

The Bible Study Series of Church Land Programme

THE ROLE OF THE BIBLE STUDY FACILITATOR



THE BIBLE STUDY Series of Church Land Programme (CLP) aims to assist local church leaders and congregations. The Series provides relevant and practical reflections on the themes of people's land rights and creation as a partnership with God. Please read through the section called "Introductory Notes" before using any of the studies.

Key to many forms of Bible Study is the role of the facilitator. The aim of these notes is to give guidelines on the role of the Bible study facilitator. The hope is that these guidelines will help you if you wish to facilitate a Bible study, but are not sure how to go about it.

The style of the Bible studies

THE BIBLE STUDIES in this series are collaborative in their style. This style (or approach) depends on a leader who *facilitates*. Dominating or overbearing forms of leadership are inappropriate in this situation, and the leader must be a facilitator.

The primary role of the facilitator is to assist the overall purpose of the study, which is group collaboration. Therefore, the facilitator needs to be **someone who enables the group to work together** collaboratively, sharing their resources and coming to some common plan for action.

To be the facilitator you do not have to have a qualification. Anyone is welcome to organise and facilitate the studies in this series, and they are not intended for ordained clergy (or ministers) alone. The studies may be used

individually, or as a series. They are written in English, but may also be done in isiZulu.

The process of the Bible studies

REMEMBER THAT THE more you have the opportunity to facilitate a Bible study, the better you will become at doing it. The following are some important things to know:

1. It is important to understand the group which is doing the Bible study. The facilitator should be familiar with the **demographics of the group participants**: age, race, denomination, language, gender, cultures, traditions, similarities and differences, how many in the group etc. Preferably the facilitator should come from within the group itself. There is also some value in thinking about the knowledge and experiences of the participants regarding the theme of the Bible study. This is so that you don't 'miss' the group completely when you are trying to encourage their participation.
2. The style of these studies is one of **participation and discussion**. This means that they are compiled with the understanding that each and every participant has wisdom – the 'answers' are not all with one person. In fact the participants play a key role and have a valid contribution to make. So when a study is done, it should not be undertaken as if in a school classroom (with the facilitator as the 'teacher'), but rather like a round table discussion between equals.



3. The facilitator is just one voice in the Bible study, so it is important to **defer to the group**, even if what the group is saying is not what the facilitator wants to hear! This does not mean that the facilitator does not have a voice, but it does mean that their voice is not the most important one.
4. The facilitator needs to **enable the 'group process' to take place**. In other words, he/she should manage group dynamics, promote turn-taking, and move the group from reflection into action.
5. Since the Bible study is driven by questions, the facilitator needs to enable the participants to **engage with the questions**, with each other and with the key text.
6. The facilitator should try to **provide information when requested**, but always in a way that draws on the resources of the group. If the facilitator does not know the information, or an answer to a question, then he/she should say so! It is better to go and find out the information than to pretend.
7. The facilitator should be sensitive to the fact that **not all of the participants may be literate**. It is the role of the facilitator to ensure that there is sufficient discussion, explanation or even repetition of any written material, so that no-one feels left out.
8. The facilitator needs to help **keep the Bible study to time**. There is an estimated time that it should take to complete each study, but this is a guide only. Some study groups may take longer, and others may be quicker. The facilitator should avoid pushing too quickly through the study as the participants may miss out on its full meaning. But, he/she should also keep the Bible study moving toward the conclusion.
9. 'Ice-breaker' exercises before the Bible study are an excellent way to help people to get to know one another. Some examples of this are included at the end of this section.
10. When the participants **divide up into smaller groups**, it may be a good idea to do this in a certain way: older women in one group, older men in another, younger women in one group and younger men in another. This is because people often feel unconfident to speak out in a group where people different to themselves are present.
11. Doing these studies may evoke **emotion in participants**. This is because the themes may be painful and difficult for many people. The facilitator will need to be ready for this and sensitive to the needs of participants. It may even be necessary to take a break at some point within the study, have disposable tissues available, or to allow participants a reprieve from having to face what is difficult for them.
12. There is value in **doing some preparation before the study begins**:
 - Read through the whole study.
 - Read through the key text, and be sure you have an understanding of what it is about.
 - Gather the things you will need for the study.
 - Read through all the questions within the study, and reflect on what you think the participants' responses may be.
 - Write a few notes for yourself in preparation.
 - Write the questions for the study on a large piece of flipchart paper or a chalkboard.



