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HADDON WILLMER

The Collapse of Congregations

Congregations, so long the normative form of English church life, are under threat. Haddon Willmer shows how the threats come from social and economic forces, but are compounded by an internal loss of bearings in churches themselves. In particular he identifies the flight from a critical intellectual life and the problems of inculturating faith in twenty-first century England.

Introduction

Christianity in Britain exists in many different forms. It appears in cathedrals, tended by canons in the close; by Bishops in their diocesan committees and the House of Lords; in Christians scattered in daily work, sometimes touched by the passing shadow of a clergyperson in a 'sector ministry'. It bobs up and down, sometimes clearly visible above the waves of the tossed post-modernist sea, in drama and media, music and clowning. It is still thought by thinkers, scholars, speculators and sensationalists. It pumps adrenalin into myriad voluntary societies and projects, responding to human needs – sometimes massively as Jubilee 2000, often forlornly, so that they have to look for rest in a home for lost causes. Christianity exists in Britain in the Queen's Christmas Broadcast and in the gigs of Cliff Richards and his many would-be successors. It has held a final redoubt in the establishment of the great and the good, but that may by now have fallen to the satirists, where Christianity does not make such a strong showing. It still hangs on in the media, though the churches are worried about what they see as the BBC's demotion of religious broadcasting and some of the more serious papers cannot keep full-time religious correspondents, for alleged lack of newsworthy religion.

Keeping it local

The congregation, as the local gathering of Christians, is another way in which Christianity exists. It is the overwhelmingly traditional way. When people think of Christianity, the image of a local building may perhaps come to mind, and even of people who frequent it, especially the vicar, and John Major's spinster cycling to Holy Communion, while the lads of the village play cricket. They may, from childhood memory and occasional attendances, have an idea of what goes on in church, though being asked what it might mean should not embarrass them. That local church means congregation, gathering the people of God together in face-to-face community, with one another and with God who shows his face in Jesus, does not make attractive sense to people. It is either boring or frightening.

And for many who work out their Christian commitment primarily in some other form, like those described in the last paragraph, the congregation is a chore, a duty done as proof of pure obedience, rather than because it is an efficient way to produce other goods. The pain of the congregation has long been felt and clergy and theologians have often despised it in their impatience with it, even while they work with it. C.S. Lewis, who in the 1930s and after, had a most interesting life in various non-congregational forms of Christianity, as a writer and a walker and in the pub and the College Common Room, was nevertheless quite sure that the congregation could not be avoided if one were to be a genuine Christian. But he also knew, from within himself, that Screwtape the tempter had an easy line of attack on the new Christian's faith simply by directing the Christian's attention to what he was surrounded by when he went to the local church. Disgust would then take over to do the devil's work of destroying faith.

The collapse of congregations in England

Can we speak of the 'collapse of the congregation in England' without indulging in the unnecessary hysteria of the little-faithed disciples in the sinking ship? On the other hand, can we be nonchalant when the Archbishop of Canterbury, who by his office is obliged to put the best gloss on things, is moved to talk of the extinction of the church in a generation or two, if present trends continue? The membership of all the mainstream churches continues to decline. Increases in some non-mainstream churches may be large as percentages, since they start from relatively small numbers, but they cannot cancel out the overall reduction in numbers of people who go to church often enough to get counted in the increasingly fashionable church censuses, whether or not they can be counted on to be church in a worthwhile sense. Congregations dwindle, some leaving buildings empty, others falling below the critical mass required to be effective in attracting and holding people. I hear that half the congregations in England do not have significant work with children and young people. Baptists are concerned that a quarter of those baptized – 10,000 people – between 1989 and 1998 did not come into church membership, which involves a public commitment to faithful congregational living.

Why are congregations declining so seriously? There are many causes. Erosion happens from all sides, so that alleviating one problem exacerbates another. Congregations decline because they are too concerned with themselves, cosseting their own identity; and they decline because they are diffused into a secular society, their Christian identity hollowed out. So the congregation breeds conflicting diagnoses, which then stalemate each other, leading to the conclusion that the congregation is incurable.

The secular weakening of communities.

