

CHAPTER I

Introduction: An Invitation to Congregational Studies

It is no small pity, and should cause us no little shame, that through our own fault, we do not understand ourselves, or know who we are—as to what good qualities there may be in our souls, or who dwells within them, or how precious they are—those are things which we seldom consider and so we trouble little about preserving the soul's beauty.

—Teresa of Avila

For congregations of the people of God, as for the individual soul whose welfare St. Teresa invokes, the good qualities within them and their relation to the world about them have all-too-often been taken for granted. Congregations have frequently been urged into action as agents of evangelization and social transformation and then written off as irrelevant because they failed to perform as desired. But the initial failure may lie not with the congregation but with those who have urged the congregation on without a sensitive understanding of its inner life and resources or of the possibilities as well as the limits placed on the congregation by the context in which God has called it into being.

This is a book which attempts to take congregations seriously in their givenness as earthen vessels through which the transcendent power of God is at work and made known (II Cor. 4:7) and through which God's purposes in the world may be realized. We seek to provide both a framework within which this givenness can be understood in a disciplined way and practical tools to facilitate such understanding. This does not mean that we are not also concerned with transformation, whether of congregations themselves or with their role as agents of transformation for individuals and society; however, we believe that this is best accomplished when we take seriously and appreciatively, through disciplined understanding, their present *being*—the good and precious qualities that are within them—as means of grace themselves that enable the transformation of congregations into what it is possible for them to *become*. Thus we begin this book with an affirmation of the centrality of congregations as vehicles for the knowledge and service of God and thus of the imperative for understanding them in their present being and their possibilities for becoming.

Congregations are embedded in the history, landscape, and mindset of North American culture. Acknowledging pressures that are brought to bear on them as they experience the tensions of living between tradition and modernity, historian Martin Marty speaks of the continuing significance of congregational ex-

pressions of Christian existence: "While efforts to establish an essential form of communal life for Christians everywhere may be futile and may limit imagination, *something like* the local assembly will remain fundamental. . . . [C]ongregations will take on varied colorings in different times or cultures, but in every case they serve to perpetuate embodiment, which is essential in the whole church."¹

For most people in North America, congregations are the primary expressions of religion. The *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* for 1984 lists the existence of some 341,000 local churches in the United States alone, with almost 135 million members and an average weekly attendance in excess of 65 million adults. More individuals belong to congregations than to any other voluntary association, and they provide as much financial support for the work of the churches as is given to all other philanthropic causes combined.

Congregations influence in varied ways both the individuals who belong to them and the communities in which they are present. By the presence of their buildings, their steeples and stained glass, and in the regular gatherings of members for public worship, congregations provide symbols and occasions for transcendence of everyday life and for grounding that life in faith and hope. In services and gatherings for fellowship, congregations draw community residents out of their isolation and differences and into relationship with one another in communities of friendship and mutual support. Through their educational programs, congregations not only transmit knowledge of the faith tradition and its meaning for contemporary life but also transmit values that promote community solidarity and continuity. Historically congregations have socialized youth and newcomers, sustained persons in need, and provided various rites of passage which mark significant transitions of life: birth, puberty, marriage, and death. They have often supported community values and institutions, but at times they have challenged these values and institutions in an effort to reform or transform them in light of the congregation's convic-

tions. Thus congregations have significance not only for the individuals who belong to them but also for the society beyond their membership.

Believing strongly in the importance of congregations for Christian existence, we aim in this book to provide ways to understand them better and to help leaders and members make faithful decisions about their ministry and mission. So we come back to St. Teresa's hopes for the individual soul and apply them to congregations. We hope to enable the discovery of what good qualities there may be in the congregation, who dwells there, and how precious it may be. We also hope to enable discovery of those opportunities for ministry open to it in the place in which God has called it into being. In these discoveries lie the hope of preserving beauty, goodness, truth, and faithful witness in congregational life and mission.

1.1 Invitation to Congregational Studies

In the broadest sense, everyone does "research." That is, everyone gathers information, tests it against experience, and acts in a way which seems appropriate to the information gathered. In the church, pastors gather impressions and insights from the people with whom they talk and the materials they read, from their observations of group activities, and from observing patterns of participation and community trends. Church members are constantly "studying the church" from a casual recognition of the church building to intimate experiences of personal care or communal celebration. In an inclusive sense, we cannot escape the constant experience of gathering and sorting out information as a basis for acting in the church as is the case elsewhere. This kind of "research" is so frequent and natural that it is a part of our taken-for-granted routines.

But there come times when this routine information processing is inadequate. Turning points come into the life of every congregation: expected patterns break down, old assumptions no longer seem to hold, the information we possess no longer seems to be a sure guide to action. In the congregation, these turning points may occur when we encounter a challenge—perhaps a prompting of the Spirit—to address a new and different occasion for ministry. Or it may be the failure of an existing program, a stewardship campaign for example, to achieve its goals. It may be a pastoral change which is the occasion for the need for more than routine understanding of the congregation. Or it may be a sense of apathy and drift, of going nowhere, that calls forth a need to take a new and more disciplined look at the congregation's life and ministry. In such

times, we become self-conscious and disciplined in the ways we gather information, test it against experience, and determine how we will act. This handbook addresses these occasions. It is an invitation to the disciplined study of the congregation. In what follows, we use the phrase "congregational study" to refer to this disciplined form of study.

Congregational study is essentially different from intuitive awareness or random investigation. The methods included in this handbook vary greatly, but all have rules which dictate the role and range of permissible activities, techniques for gathering and analyzing data, protocols for keeping records, and the like. While acknowledging that congregational leaders and members daily learn much of value about their congregation by highly informal means, this handbook strongly advocates that elements of congregational study be observed as congregations reach for self-understanding, especially in times when taken-for-granted routines are called into question. Careful, thoughtful study can, we believe, make several critical contributions.

Congregational study can confer a *balance and sense of proportion* often absent from the spontaneous self-descriptions of congregations. The extreme actions of a church's severest critics and most enthusiastic promoters, and especially the colorful language such persons are wont to use, are far more noticeable and memorable than the regular patterns of behavior and moderate opinions of the majority of members. Small groups with strong views can, of course, be powerfully influential in a congregation; but a carefully conducted study can give less vocal members their legitimate voice in making a decision or in some other important congregational negotiations.

