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CONTEXTUAL BIBLE STUDY AND/OR AS INTERPRETIVE RESILIENCE

Gerald O. West

Introduction

Contextual Bible Study as it has developed within the Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research over the past thirty years has been focussed on systemic change. Contextual Bible Study (CBS) has been formed in the intersections of South African Contextual Theology, South African Black Theology, and African Women's Theology. What is common to these forms of African theology is that they are all committed to systemic or structural analysis and change. What the South African *Kairos Document* (Kairos 1985) referred to as "Church Theology" has its focus on individual and personal change, while what the *Kairos Document* referred to as "Prophetic Theology" has its focus on structural or systemic change. CBS Prophetic Theology, but it is a form of Prophetic Theology that is produced by collaboration between ordinary African Christians and socially engaged African biblical scholars and theologians. It is *how* Prophetic Theology is produced that makes it Prophetic Theology. In this essay, which is dedicated to the life and work of one of the champions of Contextual Bible Study, Nyambura J. Njoroge, I will discuss the significance of 'how' theology is done, and why the process of doing Prophetic Theology offers resources for forms of interpretive resilience.

From People's Theology to Prophetic Theology

The Revised Second Edition of the *Kairos Document* (1986) makes an important distinction between 'people's theology' and 'prophetic theology'. It states:

It should also be noted that there is a subtle difference between prophetic theology and people's theology. The *Kairos Document* itself, signed by theologians, ministers and other church workers, and addressed to all who bear the name Christian is a prophetic statement. But the process that led

to the production of the document, the process of theological reflection and action in groups, the involvement of many different people in doing theology was an exercise in people's theology. The document is therefore pointing out two things: that our present Kairos challenges Church leaders and other Christians to speak out prophetically and that our present Kairos is challenging all of us to do theology together reflecting upon our experiences in working for justice and peace in South Africa and thereby developing a better theological understanding of our Kairos. The method that was used to produce the Kairos Document shows that theology is not the preserve of professional theologians, ministers and priests. Ordinary Christians can participate in theological reflection and should be encouraged to do so. When this people's theology is proclaimed to others to challenge and inspire them, it takes on the character of a prophetic theology (Kairos 1986: 34-35).

The *Kairos Document* states that there can be no Prophetic Theology without a "people's theology." This is the starting point of the Ujamaa Centre's work. We begin with the lived reality of local African communities as it is embodied within them. This is the 'raw material' of Prophetic Theology and CBS is a process that enables the "people's theology" to become Prophetic Theology. In the following section I will briefly elaborate on the resources and processes that are constitutive of CBS.

CBS resources and processes

CBS includes two kinds of resources, praxiological resources and interpretive resources (West 2015). Praxiological resources inhabit the cycle of praxis, which is the movement from action to reflection, and then action to reflection, in an ongoing life-long process. This process is given shape by three moments which are 'See-Judge-Act'. 'See' is focussed on a careful and critical analysis of the lived reality of a particular context. 'See' is done by organised local groups who share a reality and who analyse this reality together, with a particular emphasis on the experience of the most marginalised sectors within this reality. 'Judge' is the next moment in which the analysed reality is compared to what God intends for our lived reality. Does the lived reality conform to God's kin-dom "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10)? If not, then the praxis process shifts into the next moment which is 'Act'. The 'Act' moment is about transformation and change (West 2016b). If the lived reality does not match God's vision for earth, then we must act with God to change the lived reality. When we

have acted to change the lived reality, we must continue with the praxis cycle, reflecting again on our action and what transformation it has brought and what more needs to be done. The ‘See-Judge-Act’ process begins again.

‘See-Judge-Act’ provides the overall shape to the praxis of CBS but there is a second important component of the praxis of CBS which is facilitation. Facilitation is focused on enabling every participant to feel safe and to have the opportunity to participate fully. Facilitation is committed to what is known as ‘group process’, which includes breaking participants up into small groups in which they will feel safe and in which they feel free to participate. If ‘See-Judge-Act’ is the wheel of praxis, then facilitation is the oil of praxis that enables the wheel to turn.

A third component of the praxis of CBS is the ‘infrastructure of faith’. CBS is a form of praxis that exists within the faith of a particular community. Faith is often taken for granted, particularly in African contexts, but it is a vital component of CBS. CBS is experienced within faith-full liturgy whether formal or informal, including singing, praying and other faith-full rituals. If ‘See-Judge-Act’ is the wheel and facilitation is the oil, the infrastructure of faith is the air of CBS. Without it there can be no life.

