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JOHN WILLIAMS

Congregational Studies as Resource and Critique for a Mission-Shaped Church

There is now a large body of literature exploring new and emergent patterns of church life aimed at re-shaping the church around the needs of mission in contemporary culture. Much of this literature is strong in its analysis of social and cultural trends but weaker in its engagement with the beliefs and practices of actual church congregations (whether 'inherited' or 'emerging' models). In this article, John Williams argues that the burgeoning discipline of congregational studies should be seen as a constructive and critical partner in the quest for fresh expressions of church oriented to mission.

A few years ago, in the Diocese of Wakefield, a Bishop's Working Party looking at patterns of authorised ministry in the diocese produced a report entitled *Ministry in Focus*. It made a point of insisting that practical recommendations about ministry needed to be preceded by a process of attending to the context. This vital process of critical attentiveness needs to be one which is properly resourced and seriously engaged by local churches and all churches were invited to take part:

> Every church needs to attend to the formative journey in which we learn what it means to live the Gospel, both individually and corporately, and together discover what it means to be called to be God's church in a particular place. The local church is called to model a particular kind of presence that is attentive to its context, reflecting prayerfully on what is there, so that action arises out of this reflection.[1]

Recent years have seen a burgeoning literature exploring and commending the emergence of 'new shapes' or 'fresh expressions' of church life.[2] These works urge a radical innovatory approach to ecclesiology and the structures and patterns of ecclesial presence and mission in localities and networks. They tend to combine this radicalism with relatively conservative expectations, and sometimes prescriptions, about *belief*, or the *content* of the faith that undergirds and drives the ecclesiological and missiological patterns being explored. The authors often acknowledge the need for attentiveness to context in order for appropriate strategies for mission to be shaped. However, they rarely extend that attentiveness to matters of belief, whether the operative beliefs of the practising Christians already in the churches or the beliefs that may come to be held by new Christians coming in.

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1 Diocese of Wakefield 2004: 2.
2 See, for example, Bayes and Sledge 2006; Church of England 2004; Croft 2002; Gibbs and Bolger 2006; Gibbs and Coffey 2001; Hinton 2002; MacLaren 2004; Moynagh 2001; Nazir-Ali 2001; Ward 2002.

In addressing this weakness, this article will argue that the literature of ecclesial renewal and the churches' missional thinking would benefit from closer engagement with the discipline of 'congregational studies'.[3] Following a brief introduction to the field of congregational studies, I argue for its relevance to strategic thinking about mission for the churches today. My claim is that congregational studies not only yield invaluable evidence for determining how local churches can more effectively engage missionally with their community context, but also raise important issues about congregational patterns of *belief* that are often masked by unquestioned assumptions about shared orthodoxy.

Studying the Congregation: A Developing Discipline

Congregational studies have their roots in the emergence during the twentieth century of detailed ethnographic studies of communities, often involving long term participant observation.[4] While originally developed in America, British contributions to the field began to appear from the 1950s onwards.[5]

By contrast with classic sociology, as established on the work of such founding fathers as Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, these studies were less concerned to use empirical studies to advance general theories about the meanings of social institutions and patterns of social development over time at the 'macro' level. They were more interested in the customs, interactions, shared value systems and processes of socialisation governing the 'micro' level of everyday life in very specific communities. Many such studies were initially undertaken from a secular perspective, mirroring the position of the sociology of religion in the UK as something of a 'poor relation' within sociology as a whole. Others, however, paid close attention to the role of religious practices, institutions, beliefs and congregations in the communities under scrutiny and some focused particularly upon these.[6] This field of work employs the technique described by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz[7] as 'thick description'. This method prioritizes the recognition of complexity over the drive to produce overarching theories that simplify the analysis but distance the theorist from the reality of the situation 'on the ground'.[8] A 'thick description' requires patient immersion in the context, much listening, attempting to experience the internal movements and patterns of behaviours and relationships 'from the inside'. This means, as Frances Ward has observed, 'living with messiness'.[9] The methods involved include:

- the examination of artefacts and documents of the community,
- mapping the history and the key moments in it (for example by the use of a time-line),
- interviews with individuals and with groups,

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3 For introductory texts and overview see Ammerman 1998; Cameron et al. 2005; Guest, Tusting, and Woodhead 2004. The relevance of this field has recently been noted by Steve Croft in his 'Mapping Ecclesiology for a Mixed Economy' in Croft 2008: 186-98.

