

# WHAT MUST A PASTOR KNOW?

## Reflections on Congregational Studies

*by Arthur Paul Boers*

### *Introduction*

Having only recently moved from the pulpit to the seminary classroom I have spent a lot of time considering what a pastor needs to *know*.

As a pastor, my job was not only to practice the duties and functions of ministry, but I was responsible for learning and keeping abreast of numerous disciplines to inform that doing. There were many things to *know*.

Now as I plan courses and reflect with other professors on curriculum and ministerial formation, it is vital to consider what seminarians need to *know*. Given the variety and multiplicity of important disciplines, limited number of faculty, and time constraints of seminary education, this can make for complicated discussions and sensitive negotiations.

An emerging discipline that was only minimally addressed in my own seminary formation – and that still tends to get little attention in many seminary programs – is the area of “congregational studies.” The contributions of this discipline are invaluable. Inevitably, important questions are raised as well, not just by what is learned in this approach, but also by the implications of how such work is done.

### *Congregational Studies*

“Congregational studies” is a broad term that encompasses interdisciplinary ways of helping church leaders read and understand congregations from many different perspectives: history, sociology, anthropology, systems thinking, organizational theory, ethnography, et cetera. It provides leaders with systematic toolkits for interpreting the experience of congregations, testing ideas and insights, and acting on the basis of one’s learnings. There are in fact so many tools that no one can use them all.

This discipline is expanding. A rapidly increasing list of books and projects comprise any attempted bibliography. A survey of projects funded by the Lilly Endowment alone shows books, study guides, journal essays, magazine articles and studies on: congregational life, voluntarism, churches and the city, denominational dynamics, congregational planning, congregational histories, ministry to the poor, relationship to government programs, faith-based organizations, missional priorities, multiracial and

ethnic congregations, racism, racial reconciliation, rural churches, small group life, worship music and religious identity.

The magnitude of such efforts is also growing and three recent major surveys are particularly noteworthy. The International Congregational Life Survey began in 1999 and conducted surveys in four countries over a two-month period in 2001. It surveyed over 12,000 congregations and in excess of a million worshipers; more than 300,000 worshipers were surveyed in the US alone.<sup>1</sup> Another study, *Faith Communities Today*, calls itself "the largest survey of congregations ever conducted in the United States: and "the most inclusive, denominationally sanctioned program of interfaith cooperation."<sup>2</sup> The National Congregations Study in 1998 collected information from 1236 congregations.<sup>3</sup> The hope of such major overviews is to understand better what is happening in congregational life and to discern more carefully the choices that congregations must face. Even so, it is hard at times to know what to do with such staggering statistics.

On the other hand, many implications are clear. There is now plenty of information on how to understand conflict in our churches and how to deal with it more carefully. These studies lend all kinds of authoritative help for divisive concerns such as diversity of worship. They have important things to suggest about appropriate evangelism (and why churches might resist growth). They also give deep insight into the financial situations of denominations and local congregations. If one faces such issues, these studies are must reading.

Much of the information is useful. It is often surprising and unexpected. It is definitely necessary for church leaders to know. There is much to celebrate here. There are also important questions that need to be asked about how this material is used and what it means.

### *We are Not Alone*

James Hopewell names several reasons for in-depth exploration of congregations.<sup>4</sup> One that particularly caught my attention was "seeing beyond the embarrassment." He observes that churches are sometimes chagrined by the charge of hypocrisy and lament that they cannot measure up to ideals of Christian community. Churches are often places of cynicism and discouragement. Thick reading of congregations does reveal "specific disappointments and predictable sins." But such reading also reminds churches that they are not necessarily alone or even unusual. Furthermore, there is a lot more than meets the eye in each congregation.

This observation struck home with me. I remember in my first charge, how frustrated I would become at behavior that seemed irrational and unfaithful. I could not understand, for example, why folks were so resistant to welcoming newcomers and possibly growing as a congregation. I was dumbfounded by ushers who would sit in the foyer during the

whole service and never participate in worship. But then I read a book by Carl Dudley, who is a leading practitioner of congregational studies. In *Making the Small Church Effective* he spoke matter-of-factly about "single cell congregations" and "informal officers" such as gatekeepers and patriarchs/matriarchs.<sup>5</sup> This had several effects on me. I realized that I was dealing with dynamics that went deeper and beyond our little local congregation. I was able to be more matter-of-fact and far less anxious. I saw that our congregation was like others.

