

READING TOGETHER

A BIBLE STUDY METHOD



INCLUSIVE & AFFIRMING MINISTRIES
— since 1995 —

Welcome to Reading Together, a Bible Study method developed by Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM), a non-profit organisation, working in South Africa and other countries on the African continent. IAM empowers faith communities to recognise and celebrate Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) persons in Africa.

This Bible study method integrates IAM's theory of change and insights gained from Contextual Bible Study and Intercultural Bible reading, with the specific focus to engage with issues of gender and sexuality. We invite you into a journey, as you join other readers across the continent in an embodied reading of the Bible. This Bible study method seeks to highlight the fact that we are ordinary readers; diverse bodies that are situated within various contexts who seek to break through what oftentimes appear to be complex theological terms and to read, interpret and understand where God is calling the church. The Reading Together method invites you to reflect on the complexity that comes into play when we engage with other bodies while all bringing the gift of our specific reading of the biblical text. The ultimate goal is bringing our gifts of creative reading, various interpretations of the text and unique resources as we engage in spaces that allow more stories that have not been heard before to matter.

As we journey together as diverse groups of differently situated readers, may we seek the will of God for the church, to stand where God stands – on the side of those who are outcasts, poor and marginalised. Either by stigma of HIV & AIDS, lack of or access to education and being rejected and oppressed for their sexual orientation¹, gender identity² or gender expression³.

Selecting a Text

We never come to any biblical text without preconceived notions and pre-set agendas. When selecting a text, we need to be honest with our pre-set agendas and reasons for choosing a specific text. This could be both helpful in guiding our understanding and it can also hamper new and creative reading of the text. Choosing a text with a pre-set agenda is helpful when the reading together community is grappling with a specific idea/problem/issue in which we seek God's guidance and the text offers creative ways to position ourselves as God guides us. However, choosing the text with preconceived notions and a pre-set agenda can also stunt creativity that leads to new insights. We need to be aware of this 'loophole' throughout the process.

This strategy for reading the Bible in community strives to open minds, open hearts and open doors as we journey towards transformed, inclusive and affirming faith communities.

The method that we will use, is summarised on p 8-9. Through a process of connecting with others, reading the biblical text, while listening to different perspectives, we grow to a deeper understanding of diversity.

Process of selecting a text to study:

- Select the text you and the group will study.
- Read the chapter before and after the text the group selected.
- Demarcate the chapter and verse(s) that the group will return to throughout the process. For example: group selected Genesis 19:1-14. Read Genesis 18 & 19:35-20:18.

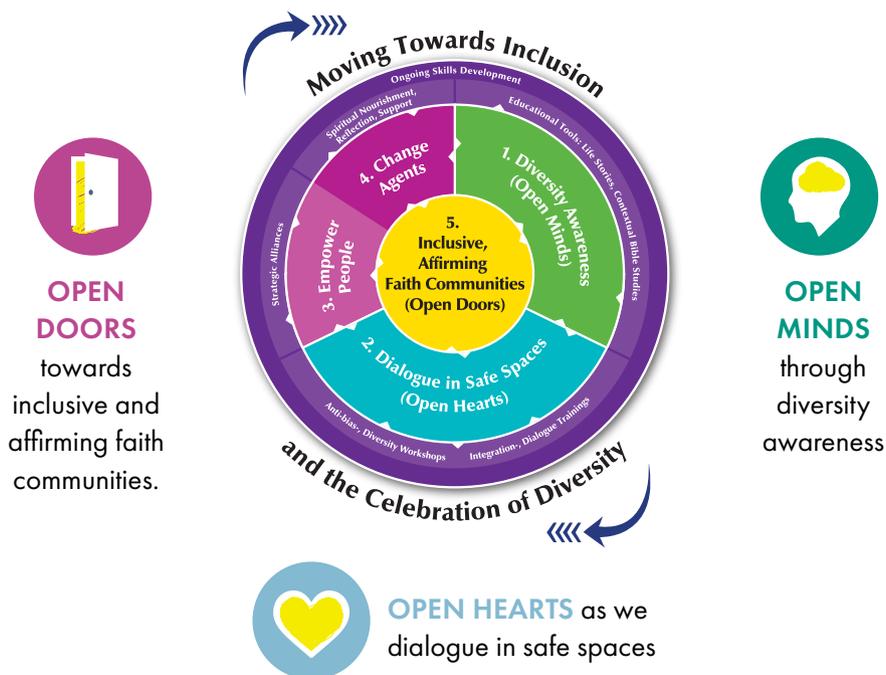
¹ Refers to attraction between any two people on various levels – emotionally, physically, intellectually, spiritually and sexually

² The individual's self-definition of whether she, he or they are a woman or a man, a girl or a boy. It is possible to be biologically male and feel like a boy and vice versa

³ Describes the external characteristics and behaviours that are socially defined as feminine or masculine including dress, speech, mannerism and social interaction.