These are the three praxiological components of CBS. The interpretive resources of CBS are located within the praxis of CBS. CBS draws on biblical scholarship because biblical studies offers methods with which to access the detail of the Bible. CBS slows down the reading of scripture (Riches et al. 2010: 41), creating opportunities to re-read (and re-read again) scripture carefully and closely. In this way participants become attentive to the detail of the text, noticing dimensions of the text that they have not ‘seen’ or ‘heard’ before. For all of us our theological frameworks determine what we ‘see’ or ‘hear’ in scripture. What CBS does is to disrupt our theological frameworks by enabling us to see the disruptive and potentially redemptive detail of scripture.

I draw from two examples to illustrate this point. The first example is that a CBS on Matthew 6:9-13 focusses on the detail of ‘the Lord’s Prayer’, noticing how the prayer emphasises economic factors like “kingdom”, “bread”, and “debt”. What, we are invited to ask, is the connection between these economic factors. The prayer Jesus teaches his disciples has a clear structure: “Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (verse 10). Our Bibles have a full stop at the end of this sentence, but if we changed the full stop to a colon, we could see more clearly how

the prayer is structured. After the colon we are told what reality would be like if God's will was done and God's kingdom had come on earth. Everyone would have bread for each day (verse 11). More importantly, everyone would be released from their debt, enabling them to retain their land and so to feed themselves and their families and contribute to their communities (verse 12). This a prayer about radical economic change (West 2017a). Yet, because of our Church Theology we do not see this but by focusing on the detail of this biblical text we disrupt Church Theology and enable the biblical text to connect with our lived realities and to construct a Prophetic Theology.

The second example comes from CBS work on HIV. For many years the Ujamaa Centre has worked with groups living positively with HIV. Our work has brought us slowly to the end of the book of Job, where God says to Job's friends "My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (42:7). Remarkably, God affirms how Job "has spoken of me" and condemns his friends for not speaking "of me what is right" (42:7). The friends have made it clear that God is punishing Job, which is why Job is suffering. To them Job is being punished and they do not understand what he has done to warrant that punishment. Job rejects this claim arguing that there is no direct link between his suffering and what he has done. In Job 42:7 God affirms the theology of Job and condemns the theology of Job's friends. This is a singularly important detail in the context of HIV but there is an equally important detail to be illustrated. God instructs the friends to offer a public sacrifice and to ask Job publically for forgiveness for their false theology (42:8). In 42:11 we see the impact of these public acts because "Then there came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and they ate bread with him in his house; they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him; and each of them gave him a piece of money and a gold ring". Those who had stigmatised and discriminated against God believing like the friends that God was punishing Job now embrace him and draw him back into community. The detail of this text makes it clear that theological change leads to social change. As Job's friends and community recognise the need to change their theology of retribution, they are enabled to embrace a theology of restoration (West 2017b).

The details of scripture disrupt 'settled' theologies, enabling 'new' and contextually relevant theologies to be born. Biblical studies offer us the

tools or methods for identifying such details but before we reflect more fully on the usefulness of particular biblical studies methods, it is worth indicating here that the example from Job is instructive for it is a good example of how the Ujamaa Centre understands its CBS work. We believe that in African contexts, theological change is required for social change. Without a change in theology with respect to HIV, for example, there will be no social change with respect to HIV. If there is theological change, then there will be social change. I will return to this understanding of our work more fully in the subsequent sections. At this stage I would like to draw detailed attention to the different ways in which biblical studies methods offer access to the details of scripture.

The second type of resources that CBS offers are interpretive resources. CBS is a collaborative alliance between ordinary readers of the Bible and socially engaged biblical scholars. A significant set of resources that socially engaged biblical scholars bring to this interpretive alliance are biblical studies methods. CBS works with each of the three primary categories of biblical studies methods which are thematic-semiotic, literary-narrative and socio-historical.