When a group of pastors read congregational studies material together, one said with a sigh of relief: "It showed me I'm not alone." So often in our churches we berate ourselves for problems we face: not enough men, too few youth, preponderance of a certain race or culture. These are all serious issues to be sure and congregations should work on addressing them. But surveys show over and over again that these are common and widespread dynamics. It is not likely that local churches can do much about them without at least some awareness of what is going on in other congregations and the wider culture. And that is precisely the kinds of understanding that congregational studies can amply supply.

### *Taking Congregations Seriously*

The greatest gift in this literature is that local congregations are seen as noteworthy, notable, and important. Congregations as distinct units merit attention and study. It is not only religions or denominations that are worthy of sustained and disciplined scholarship and observation.

Hopewell, in one of the earliest books in this genre (and a frequent seminary text) says in the opening sentences: "Christian congregations took me by surprise. Although I had always been associated with local churches, my curiosity about them came late and unexpectedly...." For two decades, he was an overseas missionary. As a seminary professor he taught and studied other religions. But late in life he discovered the fascination of the local church. He marvels at his "recent wonder about local churches" and notes that he began "to see how astonishingly thick and meaning-laden is the actual life of a single local church."<sup>6</sup> Hopewell, an Episcopal priest, here clearly with a pastoral heart.

One way or another, virtually all the congregational studies resources celebrate the importance, significance, mystery and contribution of local congregations. Scholars are not certain how many congregations exist in the U.S. Numbers ranging from 300,000 to 350,000 are often posited, with a total of perhaps as many as 135 million members and over 65 million adults attending worship each week.<sup>7</sup> And, contrary to what some might believe, "the proportion of the U.S. population enrolled in local religious bodies has climbed steadily from less than 30 percent to well over 60 percent" since the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> A familiar theme emerges over and over again, usually in the early pages of congregational studies volumes:

Congregations are important. For most people in the United States, in fact, congregations are at the heart of individual and collective religious history. Any student who is curious about how ordinary people experience their religion would do well to begin his or her exploration in the gathered communities that have formed the bedrock of American religion.<sup>9</sup>

Authors repeatedly celebrate especially the unique role of congregations in American life. Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce write:

The most common and enduring of all voluntary organizations is the local church or congregation. When compared to other associations, congregations exhibit incredible strength and vitality. No other voluntary organization enjoys the degree of commitment and centrality in the life of its "volunteers" as does the local church or congregation.<sup>10</sup>

Other authors speak of congregations being "embedded in the history, landscape, and mindset of North American culture." They remind us that congregations not only gather people for worship (an important function), but build communities and relationships and mutual support between people who might otherwise be isolated, contribute to community good, socialize immigrants and youth, help folks mark rites of passage, and occasionally challenge society as well.<sup>11</sup> A common theme in this literature is that congregations have more in common than not; many aspects about congregations are virtually universal.<sup>12</sup> Authors often reverse our understandings and readings of the situation of congregational life today. Congregations are surprisingly vital. Nancy Tatom Ammerman argues: "That some congregations find ways to adapt in the face of ... shifts in their environment is far more remarkable than that some congregations die."<sup>13</sup>

The effusiveness with which these authors regard congregations is striking, as taking the local church seriously is profoundly countercultural. Over and over again, congregational studies authors note the virtual invisibility of congregations on our cultural radar screens, in spite of their evident and profound impact on culture and society. Certain church movements and Christian periodicals consistently laud megachurches; some seem to suggest that these are really the only kinds of church bodies worth studying or emulating. This is all the more curious as "71% of U.S. congregations have fewer than 100 regularly participating adults." (While most congregations are small, most people belong to large congregations.)<sup>14</sup> Given the preponderance of small congregations it is surprising that they often elude our attention and priorities.

Our denominational structures or cultures also often encourage pastors to believe that the local congregation is not necessarily a good place to be: encouraging competition for "bigger and better" charges, denominational positions, or seminary professorships. The academy (including seminaries) is also often dismissive of the local congregation. Not so long ago various theologians were highly critical of local congregations, including H.

Richard Niebuhr, Peter Berger and his *Noise of Solemn Assemblies*, Gibson Winter, George Webber, Langdon Gilkey, and James Gustafson to name a few.<sup>15</sup> In Canada such critiques were summarized by the popular writer Pierre Berton in *The Comfortable Pew*.

