

SCHOLAR'S CORNER

Something I find valuable enough to have kept up with for more than 20 years is a weekly lectionary study group, where the following Sunday's readings are read and discussed.

My experience has been with groups made up of all (or almost all) clergy and groups where all the participants have studied New Testament Greek and biblical Hebrew, and we therefore read the lessons for the next Sunday in the original languages.

Other lectionary study groups can be made up of people who studied Greek but not Hebrew (or the other way around, though that is much rarer) or of people who have studied neither biblical language.

Groups that use original languages have the benefit of helping people keep up or even improve their language skills, but all lectionary groups share other benefits.

Lectionary groups composed of clergy provide an opportunity to explore different ways to preach the Sunday readings. A lectionary group, especially if it meets early in the week, gets participants thinking about the next Sunday's readings and so starts the weekly sermon preparation process. This benefit is perhaps the one most participants cite as the reason it is worth making room for a study group in one's busy weekly schedule.

Clergy groups also provide an opportunity for peer support and moral support among clergy. It turns out that the problems of clergy and the chal-

lenges they face are much the same, even across denominational lines. Lectionary groups provide an opportunity for a sympathetic ear, sharing of similar situations, and sometimes helpful suggestions.

Ecumenical groups have the added advantage of providing an opportunity for getting to know people of other Christian traditions and learning about other traditions. Now that General Convention has decided that the U.S. Episcopal Church will be moving to the Revised Common Lectionary used already by Presbyterians, Methodists, and other "mainline" denominations, Episcopal participation in ecumenical lectionary groups could increase.

Lectionary groups can be composed all of laypeople or be mixed (clergy and lay), though the group dynamics will be significantly different from those of an all-clergy group. Laypeople usually do not have the academic background or approach to biblical study as those with seminary training, so how the Sunday lessons are dealt with will tend to be different from all-clergy groups. Mixed groups may have problems resulting from laypeople wanting to deal with the texts in one way and being uncomfortable with and perhaps feeling intimidated by the way clergy approach the texts and discuss them. (These last comments, I have to admit, are not based on personal experience of mixed lectionary groups, but on leading Bible studies where I was the only clergy person present.)

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All-clergy groups where some have studied Greek and/or Hebrew or have had significantly more academic training (perhaps in a Ph.D. program), while other clergy participants have not studied any original languages, will have to deal with a disparity of background between members. Those who have not studied Greek or Hebrew may feel intimidated by those who have. For this reason, when I was in such a mixed clergy group, the two of us who had Greek and Hebrew tried to limit our "showing off" of such knowledge, only commenting on the original Greek or Hebrew behind the English translations when such linguistic knowledge was really needed, say to explain differences between English translations. After the other group members left, the two of us would get out dictionaries, grammars and other original language tools and pursue scholarly questions of interest to us. Based on this personal experience, I recommend, when possible, setting up lectionary groups where all the members have approximately the same academic background, or at least all have studied the same biblical languages.

What is ideal to my way of thinking

is for there to be in any area three types of lectionary study groups: those for people with Hebrew and Greek, those for people with Greek only, and those for people with neither biblical language. Language background should be the main factor in deciding which group a person should join. While there can be benefits from the members of a lectionary group belonging to the same denomination, that consideration is much less important to my mind than the linguistic one. Better to be with others with a roughly equivalent language background and level of scholarship but differing in denomination than to be all of one denomination or theological tradition but divided by academic training.

I hope this article will inspire clergy to seek out other clergy in their areas and set up a lectionary study group (or groups). Laypeople can profitably start their own (perhaps ecumenical) groups. I believe most people will find it worthwhile and even richly rewarding.

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