IAM'S Wheel of Change

Change can happen! Moving towards recognition, inclusion and celebration of diversity is a journey. We need tools and assistance on this journey. The wheel of change invites us to:



One of the key tools that we will engage is **storytelling**. We can only access each other as we engage with the stories that we share from our own lives. As we share our embodied reality we support each other, and become aware of stereotypes and prejudice. As we share our embodied stories we become empowered in realising our own capability as a change agent, joining each other towards transformed spaces that include more stories apart from those that usually dominate religious spaces.

Moving from one position or conviction to another, requires that you set up **safe spaces** in which participants are able to risk sharing their life stories as they are reflected back at them through the biblical text and their context. Learning and transformation takes place in risky, unsafe spaces in which people risk encounter with diverse bodies. These spaces need a GPS! IAM uses dialogue as a method to guide discussions.

Safe-Spaces

Before we go into the complexity of reading together, take a moment to reflect on your own contextual situatedness and how this impacts your process of reading and interpreting the Bible. As we join others in reading, we realise that we are all differently situated as we read in a diverse community. This could become threatening to many people – especially when difficult subjects are discussed. Participants are invited to read together in a risky space, as they will share honestly from their own lives, their own experiences and their own interpretative interests.

It is important to be up front about the nature of the Reading Together space. Participants are invited to co-create a space of safety for everyone present. It is up to each individual to participate honestly from their space and offer safety through sharing their stories.

Over the past 25 years, IAM has seen the value of dialogue in safe spaces when engaging on contentious/difficult issues, using the biblical text in diverse contexts.

How to create a safe-space?

- Break into groups of two participants
- Define what is a safe-space and unsafe space.
- Collaborate together in the bigger group and define a working definition of what a safe space mean.
- As a group, define the difference between dialogue and debate.
- Every time the group meets, remember to remind everyone about the shared agreement.
- Have fun!



Human beings are diverse! When you recognise the other or stranger you are also recognising how different you are from them. What makes you different or what makes the other different?

Otherness is a unique gift that opens worlds for new experiences and knowledge. Recognising otherness is to celebrate the Creator's work as participants contribute from their contextual situatedness the unique gift of their embodied story as it intersects with the biblical text, to the diversity of the Reading Together group.

Differences might include:

Language
Salary
Culture
Hair Colour
Race
Age
Shoe Size
Gender
Sexual Orientation
Denomination
Political Ideology
Disability



Discussion/activity:

- Share with your group what makes you different, using ideas from the list above as a starting point.
- Use sticky notes. Each participant writes one "difference" that they bring to the group as a unique contribution or gift.
- Do you agree or disagree that difference is a gift?



Tips: How to put diverse groups together?

- Use the list above as guideline to form a diverse group.
- Advertise in pew leaflet.
- Invite ecumenical partners.



Exercise

Collaborate as a group to write a statement of the group's commitment towards listening to of different voices throughout this process, acknowledging right from the start that this might be hard as the process of reading together unfolds. You will revisit this statement throughout the process.



Reading the Bible together with others is a gift! The early church in the New Testament, read and listened to the letters of Apostle Paul in public worship spaces together. Today, we have the many writings of ancient Scriptures compiled together in a library of books – the Bible. The Bible consists of various worlds that are temporally and culturally removed from our present context. For this reason, we cannot simply pick it up and apply it directly to our context.

As we read together we hold each other to account in reflecting responsibly from our individual places, while listening to and taking the context of the biblical text seriously as well. The gift of reading together is a present with unknown experiences, knowledge and outcomes. A good start will be identifying whether you read Scripture literally or contextually helping you to read Scripture anew.

World behind the text

Author(s) language, belief systems, culture(s) and view of the world.

World in the text

- Grammar, style and genre
- World in front of the text
- Language(s), belief systems, culture(s) and view of the world.

Discussion/activity:

- Divide into groups of two.
- Discuss in your group the difference between literal and contextual reading.
- What are the benefits of these approaches?
- Give feedback in the bigger group.
- As you read the text for the first time in this process, what is the world behind the text, in the text and in front of the text you have selected? Reflect on the dynamic between the three worlds that you encounter.
- Reflect the dynamic of the three worlds and refer to how they influence your reading and understanding of the text.

Tips:

- Engage dialogue rather than debate during the discussion.
- Time the discussion.

Exercise:

Place chairs around the room and invite participants to place their chairs in different positions – some facing each other, while others sit with their backs to participants and even facing the outside wall of the room. Read the chosen text aloud to get a sense of reading the text “from different places”, contexts and world views. Debrief the exercise as a group to share individual experiences of reading and listening from different places.