Eugene H. Peterson, while eloquent, is a lone and lonely voice in writing from a perspective of spiritual theology and urging pastors to root themselves in one congregation, going deeper where one is, rather than pining for greener pastures.<sup>16</sup> Congregational studies, coming at the issues from a different direction than Peterson, also encourage deeper and more respectful engagement of the local congregation.

### *Honoring the Life and Process of the Congregation*

Congregational studies do not just take congregations seriously because there are so many and they represent such great masses of people. More than that is involved. There is the honoring of the decisions and life of particular congregations. Nancy Tatom Ammerman is the author of what is probably the single most impressive example of congregational studies, *Congregation and Community*, an in-depth look at how more than twenty congregations around the U.S. dealt with social change and dislocation.

Ammerman became interested in such questions as she was raised in an urban congregation that chose to stay in the city during the tumultuous sixties. It managed to integrate, when so many churches ended up either moving to the suburbs or dying. As a churchgoer, Ammerman is proud of her congregation's choices and experience: "I believe deeply that Christians must act like the family of God we claim to be, and that means learning to live with people who are different." But as a sociologist she also respects other options, acknowledging the complexity of such issues. Her congregational studies affected her: "I have genuinely come to admire many of the congregations that have chosen paths I would not have chosen."<sup>17</sup>

Her example resonated with me as my first charge was in an inner-city yoked parish that faced all the problems of declining urban congregations. We were not always as ready to look compassionately on congregations – or congregants – that moved away from our good and needed work. This was complicated, of course, by the fact that I was barely out of seminary, still in my mid-twenties, and full of idealism that was not yet prepared to settle for gray areas.

Gradually, however, I came to see that in many respects a pastor is like a cross-cultural missionary.<sup>18</sup> Our graduate school education often forms us in a different kind of culture. Even if many parishioners are well-educated, usually not too many have advanced theological training. Most pastors are not deeply embedded in the culture of the local congregation they serve. So pastors are wise to observe their congregational setting carefully and for a long, long time. (This is one place where congregational studies come in handy.) One of my mature students who has served a parish for some years recently described her approach there when she found much about the congregation's worship

troubling: "I did nothing for the first year. I talked the second year. I 'messed' with it the third year." Her "messaging" actually involved careful processing, testing, and feedback. She acted respectfully and chose carefully which changes she might introduce.

Hopewell reminds us that long before he was a seminary professor, he was a cross-cultural missionary in Africa, beginning in 1954. Like many missionaries, he tells us: "my goal ... was to bring Christ to Africa, a continent not dark but dusky enough to need the light that shone brightly in my American home." He was in for a surprise: "What I came to discover in Africa was that Christ was already there and that, far from being the bridge for his entry, I, as my own dusk thinned somewhat, might have been a minor witness to his presence, already embedded in people's life together."<sup>19</sup> That is a telling truth for pastors as well. We often enter the parish, convinced that we bring the light of Christ only to find the light of Christ strongly there, even in unexpected ways.

Pastors, like cross-cultural missionaries, must be ever observing and considering. It is not enough for us to know our own vision of the church. We need to understand deeply those we serve and we must discover our genuine affection and even reverence for their ways of being, even when we do not always agree with what they do. Then we must approach carefully the connections we wish to make, the issues that need or must be tackled, and those matters which are better left alone, at least for the time being. A congregational studies stance helps us take a step back and regard more dispassionately the congregational realities before us.

This is important because pastors may in fact not always be good observers of the thick meanings of their congregation. The National Congregations Study conducted one-hour interviews with key informants (pastors or other leaders) in 1236 congregations. Intriguingly, on the basis of previous literature, they concluded that those interviewed would "not be very good at validly reporting the values, opinions, and beliefs of congregants." Furthermore, such interviewees would "also be unreliable reporters of a congregation's aggregate or overall goal or mission." This may come as a rude surprise to many pastors. (I discovered in the tenth year of my tenure at my last congregation that there was still much that I did not know and understand about that place, even though I thought I was paying careful attention.) The interviewers expected positive results in only one area: "that key informants will be very good at reporting more or less directly observable features of the congregation and its congregants."<sup>20</sup> The conclusion is clear: in order to understand the most cherished beliefs and goals of congregations and congregants, pastors need much help from other sources, such as congregational studies.