If we take into account the widespread flight from any kind of community, especially small-scale local voluntary community, in our society, congregations may be judged to be doing quite well. Their little engines are valiant against the cultural undertow, as community belonging generally gives way to commercial relations. The sick are turned into customers buying expert services, but hospitals are no

longer imagined as healing communities, or as communal agencies of a genuine wider community. People work together in teams, but that involves realistically competing with other team members for control and status: unambiguous pure community (as in the 'body of Christ?') is dismissed as unattainable.

The mobility of the car, uninhibited by fuel costs which people love to complain about but still go on paying, means that we can go further to find more specialist gatherings suited to the taste for celebrity, polish and professionalism, which is not securely on offer every week in a little local church. The church responds to the collapse of the local, mixed, amateur community, by large-scale 'celebrations' and retreat centres. These extra-congregational modes of church provide spiritual community and sustenance the like of which is not available in local congregations. Some prefer cathedrals: worship is more sublime because worshippers can preserve anonymity. The cathedral teaches that worship has a reality independent of congregation: worship cannot be experienced as congregational when the chapter is known to model dysfunctional community.

Choice and Calling

People form local communities of a kind, but they are responses to single issues and immediate practical needs, like baby-sitting circles and Neighbourhood Watch groups. Participants stick with them as long as the defining need is felt and satisfied. By comparison, Christian congregations labour under all the inconveniences of marriage – they involve a lifelong personal commitment, vulnerable to the illimitable generality of life. Commitment here is 'for utility, for futility', as we might add to the already terrifying exhilarating formulae of the marriage service. How and why should anyone bother to sustain community through futility and fruitlessness? How do we get through the doldrums of life together? Marriages are sustained, to a degree, by being grounded in the free loving *choice* by *one* person of another; but they inevitably bring obligations (which may turn out to be far-reaching) to *many unchosen* people – the families of the partner and then to one's own children and to whomever they choose. Parents can choose or decline to *originate* children – but they cannot avoid living, more or less faithfully, with what their children turn out to be. People leave congregations, or stay feebly, unfruitfully on the fringes, because the congregation requires them to be too involved with people they do not want to get close to.

Some belong to the large 'Church denominational' (which purports to have something to do with 'church universal', perhaps even by 'subsistence'). And some are still taught to go to the nearest local branch of the 'Church denominational', thus taking its parochial system seriously. Honest church policy, however, can now rest only on the recognition that the parish, as a working unity between territory and church, is finished. Virtually all Christians practise a gathered church ecclesiology, though in a one-sided liberal and indefensible reduction. Which local church they go to depends on their choosing, even their taste. The classic theological form of the gathered church, by contrast, founded it in the election of God, who gathers and builds his church. To be a member of a church is not to be a sovereign consumer in the market for spiritual and other goods, but it is to be responsive to the call of God. When a church knows it is gathered by God, it starts

with an awareness of obligation to God, of calling and responsibility. The collapse of congregation in England is revealed not merely by declining numbers, but by the virtually universal relegation of talk about church as God's *creation*, or as the *disciples* following Jesus, to the margins of liturgy; that is to say, to beautiful words which have no authority or usefulness in church management or belonging.

No doubt this is to put the issue too starkly. If this article has any readers, they will almost certainly belong to the minority who stick with church because, however erratically, anxiously, sadly or dimly, however tossed about, they are held in a practice of commitment to church, even to congregation. A high proportion of clergy are in this group, which is a source of their struggles with frustration, impotence, and their compromised optimism. Not *all* clergy: it is not surprising that some are not committed to congregation, for, despite the professions of the system, they are often not selected or trained for congregational life and ministry. For some clergy, the congregation is merely a career stepping stone, to some extra-congregational goal. Often ministers use congregations as a base for pursuing more interesting, more productive projects, often in social service and community development; arguably they should go where they can do the most good they can, but they should not remain congregational ministers when their mind and heart are not in the job. If the congregation is a fruitless relic of a religious past, then it should be decently and honestly abandoned.

