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## **What were the processes and impact of establishing a book group within the Hilltop Benefice? Are there learnings for the wider church on how to use shared-reading to build both connectivity and community?**

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### **Abstract**

This project outlines and explores the impact of the establishment of a book group organised during Lent 2023 within a particular benefice that had three separate church congregations. The opportunity to join the club, which would run for six sessions, was made available across all three congregations. The title for sharing was pre-selected and each week one chapter was read by group members as preparation. Sessions started with hospitality and then the reading aloud of the set chapter, as a group exercise, with an ensuing supported group discussion. Participants were invited to share their feedback on involvement in an online, anonymous questionnaire. This paper outlines process and findings, and in particular highlights observations that are relevant to the wider church, and can be built on in future.

### **Introduction**

It is known that book groups can connect people (The Reading Agency and BOP Consulting, 2015). There is active encouragement within the Church of England to build community using a range of different techniques and initiatives to widen missional outreach, promote involvement and encourage participation (Eames, 2022; Hayward, 2022).

This paper uses the methodology and learnings from a project trialled during lockdown within Emly Deanery, which used book groups to connect people within a church context (Baverstock, Steinitz and Cowie, 2022). The current paper reports on an experiment using the same methodology but within a different context, that of a single benefice in Surrey which includes two parishes and three churches, and is the location for the curacy of a fellow member of an Interim Ministerial Education (IME) group of newly ordained priests.

### **The planned establishment of a book group**

The origin of this project was the assistant curate's desire to do something for Lent. She wanted to promote discipleship but to offer something more inclusive and perhaps less intimidating than activities that had been previously tried and might have deterred those who had not got involved before. She was very keen on a starting point that felt accessible. The use of book groups to widen participation, within a variety of contexts, had been discussed within the IME group and this raised her confidence that such an initiative might work.

Having conceived the idea, and thought about how it could work, she approached her incumbent for his thoughts. He was encouraging; this was a project that could be managed within the time available and would be led by her. The group was seen as a one-off; there was no concern that something was being established that others would have to inherit or maintain after her curacy had ended. He gave permission to go ahead.

The Hilltop Benefice consists of two parishes, one of which contains two churches, and an aim was to build connections across the entire community. It was proposed that the book group would take place on Monday mornings, in the vicarage close to one of the churches and where the curate lived. This would begin with some hospitality – offering everyone a hot drink and biscuits – and then progress to reading the chapter out loud, and an ensuing discussion.

The book to be read and discussed, *Women of Holy Week* by Paula Gooder, was suggested by the curate and was part of the information offered on the group; so by accepting the invitation to join, they were accepting the choice of book.

Paula Gooder is very well known within faith writing, and perhaps even more widely through her comments and contributions in the media. None of the group had however previously read anything by her, and most weren't sure if they had heard of her. The title was recently published in paperback (2022), had short chapters with page of space in between them, each one concentrating on a particular woman and her role. Each chapter offered an illustration (by Ally Barrett) of the individual featured, and these factors combined to make the book feel inviting, and neither too long (96pp) or dense.

### **Location for the book group**

The location for the book group was always planned as the home of the facilitator, The Rectory, next to one of the churches. The decision was based partly on a comment made to the curate shortly after her arrival in her posts – 'I've never been inside The Rectory' – and also on her own desire to be welcoming and offer hospitality. This was based on the Biblical example of Jesus eating with others, and her personal experience that preparing food with others, and then sharing it, can be really connecting.

The issue of inviting parishioners into her home raised security considerations, but by asking everyone thinking of attending to register beforehand, all the attendees were known to her. The issue arose over whether this was personally invasive of the private space of her family, but having been a singing teacher, and given lessons at home, she was used to regular visitors. Running the book group during the school day in term time also meant that her children were out at school, and therefore did not need the living space for themselves at that time. The group did however create logistical issues. The hosting of the group would require their access to all parts of their downstairs (kitchen, bathroom and sitting room) and this occasioned a tidying up of the space on Sunday evenings. She was also unsure how many chairs would be needed before the first session when any possible unexpected attendees might turn up, and so needed to think where more could be found at short notice (the dining room).

In the long run however, meeting in The Rectory offered opportunities for personal interaction over issues that were bothering those attending more widely; it created the chance to arrive early or linger at the end, which offered opportunities for a personal conversation. Most people arrived in a timely fashion and so it was possible to give everyone their hot drink and then begin on time. An occasional late arrival would make their own drink.

This was an elderly group, meeting in a rural location, that relied on private transport. This she did not get involved in, other than encouraging the sharing of cars, which further cemented connections between the group.