Thematic-semiotic methods are close to how ordinary readers usually engage the biblical text, recognising and resonating with the themes and signs that emerge from particular texts and that cut across the Bible as a whole. CBS begins with this recognition and resonance for every ordinary Bible user can participate in this kind of interpretation. We often begin a particular CBS with the question, "Listen to this biblical text. What is the text about?" This question invites every participant to identify and share with others what they 'hear' from and 'see' in the text. There is no 'wrong' response to this question. A thematic-semiotic entry point is egalitarian, enabling everyone to have a voice, and enabling every 'voice' of scripture to be heard.

CBS then does what Riches et al (2010) refer to as slowing the reading process and CBS does this by using literary-narrative methods to discern the literary dimensions of a text. Biblical texts all have a literary structure, a rhetorical texture that careful reading can identify, and many biblical texts belong to narrative genres thus, providing plenty of narrative detail to be identified through narrative methods. For example, in our work on the contestation between Jesus and the Jerusalem temple leaders in Mark's gospel, we offer a set of questions that draw attention to how Mark 11:27-13:2 is structured, focussing on the narrative 'setting', which is the

Jerusalem temple throughout this unit, and the narrative's 'characters', all of whom dialogue with Jesus (West 2011). A common question we use with narrative biblical texts is, "Who are the characters, what do we know about them, and what are the relationships between them?" Ordinary readers can and do use a question like this to generate a detailed literary-narrative analysis of the text if given adequate time. Indeed, ordinary readers recognise literary-narrative detail that scholar readers do not. For example, African ordinary readers recognise that important aspects of the story of Joseph (Genesis 37-50) depend on an understanding of a polygamous family with one father and many mothers (West 1994).

Literary-narrative methods often generate questions from CBS participants about the historical and sociological realities of the world from which biblical texts emerge. Thus, socio-historical methods have an important role in CBS provided that they are not used as the starting point of CBS. Socio-historical methods must follow thematic-semiotic and literary-narrative methods. If used at the beginning of a CBS, they silence ordinary readers, giving too much interpretive power to the socially engaged scholar. However, if used in response to thematic-semiotic and literary-narrative interpretation, they have the potential to offer additionally important detail about the biblical text. For example, in our CBS on the temple narrative in Mark (referred to above), we ask the question: "What was the role of the temple in first century Palestine during the time of Jesus?" This is the fifth, not the first question (West 2011: 439). This question follows three literary-narrative questions, and it is these literary-narrative questions that arouse the participants' interest in aspects of the world that produced Mark's gospel.

CBS then comes to a conclusion with a return to thematic-semiotic resources, but, after an array of literary-narrative and possible socio-historical questions. After the in-depth engagement with the detail of the biblical text that literary-narrative and socio-historical methods facilitate, participants 'take' the most contextually pertinent details and combine them into a thematic or semiotic 'interpretation'. This is an act of appropriation which in turn leads to an action plan because the goal of CBS is bringing about change.

A 'slow' re-reading of scripture draws participants to details of a biblical text that they may not have noticed before. The detail, we believe, has the capacity to disrupt the normative theologies through which the Bible is usually read. For the reason that normative theologies are often theologies

that marginalise certain sectors of society such as people living with HIV, details that disrupt such theologies have the potential to contribute to the formation of more contextually relevant and more life-giving theologies. For example, theologies of stigmatisation and retribution are disrupted by the detail from Job 42:6-11 mentioned above, allowing the people's theology of those living with HIV to draw on the detail of this text and to construct redemptive prophetic theologies.

The Ujamaa Centre uses the praxiological and interpretive resources described above to build interpretive capacity for resistance to dominant theologies. For example, theologies of retribution in the context of HIV often result in death. Nevertheless, Jesus has come so that HIV-positive Africans might have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10), so it is vital that theologies of redemption challenge and contend with theologies of retribution. Prophetic theologies are theologies of resistance and hope in contexts where the dominant theologies are theologies of retribution and condemnation. In the following summative definition of CBS, we emphasise the systemic dimension of social change. This entails that Contextual Bible Study is a collaborative praxis in which the already present Bible is re-read communally and critically within a faith-full setting. The reading is drawn from local interpretive resources of particular organised communities of the poor and marginalised and the critical interpretive resources of socially engaged biblical studies working together for systemic social and theological transformation.

However, over the thirty years of our work, we have come to recognise a more modest goal. It would seem that we have discovered through participant feedback that our work with them has enabled them to re-turn to church.