Members and Attenders

For a long time, the occasional offices have brought people to church, to mark their being 'hatched, matched and dispatched.' More people now choose to be married by civil ceremony; and increasing numbers live together without seeking the legal status of marriage. Fewer parents are Christian, or are deferential towards the church, than in the past, so fewer children are brought to baptism. Now secular substitutes for baptism are attracting interest, not as expressions of a militant atheistic antagonism to Christian faith, but in order to have a ceremony tailored to the individuality of the new child in its immediate family, rather than a rite structured around Christ, who is the same for all of us. Funerals in church, or with the aid of clergy, are perhaps not declining so sharply; certainly, some clergy have become funeral experts; although ministry to the bereaved and for the dead is a necessary and good work, it is not a sign of a living church that its ministers spend much time burying the dead. Congregations are no longer maintained by an ecclesiastical monopoly on rites of passage, which people feel are indispensable to respectability, or to final safety.

Before the First World War, those congregations which had members who would be vetted before being accepted on to the church roll, which was a kind of enlistment to a publicly acknowledged responsibility, often also had regular attenders, who were in many respects participants in the social and spiritual life of the community, but were not members. Often there were as many attenders as members. After the War, attenders declined drastically. The churches lost more than those persons. They lost manifold outlets and connections to the wider society. They had no penumbra. The line between the believing, explicit company of faith

and the indifferent, uncomprehending, even deliberately unbelieving world, become a more definite impervious wall. Churches begin to worry about reaching the outsider.

But they did continue to reach some outsiders and to persuade them to become insiders. Sometimes it was done by Billy Graham's kind of evangelism, or by Christian Unions for students; sometimes by the service offered locally, through, for example, mums and toddlers' groups, where friendship and the demonstration of practical care was good news. But, as one recent analysis showed, church members lost by death is balanced by those who are persuaded to come in from outside: yet church numbers overall decline because of a third group: people inside the church who give up. This disappearance of sometimes longstanding church people happens for many reasons. There is loss of faith in general; impatience with the pace or direction of church, either locally or more widely; personal alienations. When a church-going couple's marriage breaks up, it is quite likely that one, if not both of the partners will give up going to church – if the congregation is a significant social home for them, it will be difficult for the congregation to support and hold both.

The whole tottering edifice...

Understanding the collapse of congregations requires attention to the more general vicissitudes, if not collapse, of Christianity in England. Christianity is the religion which has been integrated with the majority cultures, the constitutional order and social practice in the territory of England for more than a millenium. It is now being shaken to the roots. This shaking comes from two sides: the social cultural rooting of Christianity in England and the uncertainty of Christian faith and its truth.

In relation to the first, for example: church and congregation have no longer any significant support from the English class system and from English ethnicity. The Roman Catholic Church is less and less a church with a mass working-class base with strong cultural Irish ethnicity. The Church of England is no longer the Tory party, or 'middle England' at prayer. In the earlier twentieth century, Britain, including England, not merely fought for its survival in war, but believed its culture and tradition had value for the world. There was a national, and indeed ethnic cultural, defiance, if not unshadowed confidence. That has now been swept away, leaving only disreputable and possibly dangerous nationalistic and racist debris at the edges. While minority faiths in England show very strong relationships between religion and ethnicity, explicitly developed both by the communities themselves and increasingly by public policy, the English churches' traditional relations with English ethnicity and culture have dissolved and are in disarray and are largely disapproved of.

Finding a context

Churches do not know whether to contextualize Christianity in England afresh or to present Christianity as global-cosmopolitan, free from the limits of English provincialism. Any new contextualization is difficult because the English do not know who they are or who they want to be – Europeans or people who resist letting

their country become 'foreign'; peripheral North Americans; nostalgic English traditionalists; citizens of a world whose centre of gravity is in the southern hemisphere; globalized liberal money-makers. We know that the church *is* mission, and all mission involves contextualization, but there is no serious coherent discussion of this issue in the churches, although there is a lot of sensitivity to it.