4 For a pioneering case study see Lynd and Lynd 1929.

5 For example see Stacey 1960; Tunstall 1962.

6 Clark 1982; Moore 1974; Ward 1961; Wickham 1957.

7 Geertz 1973.

8 For a summary of the technique see West, Noble, and Todd 1999: 37ff.

- statistical and attitudinal surveys,
- neighbourhood walking,
- keeping a journal and
- practical reflection.[10]

These methods set congregational studies firmly within the discipline of 'qualitative research'[11] which seeks to excavate the deeper and richer meanings of situations by more diverse and flexible means than traditional 'quantitative' studies based on statistical surveys, questionnaires and the like.

Practitioners have also distinguished between 'extrinsic' and 'intrinsic' studies.[12] An 'extrinsic study' is undertaken with (so to speak) an 'ulterior motive'. It aims that the research should contribute to some wider benefit. For example, the study of a church congregation may be intended to contribute to the design of a mission strategy. 'Intrinsic studies' are aimed solely at fostering understanding of the community being studied, more or less for its own sake. In Britain the tendency has been increasingly towards intrinsic studies, unlike in the USA, where a great deal of research is funded by organisations motivated by the desire to promote particular social or religious ends. This is one reason why the relevance of congregational studies to mission has been neglected in Britain where the existing body of work has not tended to be seen as 'useful' to the churches. The present article is arguing that this needs to change.

Telling the Church Story

Until comparatively recently, relatively little detailed study was done of ordinary church congregations. Sociologists tended to expend their energies on more outlandish cults and sects. Pioneering work has included that of Timothy Jenkins[13] which includes an extremely detailed participant observation of a 'Whit walk' in a working class community in Bristol and analyses the complex threads of belief this major annual event interweaves between church and community.

Perhaps the most influential pioneering work, in what has come to be known as 'ecclesial ethnography', was first published in 1987 by (the late) James Hopewell. Hopewell starts with an important observation made by the theologian Wade Clark Roof:

> Theological doctrines are always filtered through people's social and cultural experiences. What emerges in a given situation as 'operant religion' will differ considerably from the 'formal religion' of the historic creeds, and more concern with the former is essential to understanding how belief systems function in people's daily lives.[14]

What we need to do is to find out what people's 'operant religion' actually is, and this is the subject of Hopewell's researches documented in *Congregation*.

Hopewell's approach is to treat the entire life of a local church as an unfolding *story* with its setting, characterization and plot. Through participant observation,

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9 See Guest, Tusting, and Woodhead 2004: 125ff.
10 See Cameron et al. 2005: 26-35.
11 See Swinton and Mowatt 2006.

12 Guest, Tusting, and Woodhead 2004: 2ff.
13 Jenkins 1999.
14 Quoted in Hopewell 1987: 18, note 3.

intensive interviewing and questionnaire testing, he aims to discover how a congregation understands its history and current role. This process is called 'congregational narrative analysis'. It asks questions of a congregation such as:

- What is its most characteristic world-view?
- Who have been the key players in its story and how they have influenced the congregation's view of itself?
- What kind of an outcome is the congregational story expected to have?

Aspects of formal church doctrine are illuminated as discoveries are made about how people's telling of their church story reveals what they *actually* believe, and why. Hopewell found that the story-telling approach was needed after he initially tried to find out people's fundamental beliefs by direct questioning. He discovered that he was not speaking the language of people's *operational* faith, but of religious officialese, the language of the experts. As a result, people tended to give him the answers they thought he was wanting to hear.

