
2. The Case of Wiltshire Church: Background

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The Setting

Wiltshire is a historic community located on the site of a former Indian village in western Massachusetts. Although it was first settled by Europeans in the late 1600s as a farming community, its early growth related to a local textile firm. In the past two decades Wiltshire has doubled in population (from 10,000 to over 21,000) due to expansion from nearby Springfield, Massachusetts.

The mayor describes Wiltshire as “a typical suburban community,” lodged between two sets of ridges that divide it from Springfield and from other surrounding communities. She suggests that many people believe that it has a “Shangri-la atmosphere [that] gives the town a positive sense of identification, but also a sense of isolation and values to be protected.”

The mayor based her philosophical reflections on patterns and cycles that she associated with the writings of Santayana and the Durants. She felt there was a quest for privacy among the citizens of Wiltshire. “In an outgoing, aggressive, and competitive culture, there is a basic reserve,” she asserted. The attraction of Wiltshire was “the ability to live in a suburban community and yet have . . . your own island. You can not only get in between the ridges every night, you then go and get in between the birches and the elms. You really can isolate yourself . . . whether for positive or negative reasons is for someone else to determine. In my own case, it has been positive. I can go at a rapid pace as long as I have a period of time to restore that energy.”

Most of the residents of Wiltshire are white, middle class. The

figures from the 1980 census show the population: white, 20,683 (97.7 percent); black, 183 (0.9 percent); and other, 295 (1.4 percent). Most of the residents in Wiltshire, including the blacks, have upper management jobs or are corporate executives, according to the mayor. A high percentage of the community is professionally employed, and an increasing number of the women are finding employment outside the home.

To conserve the Wiltshire "quality of life in a rural setting," an advocacy group has been formed called the Wiltshire Conservation Committee. A recent article in the *Springfield Times* described the town as having a "drawbridge mentality." The mayor cites an attitude among some citizens: "There is an attitude in some quarters that we worked hard to get here and anyone else who wants to be here can also work to get here. On the other side of the issue [are] the three-hundred-year residents, the descendants of the original residents, who are saying to the new people, 'We made room for you and we think you should take an example from us and make room for others.'" In the spring of 1981, the largest town meeting in the history of Wiltshire voted overwhelmingly to sell a parcel of town land to a large company for its corporate headquarters. Many residents voiced support based on the need for a wider tax base.

In the past few decades Wiltshire has been a "child-oriented" community, reflected in the middle-aged families who place a high priority on education. One resident indicated that her family had moved to Wiltshire "to buy a school, not a house." Thirty-five percent of the population is under 18 years of age. In the past decade few young married couples moved into the community because of the high cost of housing, and older people often moved to smaller houses or condominiums when their children left home. This pattern may be changing. There is a trend for older couples to retain their homes and older children to continue to live with their parents.

Population projections for 1990 suggest a decline for the school age population (from 35 percent to 27 percent) and a proportionate gain in the number of residents over 45 (from 25 percent to 33 percent). It is not clear how this will affect the employment pat-

terns of Wiltshire, since the majority of people are at present employed in other communities, primarily Springfield. In Wiltshire, the Adams Company is the largest employer, with a employment base of about 800. The second largest employer is the town of Wiltshire, which has 637 employees, most of whom are related to the school system.

The Congregational church is the oldest religious institution in Wiltshire, although the Methodists began home worship in the early 1800s. A Baptist church was constructed as early as 1833, and the Roman Catholic church dates from 1850. Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Universalist-Unitarian churches were established within the last century. Most recently, the Wiltshire Valley Jewish Congregation constructed a synagogue in 1972.

The Methodist Church Building

The church is located at the center of the historic and business district of Wiltshire. Within a hundred yards of the church building are located City Hall, the Public Assembly Building, the restored first meeting house, and at least twenty shops and restaurants, including a modern supermarket.

The church sanctuary, fellowship hall, classrooms, and parsonage are located on a relatively small lot at a major intersection, with a parking lot behind the church buildings. The sanctuary is warmly furnished with dominant dark wood tones, exposed wooden beams, and elaborate Tiffany stained glass windows. On Sunday mornings it is regularly three-fourths full at the 9 A.M. service and quite full at the 11 A.M. service. The sanctuary is the largest gathering space in the church buildings, with comfortable seating for 270 adults.