The practicalities of the Bible studies

THERE ARE SOME very practical aspects to facilitating a Bible study. The facilitator does well to consider the following:

1. Check that you have all the necessary **equipment** on hand, that there is enough of it, and that it works properly. These are some of the things which you will have to gather: Pens, paper, a Bible, large flipchart paper (or a chalk board and chalk), flipchart pens, a flipchart stand (if available), and masking tape (or prestick, or drawing pins). The Bible studies in this series in some cases will require that you photocopy a picture or arrange for each small group of participants to have a Bible to use.
2. Make sure that the responses of the participants and their group reports are **written onto the flipchart** paper for all to see. The facilitator does not have to do this him/herself, and could get someone else to help:
 - Make sure the writing is easy to read and big enough for someone at the back of the room to see – the participants must not have to struggle to see what you have written.
 - Make sure the writing is legible and clear – handwriting is not always easy to read!
3. Think about the **venue** where the Bible study will be held, and plan accordingly for it: How big is it, does it have electricity, does it have chairs, what kind of equipment is available, will it cost much (if you are paying), and will it generally be a good venue in which to hold the Bible study? You will need some walls or other places to pin or stick up the sheets of flipchart paper. (If you are meeting in the

open air, then perhaps a tree would be a good place to pin the paper up.)

4. When you are facilitating a Bible study, it is important to ensure that there is **no obstacle between you and the participants**. Do not 'hide' behind a lectern, pulpit or table. Rather have a table to the side of the room, on which the equipment is available.
5. In fact it is best to set out the **seating arrangements** in such a way that participants sit in a semi-circle and look at each other, rather than a 'classroom' style, where everyone is facing the 'front'. It is best to not have people sitting behind tables. Remember that the role of the facilitator is to help participants play an active part in the Bible study, and the way the participants are seated is crucial to this.

The participants of the Bible studies

AS MENTIONED EARLIER, the participants of a Bible study also play a very important role, and it is useful for the facilitator to understand this in some detail.

Very often the theme of a Bible study begins with the reality of the local community and the issues that it is dealing with. Because of this, the role of the participants doing the Bible study is as important as that of the facilitator, as they bring with them the themes of their local community.

The participants of a Bible study could be seen to be 'ordinary' readers of the Bible. Even though they may be 'ordinary', they still have important insights to offer the church and community. This series is really for those who want to learn from the insights and wisdom on offer by ordinary readers of the Bible, and not only those with some theological training.



'Ordinary' readers of the Bible are referred to as such because they read the Bible in an untrained way. But they are also termed 'ordinary' because often they are poor, oppressed or marginalised in our society. It is from this perspective within the South African context that they are able to offer some significant insights.

In South Africa we know that there are *different* contexts or realities, and so it is important to choose to read the Bible from the perspective of South Africans who are poor and oppressed. This choice is made because we believe that God is particularly concerned for the poor and the oppressed – those who are socially, politically, economically, or culturally marginalised and exploited. Throughout the Bible we read that God hears the cry of widows, orphans, women, strangers, those with disabilities, the poor and the oppressed. Jesus himself was

born amongst the poor and chose to live and work with the poor, and then also died the death of the poor and oppressed on a cross. So when the perspectives of the poor and oppressed are heard in the Bible study through the participants, we are echoing God's concern for them.

This is particularly important for facilitators who do not come from this South African context. It is important to be committed to reading the Bible in community with others whose contexts are different to our own. And this means that the facilitator recognises that in the group, he/she may have power which comes from having a privileged background. It also means that the facilitator's role is to empower the group participants during the Bible study to discover, acknowledge and recognise their own identity, and the value and importance of their contributions.



Great 'Icebreaker' Ideas for Facilitators



Getting to Know You

Ask the participants to get into pairs. Each person should tell their partner something small and fairly unimportant about themselves that no-one else knows. This can be a different thing for different people. (Examples of 'something small' are: where their mother was born OR what their favourite colour is.) Their partner should listen carefully and also have a chance to say something. Then get each person to report back to the whole group on what their partner said e.g.: "Nonhlanhla told me that her favourite food is curry". The idea here is to get participants sharing comfortably in small and large groups without feeling threatened.

Broken Cellphone

Ask everyone to be quiet. Whisper a short message into the ear of the first person. Only whisper once. Get them to in turn to whisper the message they heard from you into the ear of the next person. That person should pass on the "cellphone" quietly to the next person. No-one should be allowed to repeat their message. Go around the room. The last person should share out loud the message which came through the cellphone!

Mini-choirs

Ask the participants to organise themselves into mini-choirs. Each choir should have a person with a bass voice, a tenor voice, an alto voice and a soprano voice. (This is particularly good way of dividing participants into groups where it is important for there to be a mixture of genders and ages.) Some small groups may need to have more than one type of voice. This is also a good way to make the point that everyone has a unique 'voice' to offer when doing a Bible study, and that we all need to listen carefully to each other. Don't be surprised if the singing begins!

