

Impact case study (REF3b)

<p>Institution: York St John University</p>
<p>Unit of Assessment: 33 (Theology and Religious Studies)</p>
<p>Title of case study: Empirical theology in the service of the Bible and the Anglican Church</p>
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>The Practical Theology group’s collaboration with other researchers and churches has helped faith groups to understand how clergy and lay people engage with Scripture, leading to developments in the theory and practice of preaching. Consultancy and research by Dr Andrew Village has helped inform the <i>Bible in the Life of the Church</i> project of the Anglican Communion, an important attempt by a global denomination to shape its practice in relation to its sacred Scriptures. Research on Bible beliefs has informed the debate about Creationism and evolution that arose in 2009 during the celebration of Charles Darwin.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The underlying impetus has come from two main sources. The first is the development of interest in ‘real’ readers among biblical scholars. Although this has mainly focused on how the social location of scholarly readers affects their interpretation, there is a growing group of biblical scholars who are engaging with 'ordinary' readers. The second source of impetus has been the realization by churches that social and psychological factors cannot be discounted when trying to understand theological disputes about the status and interpretation of Scripture.</p> <p>Two main lines of research have informed empirical studies of Bible reading in faith communities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Development of reliable empirical instruments. Most empirical work on Bible beliefs before the 1990s was based on general population surveys in the United States, with instruments poorly suited for use among churchgoers. Single-item questions on beliefs about biblical literalism, for example, were being used as proxy measures for a range of religious and political beliefs. These measures had some success in a North American context, but were wholly inadequate when applied to Christian groups in the UK. The work of Andrew Village (Village, 2007) remedied this through a study of lay people in the Church of England. Village showed how constructs such as horizon preference, biblical conservatism and biblical literalism could be assessed by reliable and valid instruments. These instruments were developed among a range of Christian denominations, and enabled key dimensions of biblical beliefs to be assessed quantitatively. 2. The application of Jungian psychological-type to biblical interpretation. The idea that psychological-type preferences might shape biblical interpretation was first suggested in a book based on different interpretations of the Gospel passages from the Revised Common Lectionary (Francis, 1997). The theory was unproven until a successful collaboration with Professor Leslie J. Francis demonstrated an empirical link between psychological type preferences and interpretative preferences among both lay and clerical members of the Church of England (Village, 2010; Village & Francis, 2005). <p>The research programme has developed in several directions over the last few years:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Village developed theoretical ideas from the clergy study of how psychological type might impact the work of biblical scholars, and these theories were proven in a study of scholars from the Society of Biblical Literature (Village, unpublished). 2. Francis, Village and others have used preaching workshops to examine in more detail the interpretive practice of lay Readers and clergy using qualitative methods (Francis, Robbins, & Village, 2009).

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3. The role of imagination in Bible reading (represented by a long tradition in church and a rapidly expanding discourse in academic biblical studies) has been examined in relation to the psychological profile of readers (Village, 2009, 2012).

Psychological profile and social factors have been shown to influence the choice of 'interpretative horizons', a term widely used in hermeneutics, but not previously applied to 'real' readers in empirical research (Village, 2006).

3. References to the research

- Village, Andrew. (2006). Biblical interpretative horizons and ordinary readers: An empirical study. *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*, 17(1), 157-176.
- Village, Andrew. (2007). *The Bible and lay people: An empirical approach to ordinary hermeneutics*. Aldershot & Burlington VT: Ashgate.
- Village, Andrew. (2009). The influence of psychological type preferences on readers trying to imagine themselves in a New Testament healing story *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 65 Art. # 162. (1), 6 pages.
- Village, Andrew. (2010). Psychological type and biblical interpretation among Anglican clergy in the UK. *Journal of Empirical Theology*, 23(2), 179-200. doi: 10.1163/157092510X527349
- Village, Andrew. (2012). The Charismatic imagination: Clergy reading Mark 9: 14-29. *Pentecostudies*, 11(2), 212-237.
- Village, Andrew, & Francis, Leslie J. (2005). The relationship of psychological type preferences to biblical interpretation. *Journal of Empirical Theology*, 18(1), 74-89. doi: 10.1163/1570925054048929

4. Details of the impact

The impact of this body of research has been felt in several areas, notably:

1. The Bible in the Anglican Communion

As a result of the research noted above, Andrew Village was asked to act as consultant to the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC) for their *Bible in the Life of the Church* Project (BiLC). This project was commissioned by the Anglican Communion in the wake of the global controversies related to homosexuality and other issues that threatened the cohesion of the Anglican Church. At the heart of these disputes are issues about the use and authority of Scripture, and the project was intended to help the church understand how the Bible is used by its members. After a meeting in Durban in November 2010 a questionnaire survey was set up that used the research instruments already developed. The initial results formed part of the final project report (ACC, 2012), and follow-up work is planned.