### *Problem-Solving Orientation*

Congregational studies are action-oriented. All the disciplines are applied for deeper understanding with the hope of helping congregations address problems with sound decisions. In one of the newest congregational studies volumes, authors Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce note that congregational decisions are often driven by a

number of disciplines: theology (worldview, priorities and convictions), Biblical studies (key themes or "canon within a canon"), spiritual discernment (understanding how God's Spirit is calling a group now), and traditions (reflecting a congregation's history and heritage).<sup>21</sup> As important as these are, they contend that good congregational work also needs to be driven by information and data.

What happens if a congregation or parish leaves out of the decision-making equation information about the changed nature of the community in which they are located? What happens if a congregation ignores the data that reveal a change in its congregational leadership and identity? These congregations move faithfully forward making decisions based on nonexistent realities. Moving forward on used-to-be truths or half truths produces disappointing and sometimes disastrous outcomes.<sup>22</sup>

In this sense, congregational studies are practical and applied.

This is particularly evident in two classic books, *Handbook for Congregational Studies*<sup>23</sup> and its later incarnation, *Studying Congregations*.<sup>24</sup> These books are specifically geared for hands-on work and analysis by seminarians and pastors on such subjects as discovering and doing a congregation's theology, seeing the congregation in its wider context (congregational timeline, neighborhood, members' networks, local demographics), congregational culture, identity, leadership, et cetera. Little surprise that these volumes have often been used as seminary textbooks. Doctor of Ministry programs also insist that students engage in such approaches, moving from careful research to purposeful action. Woolever and Bruce believe that it is only by accurate information that congregations will be able to move into beneficial change.

Myths are tempting assumptions about congregational life. Just as cheese lures a mouse, myths lure us to beliefs we want to be true. Believing myths is its own reward. Myths allow us to avoid change. Myths permit us to use the same old methods to get the same old results. Myths immobilize and trap us in dead ends, blocking us from fully living out the answer to our most important question: What is God calling us to be and do as a congregation?<sup>25</sup>

Woolever and Bruce go on to argue that while leading congregations has always been complex it is getting more so.<sup>26</sup> (One aspect of their study that is helpful is that they often include guidelines which explicitly spell out implications and concrete steps suggested by the data revealed in the survey.)

Such approaches help church leaders and congregations adopt a research stance before whatever difficulties or conundrums they may face in church life.

## *Leadership Challenges*

Congregational studies generally see a strong role required for church leaders. Look how Ammerman describes the challenging demands:

congregations need people with leadership skills, especially effective clergy. They need someone who can envision what should be done and motivate others to participate in doing it. They need people who can help a group make a decision. They need people who can keep hundreds of details in order in the process of getting a large job done. They need people with whom members can identify, establishing an emotional connection that helps to bind them together as a congregation. They need people who make them feel both that things are under control and at the same time that everyone has a say.<sup>27</sup>

Ammerman may well be right. But a problem we need to consider is whether this is in fact the kind of leadership that congregations want, pay for, and hire clergy to fulfill. My guess would be no, but I am the first to admit that that is only an anecdotal hunch and I would welcome clearer studies on what congregations expect.

R. R. Reno offers up a discouraging picture in a new book. He believes that ministers are being required to facilitate disparate points-of-view. The "therapeutic ideal" for the pastor includes "shepherding individuals toward richer, fuller spiritual lives...." He laments the fact that whereas once a pastor was to help guide a congregation "according to apostolic faith and practice" now "ministry is seen as the orchestration of faith journeys."<sup>28</sup>

If Reno is correct – and I fear that he is – then how likely is it that churches are going to be interested in pastors helping them take a hard look at themselves? While some appreciate such self-examination, many do not. If so, how can pastors help churches learn and ask themselves what they need to learn? While I am fully convinced that pastors are called to on-going learning, I am not so sure that congregations will open themselves to on-going learning (even if they are also called to this).

## *What Have Social Sciences to do with Theology?*

While I celebrate much of what can be learned by the disciplines of congregational studies, I also confess to some unease. As a pastoral theologian, I am all too aware how social sciences approaches (for example, psychology) have not only helpfully influenced ministry and church life, but also at times usurped the agenda. While therapeutic approaches may pretend to be non-directive or neutral, they invariably imply theological presuppositions, even when they claim they are not theological.

