
BUILDING EFFECTIVE MINISTRY

THEORY AND PRACTICE IN
THE LOCAL CHURCH



EDITED BY CARL S. DUDLEY



1817

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Preface

The importance of the local church is often overlooked in the public press. In their reporting on religion, the mass media seem preoccupied with the actions of extremists, trends reflected in the public opinion polls, and statements by leaders and national religious assemblies. But the majority of people in the United States and Canada have chosen to relate themselves to the Christian faith through local congregations. Their faith is not found in extreme behavior, opinion polls, or pronouncements about religion. They associate believing with the local church and community pastor, with weddings, funerals, and personal crises, with Sunday school and neighborhood church activities.

Church members support more than 330,000 local congregations, which are found in every segment of society. There are more churches than schools, more church members than people who belong to any other voluntary association, and more financial support for churches than for all other philanthropic causes combined. Dire predictions of an earlier decade to the contrary, congregations of believers have retained their strength in a changing world. Although the ministry of the church takes on many essential forms, the body of Christ is most often associated with the outreach and caring of the local congregation.

This book celebrates the importance of the local church. It is based on two convictions. First, congregations yield unanticipated riches when taken as worthy objects of serious study. Second, the accumulation of several disciplines is necessary to fathom the diverse and complex interaction that characterizes the local church.

For many people, the beauty of a fresh look at congregations provides its own reward. The congregation appears to have endless resources in its history and in the intricate relationships and diverse perspectives of those who are committed to it. The congregation is always more than we expect because it has roots and resources beyond our understanding. The congregation is a complex gift of God.

Reflecting the fact that pastors and lay leaders alike have found the study of the congregation to be both challenging and fun, this book is written around a case study. In Part I the "case" of Wiltshire Church is presented. It is a factual account of a particular moment in the life of an actual church, although the names and places have been changed. A leading figure in the congregation tells his story, and further information is provided in background materials. This is not a model of perfection, but a congregation typical of many others, with a memorable history, identifiable resources, uncertain leadership, and recognizable problems. Given this base of information, you are invited to join with others in exploring the problems and possibilities for the people of Wiltshire Church.

The rest of the book is an exploration of insights based on studies of the Wiltshire Church case by authors who have had extensive experience working with congregations. Nine selected approaches are divided between two sections, Parts II and III, reflecting the distinction between those who seek to apply a particular discipline and those who focus primarily on the resolution of congregational problems. Part II consists of chapters written from the vantage point of disciplines that bring a recognized theoretical orientation to the study of congregations: psychology, anthropology, sociology, literary symbolism, and theology. These approaches provide the building blocks from which multidisciplinary studies are constructed. Part III includes contributions from church-related consultants who employ several disciplines in working with congregations. They emphasize the necessity for a pragmatic and eclectic approach to respond to whatever problems and needs they find.

Part IV presents three efforts to assimilate the various approaches: first, through the practice of ministry; second, through the rubrics of practical theology; and finally, through contributions that congregational studies might make to the issues of contemporary church life.

The purpose of this book is to provide new routes into the social and spiritual dynamics of the local church. Renewed appreciation for the congregation should release new energy among the membership to challenge and enliven the whole Body of Christ. Here

we see hope for clergy and church members working together to build more effective ministry in and through our congregations.

The labor and vision of many people are invested here. It is one expression of a continuing study of different approaches to working with congregations that has been under the direction of a Committee for Congregational Studies composed of Jackson W. Carroll, James F. Hopewell, Loren B. Mead, Barbara G. Wheeler, and myself. We especially appreciate the catalytic participation of Robert W. Lynn of Lilly Endowment and the support that made possible several interdisciplinary gatherings during the two years of preparation. We recognize with appreciation the extensive and creative work of the contributors who prepared and tested several drafts of each chapter in dialogue with representatives of several approaches. We received particularly valuable insights from more than three hundred pastors, executives, consultants, and other church leaders who met for a three-day conference in Atlanta, Georgia, reviewing the content of this volume and helping to shape it for publication. Several other people made extensive contributions, especially Elizabeth Whipple of the Rollins Center for Church Ministries, and Sue Cossey Armentariz, who served as research assistant and typist for the final draft. At the center of our work we want to thank the people of "Wiltshire Church," and the thousands of congregations like it, who have shared their lives in a way that all of us may learn to be more effective servants of our Lord.

CARL S. DUDLEY