Congregational study can also help congregations with multiple, seemingly unrelated, problems by uncovering *structures or patterns* in the apparent confusion. Identifying a pattern that links a series of problems does not automatically suggest a way to solve the problems. But it can alleviate the crushing sense that the congregation is the victim of an arbitrary series of plagues and afflictions and confer the hope that its multiple difficulties, because they are comprehensible, may be manageable as well. The tracing of patterns can also benefit churches that are not in trouble but that face the happy albeit confusing prospect of having to choose among opportunities for program and service. The systematic review of a congregation's past successes and failures, the illumination of its values, and the mapping of the styles of behavior that hold it together may help it to make decisions consistent with its proven strengths and real priorities.

A third contribution of congregational study, not

always welcomed but helpful in the long run, is the way in which such study sometimes reveals what a congregation does not want to see. For example, an analysis of the social class or racial/ethnic profile of congregational members, when compared with that of the local community surrounding the church, may reveal that the congregation's pattern of bonding is along class or racial lines, contradicting the members' professions of inclusiveness. An analysis of decision-making patterns may reveal considerable frustration with the essentially authoritarian and "top-down" style of the pastor or key lay officials. While such revelations may be painful, seeing the patterns enables the congregation to deal with them in a constructive fashion. It is much easier to change or accept that which we can see and identify than to deal with what is obscure and unacknowledged.

A fourth contribution of study of a congregation's life may be by far the most exciting. The informal, intuitive, and usually unsystematic ways of finding out about a congregation are almost always private and personal exercises. At most these are collections of individual responses, or perhaps more typically, an informal gathering around the kitchen table where impressions are shared of a contentious meeting or highly-charged incident. By contrast, *congregational studies open the quest for congregational self-understanding to corporate participation*. Because such studies are regulated by an established order of inquiry, a discipline for gathering information, and a set of rules for organizing and interpreting evidence, both their methods of procedure and the validity of their conclusions are available for public scrutiny. Certain kinds of studies in which the congregation investigates itself invite an especially high degree of participation and corporate effort. But even those study projects which are assigned entirely to an outside researcher or consultant potentially involve the whole congregation. Any interested member can review the data and audit the process by which conclusions were drawn and judgments rendered. Thus, through methodical study, the congregation has access to a procedure conducted in broad daylight; whatever such study reveals is the shared property of the community itself. In the broadest sense then, one can conceive disciplined congregational study as a way to confess corporately what God has done in the congregation's midst and how the congregation has (or has not) responded to God's gifts.

The methods and resources which we suggest in the following pages provide, therefore, a more disciplined and thorough process of accomplishing, at turning points in the congregation's life, what may be natural but more casual in other circumstances. The data gathered, interpreted, and reflected on provide the

basis for affirming old or determining new directions of the congregation's ministry and mission.

1.2 A Perspective for Analyzing Congregations

Our advocacy of congregational studies not only implies methods and resources appropriate to the task (about which much more will be said below) but also suggests the necessity for a framework or perspective on congregations that itself disciplines or guides how we approach our task. In an earlier book involving several of the persons who have contributed to this handbook, academic disciplines were used to provide the framework.² Thus, for example, anthropology, social psychology, sociology, theology, and organizational development provided different perspectives for approaching congregational analysis. We suggest another way of organizing the analysis in this handbook. Academic disciplines are not the categories that members of congregations and those who work in and with them use to organize their congregational experiences. It became clear that a more natural and holistic approach was desirable to provide a way of organizing both the handbook and congregational studies. We can best introduce the perspective that we have adopted by presenting four brief cases of congregations whose experiences will be referred to at a number of points in subsequent chapters.

Case 1: Heritage United Methodist Church. Heritage United Methodist Church has slowed down in the last decade. Located in an ethnically changing community of a city in Iowa, its traditional constituency of middle-class descendants of German immigrants is aging. Hispanic and Asian families now crowd into the community, which was already packed by previous waves of southern blacks and Appalachian whites.

The Reverend Ms. Deborah Jones was appointed minister of the church a year ago. In sending her, the bishop had both warned and challenged her: "The community is vibrant, but the church is dying. Here is your opportunity for both ministry and mission." When she arrived, Ms. Jones found a congregation with barely enough volunteers to staff the varied social service programs of the church.

She launched a study of church membership which dramatically showed that more than half of the members were over sixty years of age, and many lived in deteriorating housing near the church. She also discovered that there were many other aging community residents in the same predicament. Armed with these facts, she convinced the church's administrative board to convene a committee to consider sponsoring a

housing project for the elderly. The bishop and a local bank promised some financial backing, and the committee found an abandoned public school near the church that was available for redevelopment into apartments. The church would invest some of its unrestricted capital funds, along with the energy and enthusiasm of its members and staff.

At the board meeting called to make the go-ahead decision, one board member opened the discussion by calling for the church "to establish priorities we can all live with." Noting a steady decline in church membership and budget, he argued that "we should begin with our church school and hold off on the housing project." Others joined the chorus: "Volunteers would be distracted from existing programs by the housing project"; "too many of the church's resources are already going 'outside' the church, and not enough is available to nourish the congregation's faith and worship." "We are overinvolved and underfed," said one longtime member. "We need strong youth and evangelism programs," said another.

Ms. Jones pointed to the church's own history as a mission for immigrants and to the United Methodist tradition of caring and service. She pointed out that the project would benefit members as well as nonmembers. In the end, only the committee chairperson and one board member voted to sponsor the project. The pastor was perplexed. It seemed to her that Heritage had just passed up its first opportunity in a long time for new purpose and renewal.

Case 2: High Ridge Presbyterian Church. A large and growing congregation of the Presbyterian Church in America had reestablished its significant place in its affluent California community of High Ridge after an agonizing period of withdrawal from the United Presbyterian Church five years before. The new building was complete and the future looked bright: a media ministry led by the articulate and popular pastor was planned; worship services, featuring contemporary music and dramatized life situation vignettes, were drawing large crowds. Programs of child care, family counseling, and home study prospered. It appeared that even the huge mortgage on the new building would be paid off early through the herculean fund-raising efforts of some lay members.

Abruptly, in a session meeting, an elder made an explosive remark. "I think," he announced, "that it is immoral to have alcohol at the church." In his ensuing elaboration of this remark, it emerged that a leading trustee and member of the session had reserved the church's sanctuary and social hall for his daughter's wedding and reception. He intended to serve champagne. Somehow the pastor had not been informed,

though others on the church staff and in the congregation had been told.

