

CHAPTER 7

Afterword: The Double Challenge

7.1 Dealing with “Messses”

Oftentimes the motivation for congregational studies is an immediate problem: How is this church going to deal with changes in its community? What can be done about the breakdown in communication between the members and the pastor? Who is going to raise the money needed for the programs the church needs? The motivation is what chapter 1 called a “mess.” One of the goals of this handbook is to provide concrete assistance to people who want and need to deal with questions such as these—with “messses.”

A challenge of congregational studies, in other words, is to help people solve problems. In doing so it understands problems as entry points for deepened understanding of the congregation’s character and mission. This is the point of the framework for thinking about the congregation that was presented in chapter 1 and that has informed the structure and content of the subsequent chapters. How people think about congregations makes a difference in the ways they work with them. Thus, if Hope United Church of Christ is to find a pastor who will stay around long enough to rebuild the congregation’s fading self-image, or if High Ridge Presbyterian Church is to deal with its conflict over champagne at a wedding reception, these churches need to be helped to see their immediate problems in relationship to the fullness of their lives as a people of God. In the language of the framework of this handbook, they need to see the relationship between the current “mess” and their *identity* as a people, their location in a particular *social context*, their *program*, and the *processes* that help shape their life.

7.2 Beyond Problem Solving

The promise of congregational studies does not end, however, with its usefulness in solving problems. Part of the excitement of congregational studies, and its potential, lies also in congregations’ wrestling with the

immediate, concrete problems of their lives—their “messses”—in the light of God’s intentions for them. St. Augustine’s internal conflict over the appropriateness of black liberation spirituals in the Sunday service, and Heritage United Methodist Church’s argument over the relative merits of a new housing program for the elderly and new efforts to reach young families, for example, are more than problems to be solved. They are also opportunities to engage in the most creative form of practical theology. It is as church people address immediate problems in a disciplined way that they discover their essence. As Don S. Browning has put it:

Your job [as students of congregational life] is more than just studying the congregation; you must study, interpret, and understand with an end toward action, prescription, decision. You have the task of relating more or less theoretical and scientific frameworks of interpretation toward the end of *praxis*. You furthermore have the task of relating and using perspectives that are clearly partial, that thematize certain aspects of the total situation but neglect others and, for that reason alone, are inevitably reductive. And you do all this in order to take faithful Christian thought and action.¹

In the linking of research and action, of inquiry and decision making, of disciplined and prayerful analysis of what now is and what a congregation is called to become lies one of the special and never-finished tasks of church leaders. It is a peculiar calling for which there are few road maps and manuals; it is the special challenge of congregational studies.

7.3 Putting It Together in the Congregation: The Unwritten Section

This handbook has presented a large number of techniques and tools for examining individual dimensions of congregational life. No congregation is likely to use them all! Pastors, those who work with congregations, and local church study teams will pick and choose based on an assessment of the needs of their

congregation. Many will want to modify or reshape these tools to meet the needs of a particular congregation in a particular setting. This is not only recognized by the authors; it is encouraged.

The handbook has not presented a step-by-step outline for congregational analysis. There are books available that do this, some of them very well. Intentionally not including such an outline reflects a bias on the authors' part: that the day when a single set of procedures or a single set of materials can be expected to meet the needs of all congregations has passed (if, indeed, it ever existed!). There is simply no one best way for studying congregations.

At the same time, individual chapters (especially chapters 1 and 6) provide guidance to study committees in deciding which specific tools and methods are most appropriate for illuminating the specific questions they bring to the quest for congregational self-understanding. Included are concrete suggestions for "getting started" and for project design. Some readers may find the absence of a "How to Study the Congregation" checklist a problem; more, we think, will find it an appropriate lodging of responsibility where it belongs: with those who know the congregation best and care most about it—its own leaders and members.

The decision to avoid the appearance of seeming to have "all the answers" or to present a standardized technique for congregational analysis grows in part from an appreciation of the work of Donald A. Schoen² who has studied ways that "professionals" approach problems. He refers to it as the "knowledge in action" of "reflective practitioners." Reflective practice involves bringing to the "messes" that professionals confront one's values, past experience, analysis of what is going on, and openness to the "talk-back" from the situation. This makes reflective practice much more a transactional conversation with the situation than an objective, detached relationship implied by technical rationality.³

The promise of congregational studies depends on a discovery of a new relationship between the religious professional and the congregation itself, one which relies far less on applying pre-existing solutions to problems than on an ability, as reflection practitioners, to analyze the ministerial context, its opportunities and constraints, and to frame responses appropriate to one's convictions about the church *and* the particularities of the situation. That's a tall order for Fr. Cummings of St. Augustine's, for the Rev. Deborah

Jones of Heritage Methodist, for the conference minister working with Hope United Church, for the pastor of High Ridge Presbyterian Church, and for those who work with congregations like them. There are tools and approaches that can help, and this handbook contains many of them; but the tools themselves are not the answer. That answer lies as much in the life and heart of the congregation itself as in anything brought to it from the outside.

7.4 A Second Invitation

This handbook began with an invitation to congregational studies. It closes with another invitation: to use the materials that are presented in the various chapters—and to improve on them! The handbook is in no sense a final word, but one among many and what its authors hope will be many more. There are concrete ways that new ideas and approaches to congregational studies can be shared.

The simplest, but the most important way persons concerned about congregations can contribute to a deepened understanding of congregational life and mission is to become more self-conscious about the ways they share information about their own congregations. Experience, when accompanied by disciplined reflection on experience, is an extraordinary teacher. The authors of this handbook invite readers to share with colleagues in ministry—and with the wider community of persons committed to congregational studies as an instrument of local church life and mission—what they are learning as they use the methods contained here and as they develop new approaches to understanding the congregation.⁴

The Rollins Center for Church Ministries⁵ maintains and periodically updates a *Directory* of individuals and groups engaged in the study of the congregation. Readers are invited to submit their names and specific areas of interest in congregational studies for inclusion in subsequent editions. The Rollins Center also collects descriptions of tools for congregational study and intervention for publication in future editions of *The Whole Church Catalog*. The other institutions represented in the Project Team for Congregational Study (listed in the Preface) also welcome readers' interest in their ongoing education and service programs aimed at strengthening local church life and mission.

NOTES

1. Don S. Browning, "Integrating the Perspectives," in Carl S. Dudley, ed., *Building Effective Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 221.
2. Donald A. Schoen, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, (New York: Basic Books, 1982).
3. For an extended discussion, see Jackson W. Carroll, "The Pro-

fessional Model of Ministry—Is It Worth Saving," *Theological Education* Vol. 21 (Spring, 1985), pp. 7-48.

4. One vehicle for doing this is *Alban Institute Action Information*, a newsletter published six times a year "for people who care about congregations" by the Alban Institute (Mount Saint Alban, Washington, D.C. 20016).
5. Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, GA 30322.