Grace Davie has popularized the description of English religion, especially Christianity, since 1945, as 'believing without belonging'. Opinion surveys show that the majority still believe in God, and pray and the like. But it is a mistake to put any weight on this 'believing'. There is much superstition, paganism, mere deism, syncretism spiritualities which go to make up the evidence that England is not a hard-headedly atheistically secular society. Few people who believe in God think of God in an informed Trinitarian way, which is quite different from believing in a higher Power. Few have comfort or strength through living in the knowledge of the unity of creator, companion, redeemer, inspirer. The congregation suffers because of the collapse of Christian believing. Some simply leave the congregation because they no longer believe; others spend their energy in the congregation in guarding against other Church people who have a different way of responding to the increasing intellectual difficulties of faith – fundamentalists and conservatives battle with liberals, charismatics with rationalists. Entangled in these insolubilities, they cannot present the Christian gospel persuasively to people who have no inkling of the beauty of God through the intelligibility of Christ.

No longer true?

The loss of social significance for church and congregation means that the second shaking, of confidence in the truth of Christianity, is less easily evaded. When curates in the nineteenth century had a crisis of faith, the common cure recommended by their ecclesiastical managers was to keep them busy with parochial visiting. They might not know what the creed meant when they mumbled it, but they would discover Christianity as a powerful part of English life, a non-dogmatic social custom. That would interest them; make them feel useful; bring them into touch with ordinary people, with hearts of gold, good neighbours who prayed unbothered by intellectual doubts they had no leisure for, not being rich enough to go to university.

This folk remedy for collapsing Christianity ('acting saves thinking') is still offered, in updated variations, by quacks and reputable healers. Parochial visiting has largely disappeared, partly because women work away from the home; factory visiting by industrial mission no longer takes its place, if it ever did, but friendship evangelism, Alpha suppers, caring ministries and counselling keep Christians in the faith without their being obsessed by its intellectual difficulties. But in a more affluent society, where a majority now have higher education of some sort, and where science and technology are more pervasive and persuasive than ever before, and where disdainful rather than critical debate is cheap in chat shows, the truth of Christianity is increasingly confidently denied. Or even it is regarded as unnecessary to state what all intelligent chatters know, that Christianity is exploded.

Post-modernism's indifference to truth, on the grounds that the only truth is that human beings are caught in a plurality of incommensurable viewpoints and interpretations, so that all opinions are legitimate but none can judge the truth of another, has been welcomed by some Christians: it gives them permission to find a niche, where they can hold and spread opinions which they believe but can give no good reasons for. But post-modernist permissiveness is an unsafe basis for Christian believing. It has, in any case, been limited of late by counterattacks from some of the natural sciences, from historical studies, and from realist philosophy, which want evidence-based thinking.

At present in England, Christianity is not doing very well in serious apologetic. There is no popularly effective apologetic, used in congregational life, of the kind achieved by C.S.Lewis and Francis Schaeffer in their now irrevocably past times. Instead, Professor Richard Dawkins is widely noted for his rationalist, atheist, campaign against theology, against church schools, while the countering argument for faith by Professor Keith Ward is hardly known in the churches, and is certainly not heard through them. It is widely thought that this does not matter at the congregational level, because ordinary people do not think in this way. But that is a mistake. It produces ills. It allows preachers to do shoddy work, because a sermon does not have to stand up to a thoughtful hearing – it is expected to persuade by its jokes, or by its feeling, not by being a word of light. Many are insulted and bored by sermons – how bad they are is shown by the number of people who prefer to take a Sunday paper for intellectual stimulus. Of course, sermons could only be more weighty and truth seeking if they became less isolated as monologues – good sermons are bound to be controversial and disturbing and therefore must be located in a congregation where open discussion, indeed argument, is facilitated and encouraged by being enjoyed.

It is strange that the churches of Jesus, the provocative conversationalist, even the fierce polemicist, should have become the haven for utterances that are counterproductive because they are monologues. Clerics and others who want to build congregations have got to get away from this mode of 'preaching' which shapes the whole community – but they must not escape as some do, by eliminating all serious *coherent* and *informed* exposition and discussion of Christian faith from the service.