In the last few decades, pastoral counseling and care practitioners and teachers have begun to raise important questions. For example, "In recent American, as well as British writing, the limitations of the counseling model [of pastoral care] are now widely perceived, and historical (Oden, 1984), hermeneutical (Capps, 1984), moral (Browning, 1976), and socio-political (Clinebell, 1984) dimensions of pastoral care have been given fresh prominence."<sup>29</sup> The solution is obviously not to throw out, dismiss or write off psychological insights. The question rather is how to weigh properly their influence and contribution and how to evaluate them by theological standards.

Neutrality and objectivity can go too far in congregational studies, just as they sometimes have in pastoral counseling. Yet they play into a current pluralism and relativism that is hard to equate with the gospel. As much as I admire the incredible work by Ammerman, she appears at times to be neutral regarding the complex questions that local congregations face. She does note once that "not all that congregations do is unambiguously praiseworthy."<sup>30</sup> Yet when and how she would apply values is not clear.

While neutrality is a stance that one must often hold, perhaps even for a long while, it is finally not enough. Edward Farley outlines four tasks for interpreting situations. The fourth he calls "hermeneutics of situations," which he considers to be a step that is "most complex of all." This involves theological "perspectives and criticism." Situations are never simply neutral and observable. "The situation places certain demands on us."<sup>31</sup> I worry that too often congregational studies put off this final hermeneutical task too long.

The issue also arises, for example, in Woolever and Bruce, when they assert that "Congregational leaders need the kind of reality-based organizational analysis that business leaders in growing, healthy, excellence-oriented companies find helpful."<sup>32</sup> On the one hand that seems hard to argue with: Who would challenge the importance of "reality-based" analysis? But on the other hand, are businesses really the best models of comparison for congregations? Such thinking also sometimes leads to comparing pastors to corporate CEOs and that is certainly a mistake.

On reading such material, one cannot help but wonder about the implicit theology. Woolever and Bruce, for example, speak theologically when they use Noah as a story that "illustrates the importance ... of using accurate information." This is a curious text to choose. What they emphasize here is his use of "accurate information," "precise measurements of length, width, and height" that successfully carried humans and animals to safety.<sup>33</sup> But what was the source of his "accurate information?" A revelation from God. No climatologist had predicted the flood to come. There was no reasonable reason for Noah to act this way. As the New Testament writer tells us in Hebrews 13.7: "By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household..." This was not acting on "accurate information" but rather on "events as yet *unseen*." Furthermore, the author of Hebrews says this of Noah: "by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in

accordance with faith." The scriptures suggest that Noah was in fact acting in a way that does not make empirical or observable sense.

Woolever and Bruce rightly go on to point out: "Acting on faith is not the same as acting out of ignorance." They are concerned about acting on inaccurate information. They also note several miracle stories: Peter's miraculous catch of fish, Jesus' feeding of the multitude, David's slaying of Goliath with five stones. The suggestion seems to be that since the fish, multitude and stones could be numbered that they were somehow accurate information. But these stories actually subvert the approach of Woolever and Bruce. Surely, measurements empirical observation, and logical prediction would advocate against lowering an empty net in a barren lake, dividing a boy's lunch among 5,000 people, or using five round pebbles to slay a well-armed giant.

Perhaps I make too much of these examples. Woolever and Bruce slip them in at the end of their book and do not pay them much attention. But, this in itself concerns me. Why is explicit theology left literally to the last pages of the text? And why is it given such little space? I worry that these authors are not theologically astute enough (as evidenced in their strange use of miracle stories) to understand the implications of their suggestions.

I am not dismissing objective analysis but I do not want to settle for only that either. During 2000 to 2001, I was part of a Pastors Working Group (PWG) consultation sponsored by the Louisville Institute and Lilly Endowment. In one PWG conversation, Craig Dykstra of the Lilly Endowment commented that theological reading and analysis may first require the "thick reading" that congregational studies does. That is a valid point, as long as the theological reading does happen.

### *Limitations of Being Empirical*

There can be no doubt that empirical approaches are important and necessary. But numbers, as vital as they are, must be interpreted. Numbers tell a story but the story is not always clear. In much clergy-oriented literature, megachurches seem to be justified purely on the basis of their size and growth. Numerous questions go answered, including their effect on other congregations in the area or even what do such megachurches say or suggest theologically. Others contend that certain theologies must be true simply because their churches are expanding. This does not sit well with faithful remnant perspectives so intrinsic to my own theological tradition. Growth is not necessarily good, especially growth at any cost. In fact, sometimes decline is a sign of faithfulness. I would argue that the current disenfranchisement of Christianity in post-Constantinian realities provide opportunities for faithfulness.