### **Methodology of project analysis**

The group agreed to offer anonymous feedback on their experience, in order to promote observation and learning around what had taken place. The methodology and online questionnaire from the previous project was used, so that outcomes could be compared. The questionnaire comprised a mix of multiple choice, ratings using a seven-point scale and open-ended questions. The response rate was high with nine of the group responding.

Topic	Summary of Question areas (not exact wording. Answer options not shown)
Finding out about the book group	How did you find out about it? When you first heard how did you feel about it?
Reading the book / the book group meetings	How many meetings attended? How did you get the book? How did you find reading aloud a chapter at the meeting? How did you feel about the book being chosen for you by others? Did you discuss the book with anyone outside the meetings. If so was it enjoyable? What did you think of the duration of the meeting?
Impact of the book group on your sense of connection it and on your religious reading/joining other church groups	What impact did being part of the group have on your sense of connection with: the book group; the church you attend; the Hilltop Benefice; the CoE? Did the discussion relating to Christology impact you? Are you more likely to consider looking for Christological parallels in other books you read/join other church related groups
Verdict on the experience. Perceived benefits and barriers to joining	Is the book group beneficial to the Hilltop Benefice? How likely are you to recommend belonging to this book group/ any book group to others? What are the benefits? What are the barriers? How could the group be improved? Criteria for choosing a book. Would you consider choosing a book for the group?
Demographics	Age / household size etc
Attitudes to reading	How much do you enjoy reading for pleasure? Have you been in a book group before?

Figure 1: Topics covered in the questionnaire





### How did the community find out about the book group?

The group was announced in the benefice's three churches, and through all accompanying communications vehicles, for example parish emails, the parish magazine, notices put up in church, and announcements made during the service. Those wanting to attend were asked to contact the curate. While the list, initially offered as ten places, filled up quickly, the curate did not know who would actually attend until that first morning.

Book group members were asked in the survey how they had found out about the group (and to tick all routes that applied). This indicated that all the routes had impacted at least two people but that personal contact was the most popular route, mentioned by seven of the nine respondents, followed by the leaflet for Holy Week. There is also a fit with the theory that the more places through which you communicate a message about book sharing, the more likely is involvement (Baverstock et al, 2016).

## How did you find out about the book group? (Tick all that apply)

(Number of respondents, n=9)

Personal contact		7
In the 'Lent, Holy Week and Easter' leaflet		5
Announced in Church		4
In the notice sheet		2

Attendees later reported that their initial response to the idea of a book group was very positive, with everyone stating themselves to be either very (8/9) or moderately pleased (1).

Individual responses included:

'It was good to meet up with like-minded people. And very relaxing following the weekend. I liked the informality of the meeting too.'

'My presumption was that it would be an emotionally safe place with "nice" people, a chance to socialise and explore the Bible'. I was right, it was well run. I felt welcomed and indeed loved.'

### Who came along?

The survey show this to be an elderly group, predominantly female; three responders were in the age group of 61-75, six were 76 or older. Five lived in a single-person household, four with one other person. This demographic reflects two of the three congregations in the benefice, which are mostly elderly, but also the day time availability of those who had time to attend. Widening participation and involving those who were on their own was an aim of the project. Once the group was established, most people attended all six sessions; those hampered by ill-health were less regular in their attendance.

The group were keen readers; seven of the nine described themselves as very keen readers. Six had been in a book group before. Previous research has noted that book group members typically regard their involvement as:

'a vital and fun aspects of their lives. They enjoy a sense of community and, often, personal friendships—but above all else, and counter to what some believe, they value intellectual challenge and growth'. (Morgan-Witts, 2019).

### Having the book chosen for them

The response of the group to having a book chosen for them was positive, with all being either very keen about this (6 respondents) or somewhat keen (2).

Individual comments included:

'I enjoyed the book and felt it was a good choice.'

'Very happy to be guided by Leah choosing for us.'

'I was late coming to the group but very happy to go along with the chosen book.'

'I trust Leah and welcome opportunities to learn and react to anything chosen. If an individual chooses a book, it could encourage an element of human ego to influence responses. Not generally helpful! In my opinion!'

When respondents were asked if they would consider offering a book for the group to read, there was evident reluctance. Only three said they would be willing while four explicitly said they would not and two preferred not to answer.

Research around book groups has shown that these factors come up frequently. There is considerable risk of personal exposure in choosing a book for the group while, if a book is chosen collectively within a meeting the amount of time taken making the selection eats into time for discussion, when members might prefer just to get on with the meeting.