The worm within

Are the churches so accustomed now to Christianity's not being believed by thinking people that they have given up arguing for it, or thinking it for themselves? That is dangerous. Articulate unbelievers are not only outside the churches. That brings us to another section of this analysis. The collapse of congregations has so far been explained in terms of changes to congregations in themselves, and to changes coming about through the collapse of Christianity as the wider framework of the congregation. Now, we have also to think about the collapse of Christianity within the congregation. The congregation does not merely depend on extra-congregational, national or universal rather than merely local Christianity; the

congregation is a seedbed and carrier of Christianity at large. It is possible for Christianity to die in congregations, even while they keep the form of faith.

When I was young, in pre-ecumenical days, congregations in which I grew up were not afraid to criticize others by saying their Christianity was shallow, distorted, or merely nominal. That was wickedly arrogant, except that congregations which commented on others in so unneighbourly a fashion, often, in my experience, asked themselves constantly whether their own practice and faith was merely in word and not in deed, in form and not substance. Such churches were prone to internal conflicts and splits, because some people were always testing one another spiritually and driving deeper into what they would call the roots of the matter. I do not want to go back to such churches; I could not survive it. But our assurance that we are all Christians by virtue of a common baptism or some other formality prevents us from facing what is going on.

Christianity has collapsed in the congregation to a serious extent. Or maybe it has always been weak there. Congregations are not seriously thinking communities. Although many congregations are increasingly made up of highly educated people, doctors and teachers and IT experts, they do not think the faith, either in itself or in relation to the world about them.

The challenge of thought

One of the disadvantages of Christianity, in the competition of religions and ideologies, is that it is a thinking religion. It consists in processes and sequences of thinking, of conversation. It is not a mere way of life that can be entered by training in unthinking obedience and then followed by habit. Nor is it an emotional response to wonders, or to the numinous, which holds its hands up while its mind goes blank. Christianity not merely reflects on practice, or on experience, it searches in the world to see where God is and what God is doing. It looks for, and rests on, the agreement between what God is doing now, in human history, and what God has shown himself to be in Jesus Christ – it is scriptural and Trinitarian. It involves translation – not of one set of sacred sounds into other sounds, but of one witness to truth into another, a process which involves thinking, not only to find the right equivalent in another language, but also to be propelled into new situations and new experiences of truth, knowingly, so that we are able to know where we are going and what its significance is. Christianity is a religion which results from people being confronted with the amazing and the unlikely, and not being excused from making sense of it – sense to explain to others, sense to be able to turn the unlikely into routine and good practice, sense to grow as persons endowed by God with mind, even while we are thrown by God into bewilderment.

Christianity in the congregation, in our culture, as always, would like to be spared the burden of itself, that it can only be faith and community as it thinks. It cannot leave thinking to a few – it cannot afford to have a few thinkers who think to please themselves and make sense to one another. It wants thinking for its own whole life and work. If this is so, it goes far to explain the difficulty of the congregation – for there can be no more unpopular idea than to suggest that we should gather regularly as a thinking community.

Seeing decline

The collapse of congregations and the collapse of Christianity within and beyond the congregation, has been going on since, at least, 1900. It has come to dominate the consciousness of the churches since the 1960s. We can ask therefore how it has already been perceived by the churches, and how churches have developed and incorporated responses to the collapse into their own being and practice. They have for example got used to it – they have grown thick skin over sore places. They increasingly accept their smallness and many churches lack any hope or commitment to be other than small – they even fatalistically expect their demise, because they are composed disproportionately of older people, who have long since come to terms with their children, who, whether they have turned out to be a joy or a sadness to their parents, do not bother with church. All who grow old have to accept that much that they held dear in their lives will die with them – now church is amongst those things.

But that is far from being the whole picture. Collapse of the congregation does not mean that congregations will disappear, or all will become old people's drop-in centres. Christianity will be much reduced in English life, but it is likely it will sometime get to a steady sustainable level. And some sorts of congregation, in some places, have been flourishing, in recent decades. Congregations are built up by entrepreneurial persons and by 'can-do' team working. They are staffed from people who have technological and marketing experience and gifts, and who are not inhibited by traditional ecclesiastical discipline and theological scruples. The builders of congregations are perhaps less often than in the past the teachers-lecturers; or the hierarchs, sacred or secular, to be revered.