The unscheduled debate was acrimonious. The wedding feast at Cana, described in the Gospel of John, was thrown against Paul's admonition in Romans to give up wine. Claims that the church should maintain purity were met with charges of hypocrisy in the behavior of members. In the end, the vote was nine for allowing the reception to proceed and ten opposed. The father of the bride, one of the church's most influential members and successful fund raisers, was irate. He shouted at the session that he had broken no rule of the church or law of the Gospel, and that he would quit the church and consider suing if the wedding were cancelled. In the heated exchange, two of the majority stated that they could not continue to belong to the church if alcoholic beverages were served on the premises.

"How can Christians fight this way?" the pastor asked his closest colleague in the ministry the next morning. "What do you think I should do now?"

Case 3: Hope United Church of Christ. Hope United Church of Christ had become one of those revolving door congregations: Three times in the last ten years a committee had been through the arduous process of filling out statistical forms with "all the facts" about the church and the community as required by the denomination in a search for a new pastor. "Why not simply change the date on the last set of forms," suggested one committee member, "and save ourselves the trouble?"

The area denominational executive, the conference minister, tried to be gently encouraging. "It's a valuable exercise," he said. "It will help you find out who you are."

The Hope United Church committee thought it knew who it was. The church was proud of its picturesque, beautifully maintained building in the relatively prosperous community of Pleasantville. On the whole, the members were warm and caring, with no more difficult or eccentric members than most churches. Yet, with all three of the latest pastors, there had been tensions from the start, resulting in each case in an early departure. Most of the tensions centered around the church's programs, which had been limited successes at best. The committee and the congregation blamed the pastors for these persistent problems. With so much going for the congregation, they believed the blame must be placed on inadequate pastoral leadership. The conference minister wanted the committee members to analyze, first among themselves and then with him, the histories of these brief pastorates and the tensions that existed. But the committee resisted. Reviewing these matters was more painful even than filling out the

forms. Besides, they believed that sharing the stories of their difficulties was likely to hurt their chances of getting the right kind of pastor who would finally provide the kind of leadership they needed. In the face of this persisting problem and the resistance of the committee to confront it, the denominational executive wondered what was really going on in the congregation. What could he do to help the situation?

Case 4: St. Augustine's Church. St. Augustine's, a mostly black Episcopal church, had managed to attract a diverse congregation of both Caribbean and U.S.-born blacks during the 1970s. The Anglican liturgical tradition seemed to serve as a binding force among people of greatly different backgrounds.

With the support of the rector, Father Noah Cummings, a group of the parish's young people volunteered to augment the regular choir with gospel music at Sunday worship services. Some members found the music "spiritually stimulating" but others objected that the music and the movements reminded them of country revivals and bawdy night clubs. The vestry voted to use the Gospel Chorus on "fifth Sundays and special occasions," but Father Cummings continued to encourage the group by taking them with him when he was invited to preach in other churches.

On a recent Sunday, however, the controversy erupted again. During worship, the rector invited a report from a group of younger members who had attended a conference on the black religious heritage. Those making the report concluded by inviting the congregation "to join in singing a genuine Black liberation spiritual."

Remembering the vestry action, Father Cummings tried to stop the procedure, but the moment was contagious, and several members protested his intervention. In frustration he found himself saying, "There is some confusion among us about who is in charge of this service. I am asking my associate to conclude with a hymn while I retire to my study to pray."

As he left the sanctuary, Father Cummings could feel the strains of diversity within the congregation. Which tradition, he wondered, had the strongest claim on this church?

On the surface, these four congregations share little in common save for the fact that each is facing what we earlier called a turning point in which old patterns or assumptions seem to be breaking down. Yet, upon reflection, several common features of the cases provide entry points for analysis and understanding. Two that seem immediately evident are *program* and *process* aspects in the situation of each of the churches. In fact, we suspect that most issues facing congrega-

tions first come to light in one or the other of these areas, or sometimes simultaneously in both.

Consider first *program*. In each of the four cases, problems were encountered first as dimensions of program: *those organizational structures, plans and activities through which a congregation expresses its mission and ministry both to its own members and those outside the membership*. The failure of Heritage's administrative board to approve the housing project was interpreted by the pastor as a program failure—a failure in the church's mission. The members of the pastoral search committee and the congregation of Hope United Church blamed their rapid turnover in pastoral leadership for their lack of success in the programs of the church. The issue for St. Augustine's rector, Father Cummings, was one of lack of appreciation and perhaps also understanding of two approaches to the worship of the church—a more staid Anglican liturgy, on the one hand, versus the spontaneity of the black spirituals on the other. Even the High Ridge Presbyterian Church session's problem had to do with the rules and procedures involving a program—whether or not to allow alcohol to be served at a function in the church. Thus, each congregation reflects, in one or another way, concerns arising around program. Efforts to study any of these congregations in a disciplined and comprehensive way would include analysis of these program issues—for example, study of the relationship of a program to the needs, actual or perceived, of the various members and leaders of the congregation. Attempts might also be made to evaluate the effectiveness of the congregation's programs in terms of various criteria.

But even cursory reflection on the cases suggests that, for each, there are other factors at work in addition to a concern with program. Almost equally obvious are *process* dimensions. While programs point to the *what* of a congregation's life, processes reflect the *how* of members' relationships with one another. Processes have to do with *the underlying flow and dynamics of a congregation that knit it together in its common life and affect its morale and climate*. How leadership is exercised and shared, how decisions are made, how communication occurs, how problems are solved and conflicts managed—these are some of the processes that are critical for congregational life, and they underlie the manifest program issues of the various cases. A person wanting to understand the decision by Heritage's administrative board not to engage in the housing program would need to gather data about who was involved in the initial decision to explore the housing issue, how the plans were developed and communicated to the administrative board and congregation, and undertake an assessment of the congregation's morale—all as-

pects of process. The High Ridge Presbyterian Church conflict over the wedding champagne raises clear issues around process, especially concerning the norms governing church life which often remain unspoken until surfaced by an issue such as this one. Power issues and the management of conflict in the congregation are also areas where congregational research may prove helpful. Likewise, at Hope United Church, some of the too-painful-to-analyze experiences of past pastoral conflicts reflect failures of process as well as of program, and if the conference minister is to be of help to the congregation, he will need to help them analyze, among other things, how they have been functioning in relation to their pastors, what their mutual role expectations have been, and whether or not there has been a failure in communicating them. Finally, too, the issue of St. Augustine's is not only one of what constitutes appropriate music for worship but also of conflicting expectations for the church that have not been adequately communicated or resolved, and of a failure of communication between the youths and Father Cummings prior to the service. And Father Cummings' concluding comment also reflects the process dimension, that of the exercise of authority in the congregation.

