
15. Focus on the Congregation: A Look to the Future

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More than once in the preceding pages, different methods for studying the congregation are referred to as “lenses” through which the local church may be viewed. The word evokes an image for this book: a studio full of photographers, with a live model, the congregation, at the center. Each photographer has portrayed the model using a lens that refracts a distinctive way of perceiving congregational life. The reader has had an opportunity to circumambulate the studio examining the model through the various lenses, each with its different angle of vision, magnification, and points of sharp focus and emphasis.

From this tour a rich, variegated picture of the congregation emerges. The sociologists have shown that there is a two-way movement, full of tension and promise, as the congregation is acted upon by forces in its environment and at the same time moves outward to affect and change its setting. The ethnographic contributors picture the congregation both as a stage for an intense, symbological drama and a unit of culture in which invisible but deep structural forces hold sway. The theologians portray a struggle, never resolved, between the congregation’s best theological self-understanding (sometimes adopted from tradition and sometimes strikingly original) and its unthinking daily practice. Other contributors suggest characteristic ways organizations and their leaders behave, and show how an awareness of these patterns can give congregations a new freedom: either to work with, or to resist, the dynamics of organizational life and the forces of personality.

Viewed in these different ways, the congregation looks fuller, more complex, and more varied than it is often perceived in daily

experience. The array of methods used to study congregations has broadened in recent years, as this volume testifies. Yet even this composite view does not include many important modes of study and analysis. Aesthetic studies, for instance, could illuminate the meaning of movement, physical space, light, images, color, and sound in the lives of congregations. Historical studies are called for, to show the ways that many of the phenomena of present-day church life are rooted in a dimly remembered past. Congregational studies would also be strengthened by close economic analyses and by studies that focus specifically on social class as it shapes congregational life. Women have been notably absent from the company of congregational researchers. Since women are the majority population of most congregations and continue to encounter obstacles as they seek lay and ordained leadership roles, they have a unique perspective that congregational studies sorely needs. Ecumenical breadth is required as well. Roman Catholic and Jewish researchers and theologians have conducted studies in recent years of congregations in those faith traditions that should be included in any future collection of this kind. In short, both the cast of persons engaged in coordinated efforts in congregational studies and the range of methods employed could profitably be expanded.

The issue of the inclusiveness and range of congregational studies is important but even more important for the future is the question of the use of congregational studies. Of what practical utility are careful research studies and lengthy reflections by consultants, the kinds of chapters gathered into this book? What difference does it make to collect and compare such studies in order to present a richly textured portrait of a single congregation? At the deepest level, how is the faith and witness of the whole church strengthened and renewed by the kind of intense and prolonged attention that these authors have paid to Wiltshire Church?

Some answers to these questions may be found in both what this book achieves and what it does not. Taken together, the chapters show that a local congregation may be viewed in a variety of ways, that some methods of study reveal what others conceal, and that a multiplicity of perspectives gives dimensions to an understanding of congregational life that a single method of study could never offer. The authors succeed in demonstrating that congrega-

tions have facets and layers, and that in and among them lie richer resources than most of us expect to find. But just as significant is what these studies do not accomplish. Despite the fact that Wiltshire Church was subjected to scrutiny by over a dozen scholars and consultants, the authors have not succeeded in fully accounting for the church. It was not explainable simply as the product of social, cultural, historical, organizational, or religious forces. No one of the methods alone nor all of them together could “solve” the enigmas of Wiltshire. Nor do they manage to divide congregational life into neat territories, each the province of one of the methods of analysis. Stubbornly, the story of this congregation holds together, unfolding in response to an unprecedented battery of investigatory approaches trained on the case of a single congregation, but never allowing itself to be reduced to simply a social phenomenon, cultural artifact, organizational example, or theological idea.

Different contributors to this volume would suggest different reasons for the sturdy integrity of Wiltshire and of other congregations they have studied closely. Some hold views of the church that ascribe to the congregation a central or even unique role as the locus of ministry and mission. The depth, richness, and wholeness of congregational life, they would argue, is a sign of God’s presence. Others would offer a more naturalistic explanation. The congregation is a social institution with unusual characteristics, such as the age range of its members and the fact that major life passages are marked and celebrated there. Thus its powerful quality can be attributed to its complexity as a social and cultural institution. Whichever view is taken, there would be agreement in our group both that the congregation is an extraordinarily fruitful focus for studies of church life and that it has an identity not fully defined or encompassed by the methods of study applied to it, whether singly or in combination.