> When I would ask respondents to describe some theological topic in their working picture of reality, I translated their ongoing portrayal of life into abstract categories…it was a game that I, their theologically trained interviewer, was by reputation better equipped to play than they. They usually answered questions about the nature of God and redemption in an embarrassed, defensive or ingratiating way…*In a local church, members participate in religion more readily than they explain it.*[15]

Precisely because people are *primarily* 'participating in religion', rather than 'explaining it', the relationship to organised doctrine comes out *slanted* or *at an angle* rather than direct. It is important to get an understanding of the factors that produce the particular slant on the doctrine which mere credal recitation does not reveal. Everyone recites the same creed, but this doesn't mean that everyone believes the same things. There is a layer-upon-layer building of a faith identity and the convictions that ground it, from the individual through the relational to the communal. In this way, groups of religious believers engage both with 'official' teachings *and* with their own stories. Through this process, congregations produce the 'redaction' of Christian teaching they can then recognise and own as theirs if it is reflected back to them. Hopewell's work is all about enabling congregations actually to undertake this voyage of discovery.

A similar approach is found in the work of Edward Farley who designs a process of 'ecclesial reflection': 'theological judgments are made from a historical faith-community which has a determinate corporate memory carried in a determinate network of symbols'.[16] The faith community in question works out its role and identity over time. It does this not simply by adopting a given authoritative package but through the evolving process of its own common life.

Doing Theology Together

It follows from this approach that the development of mission strategies for local churches entails much more than a crude use of bald statistical projections to generate future scenarios which can then be addressed by remedial techniques.

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15 Hopewell 1987: 68-9 (emphasis added).   **16** Farley 1982.

Rather, proper attentiveness to the context and to the local church story yields understanding of the 'local theology'. It is this which undergirds and interprets the contextual understanding of mission. As Schreiter writes, 'only through trying to catch the sense of a culture holistically and with all its complexity will we be in the position to develop a truly responsive local theology'.[17]

Approaches to culture must address three keys issues:

- *Holism*: How does the culture hang together, across all its manifestations – how may it be seen whole? (hence, for example, folk religiosity cannot be excluded),
- *Identity*: What are the forces shaping identity, that which makes 'us' who we are?
- *Social change:* How does the culture cope with change?

In Schreiter's words, 'these three are of key importance to local theology because of the very tasks that local theology has most often to undertake in its service to the local community: integration, maintenance of stability, and transformation'.[18]

Local theology also requires both 'inner' descriptions (the narratives recounted by people within the cultural setting) and 'outer' descriptions (offered by the observer from outside by way of case study methods):

> Inner descriptions provide the sign systems that make up the identity of a people; outer descriptions help with social change and with linkage to the larger reality of the Christian church. Inner descriptions help a community to find its authentic voice. Outer descriptions help it to deal with change and with cross-cultural communications. Speaker-oriented descriptions help it to preserve the integrity of its traditions; hearer-oriented descriptions are necessary to ensure continued *intelligibility* and liveliness of those traditions.[19]

In anthropological language, here is a justification for missional thinking that draws on both the riches of contextually rooted local church experience and the insights and challenges of the 'outsider' perspective. To put it more plainly and concretely, the vision for mission doesn't just come from the vicar who comes in, nor is it held only by the people who have always been there, but it emerges in the interplay between them. Too often shipwreck occurs when the two are simply allowed to collide.

What kind of educational practices, tailored to the needs, aptitudes and cultural styles of local church communities, could help to achieve all this? Nicholas Healy describes an approach he terms 'ecclesiological ethnography', which means, simply, 'writing the church story'.[20] It is about church communities learning theology, in the broadest sense, by telling their story and identifying their culture.

Healy borrows the term *theodrama* from von Balthasar to develop an approach in which every individual and communal Christian story is like a part of an ongoing, unfolding play, with God in the role of Director. When groups of Christians are helped to write up their own and their church's part in the theodrama, learning takes place in a way far removed from the one-way traffic of traditional teaching methods. Within a 'theodramatic horizon', as Healy puts it, 'we receive truth by two means…by the activity of the Spirit, and through our active engagement with views different from

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17 Schreiter 1985: 28.
18 Schreiter 1985: 45.

