Bible, Human Bible: Questions Pastoral Practice Must Ask* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 2006).
6. Pattison et al., *Using the Bible*.

All rights reserved. Permission is given for a single copy to be made for private and personal use. Beyond this, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise without prior permission from Bible Society.

For permission requests, please email permissions@biblesociety.org.uk or telephone Bible Society on 01793 418100.