The fellowship hall, adjacent to the sanctuary, is about one-fourth its size. The Sunday school rooms, offices, choir rooms, and kitchen are located on two floors in relatively crowded conditions. Committee meetings are regularly held in the pastor's study, but a gathering there of more than fifteen people seems crowded. The junior and senior high youth classes meet in space across Main Street, rented from an art gallery in the historic area. The church building, which is crowded on Sunday, is relatively empty during

the week. It is used by office staff, weekly for scouts and a prayer group, and for other occasional meetings.

Church Membership

Membership in Wiltshire Church comes by transfer of letter or confession of faith. An active visitors calling program is followed by an optional one-session class for membership orientation conducted by the pastor. One lay leader said that there were two explicit expectations for membership: a financial contribution and occasional worship participation. Issues of belief or commitment were generally assumed.

The composition of the congregation is typically middle-aged upper-middle-income white families. Exceptions do not break the pattern: some younger couples, single adults, black families—all seem to share the same basic values and aspirations. Although the black members can frequently trace their Methodist roots to the South, many of the most recent white members of Wiltshire Church have no previous experience with the Methodist church.

Of the 1100 members, the senior pastor lists 800 as active. The average weekly worship attendance is 350. Since a significant number of the membership must travel in their employment, the attendance average appears to represent a larger membership who attend on a "rotating" basis. There is also a strong Sunday church school program for children and youth, with an average attendance of 250. Adult education during the week accommodates another 30 participants. Interviews with lay members suggest that their church activities are focused on Sunday morning, with a few active members involved in leadership functions and special programs during the week. Some of those interviewed identified a group of "old-timers" or "established members" that was estimated at 15 to 25 percent of the congregation and was seen to be less active in recent years.

The total projected church budget for 1981 was \$155,000, with \$9,000 (6 percent) allocated for mission and benevolence. Given the resources of the congregation, clergy and lay leaders agree that financial contributions to the church are "terrible" and "depressing."

Church Programs and Activities

For most of the year *worship* involves two virtually identical services on Sunday morning, at 9 A.M. and 11 A.M.; during the summer and Christmas holidays a single service is sufficient. Professional leadership is provided by the senior pastor, part-time associate pastor, and organist/choir director. Special music is offered by the church choir, anchored by four professional soloists, which may be supplemented by one of the choirs of children and youth. Communion, served on the first Sunday of each month, takes a different form of worship. The Eucharist is served at the rail, necessitating the communicants to come forward and return to their seats.

Church school is offered during both services of worship. The basic Methodist curriculum, *Christian Studies*, is employed for K-6, under the leadership of a paid part-time program director. As her goal, the director declared, "I want children to leave here feeling they are loved and knowing they can always come here. If we create an atmosphere of caring and love, then we are successful."

Youth program includes a separate Youth Worship Service during the 11 A.M. worship on Sunday morning and activity groups on Sunday evenings. Programs vary from devotional to social interests. The youth groups are known for their annual musical events, such as *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, performed by a combination of youth groups and many young people unrelated to the church. Leadership is provided by a paid part-time youth director and volunteer advisors from the congregation. A number of members view the youth program as outreach to the community by Wiltshire Church.

Administrative board is composed of fifteen members, who serve for a three-year term. Each board member has specific responsibilities for the operation of the church. As a board they meet with the pastor to make policy and implement programs in Wiltshire Church. At present all members of the board are between the ages of 35 and 50. The board is relatively small for a Methodist church of this size.

Adult groups reflect the needs and interests of particular constituents. They at present include two *Bible study* groups meeting biweekly, one with the leadership of the pastor. A *prayer group* of women meets every Wednesday. *Sara Circle* for the older women meets monthly for devotions, sharing, and service. *Women's Sharing Group*, for recently married women, meets monthly for a program and discussion. *Meals on Wheels* is a service group that prepares and delivers about thirty dinners each week to elderly members of the parish. *Adult education* programs, series, and special events are generated as the need is expressed and the leadership is available.

Leadership

Although charitable concerns, especially among individual members, were attended to from 1846 to 1970, there was no discernible pattern of religious presence in the community on behalf of the church as an institution. The structure and leadership of Wiltshire Church was radically altered in June 1970 by the appointment of the present senior pastor. In his view, the pastorate had been a "safe chaplaincy," and the church had been "sitting on its hands for fifty years." With the clear understanding that the bishop expected him "to straighten this place up," the newly appointed pastor dramatized his entry with a series of decisive actions that are widely recounted in congregational interviews. As a result the entire existing administrative board resigned. This placed the official control of the church in the hands of a new board, with the new pastor clearly in charge.