Experience is sourced from various people, places, books, movies and series you have watched, offering insight, knowledge and wisdom. Even reading, listening and understanding Scripture is based on experiences.

Revisiting your experiences is an opportunity to revisit your own personal journey of how your behaviour, beliefs systems, views of the world and faith has been shaped. Your individual and communal journey is connected and sometimes blurred. We learn and unlearn ideas, behaviour or beliefs when we test it amongst our own and other people's values, morals and worldviews.



Discussion/activity:

- When was the first time you read this text?
- What did you understand it meant?
- How is this text preached and understood in your faith community?
- How would your family have understood this text?



Tips:

- Give participants time to reflect on their experiences.
- Depending on your group size and time, give every participant an opportunity to speak.
- Time the activity.



Exercise:

There will always be experiences that participants are not prepared to share in a group. Participants are encouraged to reflect and perhaps write this silent experience for themselves in the form of a narrative, prose, poetry or any other artform and not necessarily share it with anyone.

Any transformation starts from within – often in the silent spaces within ourselves. Even though this is largely a group process, the internal, individual process is equally important.

The next station brings together stations 1, 2 and 3 by asking how we incorporate other perspectives on the text.



Awareness of diversity in our reading together group assists us to recognise the gift of difference in myself and the other as we read together. In reading together, we bring together the worlds of biblical author(s), the text and our group's collective unique interpretive experiences as we read together. Opening other sources of knowledge: science, scholars, pastors and activists deepens our collective understanding.

As we welcome and embrace different perspectives, discomfort might set in. This is a natural discomfort, welcome it as a gift. Exchanging what you know for what you don't know is part of the transformation process.



Discussion/activity

- Watch IAM DVD, *Created in the Image of God*, *Tears for Bobby*, *Kanarie* or any other relevant movie, YouTube clip or resource.
- What other perspectives did you hear?
- What didn't you understand or have questions about.
- Revisit the statement that you wrote at station 1. What would you like to emphasise, re-affirm, add or change?



Tips

- This could be a full session or spread across two nights or days, based on the frequency of the group meeting.
- Setup a DVD player or data projector beforehand.
- Check the sound and quality.



Exercise:

Hearing other perspectives calls for reflection and prayer. The following exercise is a suggestion and can be changed to suit the needs of the group.

- Light a candle as a sign of enlightenment to hear the pleas for those LGBTI persons, parents and friends who are victimised by stereotypes and prejudice that are fuelled by lack of understanding and compassion and might or might not be represented in this space.
- Ask for short prayers or a song for example *Senzeni na?* (What have we done?).
- If the group is continuing to the next station, let the candle continue to burn in the centre of the group.

[RE]COMMITTING TO THE JOURNEY **08**

REPOSITIONING IN THE NOW **07**

EVALUATION INNER MOVEMENTS **06**

EXPLORING OTHER VOICES **05**



READ TOGETHER
BIBLE STUDY
PROCESS

01 RECOGNIZING
OTHERNESS

02 READING THE
BIBLICAL TEXT

03 REVISITING PAST
EXPERIENCES

04 RECEIVING DIFFERENT
PERSPECTIVES

READING
TOGETHER
STUDY
PROCESS





In the Old Testament God spoke through priests, prophets and judges who conveyed God's message and commandments to God's people. The people of God would sing songs and tell stories to recount their heritage and witness about God's presence in their lives.

The early Church read the text together – mostly in synagogues and homes of believers. In their own context, the Living Word of God was heard, read and interpreted aloud as they read Scripture from their own context. Through the centuries certain contextual questions arose: the role of women in the church and society, the position of black people and their culture, the churches response to the poor and oppressed.

Today we are invited to listen to various voices who are traditionally excluded from reading the bible, as we continue to listen to God's message to God's people.



Discussion/activity

- What is the reality that you read the text from? For example - race, sex, gender, language, sexual orientation, social class, etc.
- What unique perspectives do you bring?



Tips

- Listen to excluded stories and invite the person with the least power in the group to share their understanding of the text from their context and body experience before any other voices are heard.
- The person with the least power would usually be the one with the least voice in terms of gender, sexual orientation, age, ability, education, disability, race, economic position, etc.
- Engage with the story without judgement or contestation



Exercise:

- Read the text again.
- Sit in silent prayer.

Revisit your notes on the Discussion/activity and Exercise that you completed at station 2. What new insights have you gained?



Reading together creates inner movements: contesting or wrestling with yourself, other voices and perspectives. Contestation of inner movements takes place simultaneously – individually and communally. Include voices from various places – also outside of the group. This is a good place to include stories in the media (news articles or YouTube clips) and beyond your group.