Happily, Ammerman does not insist that "growth or decline" are enough to evaluate the success of a congregational venture. She says, rather: "If there is a measure of success, it is simply the congregation's survival as the institution it determines to be."<sup>34</sup> While this is preferable to a "growth equals faithfulness" approach, this apparently straightforward

statement is also troubling. Why is "success" an important and defining concept at all? The paschal mystery undermines concepts of success, honoring instead suffering and failure which are paradoxically overturned in the reversals of the wholly unpredictable resurrection. Institutions obviously work for their own survival; but that emphasis on survival also often undermines church institutions' ability to discern and follow the call of God. Again we see that straightforward congregational studies approaches raise all manner of theological issues.

At this writing, our seminary has taken a strongly outspoken position in opposition to possible war-making on Iraq. In the present climate, this does not seem likely to endear us to the wider public. It is not in that sense "effective." It probably will not win us many converts to Christianity, let alone recruits for our school. But faith stances cannot be based on polls alone.

Too often it seems that predictability is its own justification: "If it is going to work, then do it." I fret when congregational studies seem to suggest that pastors should be amateur social scientists. And I fret even more when discernment is expected to rely primarily on social science.

Eugene H. Peterson poses an interesting contrast to the way Woolever and Bruce use miracle stories to suggest clear directions and answers. He says that

the vocation of pastor does not permit trafficking in either miracles or answers. Pastors are in the awkward position of refusing to give what a great many people assume it is our assigned job to give. We are in the embarrassing position of disappointing people in what they think they have a perfect right to get from us. We are asked to pray for an appropriate miracle; we are called upon to declare an authoritative answer. But our calling equips us for neither. In fact, it forbids us to engage in either the miracle business or the answer business.<sup>35</sup>

This vision is different than the model of pastoring often proposed in congregational studies approaches. In *Studying Congregations*, the authors suggest:

Our perspective on congregational leadership, especially that of clergy, gives primary attention to matters of *organizational leadership* rather than, for example to priestly or sacramental roles. We do not by any means assume that these or other "slighted" leadership roles, or some adaptation of them, are not important leadership roles. Issues of organizational leadership, however, have increasingly occupied religious leaders as they have tried to lead congregations in the United States.<sup>36</sup>

This is not necessarily the model we all want or should want to embrace.

At times, it seems as though the messiness and unpredictability of local congregations is not sufficiently appreciated. In trying to define congregations, R. Stephen Warner observes: "We can expect ... that congregations are typically groups of amateurs spending disproportionate time on activities that are hard to define, whereas denominations will have professionals devoted to articulated goals."<sup>37</sup> To some degree congregations are organic and messy, not neatly measurable. Should they be any other way? Our current fascination with mission statements suggests so, but I am not entirely convinced. The richest and most fruitful relationships in life certainly involve "disproportionate time on activities that are hard to define." Elsewhere, Warner notes that even carefully crafted and planned mission plans and statements do not go necessarily in the directions planned as missions often have many unintended consequences.<sup>38</sup> Congregations are not smoothly oiled machines that roll surely and predictably in certain directions. This suggests models of leadership that may not always sit well with congregational studies advocates.

### *Relative Unfamiliarity*

When it comes to congregational studies, one final issue needs to be addressed. Even though I have some theological qualms about these approaches, I nevertheless strongly believe that such studies need to be in the mix and fray of our work and discernment. There is much to appreciate about the numerous perspectives contributed. These materials are worth much study and review as congregations and their leaders interpret their situations and discern future steps. While I fear that congregational studies may dominate some agenda, I also worry that they are too often still not visible enough.

Even though congregational studies often make good seminary or Doctor of Ministry textbooks, I suspect that such understandings and approaches remain relatively unknown and not frequently implemented in local settings. In my sixteen years of pastoring, consulting with colleagues and attending various ministerial meetings and continuing education events, I was not aware of many pastors who seriously and regularly engaged these disciplines.

When I was part of the Pastors Working Group, it was clear that most of these exemplary pastors likewise were largely unfamiliar with much of the congregational studies literature or they simply did not have the time, energy, or inclination to apply such learnings. Pastors were eclectic at best in such applications, often however they were just haphazard.