19 Schreiter 1985: 61.
20 Healy 2000.

our own'. Thus the church cannot simply be thought of as 'the repository of truth', where 'proclamation is limited to instruction, as though there were no real need to move beyond simple telling to engagement and debate'.[21]

In this process the church community comes to an explicit appropriation of truths about its core beliefs, values and cultural styles which have been arrived at over time in a less conscious fashion. Healy quotes Alasdair MacIntyre to develop this point:

> Over the course of its history…the community develops sets of practices and institutions, rules and dispositions, by which its members live out their commitments. That is, they develop…a concrete identity. This identity provides the kind of normal everydayness, the taken-for-granted set of ways of thinking and acting that those who are new to the tradition must learn in order to be competent members of its community.[22]

The educative process is designed to make the implicit explicit, and so open the way to critical reflectiveness about it. The moment when 'the penny drops' or 'the light dawns' is when people can say, 'so *that's* what's going on…that's why we do that…that's what that bit of our church life means…that's why this works, and that doesn't…', and then begin to draw conclusions from this learning.

Healy coins the interesting term 'ecclesial bricolage' to describe this relationship over time of the local church to its traditions: 'The practices and institutions, and the beliefs and valuations that together constitute the church's present identity are the product of past ecclesial bricolage'.[23] The idea of *bricolage* suggests the assembling of assorted bits and pieces in a creative way.

Churches by this process construct their own local redaction or edition of Christian faith, culture and *praxis*. This redaction will take its place within the spectrum of catholic Christianity in virtue of a whole series of family resemblances. What the local church is, and does, and believes, will be recognisable as authentically Christian, but not identical in every particular with each and every other church. The *weighting* given to different elements in the tradition will vary, as to some extent will what is judged to be essential and what is viewed as peripheral. For example, some churches have a central place in their faith identity for (say) the transcendent holiness of God. Others form their identity more distinctively around the intimate closeness of the Holy Spirit, or the Kingdom proclamation of Jesus. As Healy explains:

> As Christians come together over the years they experiment with different ways of thinking and acting. They sift through the resources of the various cultures and subcultures in which their members live, rejecting certain possibilities, modifying, privileging or down-playing others so as to make them serve the tasks of witness and discipleship. They do something similar with the various practices and beliefs of Christianity too, though with considerably less freedom if they are to remain a truly Christian community. Building up a parish's cultural configuration – we could call it the congregation's 'character' – is usually accomplished without much explicit reflection; indeed, such congregational decisions are often made implicitly, by something like a communal taste.[24]

In the practice of 'ecclesiological ethnography' the congregation identifies this culture and learns from it, with consequences for ministry and mission.

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21 Healy 2000: 105, 108.　　　　　　　**23** Healy 2000: 110.
22 Healy 2000: 118.　　　　　　　　　**24** Healy 2000: 181.

Congregational Studies: A Resource and a Critique

Having located the discipline of congregational studies in its emergent context within sociology, anthropology and practical theology and having given some attention to the methods by which it might be done in a local church environment, we now offer three examples from the literature of research projects that illustrate the relevance of this approach to mission strategy.

Traditional South Wales

Paul Chambers studied the life of a congregation in an economically depressed setting in South Wales between 1980 and 1993.[25] Against a background of protracted social and congregational decline, the diocese adopted a mission strategy of appointing keen, younger evangelical clergy to the parish. This was in a bid to effect a radical shift from maintenance to mission in a context where, Chambers comments, 'the values and attitudes of the overwhelming majority of the congregation are both socially and theologically conservative'.[26] The methods used were familiar enough: modernising styles of worship, downplaying traditional 'folk-religious' observances, emphasising 'fellowship', Bible Study and the inner life of the congregation, preaching the need for 'commitment', and seeking to direct financial priorities away from spending on the upkeep of buildings. Chambers reports that early in the period there were signs of numerical growth. This accelerated initially as 'word got out on the evangelical grapevine'[27] and the congregation gained from the 'transfer in' of some disaffected evangelicals from other churches. Over time, however, growth was not sustained, as the numbers of incomers were cancelled out by the departure of many original indigenous members of the congregation. Chambers observes that there was a failure to pay attention to crucial features of the 'local theology' which were too easily written off as mere reactionary traditionalism:

> The evangelical emphasis on individualism failed to resonate with a long-standing communitarian congregational identity…there was little or no attempt to evangelize the local population, despite the presence of a complex cross-cutting net of localized social relations, ideally suited for this purpose…Furthermore, [the congregation] felt that the clergy and their supporters viewed them as 'second-class' Christians…the distance between the clergy and their supporters and the remaining congregation was allowed to grow. As far as local people were concerned, parish 'renewal'…appeared to be synonymous with running down the parish and not building it up.[28]