Interpretive resilience

During the late 1990s when the Ujamaa Centre, under the leadership of our colleague Bongi Zengele, began CBS work with people struggling to live positively with HIV, many of them had been pushed out of their churches because of stigmatising theologies of retribution. They found a safe and sacred refuge within CBS. However, having worked with what became the *Siyaphila* support group for a number of years, Bongi Zengele and I took our reflection (as part of our praxis) into focus group discussions with them. We were interested in the difference CBS had brought

into their lives. We were particularly interested in what difference CBS had made to their own interpretation of the Bible. It soon became clear that CBS had reconnected HIV-positive people to their Bibles (West 2016c: 377-392).

Over the decades that we have worked together with the *Siyaphila* support group there has been informal and formal reflections on how *Siyaphila* support group members related to their Bibles. The dominant metaphor used to describe the experience of most members with the Bible prior to their joining the *Siyaphila* support group was one of distance. The Bible was far off and at a distance from them (West and Zengele 2006, 57). Related to this image of distance was the image of place. The Bible was located in particular places, for example in the homes of their parents and grandparents, but predominantly in the church. As one person expressed, the Bible “was opened and closed in church” (West and Zengele 2006: 57). Yet, another related image used was that of belonging, the Bible belonged to others. For most of them, the Bible belonged to the minister/pastor/priest. The Bible belonged predominantly in the hands of religious professionals (West and Zengele 2006: 57).

Additionally, prior to their participation in the *Siyaphila* support groups, the Bible was linked to the metaphor of relative silence. As one member put it, the Bible required a preacher to make it speak. The Bible was a holy book and could therefore, only be made to speak by those whose task it was to do so (West and Zengele 2006: 57). As another person also said, it was a book ‘handled’ by others. In fact, this person reported that she had been expressly forbidden to touch the Bible because she was HIV-positive and therefore, regarded as unclean. Only ‘holy’ people could handle the Bible. When the Bible was handled by such ‘holy’ people it was used as the word of God to directly talk to the HIV+ people and to condemn them (West and Zengele 2006: 57).

There was also general agreement that the Bible was not about ordinary life and certainly not about an HIV-positive life. As one person said, the Bible “is just a book, talking about things that do not touch me”. She felt that she was not permitted to bring her questions or her reality to the Bible. It was ‘about’ other things, holy things that were unrelated to her context (West and Zengele 2006: 57-58).

All of these predominantly negative associations with the Bible were positively transformed by their membership to the *Siyaphila* support group. What was far from them had now been brought close to them; what had

no place in their lives now had a place within their lives; what belonged to others now belonged to them; what had nothing relevant to say to them now spoke directly to their condition; what could not be touched or made to speak by them or for them was now in their hands, they could ask their questions of it, and they heard it speaking to them directly; what had brought judgment, stigma, and discrimination now brought healing, hope, and life (West and Zengele 2006: 58).

The Bible was no longer far off. It engaged them personally and as a group; it dealt with the daily concerns that constituted their lives. As one of the participants admitted, the Bible affirmed that she was made in the image of God and offered her support in her inner struggles (West and Zengele 2006: 58). In new and refreshing ways, the Bible now belonged to them and as one of the participants said, she now ‘owned’ a Bible and she was aware of how much the Bible was used selectively in church by the church leadership (West and Zengele 2006: 58).

One of the most startling changes was that the members had come to see that the Bible dealt with real life issues. They had been amazed to discover that the things that were happening in their own contexts concurrently happened “in the Bible” (West and Zengele 2006: 58). The many connections between their lives and the Bible astounded them. Closely related to this new understanding was their sense of control. Through the participatory CBS processes, they realised that they did not need anyone else to interpret the Bible for them for they could interpret the Bible for themselves. Another aspect of this control was the sense that they could interrogate the Bible. As one of the members stated and drawing on her experience of the Job Bible studies, the Bible itself gave her permission to ask hard questions of the Bible and even God. This was especially empowering for it enabled her to talk back at those who used the Bible to say that HIV is a punishment for sin. She could now affirm that God loved her, and she could now talk about the process of interpretation. Affirming these comments, another member told the group that she had actually felt secure enough in her newfound sense of ownership of the Bible that she had confronted her own pastor about the way he was using the Bible against people like her (West and Zengele 2006: 59).