The following is an email written by the first author of this paper for a workplace book group that she chairs. The group had decided to move from choosing the book by general consensus to an individual making a choice, but expressed reservations about this. The following message, which sums up the issue of choosing, was approved for circulation to all:

'We've been sharing books for a while now and are (I think) moving onto a new stage where individuals take it in turns to offer a book for discussion, and maybe start us off during the meeting - perhaps saying something about when they first read it and why it appealed to them.

I think the reason we are doing this is that deciding on what to read by committee has meant we have read books that - while they tell us about what is popular right now, and what is selling well - don't necessarily offer us books that we can be passionate about. And I think the best meetings have always been the result of *not* complete agreement! If everyone loves it, there is sometimes not a lot to say.

I would however like to suggest that choices are made based on us all agreeing to read what is proposed. It's a bit exposing to offer a book that you like, so we perhaps need to commit as a group that we will take what is offered at face value and affirm the person who has been brave enough to suggest it by reading it and turning up!

I'll just close by saying how much I enjoy these meetings, and that it is a pleasure to get to know you all better in the process. And as we do this, you are getting first-hand experience of how Reading Force<sup>1</sup> feels - that sharing a book does bring everyone closer.'

### **How each session of the Hilltop Benefice Book Club worked**

Sessions began with the reading aloud of the chapter to be discussed, moving around the room with each participant reading a paragraph or two. This was immediately involving and those who were hesitant about reading aloud were gently encouraged to participate, although they could choose not to read aloud if they did not feel comfortable with this. Although surprising to some, the subsequent questionnaire shows that the group really liked this, with all considering it helpful (and seven of the nine respondents deemed it 'very helpful'). After the reading aloud, the curate – acting as facilitator – encouraged discussion. The meetings lasted for one and a quarter hours, which seven of the nine described as 'just right' while two thought it too short.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.readingforce.org.uk](http://www.readingforce.org.uk) – shared-reading to promote communication and closeness within military families.

### Wider discussion within the parish and community

The book group and involvement were widely discussed with other people, as has been a generally reported happening whenever book groups have been organised by the researcher.

#### Have you discussed the books with anyone outside the group meeting? (Tick all that apply)

(Number of respondents, n=8)

Another member of the book group I knew already		5
Other parishioner(s)		3
Friends outside the church		3
Someone I live with		2
Have not discussed with anyone		2

All those who discussed the book with others outside the meeting found the experience of discussing the book with others either very enjoyable (4 respondents) or somewhat enjoyable (2). It also prompted wider book-based conversations; one commented: 'I have loaned the book to others, after discussion.'

#### How has this involvement impacted on your sense of connection?

Book group members were asked to use a 7 point scale (where 1=no sense of connection, 4=moderate sense of connection and 7=significant sense of connection) to rate the impact of being in the book group on their sense of connection with four specific groups: the book group; the church most regularly attended; Hilltop Benefice as a whole and the wider Church of England. The average rating for each group are summarised below. The most significant connections were with the book group and with the Hilltop Benefice as a whole although it is worth noting an improved connection with the Church of England. This is significant and replicates findings at Emly (Baverstock et al, 2022). It can be concluded that it is the parish or institution that is the main beneficiary of book group involvement. This offers strong implications for promoting community spirit within church communities through shared-reading.

#### What impact has being part of the Hilltop Benefice Book Group had on your sense of connection with the following groups?

(Average score on a 7 point scale, where 1=no sense of connection, 4=moderate sense of connection and 7=significant sense of connection, n=9)

With the book group	5.9
With the Hilltop Benefice as a whole	4.9
With the Church of England	4.4
With the church you attend most regularly within our benefice	4.0

Verbatim comments were:

'I'm nurtured as a Methodist and attend this church because it is local and not associated with my parents' funerals or childhood...to be completely open...hence I'm on a learning curve...not always comfortable with some of the processes hence not always connecting to them...yet'

'I attend an Anglican Church in Spain and lent the book to one of the Worship Leaders who loved it.'

This demonstrates the infectious nature of shared-reading and that shared reading promotes the spread of ideas. People talk about taking part and in the process develop others. Also worth noting is the lasting impact of associating church buildings with traumatic services, and how a welcome to another building on the church's estate (the rectory) broke through this experience.

### **Associated increased interest among group members in Christological thinking and other church/faith-related involvements**

Respondents were asked the impact the discussion relating to Christology (looking for parallels with the life or teaching of Jesus) on them. As within the previous project in Emly respondents reported that the book group had moderate/strong impact. One commented that the process of learning to do this had been: 'Highly enjoyable, comforting and stimulating'

Some book group members also reported being more likely to consider undertaking a number of activities (though some did these activities already). In particular involvement in the book group correlated with increased consideration at attending a Bible study group (with 4 respondents saying that the book group had made them much more likely to do so) and in looking for Christological parallels in other books. Half the respondents said they were now more likely to join a prayer group while half said it had not changed their likelihood of doing so.