Issues of biblical authority, veracity and applicability remain of central importance for many 'ordinary' readers. Beliefs about the nature of Scripture are central to explaining how it is interpreted, but these beliefs are complex and shaped by a variety of factors. Quantitative research on ordinary readers is revealing how these different factors interact, and why simple explanations do not always suffice. For example, the effects of educational experience on levels of biblical literalism vary even within a single denomination. Research that makes these effects clear is helping denominations such as the Anglican Church to better understand the forces that are currently creating internal tensions and threatening schism.

The impact of the YSJU research input to the BiLC project has been to help members of the ACC working group recognize that, without some attempt to reach 'ordinary' members of the denomination, there is a danger of assuming that the only relevant view of Scripture in the Church is that which is wholly derived from the educated, informed and interested sections of the hierarchy. The survey has shown how other voices might potentially be

heard in a debate that has profound significance for members of an internationally important religious denomination.

2. The SIFT method of preaching

Psychological type measures such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator are widely used among churches to help individuals to better understand themselves and to help groups to function more productively. This is not without some critique, so it is important that there is a sound body of evidence to ensure that any application of psychological type is valid and justified.

Research on psychological type in churches has shown that congregations and clergy have distinct psychological profiles that differ from each other, and from the public at large. This means that it is especially important that those responsible for teaching or preaching in churches understand the way in which psychology shapes the hermeneutical task of delivering a message to a particular group of people.

The SIFT method of preaching (Francis & Village, 2008) is based on the theory corroborated by the research mentioned above. It has been applied to specific lectionary readings (Francis & Atkins, 2000, 2001, 2002) and to the general theory of preaching. SIFT preaching is increasingly being discussed by preachers (for example it was the theme of the Church of England's annual lay Reader's conference in 2012) and taught through workshops delivered in the UK. The theory predicts that people have different preferences for acquiring and evaluating information, and this may shape the way that sermons are heard or the Bible read. Preachers are using the results of the research to their advantage, by shaping sermons that ensure their listeners can appreciate biblical expositions using their preferred ways of psychological functioning.

3. The Bible and Creationism

The 2009 celebrations of Charles Darwin spawned a number of publications and research studies. Empirical studies were aimed at the general population, and left some church groups feeling that they had been misunderstood. A survey of mainly conservative denominations in the UK in 2010 drew on the research expertise of the Practical Theology group at YSJU, and was sponsored by church groups interested in understanding in more detail what Creationists in the UK believe about the Bible, creation and the environment. The impact of this study has been to move the debate from a simple description of beliefs among churchgoers to a more analytical understanding of what factors predict different beliefs, and why Creationist beliefs persist in some church traditions.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Bible in the Life of the Church

Publications linked to project:

ACC. (2012). *Deep engagement, fresh discovery*. London: Anglican Consultative Council.

Amos, C. (Ed.). (due 2013). *Anglican approaches to the Bible*. Norwich: Canterbury Press.

Website: <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/theological/bible/index.cfm>

Website for Church of England Readers conference 2012 (based on SIFT):

http://www.readers.cofe.anglican.org/news_item.php?161

Review of psychological type and Bible research:

<http://www.brin.ac.uk/news/2010/psychological-type-and-biblical-interpretation/>

Reviews of *Preaching with all our Souls*

'This reviewer [...] approached [this book] with caution, only to find his fears disarmed and his prejudices challenged [...] finding its results both surprising and enlightening.' *Church Times*,

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"Leslie Francis and Andrew Village's book is valuable for experienced preachers wishing to revise their approach to hermeneutics and rethink their communication skills, as well as for theological students just beginning to develop an understanding of homiletical approaches to teaching sacred texts... Francis and Village turn a useful psychological diagnostic tool into a way of breathing spiritual depth and resonance into the teaching life of our churches." Reviewed by Jane Wallman-Girdlestone in *Expository Times*, September 2009.

"The joining together of these two well-established traditions, one based in the theological domain the other within the psychological domain, provides the world of preaching and hermeneutical biblical interpretation with a unique perspective on preaching to reach out to all members of a congregation. This book is highly recommended not only for those whose mission it is to preach the biblical texts, but also for those who strive to apply psychological-type theory in real and meaningful ways. The great potential of the SIFT method of hermeneutical interpretation not only lies with its applicability to preaching, but also with its potentiality to be applied to other areas (such as, say, teaching)." Emyr Williams in *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, August 2012.