These two lessons from congregational studies, that the congregation is an abundantly fruitful focus for study and at the same time durable, not easily reduced or explained away, suggest where the significance and promise of congregational studies may lie. The integrity of the congregation, its fullness and wholeness, contrasts strikingly with many of our experiences elsewhere in church

life. Much of the literature about the state of the church suggests the opposite: it is rife with divisions—between liberals and conservatives, local churches and denominational offices, and seminaries and church bodies, and among denominations. Its spiritual life, social witness, and theological reflection are criticized for their aridity, rootlessness, and poverty of images. Congregational studies cannot by themselves heal divisions and lend vitality in troubled areas of church life. But they may provide new grounds for conversation among separated or discouraged parties. The study of the congregation might help to restate the issues and improve the quality of discourse in several areas.

First and most critically, congregational studies can help free congregations from their own frequently superficial self-understanding. Both the source of a congregation's unity and power and its resources for outreach and mission are all too often buried under a caricature of itself that it harbors. A symbol or image or explanation of "why this church is the way it is" is chosen because it initially is truthful and powerful. But then the chosen symbol or explanation becomes an emblem, and evidence that contradicts it is excluded, so it becomes empty and finally deceptive. Wiltshire, for example, has reached an easy consensus that its identity is tied to the image of "the best show in town." Yet the studies in this book show that there are other and more meaningful images that bind the congregation together. The freedom to take steps in other directions, the freedom *not* to be the best show, depends on discovering those other images and the relationships and hopes that are also reliably binding forces.

Here congregational studies can help. Of course it is not possible to assemble a multidisciplinary team of scholars under most circumstances. Nor, in most cases, is even a single full-scale research study a possibility. But pastors and lay leaders *can* learn, using more formal studies as examples and guides, to take a careful look at the life and work of their own congregations. Many also have the resources to hire consultants to help in the process of self-study. Whether on their own or with consultants' help, however, two elements are critical. There must be some disciplined research; merely rehashing the ideas, images, and explanations that come readily to hand and mind is *not* congregational study.

And, if the lesson of this larger effort that this book represents is to be taken seriously, the self-study should include multiple methods of investigation, because it is in the clash and complementarity of different "ways of seeing" that both the stubborn power and meaningful richness of congregational life come to light, as well as the deceptiveness of too-easy answers.

A second mission for congregational studies may be to promote understanding between local churches and church executives. Resentments on both sides run deep in this arena. Clergy and laity in local churches tend to view regional, and especially national, staff as privileged idealists, free to take positions on controversial issues without reference to local opinion or political consequences. From the local perspective, executives can also appear self-righteous, judgmental, and even condescending toward the realities of local church life. On their side, executive staff may view local congregations as more concerned for their own comfort and identity than for the larger mission of the church and too often captive to the values that are embedded in the socio-economic location of their members. Congregational studies reveal a much more mixed and complicated image of the congregation than is usually considered on either side of the division between local churches and denominational (or ecumenical) executives. They show how difficult are the distinctions and how permeable the membranes between congregation and community, internal and external concerns, ministry to members and outreach mission, community self-preservation and self-sacrifice—all the classic dichotomies involved in the debate as it is usually carried on. Like leaders of congregations, executives do not have the resources to engage in much formal research themselves. The executives who most frequently work directly with congregations, those in districts, presbyteries, dioceses, and the like, can spend very little time in any one setting. But they can build methods from congregational studies into their pattern of work. They can discipline themselves to ask questions and gather information designed to reveal the pluriform character of the congregations they assist. They can learn to apprehend and take seriously both a congregation's story and its statistics, both its organizational structure and its theological convictions. Proceeding this way, congregations will appear more complex, more "rich

and strange," as Shakespeare wrote, and much less easy to stereotype. If church officials who have deepened and expanded their understanding of congregations are joined by congregations who have worked to enrich their self-understanding, the conversations between the two parties are almost certain to improve.

