

Studying Congregations: A New Handbook
Nancy T. Ammerman

I. Introduction

Part of my task during the IIM joining phase is to get to know the congregation and to allow the congregation to reflect on itself. *Studying Congregations* describes how helpful it is for a congregation to learn about itself in context (or ecology). Another task I have during the IIM joining phase is to set up a senior leadership team and begin equipping the team. *Studying Congregations* describes the necessity for leaders to learn to develop a holding environment.

II. Ecology: Seeing the Congregation in Context

My, my, how times have changed: sometimes for the better; other times for the worse. Regardless of the outcome, we all know that time does not stand still. Nancy Eiesland notes, “In other times and places, religious institutions were the overlord, or steward of society.”¹ What a role the church once played! There was a time when the church was at the center of society. The church had a role to play and everyone knew what it was. I recall learning as a first year student at Concordia Theological Seminary that the chapel was placed at the very center of the campus, modeling how churches of old were built first and in the center of the town, with everything else built around it. Today, when one visits a large city like New York, one may find a great cathedral completely dwarfed by far greater skyscrapers. It seems the evolutionary process has taken its course, maybe more than only symbolically, and these once massive and magnificent church cathedrals have shrunk in stature and purpose.

Congregations today feel the effects of a changing stature and purpose. A dominant theme throughout the *Studying Congregations* handbook is understanding the congregation’s story within the larger ecology of stories. Eiesland observes, “the ecological perspective – the recognition that your congregation is one among many congregations and organizations in the community – makes particular sense in our day.”² Eiesland holds that our churches are better served when they consider themselves in relation to the other ministries in town. Again, we are one among many. Eiesland warns, “Congregations can consciously cooperate and compete; they can hinder (and help) one another without intending to do so.”³

It will be helpful for me to find opportunities during the Joining Phase to invite people to consider the congregation’s place amongst the other religious organizations and the surrounding communities. A congregation can learn much about how to form and shape its mission and vision simply by knowing about its local counter-parts in the Christian community. What areas of the “market” are already being served and what areas of the community are being neglected? By discovering how one fits in its community, the church can find its “calling” by meeting a need that otherwise would go unmet. There are three activities recommended to assist the congregation in understanding its context: one to look at the congregation in time, one to look at it in space, and a third to explore the network maps of members of the congregation.⁴

¹ Nancy T. Ammerman., “Studying Congregations A New Handbook,” (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1998.) 40.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 43.

Ammerman outlines congregational studies conducted using an ecological framework. Three studies in particular emerged with specific “types” or profiles of congregations. David Roozen’s study of more than 177 churches came up with two types of churches: “sanctuary” oriented or “activist” oriented. Carl Dudley’s study of more than 100 churches took a less “structured” approach and came up with five types: “profit” (similar to activist), “pillar,” “servant,” “survivor,” and “pilgrim” oriented churches. In the early 1990s, Penny Becker studied 23 protestant, Catholic, and Jewish congregations. She developed four types: “leader,” “family,” “community,” and the “house of worship” congregations.⁵ Ammerman reports, “The only congregations that avoided conflict were those that refused to change, a refusal that would ultimately mean their demise.”⁶ Understanding that there is a range of viable models may help a congregation better structure itself to meet the needs of the wider community.

III. Leadership and the Study of Congregations

“A crucial task for leaders and a key first step in practical theological thinking is helping a congregation gain a realistic picture of itself, its situation, and its possibilities in the present and immediate future.”⁷ Dan Browning calls this activity “descriptive theology.” Jackson Carroll describes how Browning, “emphasizes that understanding the concrete situation of ministry... is an important theological task in its own right and part of an overall process that he calls ‘strategic practical theology’.”⁸ For a congregation to embark on building a “descriptive theology,” leaders must appreciate their role.

Carroll describes the importance of both “calling and competence,” or the office and personal authority. It is important for leaders, pastor and lay, to have a level of expertise that garners confidence and trust. Carroll refers to what Ronald Heifetz calls a “holding environment” in which the leader “has the power to hold the attention of another party and facilitate adaptive work.”⁹ This is the work that allows the congregation to “frame” or “reframe” the congregation’s vision for ministry. Heifetz describes this ability as one’s “personal authority.”¹⁰ Carroll asserts that such personal authority will allow the leader “to help the congregation face and deal with conflicts” and it will help in choosing “what kind of decision-making process will be followed.”¹¹ As the leader’s relationship to God, spiritual maturity, and personal and professional ministry aptitudes are recognized, necessary trust is granted.

IV. Theological and Personal Reflection

Facing congregational obstacles is often not a matter of being honest, but of becoming aware of what members never knew was there. In my current assignment, members are coming to terms with their 80 year history and their context in the community. In a changing community, the congregation is not what it once was. Based on my initial joining interviews, one of my

⁵ Ibid., 75.

⁶ Ibid., 76.

⁷ Ibid., 173.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 172.

¹⁰ Ibid., 173.

¹¹ Ibid.

Martin L. Schroeder February 15, 2016

primary tasks appears to be assisting them in discovering a new image. How will they complement or compete with the other faith communities? What resources have they acquired? What are their gifts? And how will the leaders be equipped to face these challenges? *Studying Congregations* provides practical direction.