

One New Book for the Preacher

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AMERICAN CONGREGATIONS, VOLUME 1: PORTRAITS OF TWELVE CONGREGATIONS, 712 pages.

AMERICAN CONGREGATIONS, VOLUME 2: NEW PERSPECTIVES IN THE STUDY OF CONGREGATIONS, 292 pages.

Edited by James P. Wind and James W. Lewis, University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Few university press published books find their way into a preacher's library these days. Few such books merit that placement, given their contents or concerns. These two volumes constitute a strong exception to this general rule.

Local congregational history is often thought to be the lowest form of church history. It is also frequently the duller reading. The first volume of *American Congregations*, a two-part series produced by the Congregational History Project, provides ample evidence that local religious history need neither be unimaginative, nor dull. Between the covers of this 712-page book lies some of the the most compelling recent writing about American church life. Pastors wanting to enliven the work of a committee charged with writing a diamond jubilee history will be well served by commending a couple of the twelve portraits of congregations in this book to their would-be historians. Harry Stout and Catherine Brekus, for example, spark the imagination with the unlikely device of statistical analysis to make the 350-year journey of Center Church in New Haven, Connecticut, come alive. Raymond Williams teaches us about Hinduism in the gentlest and most engaging way possible, by introducing us to the Swaminarayan Hindu Temple in Glen Ellyn, Illinois. Randall Balmer and Jesse Todd, Jr., make readers palpably aware of Costa Mesa, California's Calvary Chapel and its endless round of religious consumer activities by exhaustively listing a single week's offerings. The congregations here portrayed span racial, geographical, and religious lines, but all make good reading, both for aspiring chroniclers and for those who like to visit congregations with first-rate guides without having to leave their armchairs.

The second volume of *American Congregations* will be of interest to all ministers, for here the focus is on interpreting the phenomena of the religious congregation. The round of activities at the typical congregations is so intense that few religious leaders have occasion to pause and consider what a remarkable institution it is in which they work. What other institution in American life combines voluntary action, educated leadership, transcendent values, property ownership, community service, rites of passage, and acts of compassion—and does so every week? In a time when the rest of the world is told to be fascinated by America's democratic capitalism, a far more stunning institution—the religious congregation—is just beneath our noses and oftentimes beneath our notice too. Yet these 300,000 or more congregations may account for more of what forms and sustains the character of American life than those large-scale phenomena like the market and the media that garner so much comment. This volume contains eight essays that challenge pastors and others to rethink the context of their service in fresh and exciting ways.

The book constitutes the best introduction to congregational studies I know and an advance on the state of the art. Where many of the practitioners of congregational studies have been sociologists, this volume includes a strong historical dimension. Essays by Brooks Holifield, Martin Marty, and Jay Dolan make it clear that congregations have indeed changed over time. For religious leaders, this means that there is a possibility for change. This possibility is both constructive and threatening from theological and institutional survival points of view. Ethicist Franklin Gamwell and theologian Langdon Gilkey take up these normative questions posed by the social fact of congregational life. Dorothy Bass pays close attention to the practices of congregations for clues to their theological identities and Don Browning proposes that congregations themselves serve as the primary site for doing critical practical theology. Robert Franklin's essay on the Black church's congregations, which he calls the safest place on earth, shows just how important these institutions have been in sustaining the spiritual, artistic, moral, educational, and social life of African-Americans. But it also raises the question for white readers whether their congregations have been as constructively comprehensive in their self-definition. Another dimension of American congregational life that has disturbing implications is Stephen Warner's fine analysis of the ways in which religious life from whatever ethnic or theological background gets expressed in the socially available and accepted model of the local congregation. This reduces both hierarchical polities such as Roman Catholicism and individualized expressions of religious observation like Buddhism to a *de facto* congregationalism. This accounts, in part, for our ability to accept religious viewpoints at considerable variance from our own, so long as they are expressed in a familiar, congregational form.

Both volumes of *American Congregations* will provide hours of enjoyable reading and a fountain of critical insights into one's own setting of ministry. Congregational studies have never been so well served or so interesting as in this effort.



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