CBS had empowered *Siyaphila* members to resist their churches’ biased use of the Bible. Such an outcome speaks to how we as the Ujamaa Centre understand the goals of our work. We work to resist doctrinaire ‘church

theologies' (Kairos 1985) of stigmatisation, discrimination, and retribution, and we aim to construct 'prophetic theologies' of acceptance, inclusion and redemption. However, as I have indicated, for many CBS participants there is a more modest goal.

As the *Siyaphila* members told us, CBS had given them the resources to engage directly with their church leadership. What became clear was that this engagement included elements of resistance and resilience. While they were resisting dominant interpretations of the Bible, they were also re-entering the church space, a space from which they had been driven out. CBS had also given them the necessary resources for an interpretive resilience through which they were able to reoccupy their place in the church.

This understanding of our work has been supported through external evaluations of the Ujamaa Centre. In the 2010 external evaluation, the evaluators include the category titled "Unplanned Impacts" which records how CBS has contributed to capacity building in five related areas, which are, understanding of God, self-confidence, integration of faith and life, reintegration and respect within their families and an inclusive space within churches.

To begin with, participants reported that their "faith had been strengthened or that they had learned something new about God through their participation in the programme" (Cossa, Mkhize, and Strydom 2010: 20).

In addition, "A number of people reported that they, or people they knew, had experienced increased self-confidence and self-esteem and/or greater understanding of themselves" (Cossa, Mkhize, and Strydom 2010: 40). Through CBS resources, participants had, in the words of one participant, "been able to uproot the misconceptions and myths that clouded my judgement and tampered with my faith" (Cossa, Mkhize, and Strydom 2010: 40). A specific example is "how the CBS programme has helped women to realise they are important and valuable and have a legitimate role to play in terms of land issues" (Cossa, Mkhize, and Strydom 2010: 40). There was also recognition that CBS praxiological resources had been appropriated with participants reporting "how involvement in the programme had equipped them with skills, particularly networking, listening, reading, writing and presentation skills. Several people attributed their subsequent employment in various fields directly to the skills and confidence they had gained through the Ujamaa programme" (Cossa, Mkhize, and Strydom 2010: 26).

To add on, participants reported a new awareness of the relevance of the Bible to contemporary situations (Cossa, Mkhize, and Strydom 2010: 40). CBS work had enabled them to see a new link between the social and the spiritual, and they admit that they are now more responsible and are able to help other young people speak out on issues affecting them, especially HIV and economic matters (Cossa, Mkhize, and Strydom 2010: 16-17, 25). CBS has also equipped participants to have meaningful interactions with their families and some participants report that their families have more knowledge and understanding about [gender-based] abuse through the involvement of participants. In some cases, this has had a direct impact on family relationships. As one respondent explained, “In my family we are aware of such things and we are careful”. Another participant stated “because of me, the family is at peace. I’m like a problem solver” (Cossa, Mkhize, and Strydom 2010: 20). Similarly, with reference to the economic CBS work that we have done, two unemployed young people spoke about receiving new respect from their families because of the ideas they were sharing from workshops and their involvement in community activities and in the words of another participant, “I have been able to discuss deeper things with my family that I have been unable to do before . . . I have begun to involve my family more often” (Cossa, Mkhize, and Strydom 2010: 26). There was a recurring reference to how CBS work had contributed to participants’ gaining new respect within their families (Cossa, Mkhize, and Strydom 2010: 26).

Another development from CBS work is that one minister explained his realisation that he had been interpreting scripture to suit his own needs and that his sermons needed to become more balanced (Cossa, Mkhize, and Strydom 2010: 25). The minister recognised the need to make his church more receptive to those whom it had previously excluded.

Based on the 2010 external evaluation report, it has become clear that these five areas of “unplanned impacts” have altogether contributed to forms of resilience that in turn have enabled the reintegration of social sectors who had been marginalised by faith communities (including families and churches). Having noted these “unplanned impacts” we asked the external evaluators, five years later, to pay attention to factors like this. They managed to do this and so our reflections on the notion of ‘interpretive resilience’ have become clearer as we have begun to discern the contours of ‘interpretive resilience’.