Program and process, therefore, are two quite important dimensions of congregational life around which concerns arise leading to the need for congregational study. Given the prominence in church circles in recent years of both program planning and evaluation strategies as well as organizational development emphases, there is a temptation to conclude that program and process exhaust the dimensions of congregational life where research may be of help. This, we maintain, reflects a serious shortcoming. As important as program and process dimensions are, they are in fact almost always closely connected to two other aspects of congregational life: the *social context* of the congregation and the congregation's *identity*.

By *social context* we refer to the *setting, local and global, in which a congregation finds itself and to which it responds*. Included in the context are people—their culture and characteristics, institutions and social groups, and the various social, political, and economic forces operative in the setting. For each of the four congregations, a probing of its perplexities points to dimensions of its social context that are also operative in addition to program and process. Context factors are most obvious in the case of Heritage United Methodist Church. It was the analysis by the pastor and her committee of the social context of the congregation that led to her program proposal. Though the program was voted down, perhaps from faulty process as suggested above, the kind of analysis that was done was essential to the

development of the proposal. Less obvious but no less important is the power of the social context in the other congregations. The problem faced by the High Ridge Church session has much of its rootage in a conflict between symbols of otherworldly purity, important to some members, and the values and life-styles which other members bring to the congregation from their participation in what we call, in chapter 3, "social worlds." At High Ridge it is the social worlds of affluent Californians. And if we were to probe the concern of Hope United Church's leaders over the lack of program success, we might find them tied in part to issues in the surrounding context: for instance, it may be that its programs falter because the congregation is heavily stocked with the families of corporate managers who change jobs often and move before they can carry out the plans they have made. This is a factor in the social context of the church rather than a flaw in the design of its programs which can be blamed on the pastor. Likewise, analysis of the tensions surrounding worship in St. Augustine's would likely reveal that they cannot be separated from the different social worlds inhabited by older and younger members of the congregation, including the social worlds brought by those with Caribbean origins and those whose roots are in Black America.

Finally, there is the dimension of congregational *identity*, which is perhaps even more often overlooked than its context as we seek to make sense of congregations. It is sometimes overlooked because we are not accustomed to thinking about the identity of a congregation. By *identity*, we mean *that persistent set of beliefs, values, patterns, symbols, stories and style that make a congregation distinctively itself*. The convictions about itself that constitute a congregation's identity are rarely stated, even by members to each other. Like the submerged bulk of an iceberg, they often remain below the surface. Their discovery and analysis are central to the understanding of congregational dynamics, as yet another look at the four congregational cases makes clear. A probe of Heritage Church's failure to accept the housing proposal—or better still, as part of the congregational study that preceded the development of the proposal—might include analysis of what the proposed changes would mean to those who currently carry the congregation's identity. The stubborn resistance encountered by the proposal was more than a failure of communication; it can also be understood as an effort to protect the members' already precarious sense of identity. For those session members in the High Ridge Presbyterian Church, there was also a sense of precarious identity. Having recently changed affiliation from a liberal to a more conservative denomination, they resisted a practice that they thought might

compromise the congregation's character symbolized by that change. Probing the identity issues around that change and the church's emerging self-image might be one helpful response which the pastor and others could make in dealing with the conflict. Perhaps, too, Hope United Church's pastoral search would be more successful if members and the denominational executive working with them were helped to bring to the surface the strong convictions that they harbor about who this congregation is, about its view of the world, its beliefs and values, and the particular moments of its history that are most important. It may be that the congregation is playing hide-and-seek with its succession of pastors: "Find us in our hiding place, or you're out of the game." Finally, congregational identity is particularly crucial for understanding the dynamics of St. Augustine. In the past, the congregation's identity was centered in large part around a single liturgy that had the power to unite people from diverse social worlds. But now, based on a new source of religious and cultural identity—the Black religious experience—younger leaders began to challenge not only the older identity but also the established authority figure. It is not fully possible to grasp what is happening in this congregation—as is also true for the other three—without insight into issues of identity (or clash of identities).

These four aspects of a congregation—program, process, context and identity—form the organizing scheme of this handbook. They are constructs which we believe are useful for congregational study. We chose the four, not because they constitute a comprehensive model of the congregation that defines all that it is and encompasses every possible way of looking at it, but because they are dimensions of congregational life which are recognizable to people who invest their energies in churches. In fact, to a greater or lesser extent, the categories are in use in the everyday quest of church leaders and members to find sense and meaning in their common life.

As already noted, *program* is the "face" most often visible both in the official self-representation of congregations and to the outside world. In annual reports and articles on the religion page of the newspaper, congregations emphasize the program of the church, both its organizational arrangements (fellowship groups, committees) and the actual products—the annual bazaar, a food pantry, revival speakers, the youth group retreat. When churches are enmeshed in controversy, it is most often program issues they debate, such as repairing the organ or supporting fair housing. Denominational staff, seeking to be helpful, most often produce materials directed at developing particular programs of evangelism, education, steward-

ship, social witness or spiritual growth. Program, then, constitutes one important dimension of a congregation's life. In terms of our interest in congregational studies, program is most often addressed in terms of strategies of needs assessment and program evaluation, keeping in focus not only the desires and assessments of members but also the calling to be faithful to the gospel.

The *process* dimension of church life is also very much in evidence. As we have noted, it is evident in a congregation's characteristic patterns of behavior, in the ways its members treat each other, in the agreements they make to maintain the coherence of the body and to nurture its growth. A newly-arrived minister may propose an open congregational meeting to debate some controversial issue in the congregation. "No," she may be told by a long-time lay leader. "That's not the way we fight in this church. Our way is to let things settle out and resolve themselves slowly." "Our way" is a characteristic of that congregation's process. Unlike programs that have a more recognizable content, process is frequently more hidden from view and can often only be inferred from other observations or descriptions by knowledgeable members of the congregation.