### **Since joining the book group, have you found yourself more likely to consider any of the following?**

*(Average score on a 7 point scale, where 1=no effect, 4=more likely and 7=much more likely, n=9)*

Attending a house or Bible study group?	4.2
Looking for Christological parallels in other books you read?	3.9
Reading the Bible?	3.7
Joining another church-related forum?	3.0
Joining a prayer group?	2.9

Verbatim responses included:

'I attended Bible study and other aspects of church life prior to attending book group hence reply "no effect". I read the Bible but book group has helped (me) see stories from a different perspective, whetting appetite to read more'.

'I'm not comfortable with my perception of a prayer meeting...I probably should find out exactly what it involves, but prefer to keep my prayers private and intimate'.

'I enjoyed meeting and talking to members of our other two churches. Book Groups encourage me to read and mostly enjoy books which I wouldn't have chosen and may be out of my 'comfort zone'.

### **Strong agreement on the benefit of the book group to the Hilltop Benefice**

When asked whether the book group was beneficial to the Hilltop Benefice as a whole, respondents were very enthusiastic (average rating 6.6 out of a maximum of 7) and they were strongly likely to recommend joining a book group to others (average rating 6.1) thus evidencing the likelihood of considering, and then actually participating in, further church involvement.



**Do you think The Hilltop Benefice Book Group is beneficial to the benefice as a whole?**

**How likely are you to recommend the Hilltop Benefice Book Group?**

**How likely are you to recommend belonging to a book group to others?**

*(Number of respondents, n=8)*

	Beneficial to Hilltop	Likelihood of recommending this book group	Likelihood of recommending any book group
Very beneficial/very likely	7	6	6
Somewhat beneficial/somewhat likely	2	3	3
Not beneficial/not likely	0	0	0
Average rating (maximum 7)	6.6	6.1	6.0

**Comments included:**

‘The group held in Leah’s home was warm and welcoming.’

‘I do tend to invite people to events but there is a real reluctance to join ‘religious/ meetings, almost a fear-type reaction of joining a culture. But most are happy to buy a self help book’.

‘A gentle way to invite non-church goers and the ‘church-curious’ to sample a no obligation and non-judgemental Christian discussion.’

**What have been the benefits to those who came?**

When asked “what, if any, do you think are the benefits of taking part in a book group that operates across our Hilltop Benefice?” 8 comments were made (the biggest qualitative response to any question):

‘Can embrace a wide range of churchmanship’

‘Unites the three churches’

‘Connects and unites members of all three churches, broadens horizons and inspires Christian witness and outreach.’

‘Meeting like-minded people. Friendly discussions.’

‘The main benefit is sharing ideas across parishes and meeting others. The clergy will know most people in each parish - but that isn't always the case with the laity. If the Benefice is to me more than an administrative unit - sessions like the book club are important. I know there are other opportunities to meet - but a book group obliges participants to talk, and sometimes about quite personal matters.’

‘Knits communities together ,where otherwise those of diverse socio economic groups might not otherwise mix. A boon to the lonely. Discussion open to physically disabled.’

**What are the barriers to involvement?**

It should be noted that the following comments were received from those who did attend. So there

is a bias inherent in those who did choose to attend assuming the motivations of others who had the opportunity but chose not to be part of the group. Responses included:

'General apathy'

'None'

'Limited space, perhaps, if attract more members, though meeting at Leah's is special!'

'Some may think they need to know theology in order to contribute? The time needs to be right. Early on a Monday turned out to be a good choice - before the week gets (over) full.'

'Transport. Members of group form a transport rota. Braille and Audio book options for any sight-impaired individuals showing interest ..it would probably have to be advertised as available to discover any interest!'

'I think there are some individuals who would find it difficult to read aloud in the presence of other people.'

This final comment is particularly important, as there is a danger in assuming that everyone is comfortable with reading aloud. Two thirds of those attending were regular readers, and had belonged to a book group before. Joining a book club could be daunting to those who do not read a lot, find it difficult due to eyesight problems, or feel unconfident discussing books in front of others.

Asked if members would consider recommending a book for others to read, only three said yes, with six either saying no (4/9) or preferring not to answer (2/9). Verbatim comments were as follows:

'Happy for others to choose but would recommend if came across a book I considered suitable.'

'I would like books to be chosen by the clergy and not the laity – so I probably wouldn't be that keen on books chosen by others either. We need a focus.'