A third arena in which the focus on the congregation may promote understanding is that of the difficult relationship between seminaries and churches. "The great divide" was how one recent magazine article characterized relations between seminaries on the one hand and both local churches and denominational agencies on the other. The critics of seminaries, many of them their own graduates, accuse seminaries of preoccupation with recondite scholarly subject matter and neglect of subjects and issues that pertain to the practice of ministry and the conduct of church life. Seminary faculty have been less openly critical of churches than clergy and laity have been of seminaries, but faculty have held up their side of the estrangement with the conviction that their critics are essentially anti-intellectual and hostile to the scholar's ministry of critical inquiry.

The study of the congregation may help in several ways to create a climate for constructive discussions. Seminary faculty who use the tools of their disciplines to study with local congregations will demonstrate that they take it seriously. Such demonstrations may help to repair the seminary's tattered public relations image with churches and address an even deeper problem: the difficulty that many church people have conceiving of seminaries as important expressions of the church. Even the usual way of naming the problem—"the tensions between seminaries and churches"—suggests how widespread is the notion of the seminary as something-other-than-the-church. Faculty research on the congregation cannot correct this view by itself, but it can create some healthy confusion among those on both sides who believe that scholars and church leaders have such different interests and values that they can never share a common object of study and concern.

The focus on the congregation also holds promise for current efforts to reconceive theological curriculum. Lately some seminary educators have joined church critics in calls for curriculum reform. One of the contributors to this book who teaches in a sem-

inary has written elsewhere¹ about the curiously disembodied quality of much seminary education, about its prudish preference for ecclesiological abstraction over what Clifford Geertz has called "bodied stuff,"² in this case, the data of congregational life. Others, such as Edward Farley,³ have charged that the present organization of the curriculum corresponds to a long-vanished ecclesial reality. The study of the congregation is one response to both these critiques, since it can provide insights about the church's living body significant for both the form and the content of seminary education. If the congregation is in fact a rich expression of the church in which many elements cohere, then perhaps the study of it from a variety of perspectives can serve to re-orient, re-organize and unify what Farley has called the "dispersed disciplines" of theological study.

One can cite other examples of the potential of congregational studies to draw together parties divided on religious issues. *Since congregations are an ecclesiastical form common to all Judeo-Christian faith groups, congregational studies may have a role in ecumenical dialogue.* Comparative studies of congregations in different faith traditions are one way that abstract ideas about religious differences and points of commonality can be tested. In a similar way, congregational studies may promote deeper understanding *within* faith communities divided along theological or ideological lines. As we have noted earlier, the life of actual congregations studied in any depth has a density and variety that confounds the usual partisan dividing lines. Congregations *do* differ from each other in dramatic ways, but rarely are the deepest differences explained to the extent one would expect by denomination, theological position, or political outlook.

In recent years Protestant attitudes toward congregations have changed. Twenty years ago many of those who cared intensely for the mission of the church had given up on the congregation, re-

¹James Hopewell, "Examining the Body," in *Ministry and Mission* 3 and 4 (1981-82).

²Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 23.

³Edward Farley, *Theological Education* 12, no. 2 (1981).

garding it as fatally committed to its own institutional survival and the preservation of the class and cultural interests of its members. Today most denominational energy is invested in building congregations. The present concern for the physical fitness of the congregation takes different forms. In evangelical and conservative churches the emphasis is on growth in size, especially in membership. More liberal communions tend to focus on effectiveness and organizational strength. But the presuppositions are similar. The congregation is an essentially healthy form of church life. What is required is more of it (church growth) or more effective use of its resources (church management).

Readers with experience of congregational leadership will find neither of these recent views true to their experience; the essays of this book suggest different conclusions as well. The congregation is not bankrupt or irredeemably self-absorbed. Neither is it naturally healthy. The congregation is not automatically either damned or saved simply by being the congregation. Rather, it is a powerful mixture of elements, containing in its culture, tradition, structures, and practices the seeds of its own and the world's undoing or salvation.

This book is an argument for the value of serious analysis of various elements in congregational life. Even more important, it demonstrates the difficulty of isolating or finally defining the limits of those elements. Congregational studies will make significant contributions to the life of local churches and to the healing of deep divisions in the whole church *only* if future studies reflect the integrity and richness found in congregations themselves. There are many methods of analysis, many perceptual lenses, many interpretive conclusions, many members, but "the body is one."