Social context, though a persistent condition of the church's existence, is an aspect often obscured by the public bustle of programs or attention given to improving process. If the youth program falls on hard times, some churches have been known to endure a long series of program evaluations and attempts at new program strategies before they have taken a hard look at the demography of their neighborhoods or seen whether there is a significant cohort of young people to be attracted by any program whatever. (Of course, the opposite can be true. Some congregations may blame the context, when the problem may be better understood as a failure of process.) What this discussion of the context illustrates well is that congregations can helpfully be thought of as "open systems," implying not only systemic interaction between the various dimensions—a point to which we will return below—but also the interaction of congregations with their environments. Congregations have the potential to affect their contexts as they engage in mission, and they are also shaped by their environments (even when they set themselves in opposition to the values or demands of the context). While its social context does not *determine* the commitments of a congregation, it does provide the setting within which the congregation must make its decisions. Furthermore, the context is not only "outside" the church; it also permeates the values and challenges the commitments of members, as we saw in several of the cases. We would note also that the

congregation's social context extends far beyond its immediate neighborhood and is global in scope. Both the universalism of the Christian faith and the interdependence of the global village in which we live make it difficult if not impossible for congregations to ignore the challenges and opportunities of this larger setting.

Like context, *identity* is also a powerful shaping element of congregational life. But it is more often a hidden face of the congregation, publicly articulated and advertised only infrequently. Lodged in gossip, in unwritten rules, and in a myriad of tacit signs, the components of identity are more often stumbled upon than codified. In an interview with one of the contributors to the handbook, a pastor described a recent incident:

Our committees in this parish . . . proposed some very interesting revisions of our worship space. Over a three-year period of study, a representative cross section of people . . . proposed these things, and the church board received the proposals and the architect's drawings and adopted it and said here's what we're going to do. There was a storm—a torrent of protest unlike anything I ever experienced anywhere, and we have spent the last year trying to sort out what that means. . . .

It's the damndest thing. I preach unorthodox, even heretical sermons fairly often, and three years ago the church board took the results of the sale of property [over a million dollars] and set it aside for the meeting of human need in [this city]. There's never a peep about the dramatic action on the part of the board. But when we said we wanted to move the pulpit a couple of meters to the left and the lectern just a couple to the right—I mean there was—a storm is not too strong a term.³

The inexperienced pastor, and many currently popular books on church leadership, would seek the source of the storm over moving the pulpit in the process used to make the decision. What procedures should be changed? How could those who protested the decision have been included at an earlier time so that they could have had "ownership" in the proposal? While these are not unimportant issues, this veteran pastor realized that the deeper issue here lies less in the process than in the function of the pulpit—and probably the whole configuration of furniture, space, and decoration—as a powerful symbol of the congregation's identity.

1.3 Relationships Among the Four Dimensions

Up to this point, we have emphasized the distinctions among the four dimensions used to organize the handbook. But the connections among these facets are equally important. Three implications of the relationships among them deserve special emphasis.

First, the four dimensions are not neat divisions or discreet categories. Each is a topic that suggests what kinds of data to gather and then helps to organize that data into coherent patterns. But much of the data may be relevant to more than one dimension. To use the most recent example: information gathered about the pulpit furor may reveal important insights about both process and identity and have relevance for programs of worship. Further, as our discussions of the cases indicated, the four categories are complex, and thus the lines of definition between them are difficult to draw. Program and process, for example, are very difficult to separate, both in abstract analysis and in studies of real life congregations.

Second, the dimensions not only overlap, but there is also a constant interaction among them, reflecting the systemic character of a congregation to which we called attention previously. One way to illustrate this is to think of the congregation as a house. Its foundations, supports, walls, doors for entering and leaving, insulation from the world, and windows on the world are made from materials drawn from diverse sources of supply in its context. Some of these materials are close at hand—values, attitudes, and stories that the members contribute from their personal storehouses to the project of building the congregation. Others are drawn from the surrounding neighborhood—social conditions, local customs, and zoning regulations which influence the shape of the project. Still other elements are more exotic—traditions, symbols, and, again, values imported from the ancient and modern history of Christian churches everywhere, from national and Western culture, and from the global social and political realities that shape all of modern life. The house which emerges is finally a unique and new creation with an identity that is its own, a configuration of God's work in the world which is both more than and different from the sum or product of its building materials. But it has also, as just described, been inescapably shaped and formed by the materials of its context. And its identity—the way that the house takes its peculiar shape in interaction with the context—further affects *what* transpires within the various rooms of the house (its program) and *how* it takes place (its processes). Nor does the relationship between the house—with its distinctive identity, program and process—and its context by any means flow in only one direction. The congregation, the handiwork of God, acts on and changes the world that contributed to its construction. The new house changes the character of the neighborhood, and any single house's impact on its context is carried even further as the neighborhood adds to and deepens the rich resources of the whole created world.

Third, and critically important for the users of this

handbook, anyone who embarks on the study of a local church must recognize that each of the four dimensions is only one facet of a social, cultural and religious reality—the congregation—that has an essential integrity. To concentrate all investigatory attention on any one dimension reduces the rich, full-bodied interplay of human and divine activity in a congregation to a flat abstraction. Certain fads in the study of the congregation have had this effect. Earlier in this century, the primary emphasis in the study of congregations was given to context and program. Demography was practically destiny as far as congregations were concerned. Community religious censuses were taken, population pyramids were drawn of both the local community and the congregation, and programs were assessed in relation to community characteristics. Then, during the 1960s and 1970s, organizational development was “discovered” by the churches. Context was swiftly forgotten as we moved “beyond the population pyramid” and focused on the internal dynamics of the church. Program planning and evaluation, decision-making, communication, conflict management, and the “climate” or psychological well-being of the congregation came to be the dominant emphases. The study of congregational identity has yet to become a fad, though its day seems likely to come as increasing numbers of church leaders become aware of its importance and learn ethnographic techniques for its study. The point is that each of the four dimensions has become, or has the potential of becoming, the *exclusive* focus of study, and as such leads to an unfortunate and distorting reductionism. The part comes to stand for, even to define, the whole. Each of these four dimensions is important for understanding a congregation, and studies of the congregation need to take a multi-dimensional approach. Yet, even when this is done, it is important to recognize that no one dimension, nor all of them together, can replace the integrity and God-given particularity of that congregation.