Discussion/activity

- Re-read the text. Have you come to different insights about the text since the first time that you read it at station 2? Also revisit your notes at station 3 and 4.
- How does this text challenge your context and community?
- How has this text been used in your context and what has been the impact on your own life and the lives of individuals and your community?
- What is the Holy Spirit telling us through the impact that the Biblical narrative/message have on the lives of people on a more societal level?



Tips

- Emphasise safe space community agreements.
- Encourage participants to reflect from place of honesty and vulnerability.
- At this point reading together may become uncomfortable and threatening, the only promise that the reading together group can make to each other is to continue to hold on to each other in honest reflection.



Exercise:

- Fold an A4 page in four quarters.
- In each of the quarters, write the following headings: self, family, faith community and broader community.
- List behaviours in each of the quadrants that are addressed by the text.
- Under each list, suggest practical activities that could be employed as a response to the message of the text.



In the previous six stations we have heard from different voices, stories and places; allowed the text and Holy Spirit to speak to you from diverse experiences and perspectives. Now you have an opportunity to reposition from where you were, when you started to read the text in a diverse and inclusive community.

Before any further discussion or activity, do the following exercise in the group. It will be helpful to emphasise the importance of “repositioning”. On a blank A-4 paper, draw a figure 3 (from various angles, in writing, the figure 3 also appears like a “w”, an “m”, an “e”, etc.). Invite participants to start at one place and say what they see when they look at the A-4. Each person will see something different. What do you see when you move to a different place in the circle? This is repositioning.



Discussion/activity

- Re-read the text one final time in this process.
- How have the previous six movements – recognising, reading, revisiting, receiving, exploring and evaluating – shifted your understanding of the text?



Tips

- Invite participants to share in groups of two or reflect on their own before sharing with the larger group.



Exercise:

- List all the experiences or knowledge you have received.
- Creative exercise – write a passage of prose, a poem, or draw a picture that reflects the way in which you have repositioned.



At the end of the reading together process, engage in a Liturgical process – light a candle, say a prayer, become aware of the gift of diversity in your space.



Discussion/activity

- How has this process influenced your understanding of the text?
- What are the inclusive practices that the text is calling you to?
- What are the practices that the text is calling you away from?
- Who are the people that you can join as an ally/partner?
- Where in your community can your prophetic actions become tangible?



Tips

- Silence and other symbols are valuable gifts in this final steps. Symbols can include light (candles), water, scented oils, etc. Invite participants to add a few of their own symbols that are significant to them..



Exercise:

- What does an Inclusive Affirming Faith Community look like? Make a poster-sized “collage of words”
- How does my behaviour, beliefs and faith contribute to this community?



Conclusion

We invite you to document your journey on the blank pages that follow. Our journey with the text and our circumstances, is never completed. God, through God's Spirit, continuously surprises us with new meaning paths already walked. With this new meaning, we draw faith to form part of Christ's Body, that works for justice and reconciliation that the world may believe,



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

IAM suggests the following resources to facilitate further conversation. These sources provide digital information regarding SOGI, People Living with HIV (PLHIV) and friends and family of SOGI and PLHIV.

Web resources:

Inclusive and Affirming Ministries: www.iam.org.za

Triangle Project: www.triangle.org.za

Gender Dynamix: www.genderdynamix.org.za

Intersex Human Rights Australia: www.ihra.org.au

Irant: www.iranti-org.co.za/index.html

Inerela: www.inerela.org

Good Hope Community Church: www.goodhopemcc.org

Treatment Action Campaign: www.tac.org.za

South African Family and Faith Institute: www.saffi.org.za

Institute for Healing or Memories: www.healing-memories.org

For literature, films, documentaries and novels: www.gala.co.za

For hate crimes support, telephone and face-to-face counseling, support groups: www.out.org.za

For victim support of hate crimes, safe spaces for LGBTIQ, trans*bodies and asylum seekers safe spaces:
Access Chapter 2: www.ac2.org.za

Intersex South Africa: Facebook Page: [Intersex South Africa](https://www.facebook.com/IntersexSouthAfrica)

The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation: www.ijr.org.za/portfolio-items/a-gender-conversation-toolkit

Movies & Documentaries:

Rafiki (2018)

Kanarie (2018)

Inxeba – The Wound (2017)

Moonlight (2016)

The Danish Girl (2015)

Prayers for Bobby (2009)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqIF50ISNV0>

For the Bible Tells Me So (2007)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yhSa1oAipHg>

The Priest (1994)

Books:

Benade, R. 2017. *God, Gay en Genade*. South Africa: Naledi

Mabenge, L. 2018. *Becoming Him*. South Africa: MFBooks Joburg:

Khumalo. S. 2018. *You have to be Gay to know God*. South Africa: Kwela Books

Morgan, R., Marais, C. & Wellbeloved, J.R., 2009. *Trans: transgender life stories from South Africa*, Auckland Park, South Africa: Fanele.



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