

## African Bible Study

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### INTRODUCTION

The Cathedral, founded in 1835, is located in the economically depressed Jamesville neighbourhood of north Hamilton. The congregation gathers from 290 households scattered over a very broad area covering the whole of the greater Hamilton area, and portions of Burlington. Sunday attendance averages 150 people. While the congregation reflects the community profile for middle aged adults, it has a much higher proportion of seniors, and a much lower proportion of children and infants. The congregation embraces a wide range of ethnic, socio-economic, and life-style expressions among its members, and a similar wide range in its worship styles.

During Advent 2000 and Lent 2001, the Cathedral offered a series of sessions using the African method of bible study. Anglican Bishops from around the world used this method of study at the most recent Lambeth Conference.

The African method of bible study encourages individual participants to engage with the scriptural passage in an intimate and personal way. Rather than focusing on the theological significance of a given passage, or on what the experts say about the passage, people are asked to consider what the reading is saying to them in the context of their own daily lives, and to attempt to determine what action they are called to as a result of hearing God's word.

In addition to individual reflection, participants are encouraged to share their thoughts and feelings with the rest of the group, so that others may

benefit from their insights. Any sharing is, of course, optional.

### THE ADVENT EXPERIENCE

During each of the four Sundays in Advent, the African bible study method was used within the 10:30 service. The time normally allotted to the sermon was devoted to bible study, and the entire congregation was encouraged to take part.

The idea of replacing the sermon with an interactive bible study was seen by some parishioners as a relatively high-risk venture.

Just prior to the Old Testament Lesson, the choir and the clergy joined the congregation in the pews, and people were asked to form small groups of 4 to 6 by moving about the sanctuary, joining others, or by simply turning around in their pews to speak with those behind them. A small number

of people who preferred not to participate simply knelt in silent prayer during the time of study.

As outlined in detail in the section entitled "The Method", the same passage was read out loud a total of 3 times. Each time the passage was read, participants were asked to reflect on a different question, and were then asked to discuss their ideas with others in the group. Allowing approximately 5 minutes for discussion following each reading, the entire process took about 20 minutes.

Each week, a group of 6 to 10 "facilitators" met prior to the service to study the given passage. When the appropriate time came, these facilitators joined various groups in the congregation, ensuring that everyone understood the process outlined in the bulletin. They were not intended to be content

experts and did not explain the meaning of the passage to others.

**RESPONSE TO THE ADVENT PROGRAM**

The idea of replacing the sermon with an interactive bible study was seen by some parishioners as a relatively high-risk venture. With an aging congregation, tending towards a more traditional approach, there were worries that attendance would decline as a result. These concerns were not borne out. Attendance remained consistent throughout Advent and response, although mixed, was generally more positive than had been expected. Announcements for several weeks prior to the start of the program helped prepare everyone, and the options to join a group to listen without talking, or to remain on one's own were stressed each Sunday.

As mentioned earlier, response to the initiative was predictably mixed. Approximately a third of the congregation really enjoyed the experience, another third were accepting but not engrossed by it, and the final third would have preferred to maintain a traditional service with a sermon.

Apart from the reactions noted above, a number of benefits were realized. It was encouraging to see that the vast majority of people were willing to open themselves up and engage with others at a level beyond, "Good morning", or "Peace be with you". There was wide diversity in how people responded to individual passages, both within groups and between groups. The opportunity to hear how others reacted frequently provided additional insights and was often helpful for those who struggled to find a positive message in some of the Old Testament words.

Finally, there was a genuine caring experienced as parishioners listened to one another and got to know each other a little bit better.

**THE METHOD**

Before the selected passage is read for the first time, each participant is instructed to listen for a word or phrase that catches his or her attention — for whatever reason. One person reads the selected passage slowly out loud to the group. Each person is given a chance to share his or her word or phrase with the group before any discussion takes place. Before the passage is read for the second time, people are invited to ask themselves, "Where

does this passage touch my life (at home, work, school, church, or community)?"

The passage is read out loud a second time, ideally by a different person. Each person is given a chance to share his or her reflection with the group before any discussion takes place. Before hearing the passage for a third time, all participants are invited to ask themselves, "How is God calling me to respond?" A third participant reads the passage aloud for a third time. Each person is given a chance to share his or her reflection with the group before any discussion takes place. Time is allowed for individual or communal prayer so that people can raise their issues or intentions to God.