In due course the experiment was abandoned and a new incumbent appointed who set about, in his words, 'giving confidence back to the people'. Chambers comments that the situation had been one in which, as Martyn Percy has noted, 'a commitment to orthodoxy was seen as more important than a commitment to unity', quite contrary to the local theological perception. But 'this strong sense of identity, solidaristic but inclusive and quintessentially Anglican, held the congregation together during a difficult period and contributed to the subsequent return of local people to the congregation'.[29]

25 Chambers 2004.
26 Chambers 2004: 63.
27 Chambers 2004: 64.

28 Chambers 2004: 67.
29 Chambers 2004: 67.

'Emerging Church'

Swinton and Mowat[30] describe the project undertaken by one of their students, identifying the central theological questions governing the life of an 'emerging church' with the pseudonym 'Jacobsfield Vineyard'.[31] Using participant observation and extensive interviews, the researcher identified four dominant themes for the church which saw itself as re-educating people, within a pre-existing evangelical framework, into 'new ways of being church' for the purpose of missional engagement with contemporary culture. The four themes were (1) safety through honesty and openness (in a context experienced as risky in its embrace of change), (2) experimentation, (3) maturity, and (4) the changing relationship to evangelicalism.[32] The key finding was that the first three themes stood 'at an angle' to the fourth. The changing relationship to evangelicalism persistently interrogated the others: how much honesty and openness, experimentation and advance in Christian maturity were compatible with received understandings of the underlying tradition? From this insight, the researcher was able to formulate a 'central theological question':

> What are our communally accepted and critically held criteria for reconstruction which result in relevance to ourselves and to those to whom we are trying credibly to represent the Christian faith?[33]

The researcher then identified three areas of theological reflection for further exploration by the church community in pursuit of its mission of reconstruction. First, they would need to face the implications of permitting doubts and questions in matters of faith, especially as the church gained new members from a non-religious background. Thus Jacobsfield Vineyarders took 'a more relaxed view of propositional truth; for them, 'believing in dogmatic religious truth was not a necessary prerequisite for belonging to their church, though it did prompt confusion as to what it meant to be a Christian'.[34] Second, in their reconstruction of evangelism they drew a circle to *include* people rather than marking clear boundaries to define who was 'in' and who was 'out'. They were therefore challenged as to their understanding of the Kingdom of God. This 'prompted the question of how to be *intentionally evangelistic* without trespassing on the Other's right to be Other'.[35] Thirdly, they were engaged in an ongoing struggle to redefine Christian maturity. Within a postmodern environment, they were increasingly convinced that this entailed such characteristics as openness, individual choice, 'messy spirituality' and personal journey. They therefore needed to wrestle with how these values could be reconciled with traditional instruments of spiritual growth such as Bible study, congregational worship and the disciplines of prayer.[36]

An ethnically mixed urban congregation

Frances Ward has studied issues of power within an ethnically mixed inner-city congregation.[37] Her aim was 'to explore the ways in which a church understood its corporate identity', in the light of St Paul's assertion that in Christ 'there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female' (Gal. 3:28). Ward discovered a wide diversity of cultural expectations and evaluations of the life of the church, anchored

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30 Swinton and Mowatt 2006: 133-155.
31 For a detailed definition of 'emerging churches' see Gibbs and Bolger 2006.
32 Swinton and Mowatt 2006: 147.
33 Swinton and Mowatt 2006: 149.
34 Swinton and Mowatt 2006: 153.
35 Swinton and Mowatt 2006: 154..
36 Swinton and Mowatt 2006: 155.
37 Ward in Cameron et al. 2005: 221-233.

in underlying if not always explicitly expressed theological convictions. For example, some black (Afro-Caribbean) members of the congregation felt that there was little or no 'real' preaching, praise or worship in the church services, noting that, in Barbados, 'when you go to church… you got to hear a [real] sermon: you got people crying. You never get that here.'[38] These words from one black respondent contain an implicit theology to be unpacked. A white member of the church was less interested in sermons: 'Christianity for me, or rather worship for me, has become an icon, it's symbolic…it's a bit of God coming to me through the liturgy'[39] .