Why this is so, bears further study. Is it simply that pastors feel they do not have enough time? Is this just one more demand among many? Or is there something intrinsic to congregational studies that pastors resist? Have they not been convinced of the priority of such approaches? Do these not feel appropriately theological? (Indeed, while many of the Pastors Working Group clearly appreciated their survey of congregational studies,

one noted deep discomfort, wondering, "Where's the mystery? Where's God?") Do pastors not feel sufficiently equipped for this kind of work? Why not?

Certainly one distinct problem is that many, if not most, of these materials are not written with pastors in mind (let alone other congregational leaders). The main audience for much of this work remains academics. Even if those academics are in seminary, much of this is not necessarily material that is reaching pastors and other church leaders. That strikes me as a glaring problem and an ironic one, given the fact that congregational studies makes so much of analyzing and assessing situations and planning accordingly!

It is probably time for some practitioners of congregational studies to test these questions directly and objectively with pastors.

### *Conclusion*

Congregational studies have contributed greatly to our understanding of congregational life in North America today. It offers much in terms of helping church leaders tackle and address a host of subjects.

As a multidisciplinary field it is far too diverse to be adequately covered by any one practitioner. And it is an approach that might not always be appropriate for all pastors all the time. But it is useful when facing changes, transitions, or crises. Perhaps it is the perceived crisis in the North American church helped accelerate interest in congregational studies.

Several years ago, I began experimenting with expanding my repertoire of skills so as to improve my preaching. A parishioner loaned me a textbook on communication for actors and speech-makers. I read this carefully; it was my first exposure to such literature. At times I felt overwhelmed by all the various factors that contributed to or detracted from healthy, helpful, and clear communication. While some of the factors I knew, many were surprises. I concluded that I could take in only a few of the points at that time. I resolved to read the book again in a year or two and to see what could be further gleaned from the text. In learning any skill, there are invariably many details, ideas, and habits to master. Such things are not learned by theory alone but also by practice and reflection on that practice.

Seeing the breadth of congregational studies, one can easily be overwhelmed by all the various aspects that could or perhaps even should need attention, comprehension, and interpretation. There is simply no way for anyone to master all of these at once. Our knowledge base, observation, comprehension of theory, and interpretation grow slowly.

What is required is a commitment to study and growth. Reading, continuing education, attendance professional workshops and seminars, and collaboration with other colleagues

all expand a church leader's repertoire and abilities. One hopes that congregational studies will continue to inform and benefit such opportunities.

### Works Cited

- Ammerman, Nancy Tatom. *Congregation and Community*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999.
- Carroll, Jackson W. "Leadership and the Study of Congregations." In *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*. Edited by Nancy T. Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney, 167-195. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998.
- Chaves, Mark, Mary Ellen Konieczny, Kraig Beyerlein, and Emily Barman. "The National Congregations Study: Background, Methods, and Selected Results." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38, no. 4 (1998): 458-476.
- Dudley, Carl S. *Making the Small Church Effective*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978.
- \_\_\_\_\_ and David A. Roozen. *Faith Communities Today: A Report on Religion in the United States Today*. Hartford: Hartford Institution for Religion Research. Hartford Seminary.
- Farley, Edward. "Interpreting Situations: An Inquiry into the Nature of Practical Theology." In *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge and James N. Poling, 1-26. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987.
- Handbook for Congregational Studies*. Edited by Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney. Nashville: Abingdon, 1986.
- Hopewell, James F. *Congregations: Stories and Structures*. Edited by Barbara G. Wheeler. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987.
- Peterson, Eugene H. *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*. Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992.
- Reno, R. R. *In the Ruins of the Church: Sustaining Faith in an Age of Diminished Christianity*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002.
- Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*. Edited by Nancy T. Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998.

- Warner, R. Stephen. "The Congregation in Contemporary America." In *American Congregations*, Volume 2, eds. James P. Wind and James W. Lewis, 61. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Wind, James P. and James W. Lewis. "Introducing a Congregation." In *American Congregations*, vol. 2, eds. James P. Wind and James W. Lewis, 1-20. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Woolever, Cynthia, and Deborah Bruce. *A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations: Who's Going Where and Why*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002.