Current lay leaders of the congregation agree that the pastor "filled a leadership vacuum" during his first years in the congregation. The feeling persists among some members that a small group of leaders makes the decisions for the congregation under the direction of the senior pastor. Most members of the administrative board believe that the pastor has been the primary factor in decision making for the church. Yet the current situation is in flux. Some board members have expressed confusion about their responsibilities on the board, and some have commented on the lack of clarity about the goals and direction of the church in the past several months. In the same period of time, several board

members have observed an increase in conflict within the congregation. Many board members noted, with a variety of feelings, that the pastor recently had not appeared to function with his usual strong style of leadership. At the time of the annual board retreat, the pastor admitted that he was attempting to withdraw from his usual directive pastoral leadership style "while the board attempts to develop new leadership."

During the course of this study, several changes in church leadership occurred. Resignations were submitted by the chairman of the administrative board, one other board member, and the church treasurer. In his letter of resignation, the chairman of the board raised several "charges" about the senior pastor, and indicated his concern for the quality of life in the congregation. Several staff positions also opened: the part-time associate pastor received a full appointment to another congregation; the interim youth director returned to seminary; and the minister of music resigned.

Methodist Structure and Organization

During the past decade Wiltshire Church functioned as "a village community church," as one member described it. The senior pastor has publicly criticized the Methodist system. When asked why neither he nor lay leaders provide leadership for the conference, the pastor indicated that the meetings were more than two hours away, large, tedious, and unproductive, with debates clouded by "polarized pressure groups." Further, both the pastor and the board expressed unhappiness with the district superintendent for offering "no help whatsoever" on two occasions when they felt they needed the appointment of an assistant pastor.

At the same time, the district superintendent said that, although Wiltshire Church was unique as a Methodist church in its building, administrative structure, and relation to the conference, it was the "strongest church in the district" in terms of growth in members, money, and church school. He noted that it was not numerically the largest church in the district, at least not yet. He further expressed concern about a connectional church built as heavily around the style of the pastor as is Wiltshire Church.

The middle-management mentality of the community is reflected in the mind-set of the membership, who expect professionally

competent services from the staff under a directing but noncontrolling board. One leader observed, "We don't know what we want and expect from the church staff, so we hire talent to give it. This results in what appears to be a 'one man show.'" A board member declared that the priority on personal needs often resulted in burdens on the pastor and conflict in the congregation. On the other hand, the pastor and several lay leaders stated that the "quiet majority" of the congregation was satisfied with the present tone and direction of the church.

Observable Themes in Congregational Life

The "best show in town" and the "in" church were frequently used to describe Wiltshire Church by members, visitors, community residents, and even staff. The meaning and specific application of the terms varied with the speaker, but the image was consistent. The First Congregational Church of Wiltshire was viewed as "historic" and "established." But Wiltshire Church was where the action was. No other congregation had such clear and immediate recognition in this way.

When asked about the impact on the community beyond the church, the senior pastor recalled the support of the congregation in the face of opposition by many town residents for the church's purchase of a building to house a program for helping runaway youth. "However," he said, "I look on myself as a minister of this Methodist church, with a minimal interest in impacting major social and economic problems in the community. There is a major question in my mind whether the church ought to be addressing these as a church. We do attempt to reach out through the conference . . . but for the most part that is a very peripheral part of our lifestyle." Over the past ten years, however, the senior pastor has served on numerous community boards and agencies.

The associate pastor agreed with the pastor's analysis of social involvement. After a recent administrative board meeting, called for the purpose of setting goals, he said, "We are the church of Jesus Christ. What does that mean for us? They have a reputation as a country club. . . . I am surprised we don't have some sort of service at . . . the beginning of the season when everybody

brings their tennis rackets to church and they bless the damn things.”

The associate pastor indicated particular frustration with the administrative board. He believed the leadership was out of touch with those members in the congregation who want to “spend less time and attention on ourselves, and to address the community needs not only of Wiltshire, but of the people in Springfield as well.”

Among the membership a significant number had not been active in any congregation prior to membership in Wiltshire Church. The church image was felt to be communicated through the style of the church and the personality of the pastor. There are also a number of people who attend regularly but have not become members. Since the line between church member and constituent is not sharply drawn, these church attenders are listed in the directory of membership, but in different size type.