**THE LENTEN EXPERIENCE**

Following the success of the Advent program, it was decided to offer a similar experience during Lent. Given that there was a mixed response to the inclusion of the Advent program within the service, it was decided to offer the study at two separate times, outside of the service: Thursday evenings, and between services on Sunday mornings. The Thursday evening sessions began at 6:00 pm, included a light supper and finished at 7:00 in time for the regular Thursday night Eucharist. The Thursday evening time also allowed interested choir members to attend before practice.

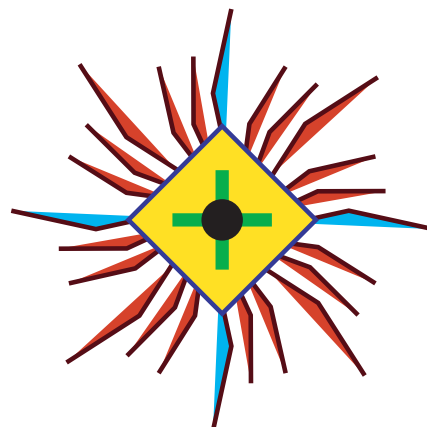
Rather than using the Old Testament Lesson, the appointed Gospel was used for the basis of the study. This was done in an attempt to make the passages more familiar to people so that they might be more comfortable discussing them with others.

People were invited to come as often as they were able, and the numbers ranged from 8 to 15 people

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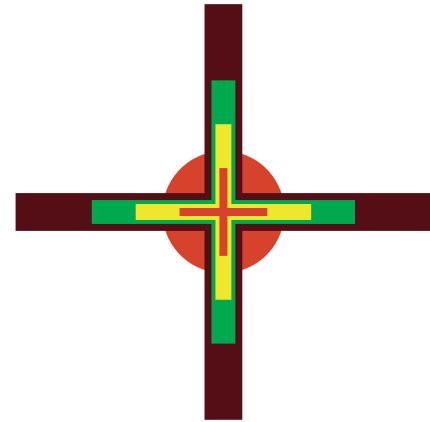
on Thursday evening and 4 to 8 people on Sunday morning.

**RESPONSE TO THE LENTEN PROGRAM**

The Lenten program drew fewer people than was expected based on the number of positive responses coming from the Advent program. However, the participants still realized several advantages: Many people found that studying the passage beforehand made the Gospel reading more meaningful to them during the Sunday service. Since membership in the groups was more or less consistent over Lent, the comfort level rose over time and people were able to share their reactions at a more intimate level. The meal on Thursday night allowed for an additional time of fellowship, and everybody enjoyed Vi's lemon meringue tarts!

**TIPS FOR USING THE AFRICAN BIBLE STUDY METHOD IN YOUR PARISH**

- Choose a leader or facilitator who can encourage participation without intimidating others or providing an "expert opinion."
- Emphasize that people should share only what they feel comfortable sharing with others in the group and that it is OK to say "pass" at anytime. Encourage everyone to listen to others' feelings and opinions in a non-judgmental way. The idea is to understand where others are coming from not to convince them that you're right and they're wrong
- Emphasize that the most important part of the bible study is what happens inside the individual participant, not what happens aloud in the group.
- Allow enough time for full discussion. We found that 20 to 30 minutes was a minimum amount of time to go through the entire process, but that 45 to 60 minutes probably would have felt less rushed allowing for more in-depth discussion on points that interested the entire group.
- Selecting passages from the upcoming week's lectionary serves as a good way to tie the study time to worship. Consider using more familiar passages if you want to encourage participation. Choose less familiar passages if a high level of comfort already exists within the group and people are interested in exploring deeper levels of insight
- Open and close with prayer. If some of the insights or desires expressed by the group during study can be incorporated into the closing



prayers, it is particularly effective. Further, if these same issues or concerns can be brought forward into Sunday morning's intercessions, it's a great way to link people's everyday lives to Sunday morning worship.

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**IF YOU PLAN TO USE THE METHOD AS PART OF YOUR SUNDAY WORSHIP SERVICE**

- Prepare people well in advance. Explain the method, the rationale behind it and some of the expected benefits of engaging in it.
- Recruit some facilitators who can disperse themselves among the congregation to assist people in following the process and encourage non-judgmental listening.
- Have the facilitators meet beforehand so that they are comfortable with the process, and so they can be somewhat prepared for avenues of discussion which may arise.
- Ensure people that they are not obligated to participate. Offer them the opportunity to sit and listen, or to remain quietly by themselves.
- Expect a negative response from some individuals. This type of interaction and level of intimacy is uncomfortable to some people.

**CONCLUSION**

As with any new initiative, especially one that breaks with tradition, there were challenges. However, the African bible study as we used it at the Cathedral was a positive and rewarding experience. ✎



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