In the 2015 external evaluation report, some participants made direct links between the dignity they experienced within CBS work and their yearning for similar acknowledgement of their dignity within their churches. We learned that many [women] participants spontaneously commented on the experience of being respected when they are used to being judged, blamed and ridiculed for their different conditions. They spoke of feeling rejected by the church and finding it valuable to find acceptance from a church-based position [such as the Ujamaa Centre]. This led to a restored sense of dignity and self-worth as reported by participants (Msunduzi 2015: 25-26). For these women, CBS has remained a safe and sacred site in their interactions with the Bible, given that “these things [referring to 2 Samuel 13:1-22] are not read in churches, they are being hidden” (Msunduzi 2015: 26). While these women still felt disrespected in their churches, others used the resources of CBS to build their capacities to return to their churches. Part of this was because CBS trained ministers had changed how they used the Bible and now used Ujamaa Centre resources, such as the Worker Sunday materials in their church services. Ministers reported of how unemployed people spoke movingly about their plight during these services (Msunduzi 2015: 28). This is significant given how the unemployed often feel stigmatised by their families and churches (Gwala 2007). AIC pastors spoke of how they do not have capacity, and of how the work with Ujamaa has provided a platform to strengthen the capacity of the clergy (Msunduzi 2015: 30). This kind of capacity building is the core business of the Ujamaa Centre. As one respondent put it, the clergy have changed how they preach, and the gospel has shifted because of the training (Msunduzi 2015: 31). The work of the Ujamaa Centre is to ‘shift’ Church Theology’s understanding of the gospel.

Accordingly, part of what has enabled marginalised sectors to re-turn to their churches is because of how the church has changed. When theological systems change – when what is ‘good news’ (the gospel) shifts – the church becomes a safer place for marginalised sectors. But another part of this return to church is also because CBS participants feel scripturally confident and equipped to return to their churches.

It is clear that CBS resources contribute towards “emotional healing” and “individual agency” (Msunduzi 2015: 33). These are according to the 2015 external evaluation report, “additional outcomes” (Msunduzi 2015, 33) and they are key components of resilience. Having become “community resource people” and having contributed to “capacity building” within their communities (Msunduzi 2015, 34), some of the participants have

become church resource people, returning to their churches with CBS interpretive resources. The 'outcome logic' (Rao and Kelleher 2005) of this development is explained by the external evaluators as follows:

Reaching the most marginalised and vulnerable people > The most marginalised and vulnerable people experience acceptance and a non-judgemental attitude from educated theologians (Ujamaa facilitators) > There is a shift from self-blame to understanding contextual factors contributing to their vulnerability > Increase in confidence and individual agency; increase in group solidarity and cooperation > Mobilisation of community action; marginalised people become resource persons for others in the community (Msunduzi 2015: 45).

What this does not capture fully is how some of most marginalised and vulnerable return to their families and churches bearing interpretive gifts, gifts of interpretive resilience that enable them to find a place within sites that have stigmatised and marginalised them. What follows is a brief case study of interpretive resilience within both the family and the church.

A case study of interpretive resilience: a sexuality CBS

The advent of HIV has created a significant space for working with local faith-based communities and organisations in the related areas of masculinity and sexuality (West 2016a). In its work on sexuality, the Ujamaa Centre has established a collaborative relationship with the Pietermaritzburg Gay & Lesbian Network.¹ Among the workshops we have done together has been a series of workshops in 2013 which included church leaders from the KwaZulu-Natal province and members from the Gay & Lesbian Network. The workshop was constructed in two related phases, the first phase provided a baseline measure of participants' experience and perceptions of homosexuality. During this workshop one of the activities was a CBS on Genesis 18-19, which located the infamous Genesis 19 within its literary context, reading Genesis 18-19 as a single narrative (with various sub-plots) (West 2016a). The CBS concluded with participants committing themselves to forms of 'action' (Act) that they had agreed upon in their small-group work in response to their engagement with the CBS, an integral component in the See-Judge-Act process of CBS.

¹ <http://www.gaylesbian.org.za/>

This first phase workshop was followed some months later with a second phase. The introductory activity of the second phase workshop was a report by each participant on what ‘actions’ they had undertaken in response to the CBS on Genesis 18-19. Each participant reported on what they had done. When the process of reporting was complete there was an interruption as the Gay & Lesbian Network’s video operator asked if he too could present a report. As facilitators, we in the Ujamaa Centre were intrigued. The young self-identified gay man had not wanted to participate in the CBS itself during the first phase of the workshop activities. We had offered him the opportunity, but he had declined indicating that he was not that interested in ‘religion’. His role was to film aspects of the workshop for the Gay & Lesbian Network. He was a persistent but self-effacing presence throughout the workshop. His request to offer an ‘action’ report was, therefore, unexpected. However, we readily welcomed him to share with the group.