The relationship between the larger mass of members and the church leadership was not always clear. Among some leaders there were concerns voiced in dramatic terms of “our present problems,” “distress,” and “the turmoil in the church.” For these people, three themes occurred most frequently:

1. The need for *spiritual depth and growth* was expressed. Some people sought help from the worship services, which sometimes seemed to lack “spiritual and theological depth.” Others looked for help in Bible study and prayer groups both within and beyond Wiltshire Church.
2. In what had become a “large church” some expressed a need for *nurturing communities*. Some wanted a sense of community in a transient world. Others wanted space where they could “comfortably share problems and seek help.”
3. Some indicated their desire for a church to be a vehicle for *service* to the community and beyond. Some people wanted a channel for their own commitment, and others were pushing for the commitment of the congregation as a whole.

Although these issues were frequently mentioned, it is not clear how many people were involved in the “turmoil.” Several leaders

suggested that such restlessness was limited to “splinter groups” and a “relatively small percentage of the congregation.”

Theological Self-Understanding

Both pastors and most lay leaders were unable to define the church’s theological self-understanding. The traditional terms, “conservative,” “liberal,” “fundamentalist,” were avoided or rejected. Whenever the interviews pressed the theological question, the response was a description of the needs of the congregation or the community. The senior pastor suggests, “It is difficult to assign a theological category to the bulk of those people because I don’t think they think in theological terms. It is alien to their lifestyle.”

The theology that appears to be reflected in the worship and life of the congregation is very personal and individualistic. This is typified by the conviction that loneliness, anxiety, or failure can be “lived through,” or survived, by virtue of Christian faith. The God proclaimed is “loving Father,” who knows how to give good gifts to his children. The Jesus proclaimed is the one who says “come unto me for my yoke is easy and I will give you rest.” The Holy Spirit that is summoned is the “comforter” who assures of God’s forgiveness and Christ’s presence in moments of trial. The world outside the doors of the church is seen as the appropriate arena for one’s life actions. Christ is present in and involved in that world through individual Christians. The church provides “sanctuary,” as the senior pastor stressed in a recent sermon. It is the place that provides nurture and caring for those who must go out of the sanctuary and do battle in a fundamentally positive and exciting world. Faith in God and participation in the community of the church can provide the strength to live in the midst of the tensions of the world and the socio-economic conditions in which we find ourselves. It is the pattern of Jesus’ life and the model of caring among individual Christians that are the resources to which one appeals. The gospel is forgiving and restorative.

Some have said in the community, “If you can’t afford to join the Wiltshire Country Club, join Wiltshire Church.” This piece of local humor can be variously understood. Some take it as a good-natured compliment, and others are highly offended by the

image. Still others take it as a simple statement of fact, that Wiltshire Church offers a significant ministry to its own constituency. There exists a difference of opinion among present staff and members whether the church *should* be more active in the world outside its doors. There is, however, a congruence between the church's self-understanding and the activities it supports.¹

¹ The writers of subsequent chapters of this book are accustomed to developing their analyses in dialogue with the people of the local church. This working relationship provides a test for the accuracy of their insights. More important, by sharing their information, the congregation joins with the researcher-consultant in shaping the result in such a way that it becomes absorbed naturally into the life and work of the church.

Their normal procedure was not possible in this instance. Although they could request information, the contributors could not work personally with the congregation. The written case undoubtedly reflects some of the values and biases of the authors. In addition, the contributors experienced unexpected frustration as they developed their perspectives apart from the congregation. Many authors rediscovered how important to their ministries is the personal contact that they have in working directly with members of congregations they serve.

However, the congregation was very cooperative in providing additional information not normally available in church consultations. As noted in the Preface, the case writers developed far more documentation than could be included in this brief case. Additional information, such as letters and minutes, are sometimes quoted by contributors with appropriate citations. The sociologists were especially active in gathering further information about the community. The theologians were provided with additional data from a survey of the membership and from worship materials. Newton Malony engaged the pastor and a few members in a leadership study, and James Hopewell was provided with an additional survey on the world view of the membership. Even in the absence of extensive personal contact, the members and leadership of Wiltshire Church were outstanding in their cooperation for a common cause.—ED.

II

BASIC BUILDING
BLOCKS:
THE APPLICATION
OF THEORY

SEPARATE disciplines are like primary colors of red, green, and blue. They are not more pure than other approaches, but they provide the basic building blocks of recognized theory that produce a consistent perspective in themselves and combine with others, without losing their integrity, to enrich the picture of the whole. We include five disciplines: psychology, anthropology, literary symbolism, sociology, and theology.