Congregations flourish more in some contexts than others. The village church, for so long the Anglican ideal of the congregation, is weaker, because the village is weaker, thinner, more likely to be peopled by weekending incomers, who use the country to get away from pressure, including the pressure of a church commitment. Urban congregations of several hundreds can be gathered in areas where there are forty thousand university students. Small congregations can survive and do useful work if they are adequately financed – which can sometimes happen when a centralized church decides to keep clergy and other resources in deprived areas, or where the church members are rich *and* committed.

Recovering the congregation

There can be no simple recipe for recovering the congregation. That is one reason why a basic need is for people to be Christian, in ways which give them good reason to stick at the project of forming congregation even when it is discouraging. It helps if they have the kind of Christian faith which requires and leads us to be congregational – which knows there is no way of being a Christian alone, but also knows that the congregation is not provided and sustained by denominations, so that it can exist without the members being responsible for making it happen. Congregations are not like local branches of a supermarket firm, which are put in place by the central management, and made available to customers – although most denominational episcopos behave as though that is the case. Congregations are

not to be started, rearranged and closed by managements at a distance, for this teaches congregations to be, at best, dependent, at worst, disgusted with the oppressions of a supposedly liberating body. Congregations which live come about by people in the locality making them, covenanting with one another and with God to be the church in that place. What the situation requires now is such congregations which will show initiative in mission, because their very existence is an experience of sharing the initiative of the Spirit, directly in them. There is no hope in congregations which exist out of deference to the missionary or the bishop, whose initiative dys-angelizes them into dependence rather than calls them to responsibility.

The day has long gone when congregations could be made by law requiring church attendance. No longer can paternalistic employers expect their workers to worship in their chapels. And no longer does the desire for social acceptance, for respectability, keep people in touch with the church, where they may, against their will, perhaps, be hooked by the Word of God; respectable people today are privately secular and fame is gotten by the shameless confession of unrespectable behaviour. Congregations can no longer be built up through Sunday Schools – parents wanting a quiet day off no longer need to send their children to them. Secular education has rendered them redundant as schools, so they have lost the social necessity which made them powerful in the nineteenth century. They aim to bring children of church-going parents into Christian life, but with limited success. No matter how good and attractive the provision for pre-teenage children is, it will not suffice to build congregations in the future. The church of the future depends on evangelizing adults in adult ways – and our weakness in that enterprise is evidenced by our failure to persuade teenagers to go on being congregational Christians, or even Christians who believe without belonging. We go on entertaining and indulging teenagers as though they were still children, instead of calling them to adult, responsible, thoughtful Christian action in the world.

For a long time, we have recommended Christianity as the answer to need, to many kinds of need, from the trivial to the ultimate. Some evangelisms only offer to supply the final need – where will you spend eternity? – reflecting the Gospel warning that it does not make sense to gain the whole world, if it involves losing one's life. Other evangelisms have offered eternal salvation with the supply of other needs – an enriching culture of sacred music with organs or sanctified pop with guitars, for example. Charismatic evangelisms offer life and healing for the whole body and spirit person. But for all their differences these evangelisms trade on need and its satisfaction, teach people to see themselves as needy, which easily enculturates itself in contemporary culture, in which we are primarily consumers with appetites, and even worse, with rights to the satisfaction of appetites. Not only is the congregation likely to lose in competition with more powerful purveyors of satisfactions, but it misses and misrepresents the Gospel by working in this idiom.

Needed – one congregation

The congregation is, however, a necessary form of Christianity. If it withers, Christianity in other forms will be undermined and will not be able to substitute for its loss. Why is this? The congregation is local – it is public and shared

Christianity near where we live. Congregational Christianity affirms the bodiliness of Christians together through its requirements – it needs people to come as whole persons to be Church (it saves us from the practically disembodied chatter about embodiment which leaves us with virtual, rather than virtuous reality, with forms of godliness, but without the power – *virtus* – thereof). Congregations require people to move the chairs and make tea and dance and get hold of the broom.

