ON EXPLORING THE HISTORY OF A CONGREGATION

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Some readers will know this joke. It is about a little girl who sees the names of military personnel on a bronze memorial plaque attached to a wall of her church "Who are these people?" she asks her mother. "Why, they are members of our church who died in the service." "Which one," asked the daughter. "The 8 o'clock or the 10.30?"

For some people, the writing or exploration of a congregation's history is no more meaningful, or valuable, than the list of names was to the child in the story. For many people, a congregation's history amounts to who ran last year's church fete, or the last congregational crisis that people would just as soon forget. For some, parish history is the dusty row of council minute books on a shelf in a neglected cupboard in the vestry, or the photographs of nameless ministers hanging around the wall or the two pages handed out to newcomers to the congregation with the explanation, "This is our history".[1]

Can the exploration or writing of a congregation's history be more valuable than this? Can this kind of enterprise serve the congregation? the denomination? the wider Church? These questions are real, for histories of parishes or congregations often serve no more purpose than a nostalgic look over the shoulder or a fussy, sentimental, parochial exercise in self-deception. Too often, they are akin to the sticky, overly sweet, stale cream buns that many of us as children consumed at Sunday School picnics. Alternatively, they may be likened to a 'Men's Club' promotion, offering potted histories of the Church's [male] clergy and significant [male] laity and detailed accounts of one hundred years of property acquisition and building.

Is it possible to move beyond this narrow vision, and envisage a parish history that is honest, inclusive and comprehensive in its concerns and outlook? As a starting point to answering this question, it is worth dipping into a history of the parish of Myddle, Shropshire, England. Richard Cough's *Human Nature displayed in the History of Myddle* (also known as *Antiquities and Memories of the Parish of Myddle, County of Salop)*[1] is, without doubt, a very peculiar parish history. It was written in the early eighteenth century by a quite elderly layperson of the parish of Myddle. Gough begins his parish history in the usual way. He presents the history and geography of the area in which the parish and church were situated. He tells the story of the building of the Myddle Church, of the rectors who had ministered there, and of some of the prominent lay people.

Then, Gough settles down to his main concern. He gives the reader a rough drawing of the arrangement of the pews in his parish church, and a listing of the families and individuals who rent, and therefore sit in, the various pews.

Then, beginning with the first seat on the north side of the north aisle, and ending with the thirteenth pew at the south door of Myddle church, he proceeds to offer potted histories of each of the families and individuals who have sat in the pews of the parish of Myddle.

What does Gough tell? He tells of the occupations of the women and men who have sat in these pews, of the wars they have fought in, the financial difficulties that some of them have faced, their various personal trials and tribulations, and the children they produced- He tells us what he thinks, and what other people have thought, about each of these people.

Reading Cough's pew-based history of Myddle, some readers will undoubtedly wonder about the litigation that might result if someone wrote a history of their congregations in the style of Gough, exposing all the personal, financial and sexual foibles of each person and each family. One may also seriously doubt whether Gough's *History of Myddle* is a "good" parish history. For all that, however, it is possible to find in Gough's potted exposes aspects that are worth holding onto in the writing of a congregation's history Gough reminds us that a good history requires good stories—and that the idle conversation after the parish meeting is often more revealing than the discretely-written and preserved minutes of the Parish meeting.[3] Gough also reminds us that where a person sits in Church tells a great deal about that person and the dynamics of that congregation.'[1] He offers a salutary lesson in his refusal to distinguish between the public "religious" lives of people and their private, "personal" lives. Most significantly, Gough reminds us, as has Nancy Ammerman in more recent times, about the value of writing history, parish or otherwise, from the "bottom up"; specifically, about the importance of listening to the experiences of those "on the margins" of the church community, or whose ideas will never make it into a library or archive.[5]

A decision to *listen* to the experiences of people in various degrees of connection with a particular Church or congregation, is vitally important to the congregational historian who seeks to move beyond the "dry as dust" histories, themselves usually gathering dust in neglected parish bookshelves. To listen as an oral historian is different, in some measure, from listening as a pastor or carer. The doing of oral history within the context of a congregation involves mastery of a number of crucially important practical, ethical and legal considerations. [6]

Yet the doing of oral history within this context may also have pastoral significance. It offers the possibility of empowerment and transformation for individuals and for a community.[7] It also requires a willingness, both on the part of the historian and of the congregation, to deal with difficult memories, particularly those which have been repressed, or hidden behind a facade of niceness and respectability.[8] The pain of a congregational schism, the feelings of betrayal remaining after a pastor suddenly resigns, the cynicism lingering after congregational scandal, and many other memories often go unmentioned in daily congregational discourse. Yet those may powerfully influence a congregation's life.