He told us that he had paid careful attention to the CBS, filming the plenary sessions and some of the small-group sessions. He said that his apprehensions about ‘religion’ in general and the Bible in particular had slowly begun to dissipate as he watched and listened. His experience with religion and the Bible ever since he had been open about his sexuality was of stigmatisation and condemnation. On the other hand, his observation of the CBS on Genesis 18-19 had given him a reason to reconsider. He had found the CBS as ‘empowering’ as had the other participants.

During the first phase, a number of the gay, lesbian and transgender Christian participants had shared how they had become alienated from their churches and the Bible. But, when the small groups reported back after the CBS, participants shared how, by re-reading this story through the CBS process had given them another perspective on the Bible. One participant said this CBS “takes away the power of the text over us as homosexuals, for we are told that homosexuality is the reason for the destruction of Sodom; we are told that we pose a threat to the church, that we will bring destruction on the church”. Another participant explained, “Many have left the church because of this text”, while yet another participant clarified, that in her context, “Everyone claims to know what this text is about! It will not go away; it must be re-read”. Other participants asked, “Why is it that we have not questioned the interpretation of this story?” Still others wondered, “Perhaps this re-reading enables us to go back to the church”.

Significantly, some of the participants appropriated the re-read biblical text as a resource with which to confront the church: “The church is like Sodom, just as the men of Sodom wanted to subject others to their power, so the church wants to subject us to its power. Re-reading this text reminds us to question each and every text; God himself will come down to judge the church, just as God himself came down to judge Sodom!” This theme was taken up by others, who asked, “Could not this text, as it is interpreted by Ezekiel and Isaiah and Jesus, be read as a story about receiving and welcoming homosexuals into our churches?”²

Amidst all this sharing in the first phase workshop, our video operator had not said anything. Yet, as we were to discover when he asked to share during the second phase, these responses by his comrades confirmed his own re-appropriation of Genesis 19, the classic anti-homosexual proof-text (Gagnon 2001: 78, Lings 2013: 241). He told us how he had returned home after the first phase CBS and had used the same CBS with his mother. His mother is a devoted Christian who loved him dearly but who worried that God might condemn him for being gay. Her acceptance of his sexuality was tempered by her theological apprehension. So he went home and worked through the CBS with her. The effect was profound, he told us, with tears in his eyes, for she now understood Genesis 19 (within its literary-narrative context) in a new way recognising that this text (and God) did not condemn him. Our corporate, collaborative re-reading had offered an antidote to the toxic interpretations of this text that characterises the reception history of this text in African faith communities and families. Through CBS, he had found interpretive resources with which to engage directly with the theological world of his mother, negotiating an inclusive theology for their home. And many among his comrades from the Gay & Lesbian Network have found interpretive resources to engage with their churches.

Conclusion

We are coming to understand more fully how our CBS resources, both praxiological and interpretive, make a contribution to building capacity for

² I recorded these contributions with the permission of the group, taking notes on the powerpoint version of the CBS publicly so that everyone could see what I was writing and could confirm that I had recorded their comments correctly. They wanted to be heard and they wanted their responses to the CBS to be shared with others.

interpretive resilience. There are clear indications from participants that they are able to return to their families and faith communities, re-establishing a place within these important social domains from which they had been marginalised. We are working with the notion of interpretive resilience that emphasises the agency of CBS participants as they do what Ungar (2008) refers to as to “navigate” and “negotiate” CBS resources, integrating what is useful to them as they build their interpretive resilience so that they are able to re-turn to their families and churches.

Some, as we have seen, do more than resiliently subsist within their families and churches. Some use their interpretive resilience with the Bible to ‘rework’ and even ‘resist’ (Katz 2004, 152) dominant interpretations of the Bible. Though interpretive “reworking” and “resistance” are the primary terrain within which the Ujamaa Centre works, we have come to recognise the importance of interpretive “resilience” as a necessary capacity for a re-turn to family and church that so many vulnerable and marginalised sectors yearn for.

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