1.4 Getting Started

We have emphasized the importance of congregational studies, especially at those turning points in congregational life when new opportunities present themselves or old ways of doing things seem not to be working. Further, we have presented a perspective for thinking about congregations as one prepares to engage in congregational study. In the chapters that follow, we will look in some depth at each of the four dimensions and suggest methods and techniques for studying them. Before we turn to these more detailed discussions, several general methodological comments may

be helpful for getting started with the process of disciplined study. Although there is something of a temporal sequence implied in the following steps, it is by no means invariant.

First, there is a need to *clarify and limit the task at hand*. This is easier said than done. On the occasions when the need for congregational study arises, it is often difficult to be entirely clear about what the precise problem is, as the four cases illustrate. Some situations are simply “messes.” The following quotation from a management specialist makes this point quite well and is applicable to many church situations:

Managers are not confronted with problems that are independent of each other, but with dynamic situations that consist of complex systems of changing problems that interact with each other. I call such situations *messes*. Problems are abstractions extracted from messes by analysis. . . . Managers do not solve problems: they manage messes.⁴

The denominational official working with the search committee at Hope United Church, for instance, has little idea what is at the heart of Hope’s problem which has created the revolving door for its pastors. He might therefore encourage the leaders of the congregation to do more than fill out a new set of vacancy forms. Instead (or in addition) he might assist them in employing various studies as means of clarifying and defining their problem.

The four dimensions of congregations—program, process, context and identity—offer one way of beginning to clarify and define the problems underlying the “mess” a congregation may be experiencing. Using the four categories as a sort of map or guidebook points to different areas of congregational life that need to be explored in clarifying what the focus of the disciplined study will be. It may be that all four dimensions will be found relevant; or, one in particular may be the focus of the problem. In addition, some of the techniques described in the following chapters can be useful as exploratory devices oriented to problem definition rather than problem solution, and they may be useful gaining clarity about problems that lurk in the “mess” that the congregation experiences.

However one proceeds to problem definition, it is essential that as much clarity as possible be gained so that the task for study can be defined and limited. The key question, “Why do we want this study?” needs to be answered as clearly as possible, and it needs to be asked continually throughout all the steps in the study process.

A second step is *determining who will be involved in the study process*. There is no set answer to this question. In some cases, it will be the pastor and lay leadership of

the congregation who will take the initiative not only in calling for the study but in carrying it out. Whether directing the study process is undertaken by the pastor or by a lay leader(s), two guidelines are important. First, the group undertaking the study needs authorization by the congregation's governing body to do so. Without such authorization, it will be difficult to secure the needed information; equally as important, it is unlikely that the results of the study will be taken seriously. Second, and somewhat related, it is important to build ownership across the congregation for the study. Where possible, the study group should include representatives from various formal and informal interest groups within the congregation, and the congregation should be kept informed of the progress of the study, and especially of the results. It is to such a study group or team that the methods and techniques of the following chapters are directed.

There are times, however, when outside assistance is important. One such situation is where the level of conflict within the congregation has escalated to the point that no person within the congregation is trusted to represent adequately the concerns of all groups that have an interest in the outcome. Outside assistance is also desirable when the study needed is more complex than congregational leaders are able to manage, either through lack of needed expertise or time. There are those who believe that outside assistance is *generally* advisable, not only because of the difficulty of the task of congregational study, but also because of the ability of an outsider to see things that congregational members cannot see because of their very familiarity with the situation.⁵ We recognize the merits of this view while believing that it is also possible, and sometimes necessary, for a congregation to engage in a *self-study*.

If a consultant is invited to assist the congregation in the study process, it is important that her or his credentials are checked in advance, preferably through people who have used the consultant's services in the past. Does she or he have the skills necessary for assisting in congregational study, ranging from assisting in problem definition to the ability to gather, analyze, and interpret data and assist the congregation in its use? Some consultants may be skilled in process or program consultation but not equipped to assist in doing congregational study. Others may be skilled in research methods but lack the capacity to assist the congregation in interpreting and using the information in a helpful way. What is needed is someone who can assist with both tasks or a division of labor among several consultants. Also, it is important that the consultant not be tied to a single approach but be flexible enough to help the congregation gather and use whatever information is needed. In contracting with

the consultant, clarity should be developed concerning the consultant's role, access to members and to information, accountability, schedule, and cost.

Third, *a design for the study and a plan of work must be developed*. There are a number of issues involved, some of which will be touched on in greater detail in subsequent chapters, especially in chapter 6, where a number of more technical aspects of research methods will be discussed.

An important consideration of study design is deciding *what kind of information will be relevant and useful to address the task or problem that has been defined* (step 1 above). If the problem is primarily one of process, then program statistics or census data will probably be of limited relevance; however, a transcript of or a visit to a committee meeting will likely be of great value. Usefulness of the data is also a crucial consideration. What is sometimes of interest and importance to an academic researcher in testing or expanding theoretical understanding may be of limited usefulness to a congregation in dealing with its particular issues. "Why do we want this information?" and "What will we do with it?" are important questions to be considered as one is deciding what information will be gathered in the study process. Finally, the credibility of the information to the audience who will use it must also be considered. The audience needs to be able to believe that the methods employed in the study process and the individuals who conducted the process are trustworthy. A study team will save itself considerable grief in later stages of the process if it does a careful job of asking these questions of the relevance of the information to understanding the problem that has been identified, its usefulness for decision making and problem resolution, and its credibility.

Some information that meets these criteria will be relatively accessible. It already exists, for example, in annual reports, membership records, or Census documents. But new information will often also be needed to address the congregation's issue(s). Here, too, there are levels of ease of accessibility. It is relatively easy to develop and administer a simple pencil and paper questionnaire to ascertain member evaluations of particular programs; however, it is much more difficult to gain insight into more elusive aspects of a congregation's life, its identity, for example, or members' social worlds. These areas should not be avoided because of their elusiveness. Sometimes, like Jacob, one can only gain the "blessing" of insight into the congregation's dynamics if one is willing to engage in a "wrestling match" with these tough "angels." We do not mean to suggest that the often unknown and unconscious dimensions of a congregation are more powerful than more manifest ones in the decision making of a

congregation; however, unless the study team is willing to wrestle through to an understanding of them, they can haunt a congregation and make resolution of the issues impossible.