The Building

Besides listening to the people, the historian needs to take time to "read" the building. This involves not merely reading the reports of property committees and looking at plans, but also taking a long and careful look at the building or buildings that have housed a particular congregation over the years. From the outside one may begin to ask: "What does that building say about this group of people? What does their building say to the community, including to other Christians?" Moving inside, the historian's questions will continue: What vision served as foundation for this particular structure? What motives were present in the minds of the planners? What stories can be told is one learns to read the building's architectural and aesthetic symbolism? Or, further, what do arrangements of furniture, points of vision, and types of artwork employed testify about the congregation's theological understandings, cultural assumptions, social aspirations and aesthetic canons?[9]

The Culture of the Congregation

"Reading a building" also has its corollary in "reading" a congregation's culture. Again, this is a complex task It involves the historian coming to terms with the way the congregation relates through its history (both in its representation of the past and its expectation of the future), appreciating the traditions that constitute the congregation's heritage; defining the congregation's world view (the perceptual framework we use to make sense of our total life), and observing the congregation's use of symbols and its practice of group ritual. "Reading a culture" also involves the demographic analysis of a community. It also involves comprehending the congregation's essential character: that which Clifford Geertz calls its tendencies, capacities, propensities, skills, habits, liabilities, pronenesses' [10]

Having "heard voices", "read buildings", and indulged in a spot of cultural taste-testing, where else must the congregational historian go? The logical place to go is to the congregation's or denomination's own archives. Entering many such archives, even the most committed historian will agree, is not always a source of immediate inspiration Exploring a congregation's archives, more often than not, may offer the prospect of a slow drowning in minutiae - of minute books, records of income and expenditure, weekly or monthly bulletins, the occasional batch of sermon notes and a plan showing how the Church's toilet block was connected with the local sewer in 1925.

In first encountering these sources, the congregational historian needs to heed the horror stories about historians who become experts in historical trivia, but never wrote a history because, essentially, they had nothing worthwhile to say. The best way to avoid this trap is to approach the written records with questions and hypotheses—and then be willing to discover further questions and shape different hypotheses. This also entails interpreting rather than merely collating the material found, and of understanding the two great requirements of any historian (perhaps also of any good pastor): a capacity to enter another person's world with empathy and compassion; and a capacity for detached, informed, insightful interpretation. Finally, the process of turning the "dry and scattered bones" generally deposited in church archives into "living history" also involves imagination, artistry, a keen sense of

audience and a practical understanding of the nuts and bolts of publishing.[11]

The Worth Of Congregational History

At the end of the day, surrounded by a room-full of memories, repressed or otherwise, ethnographic observations, cheque butts and a plan of the 1925 city sewer, is the enterprise of exploring the history of a congregation worth it? James Wind, one of the more recent and insightful "encouragers" of the writing of congregational history, argues that the congregational historian can make an important contribution to individuals and congregations searching for who they are. Probing the past and relating it to the present life of the congregation, he suggests, can help people recover the traditions which shaped people and connect them to durable systems of meaning. It can help people identify the places where identities have broken down, where dramatic or subtle changes have occurred in past times that have set the terms for how the present generation perceives itself and its world. By looking back at their histories, individuals and congregations can rediscover their moorings and be enabled to set off in directions which will give future writers of church history richer, fuller and more complete stories to tell. Alternatively, Wind warns us that to fail to explore the congregation's common memory is to risk leaving wounds festering beneath the surface, a strategy that will backfire when a new congregational controversy occurs:

Exploring the history of a congregation becomes a way to create room for a congregation to move on with its life—with a clearer sense of who it has been and is, as well as fresh appreciation of itself as a trustworthy community that can deal with human failings.[12]

Viewed in this light, the exploration of a congregation's history becomes something far more than the celebratory document usually brought out in time for a significant church anniversary.

Theological Education and Congregational Histories

A further, and consequent argument may be offered concerning the crucial important of theological colleges and seminaries teaching their students the skills and perspectives of the congregational historian. James Wind and James W. Lewis contend that if the need to facilitate and deepen memory is genuine, then those who lead congregations need to learn how to read an additional set of texts besides those that receive so much attention in the seminary or theological college curriculum. This is not to suggest that the scriptures, confessional writings, theological texts, and the like should be slighted; but it is to point to the congregation as a text—a living one—that also requires interpretive skill:

If congregations need to become better able to explore their own memories, then the institutions that train their clergy and support them in their ministries need to foster these abilities. Seminaries need to turn attention not only to their sacred texts and the various official skills that allow pastors to

function professionally. They also must help pastors learn how to approach a congregation and interpret its life. Every pastor, priest, or rabbi should in some sense become a congregational historian.[13]

The American historian E. Brooks Holified strongly supports this point of view:

> We have not been remarkably successful in convincing our students that 'thinking historically' is a useful aid to ministry in a congregation. It is possible that historical investigation that takes the congregation as its object could engender a way of thinking about the local church that a minister would find valuable.[14]

Do congregational historians need more incentive than this before they—equipped with the skills of the ethnographer, the listening ear of the oral historical, the empathic yet impartial judgement of the jury, judge, and perhaps executioner, and the spirit-filled illumination of the artist—begin their task? During an expensive, but still fondly-remembered book-shop crawl in Berkeley, California, I came across a book by an American journalist, Gary Dorsey, entitled *Congregation: The Journey Back to Church.* I must admit that this Australian had her doubts about an American book proclaimed as a "compassionate, funny, mystical and deeply affecting" spiritual documentary about Dorsey's rediscovery of the community of a 'ordinary' congregation. Australians, like other people who have lived under a certain kind of American cultural imperialism, tend to view what seemed to be Dorsey's kind of self-revelatory block-busting style with a mixture of amusement and unease.