---

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations: Who's Going Where and Why (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), vii, 4.
- <sup>2</sup> Faith Communities Today: A Report on Religion in the United States Today (Hartford: Hartford Institution for Religion Research), 1.
- <sup>3</sup> Mark Chaves, Mary Ellen Konieczny, Kraig Beyerlein, and Emily Barman, "The National Congregations Study: Background, Methods, and Selected Results," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38, no. 4 (1998).
- <sup>4</sup> James F. Hopewell, *Congregations: Stories and Structures*, ed. Barbara G. Wheeler (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 9ff.
- <sup>5</sup> Carl S. Dudley, *Making the Small Church Effective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978).
- <sup>6</sup> Hopewell, *Congregations: Stories and Structures*, 3.
- <sup>7</sup> Dudley and Roozen, *Faith Communities Today: A Report on Religion in the United States Today*, 3. *Handbook for Congregational Studies*, ed. Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 4
- <sup>8</sup> Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 2.
- <sup>9</sup> *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, eds. Nancy T. Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 7

<sup>10</sup> Woolever and Bruce, A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations: Who's Going Where and Why, 2-3.

<sup>11</sup> Handbook for Congregational Studies, ed. Carroll, Dudley, and McKinney, 7-8.

<sup>12</sup> Woolever and Bruce, A Field Guide to US. Congregations: Who's Going Where and Why, 3.

<sup>13</sup> Ammerman, Congregation and Community, 347.

<sup>14</sup> Chaves, Konieczny, Beyerlein, and Barman, "The National Congregations Study: Background, Methods, and Selected Results," Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion: 468.

<sup>15</sup> James P. Wind and James W. Lewis, "Introducing a Congregation," in American Congregations, vol. 2, eds. James P. Wind and James W. Lewis (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 6.

<sup>16</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992). Peterson does not write from a congregational studies perspective. In his honoring of the place of the local congregation, he is heavily informed and inspired by the Benedictine vow of stability and Wendell Berry's priority of place.

<sup>17</sup> Ammerman, Congregation and Community, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Ecclesially, this may be a particularly distasteful idea for denominations which call pastors from within the congregation, such as the Mennonite church or United Methodists who appoint license local lay pastors. But even in such situations, congregations often recognize that their pastor – especially as he or she pursues further training – is of a somewhat different culture.

<sup>19</sup> Hopewell, Congregations: Stories and Structures, 17.

<sup>20</sup> Chaves, Konieczny, Beyerlein, and Barman, "The National Congregations Study: Background, Methods, and Selected Results," Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion: 465.

<sup>21</sup> Woolever and Bruce, A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations: Who's Going Where and Why, 7.

<sup>22</sup> Woolever and Bruce, A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations: Who's Going Where and Why, 8.

<sup>23</sup> Handbook for Congregational Studies, ed. Carroll, Dudley, and McKinney (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986).

<sup>24</sup> Studying Congregations: A New Handbook, eds. Ammerman, Carroll, Dudley, and McKinney.

<sup>25</sup> Woolever and Bruce, A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations: Who's Going Where and Why, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Woolever and Bruce, A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations: Who's Going Where and Why, 4.

<sup>27</sup> Ammerman, Congregation and Community, 48.

<sup>28</sup> R. R. Reno, In the Ruins of the Church: Sustaining Faith in an Age of Diminished Christianity (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), 101, 105.

<sup>29</sup> Alastair V. Campbell, "Pastoral Care," in The New Dictionary of Pastoral Studies, ed. Wesley Carr (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002).

<sup>30</sup> Studying Congregations: A New Handbook, eds. Ammerman, Carroll, Dudley, and McKinney.

<sup>31</sup> Edward Farley, "Interpreting Situations: An Inquiry into the Nature of Practical Theology," in Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology, eds. Lewis S. Mudge and James N. Poling (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

<sup>32</sup> Woolever and Bruce, A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations: Who's Going Where and Why, 77.

<sup>33</sup> Woolever and Bruce, A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations: Who's Going Where and Why, 78.

<sup>34</sup> Ammerman, Congregation and Community, 5.

<sup>35</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 152-153.

<sup>36</sup> Jackson W. Carroll, "Leadership and the Study of Congregations," in Studying Congregations: A New Handbook, ed. Ammerman, Carroll, Dudley, and McKinney, 194 n. 4.

<sup>37</sup> R. Stephen Warner, "The Congregation in Contemporary America," in *American Congregations, Volume 2*, eds. James P. Wind and James W. Lewis (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 61.

<sup>38</sup> R. Stephen Warner, "The Congregation in Contemporary America," 66.