Although *psychology* is frequently associated with studies of individual needs (contributing directly to such fields as pastoral counseling and clergy development), the group consciousness of social psychology has also had an impact on the church. Kurt Lewin and Robert Bales, for example, directly influenced the small-group movement associated with programs promoted by National Training Labs. Organizational psychology, with roots in business and industry, strongly influenced the organizational development program adopted in many denominations. In England the Tavistock and Grubb institutes are widely known for the application of psychological, and even psychiatric, principles toward the understanding of group behavior. The chapter by Barry Evans and Bruce Reed applies the basic principles of dependence, expectancy, and fight-flight to the problems of Wiltshire Church.

As a field method of cultural *anthropology*, ethnography has come of age in recent years as an efficient instrument for congregation studies. Ethnographers do not study the church as if it were only an object, but become participants. Their basic tools are interview and observation. Melvin Williams advocates participant observation, implying that without participation there is no accurate observation; this made his work through the screen of case

writers particularly difficult. The ethnographer interviews “informants,” not “subjects” or “respondents” as they are called in other social sciences where a priori theories dictate both questions and possible answers. Ethnography seeks to find implicit patterns of behavior and of language that suggest the deep structures of symbolic meaning for that particular church. Because cultural anthropology is primarily concerned with the powerful symbols and social values that bind or divide a congregation (or any subculture), many sensitive pastors and church people may discover that they have been “closet ethnographers” for a long time.

Literary symbolism is related to ethnography through the awareness of the congregation’s story. Of all the disciplines represented, seminary graduates have the most training and practice in the importance of literary criticism of the biblical text and use of literary symbols in skills of communication, especially in preaching. James Hopewell applies an old, familiar discipline of literary symbolism to the congregation as a whole. Through the tools of ethnography, the patterns and beliefs of the congregation become his text. Through literary concepts he shows how the congregation’s web of meaning is often an unspoken story continuously retold in the actions of the people. Like an ancient myth recounted in the light of the campfire, his analysis is at once mysterious and comforting.

In recent years *sociology* has embraced at least three different traditions of social inquiry: first, the classical empirical approach with an emphasis on population predictability based on age, sex, social class, context, and ecology; second, the institutional orientation based on studies of subsystems and small work groups, using principles of integration, conflict, and exchange to interpret behavior; and third, the concern for culture and value systems, for symbolic interaction and significant reference groups. The three authors in sociology, William McKinney, Jackson Carroll, and Clark Roof, originally prepared three separate analyses of the Wiltshire Church case. Because of their common commitments to empirical data and sound sociological theory, they integrated these into one chapter showing a unified sociological approach—with the strengths of their differences still clearly evident to the discerning reader. Taken as a whole, the chapter provides a brief cross

section of contemporary sociology and a protest against the fractured way that sociology is commonly employed.

Theology came first for the church. In the Middle Ages, theology was called queen of the sciences, but more recently it has fallen on hard times. Thinking theologically about the congregation has become so muddled that many pastors seem to have stopped trying. For our project it was difficult to find professional theologians who concentrate on anything as concrete and particular as the local church. We offer two positive approaches.

Theological ethics provides a model of a theologian at work in the parish. With the aid of the social sciences, Joseph Hough develops a fascinating profile of faith in Wiltshire Church. As a second step he uses the Bible and appropriate theological interpreters to expand an ideal of the authentic Body of Christ. Step one is the situation he finds, and step two is the ideal he desires. Like any good pastor, in step three he struggles with the difficult task of reconciling the two images.

In using *philosophical theology*, David Pacini points to a fatal flaw in the metaphors that have been taken for granted in Wiltshire. He then broadens the discussion to challenge the assumptions unquestioned by his colleagues in this book. In his discussion of "breakdown," Pacini reflects a major thrust of contemporary philosophical theology that projects an edge of doubt into the polished veneer of Wiltshire's success and self-sufficiency.

Each of these approaches stands alone as an intense engagement with Wiltshire Church. Although each of the contributors felt limited by the style of research and space for reporting, taken together they represent far more "study" than would be needed in most situations. These disciplines are presented to show their separate insights—the discovery of what they do best and when their approach would be the most appropriate. For the purpose of understanding the particular light that each discipline casts upon the congregation, these chapters are best read separately and digested slowly, to enter into the logic and to discover the results that are possible from each distinctive vision of the church.—ED.