I must confess, however, that this Australian found much delight in Dorsey's narrative. In particular I found myself mentally highlighting an observation which Dorsey attributes to Martin Luther, But I will allow Dorsey, who found it first, to introduce Luther's statement:

The Church became an object of intense curiosity for me In my imagination the composition of ordinary stories took on larger meanings. I continued reading—mythology, religion, theology, sociology, biographies of saints, stories of congregational life. Eventually [says Dorsey] I came across a quotation from Martin Luther that created, to my surprise, a great stirring of heart:

> Let every one of us stay each in his own parish, where he will discover more useful work than in all the making of pilgrimages, even if they were all combined into one. Here, at home, you will find, baptism, sacrament, preaching, and your neighbour; these are more important to you than ail the saints in heaven.[15]

ENDNOTES

[1] Story and initial observations from Douglas Scott, "Harnessing your Church's History", *Leadership,* 11 (Winter 1990), p.100.

[2] Richard Gough, *Human Nature displayed in the History of Myddle* (also known as *'Antiquities and Memories of the Parish of Myddle, County of Salop'),* (Centaur Press, 1968).

[3] For a discussion of the value of "gossip", especially in relation to Gough's history, see W G. Hoskins "Introduction" to R. Gough, *op. at*, p.3

[4] For an exposition of this point, see Melvin D Williams, *Community in a Black Pentecostal Church: An Anthropological Study* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974), esp pp. 3f, 29, 36, 38, 61f, 73, 76, 81 and 114. Williams's work is described in James P, Wind, *Places of Worship. Exploring their History, Nashville (* American Association for State and Local History, 1990).

[5] N. Ammerman, "Telling Congregational Stories", *Review of Religious Research,* 35, 4 (June 1994), pp. 289-303.

[6] There are a number of excellent guides. See, for example, Beth M Robertson, *Oral History Handbook.* (Adelaide, Oral History Association of Australia, South Australia, 1995); Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994)

[7] Note, for example, the judgement of Paul Thompson: "Oral history is a history built around people. It thrusts life into history itself and it widens its scope. It allows heroes not just from the leaders, but from the unknown majority of the people. It encourages teachers and students to become fellow-workers. It brings history into, and out of, the community. It helps the less privileged, and especially the old, towards dignity and self-confidence. It makes for contact—and thence understanding—between social classes, and between generations. Equally, oral history offers a challenge to the accepted myths of history, to the authoritarian judgement inherent in its tradition. It provides a means for a radical transformation of the social meaning of history." Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[8] For an insightful discussion of memory, history and congregational amnesia, see James P. Wind and James W. Lewis, "Memory, Amnesia and History," in Carl S. Dudley *et* a/., *Carriers of Faith: Lessons from Congregational Studies* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), pp. 15-30.

[9] For an invaluable discussion on this point, see James P. Wind, *Places of Worship. Exploring their History, Nashville,* American Association for State and Local History, 1990. Excellent examples of this kind of 'reading' are available in James P. Wind and James W. Lewis, American Congregations. Volume 1: *Portraits of Twelve Religious Communities* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[10] For a brief, but comprehensive introduction to this discussion, see Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley and William McKinney, *Handbook for Congregational Studies* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1986), chapter 2. See also: Denham Grierson, *Transforming a People of God* (Melbourne: The Joint Board of Christian Education, 1984); James F. Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987); James F. Hopewell, "The Jovial Church: Narrative in Local Church Life" in Carl S. Dudley (ed.)> *Building Effective Ministry: Theory and Practice in the Local Church* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983); Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 95 and Melvin D. Williams, "The Conflict of Corporate Church and Spiritual Community" *in Building Effective*

Ministry, pp. 55-67.

[1'] The best "how to" guide to writing the history of a congregation is James P. Wind's, *Places of Worship. Exploring their History (* Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1990).

[12] James P. Wind and James W. Lewis, "Memory, Amnesia and History", in Carl S. Dudley *et al., Carriers of Faith: Lessons from Congregational Studies* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), pp. 15-30.

[13] James P. Wind and James W. Lewis, "Memory, Amnesia and History", in Carl S. Dudley, *et al., Carriers of Faith: Lessons from Congregational Studies* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), p. 30.

[14] E. Brooks Holified, "The Historian and the Congregation", in Joseph C. Hough and Barbara G. Wheeler, *Beyond Clericalism: The Congregation as a Focus for Theological Education* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1988), p. 101. See also Jane Dempsey Douglass, "A Study of the Congregation in History" in Hough and Wheeler, *op. cit.,* pp. 63-75.

[15] Gary Dorsey, *Congregation: The Way Back to Church* (New York: Viking, 1995), p.8.

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