'leave decisions to the Group leader'

'Not too sure!'

When asked about the group size respondents generally thought that the current size was a good one and that if it became larger there would need to be more than one group. Comments included:

'Would have reservations about the group becoming too large and intimidating for some.'

'The group was a good size, enabling members to speak freely and was a very positive experience. Might need more than one group if too many attendees.'

'Like the size of the group as it is.'

'Mission growth – share the joy. If it becomes large can divide into multiple discussion groups then conclude with common responses. Maybe.'

**When asked how the group could be improved, there was a general feeling that it was operating well.**

Comments included:

‘I think it was just right as it was’

‘None, love Leah’s leadership and guidance.’

‘Plan another one...’

‘To attract new members : I expect that most non-church-goers or those without a family church connection would be more likely to join with an option to choose a book themselves and therefore not be put off by an obviously Christian title...whilst subconsciously wanting a taster of Jesus? The interpretation of Christian love in action or indeed evil in action , in widely known non-religious books , those made into a theatre production... ( such as recent interpretation of Les Mis..) Shakespeare...with a value-added trip to the theatre if keen. Historical events...interpretation of how good prevails, suffering, how God does not always intervene...Hitler. Holocaust. Terrorism ..museum visits. Current Affairs...how to stay buoyant with depressing news coverage. Journalist authors Speakers ...(voluntary authors...how to write a book , style , language Food books .. foods found in Bible? HRH The Queen and her life of Christian devotion. Sorry going on a bit!’

This last comment shows how the book group has sparked ideas for more points of connection.

#### **Criteria for choosing a book in future**

Asked for feedback on the type of book that should be chosen for sharing in future, comments were largely practical with focus on the title not being too long, which had made the initial chosen title popular:

‘Not too long or too academic!’

‘Book length’

‘The length of readings is important - these were all very short and very well constructed.’

‘Length. I wonder if some booksellers have reductions for Book Club multiple purchases? I thought the book used was ideal. It was clearly set out and attractively presented.. The print size was good too, for those whose sight is "failing" ...’

#### **Comment from Paula Gooder, author of the book that was read by the group**

Dr Paula Gooder, Canon Chancellor of St Paul’s Cathedral, well known author and media commentator was approached for comment. She affirmed the comments of the group about wanting a text that would speak to them directly and not be too long or difficult to read.

‘People who read my books do regularly tell me that it’s as if I am talking to them directly and that’s what I aim for; for me that’s the best kind of feedback. You have to talk to the individual, and focus less on the content you want to communicate, and feel they should hear, and more on what they are able to hear.’

## Learnings

The high response rate to the questionnaire, and rich comments received through offering the opportunity to expand on quantitative answers, all validate the approach taken. Participants had clearly felt free to share their thoughts and the usually unheard voices of those from the congregation(s) taking part can be observed. This is both unusual and revealing. For example, it is doubtful whether, if asked to comment orally, or to fill out a questionnaire in the presence of the group facilitator, the issue of confidence in reading aloud would have been raised.

The preciousness of the group to those who were part of this experience was evident and when it finished there were many comments that individuals would 'love to do this again'. As the curate moves on to her first incumbency, one may suspect that this will be regarded as a very special initiative and participants will reflect with pride on their involvement.

## Conclusions

1. Book groups can significantly increase the connectivity between parish members, and the prevailing sense of community.
2. They can connect parishioners with their church and with the wider Church of England.
3. Great care needs to be taken with the practical arrangements (the timing, location, accessibility etc). This group liked the duration of 75 minutes.
4. The role of the group facilitator is particularly important in setting the tone and encouraging involvement.
5. If this is to be an activity that promotes widening participation, it is important to understand that pre-existing familiarity with book clubs and how they work may be lower than those suggesting or running groups anticipate.
6. Understanding of, and familiarity with, religious literature may be vastly less than may be assumed.
7. Choosing a book before the start of the book group, so those joining know what is expected of them and what they have to read, is positive. There may be anxiety around choosing a title for others to read.
8. Moving participants outside their usual range of books, and their 'comfort zone', is a likely outcome of involvement.
9. Confidence levels in talking about books is concentrated, with some parishioners seeing this as a repeat activity and some never previously involved. For the activity to be inclusive, this needs to be considered.
10. Communications about the planned book group need to be planned well ahead and through multiple media. Attendance correlates with sharing information through various media, which in turn promotes wider word of mouth.
11. Once established, it can be difficult for book club members to enable others to join; they may be happy with the format and membership of the group as it has evolved. If new members are to be introduced, the mechanisms for achieving this need to be thought through.

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