Ward examines the 'dominant discourses' of the church (drawing on the work of Michel Foucault as a tool of analysis) and finds that these were those of the white members. Their preferences dictated the style of worship and they 'powerfully regulated members into a sense of corporate identity'[40] in which those whose theological stances were not reflected in the worship nevertheless remained. This observation leads Ward to posit the notion of a 'hybrid' body of Christ:

> I came to the conclusion that it is discomfort and insecurity that become the clear signs of the presence of this body of Christ, for they indicate restlessness and movement, the position of not-having-arrived-yet, a desire for something different. Such an understanding of the body of Christ as a lively, hybrid body becomes a theological motif with transformative power.[41]

Building on her research findings, Ward goes on to design a process of 'corporate reflection' that could be undertaken by a group within the church to help them understand the theological dynamics driving their life and shaping their mission. The fundamental question, – 'what does it mean to call the local church "the body of Christ"?' – would be addressed with careful facilitation, drawing on resources and models used by Ward in her research. People would explore elements of the local understanding of this theological principle through questions, for example: 'What helps the congregation stick together? Who do you think is powerful? Who is not? What practices could be identified that shape the corporate identity? Who has most say in how these practices work? What sort of body is it that we "embody"?'[42] From all this, Ward suggests that the church might then come to explore possible changes in its liturgy, structures and fellowship life in order to reflect more closely the reality of the body it aspires to become. This in turn will influence the shape of its mission locally.

Conclusion

In his recent book *Rebuilding Jerusalem: The Church's hold on hearts and minds* Bishop Stephen Platten is sharply critical of the work of John Milbank and Stanley Hauerwas. He characterizes them as each, in a different way, representing a strategy of retrenchment for the contemporary churches.[43] Each of them in their own way places an emphasis on the central importance of the Christian *congregation* as a distinctive intentional community of practice, defining its identity often uncompromisingly over against the surrounding culture. Rejecting this stance, Platten declares himself to be on the side of a strategy of religious renewal through a sustained exercise in cultural engagement. This would put people back in touch with the roots of faith already

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38 Cameron et al. 2005: 224.
39 Cameron et al. 2005: 225.
40 Cameron et al. 2005: 227.

41 Cameron et al. 2005: 230.
42 Cameron et al. 2005: 232.
43 Platten 2007: 114-19.

embedded in their cultural heritage.[44] He would seek to 'name afresh' the Christian identities within culture that have become overlain with a kind of secular veneer and are often only dimly recognised by people in the form of a vague and unfocused sense of the spiritual. One can perhaps detect in Platten's stance something of that classic Anglican distaste for anything that smacks of 'congregationalism' and even nostalgia for a Christendom model of the relationship between 'Church' and 'people'. The central problem with his position can, however, be located in the question about congregations, their nature and purpose.

Those who place their hopes for the future of Christianity in Britain in the renewal of some form of culturally transposed faith that taps into people's so-called natural religious instincts need to remember that ultimately the torch of the gospel is carried by the many and diverse assemblies of the faithful who profess it and seek to live by it. To put it another way, a diffuse cultural presence of Christian faith is only ever parasitic upon the intentional congregational communities that continue to 'name' that faith and make it explicit. The ways in which this is done will always include inhabiting the gospel narrative through faithful practice, and enfleshing its meaning for the world through steadfast discipleship of Jesus. For this reason there can be no renewal without critical attentiveness to the lives of those communities that name their faith in this way.

The *Mission Shaped Church* and *Fresh Expressions* movements know this but they pay too little attention to it in their enthusiasm for the generation of innovative *shapes* of church life. They make insufficient effort to understand the patterns of believing, the dispositions, motivations and personal redactions of gospel and discipleship which are held by the *people* who will, after all, breathe life into those innovative shapes and make them into vehicles of mission.

According to recent statistics there are still more than two and a half million people in the churches on an average Sunday. The disciplines of congregational studies pay them the respect of being taken to be *interesting* and worthy of detailed exploration. This is of crucial importance in the critical task of shaping Christian discipleship, ministry and mission for tomorrow.

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44 For example, Platten 2007: 160-67.

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