A closely-related issue is *how* the information will be gathered. Some areas of congregational life lend themselves more easily to quantifiable data (whether easy or difficult to gather). Demographic characteristics of church members and community residents, rates of giving or attendance, and the strength with which beliefs, values, attitudes, or opinions about various aspects of congregational life are held can be obtained through structured interviews, questionnaires, or in some instances from existing records. Other areas of church life, as we have already noted, can only be studied by more qualitative methods involving a considerable degree of empathetic involvement on the part of the one gathering the information. Elements of a congregation's culture, expressed in its language, symbols, and rituals, or dimensions of congregational process can often only be studied through these more qualitative approaches. Various ethnographic techniques such as participant observation and open-ended interviews are best used in these situations. There is a temptation to set more quantitative methods over against more qualitative ones that involve greater subjectivity and empathy, and to say that one or the other is inappropriate for the study of congregations. A recent, very helpful book on congregational analysis by Christian educator Denham Grierson argues strongly *for* participant observation as *the* appropriate way to understand congregations and *against* more quantitative approaches.⁶ Though we appreciate Grierson's position, we are much more eclectic in our approach. Each of us involved in producing this handbook probably leans in one direction or the other in preferred methodology and techniques; however, we believe that there are circumstances and issues for which more objective, quantifiable approaches are most helpful, and the same is true for the more subjective, qualitative and descriptive approaches. Often one will find her or himself using first one and then the other in the same situation.

The *how* of gathering needed information will also necessitate other decisions, such as *from whom it will be gathered and when*. Will a questionnaire be administered or interviews conducted with the total congregation or a representative sample of members? How can first impressions and gossip (which are valuable resources for descriptive studies) be validated? What range of activities or aspects of church life will need to be observed in order to form reliable impressions? How will such observations or responses to unstructured interviews be recorded? How will the information gathered, whether quantitative or qualitative, be

analyzed, summarized, and reported so as to be maximally helpful for addressing the congregation's needs? These are critical questions for any congregational analysis and are treated at length in this book.

The final step in the process of congregational study is that of *planning for the use of the information to address the issue(s) that the congregation is facing*. While it may seem gratuitous to include this—"After all, isn't that why the congregation undertook the process in the first place?"—there are many studies that have gathered dust upon completion because of inadequate attention to how they would be used. This is why we have insisted, in discussing several of the steps in the process, that attention be given to the ultimate use of the information: in the efforts to identify what the issue to be studied actually is; in being sure that the study team has authorization to proceed and therefore has some official status which warrants attention to their findings; in the process of selecting and contracting with a consultant; in the types of information one chooses to collect, making sure of its relevance to the issue and its usefulness in pointing to possible solutions; and in the techniques for gathering, analyzing, and presenting the information. Even when all of this has been carefully done, there will be work remaining in deciding what, if anything, is implied by the data for responding to the issue, what those responses will entail, who will make them, when, and how. Such steps, which take us beyond the congregational study process into decision making and planning, are also beyond the scope of this handbook; nevertheless, they are a critical part of the flow that begins with recognition that the congregation has reached a turning point in its life and proceeds through congregational study to an informed response to the congregation's situation.

Since this list of the steps in the process may seem rather daunting, it is worth recalling, as we conclude this section, why such studies are important. First, for troubled congregations, they will yield studies that bring clarity, intelligibility, and possibly improvements and solutions to many vexing issues in congregational life. For strong congregations, full of energy and hope, they will help identify directions for even greater mission and service. And for all kinds of congregations, the guidelines recounted here offer an order that makes it possible for a whole community—because it has entered into a common agreement on how to proceed—to participate in the enrichment and deepening of its self-understanding. It is on the basis of such self-understanding that God's work in and with local communities of believers becomes manifest, that love deepens and expands, and that the redemption of the whole created world finally depends.

1.5 Theology and the Study of the Congregation

This affirmation of what we believe to be a core purpose of congregational studies brings us finally to identify several theological concerns which are at least implicit if not always explicit in our approach to the study of the congregation. While as authors of this handbook we differ among ourselves at a number of points concerning the relation of congregational studies and theology, there are several areas in which we share general agreement and which we believe should be stated, albeit briefly.

We begin with the acknowledgment that we are neither neutral nor value free in our approach to congregations. We all come with a variety of values—some theologically grounded, some from the disciplines of study that we represent, and some from interests that we bring. In the case of theological assumptions, for example, what one believes about God's purposes for the church will shape the agenda for what will be addressed in congregational study. Thus those who believe that it is God's intention for the church to grow will be led to study the congregation and its context in ways quite different from those who are more in sympathy with liberation theology and who assume that God has a preferential concern for the poor. We too have our own convictions about the church and God's purposes for it which we will indicate below. But before doing so, we wish to consider further how such convictions affect what we study and the conclusions we draw.

Does acknowledging that we are not neutral or totally objective in our approach to congregations constitute a fatal flaw in our efforts at understanding? We think not; although, some who argue for the strict objectivity of a scientific approach would doubtless say yes. While one's values and beliefs, as we acknowledge, do influence what one looks for and is able to see in studying a congregation, they need not prevent one from taking an approach that is disciplined and rigorous, that follows rules and procedures that are open to the inspection of others. Nor does it imply that honesty in gathering data and drawing inferences about the data is impossible.

The importance of discipline, rigor, openness, and honesty in studying congregations cannot be overemphasized. Because of deeply held values and commitments, often unstated and even unrecognized by us, there is a danger that we will see only what agrees with what we already believe and value and deny that which we do not believe or value. There is an old story about certain theologians who refused to look into Galileo's telescope when invited, because they were afraid of seeing something that they could not believe. We believe, however, that the approach and methods

advocated in this handbook work against refusing to see what we do not wish to see by stressing a discipline of study with rules for proceeding and sharing findings that are public and communal, not private. While these things do not guarantee honesty nor totally rule out the possibility of avoidance or denial, they make them much more difficult.