Congregations engage people in building and sustaining local communities. They are places of conversation, of gossip (a good practice, as the origin of the word reminds us: god's sibb, person related to one in God – it is action within God's community). They can be centres of local intelligence – especially if they are inspired by the love and care that is curious about other people. And intelligence can result in action, when people are willing to act on it, even at the risk of rebuff.

Congregations are enterprising, opportunistic: they vary from one another because they respond to local circumstances, and build themselves up from whoever chooses to join in. That is often difficult – but congregation is valuable insofar as it involves people in practice, in training through practice, in forming societies that are welcoming, embracing.

Renewing the congregation

Congregations are not enclosed, static communities – they have continually to renew themselves by incorporating new people. They are mixed communities, with young and old, men and women, good and bad. Their membership is determined by the love of God that is open even for enemies, not by passing tests of acceptability. Yet it is unrealistic to expect any single congregation to be limitlessly all-inclusive. Congregations will vary in character and will be more accessible to some sorts of people rather than others. Some people will find it interesting and helpful to be occasional visitors to a congregation, while accepting that they would not want to fit in to it as a reliable working member.

What Christian mission and service in society requires is not that each congregation suits everyone equally, but that somewhere in the range of congregations people can find a place where they can be useful not merely comfortable, and certainly not irritated Christians with others. Implied here is one of the most valuable features of the congregational mode of Christianity: it enables the display of variety, and that depends on the development of congregational self-awareness, identity, and the cultivation of congregational characteristics. Congregations are not forms of local community prescribed by some central authority on a standard pattern. Congregations are not local branches of a chain of restaurants, where head office tells local chefs how many peas are to be put on each plate – though there always have been church authorities who would like it that way. Congregations are not locally stationed platoons of an army.

Congregations are a component, sometimes an aid, for a good civil society, where people not only come together at an intermediate level, between state and household, but where they generate the real life of a society. Then society becomes a place where human beings become more fully human, because it is a place that is only filled up by their free, inventive, responsible action – not by doing what

they are told. Merely by being congregations, in this true sense, local churches serve the well being of the whole society – they will be bound to defend local community in principle and to pioneer and support it experimentally. It is perhaps as good a sign as one should ever expect from political leaders that in Britain they are making more of the value of faith communities for society generally. But there are many in the churches who lag behind and are careless about the contribution that congregations make and could make to combatting social apathy and alienation.

If the congregation attempts anything like this, it will have to struggle against all kinds of disillusion, laziness and weakness. Congregations often make mistakes. They are human. All human beings and communities have ways of dealing with mistakes, making them worse, excusing them, surviving them, learning from them, even sometimes putting them right. We can be mistaken about how we deal with our mistakes, and then we get caught in escalating tangles. Congregations find all this very hard and painful and often end up being evasive and dishonest communities. But as Christian communities, they go over, week after week, the Christian story of God, who brings mistakes to light in the light of the Great Repair. And if a Christian congregation is truly itself, it will be writing out new chapters in the story, 'in the fleshy tables of the heart' (2 Cor.3.3) with even more pain than the writer of a paper article incurs. In an increasingly punitively minded culture, divided between self-affirming people and those who are 'taken out of society', congregations are places where we learn and witness to the saving but fragile way of being our true selves, in confessing sin and living by undeserved gift. The congregation becomes, in this as in other ways, the 'hermeneutic of the Gospel'.

There is a lot to be said in favour of the congregation. So the collapse of the congregation is a serious matter. Yet that collapse has been happening and continues. It may never be complete as a social collapse – the congregation is unlikely to vanish completely from English society. But the collapse of congregation is a daily occurrence in individuals – people leave particular congregations, and are glad to be free of congregation. Congregation has collapsed for them as a way of being Christian. It is no longer sufficiently a delight to hold them. It no longer seems to be a concrete living wisdom. It is no longer necessary to pursue the promise of God as life abundantly. Sometimes, when the congregation collapses for individuals, it goes along an abandonment of Christianity in general – but not always. Some are uncomfortably suspended between Christian faith which they hold to, and the congregation which they cannot bear. It is possible that the collapse of the congregation in the minds and practice of individuals has now become so extensive that it has brought many congregations to collapse and has vastly reduced congregational Christianity at large in society.

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