However, the fact that we bring our theological assumptions and values to congregational study can also have a positive effect. Not only do our assumptions direct our efforts at defining what we want to know, but they also help us in raising the questions that we want to put to the data we collect. Furthermore, it is easy to get "taken in" or seduced by the appearance of the objectivity and "hardness" of one's findings. Rather than not believing what we see, sometimes the opposite temptation is there: to believe *only what we see* and to see no possibilities in and beyond the apparent givenness of what is. If, for example, what we see is a negative or very difficult situation facing the congregation—for example, a deteriorating neighborhood or a serious financial shortfall—there is the temptation to accept the situation as a given that has no possibilities for a creative and faithful response. But congregational study that is rooted in a belief that God is at work for good in all things can inform a lively and playful imagination that leads us to push beyond a deterministic acceptance of the apparent givenness of the situation. In the interplay between the congregation's present being and envisioned possibilities for its becoming, new openings for ministry and mission in and through its present circumstances may be discovered. By so informing our imaginations, our beliefs and convictions play an important positive role in the process of congregational studies.

Having said this, what are our convictions about congregations that we as authors of this handbook bring to the study process? Our affirmation of the significance and centrality of the congregation with which we began this chapter grows out of a twofold conviction that local congregations are major carriers and shapers of the faith tradition of the church, and that God is at work powerfully in and through them. To be sure, there are other carriers and shapers of the church's heritage and interpreters of God's activity in the world, such as Scripture, creeds, ecclesiastical councils, denominational agencies, or theological seminaries. There has been a tendency to think of these sources as primary bearers of the tradition and interpreters of the activity of God in the world, and to consider local congregations essentially as consumers of truth generated from other sources. We disagree. As important for the life and mission of the church as these other interpreters of God's activity are—and we would

add to the list prophetic voices standing outside the church—they are not the reservoirs of truth from which dependent local churches are simply to be spoon-fed. God is alive and active in the local church at least as much as in the theological centers or church hierarchies. Thus, we bring to the study of congregations an expectation that we will find evidences of God's activity in and through these local bodies and through the efforts of their members to live out their faith.

We are not so naïve as to believe that all that is said and done by local congregations and their members is faithful to the gospel. There is more often than not a tension, if not a conflict, between faithfulness to the gospel that is confessed in a local congregation and the actual living out of that gospel in the behavior of the congregation as a corporate body or in the lives of its members. Congregational study is an important means of holding up these behaviors for examination in the light of the faith a congregation espouses. In the chapter on congregational identity, we will consider further ways of examining possible tensions that may exist between the broader Christian tradition (what we call the great tradition) and the distinctive traditions of local congregations (the little tradition). We might add, however, that we believe that other bearers and shapers of the faith tradition are also subject to tension between the understanding of the faith they convey and what it is that God is calling churches to be and do in new and different situations. Being anchored in interpretations of the faith in the tradition that seem anachronistic in light of present realities—as, for example, theological assumptions based on the pre-Copernican view of the earth as the center of the universe—is no better than the failures of local congregations to practice what they preach. Congregational study is also helpful in these situations by assisting congregations (and other bearers of the tradition) to examine traditions in light of present realities as a part of their efforts to respond to the leading of the Spirit.

In our belief that congregations are key bearers and shapers of the faith tradition and that God is at work in and through them, we are affirming an essentially incarnational view of the church. It is our conviction that God's presence to the world in the ministry and mission of Jesus is continued in and through the life and ministry of local congregations as well as other expressions of the church. Much of what the world sees and knows of the Gospel and its meaning for life; much of what it sees and knows of God's concern for the poor, the suffering and alienated; much of what it knows of God's concern for reconciliation and peacemaking; it sees and knows through the life and activities of congregations and their members at the local level. It is through these often frail, earthen vessels that the Word

becomes flesh in different times and places and under changing circumstances.

In the Incarnation, God became present to the world in human form, in a particular place, at a particular historical moment, in a particular society and culture. While, in effect, this limited who could hear the Word and how they would hear it through available language and cultural forms, this very particularity made the Word hearable and seeable. And while the Resurrection was, in one sense, a freeing of the Word from those particularities so that it could become fully universal, it was, in another sense, a freeing of the Word so that it could become particular again and again, in different times and places, under different social and cultural forms, and be given voice in a multitude of languages. It is our conviction that local congregations are one of those instances through which the Word continues to become flesh.

But if this is true, then congregations need to be helped to discern the intention and tendency of Jesus' ministry in which they are called to participate, to examine their present life in terms of that intention, and also to find ways of becoming truly indigenous in the social and cultural setting which they find themselves called to serve. We believe that congregational study can assist in this process by holding congregational life up for such critical inspection: considering its programs and processes, its relation to its social and cultural context, and its identity. To what extent is a particular congregation captive to past expressions of faith and practice that are unfaithful to God's calling in the present? Or conversely, to what extent is the congregation—open system that it is—so captive to its context that it has lost its critical edge? What opportunities exist for it to become more faithful and authentic in its particular place and circumstances at this time in its life? A commentator on an early draft of the handbook illustrates the potential of such questioning from the perspective of liberation theology, and provides a helpful conclusion to this introductory chapter:

The real promise of Congregational Studies in the context of the American church is that it may become a means of indigenizing our theological heritage in the first world in the way that base communities are doing in the third world. As such it could be the salvation of liberation theology which now admires the application of the gospel abroad but cannot imagine what shape the church should take at home. In its anxiety to be prophetic, liberation theology tends to project scenarios for the American church that fly by the reality of congregational life as it is.⁷

The comment sums up well our conviction about the contribution that congregational studies can make to congregations as they seek to be faithful in continuing the ministry of Jesus in their particular time and place.

NOTES

1. Martin E. Marty, *The Public Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 45.
2. *Building Effective Ministry, Theory and Practice in the Local Church*. Carl S. Dudley, ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1983).
3. From an interview later recorded in "The Educational Preferences and Practices of Talented Ministers: Report on an Exploratory Study," an unpublished study by Barbara G. Wheeler (November, 1984). Distributed by Auburn Theological Seminary.
4. Russell Ackoff, "The Future of Operational Research is Past," *Journal of Operational Research Society*; 30, 2 (Pergammon Press, 1979) pp. 90-100. Cited in Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), p. 16.
5. See Lyle E. Schaller, "A Practitioner's Perspective," in Dudley, ed., *Building Effective Ministry*, 160-62. Also, see Loren B. Mead, "Seeking Significant Intervention," *ibid.*, pp. 155-59.
6. Denham Grierson, *Transforming a People of God* (Melbourne: The Joint Board of Christian Education of Australia and New Zealand, 1984), pp. 39-49.
7. Neill Q. Hamilton, "Friday Morning Comments on the Handbook," correspondence to the authors.