

READING 3: DISCOVERING THE SOCIAL FORM OF THE CONGREGATION

by Rev. Dr Dean Drayton

Introduction

When we move from asking how to grow the church, to asking what does it mean to be the people of God, some very important matters come to the fore. It means we move from an internal look at the life of the church to looking at the church as the people of God in mission. The understanding of the mission field to which the church relates has changed. The world has moved from a series of industrial nations plus the Third World to one world, with all its divisions. Many have focused on looking at the various mission contexts within Australia.

What is a Congregation?

It should not be surprising that such a look at the life of the people of God should inevitably lead us to have a fresh look at that which we have taken for granted. That has meant that slowly the question surfaced which is so obvious but, in fact, one that I had never really addressed before, "What is a congregation?" Obviously a congregation is a congregation, but in fact it is not at all obvious what comprises a congregation. It turns us to the root of our understanding of the gospel.

We are a people called by God into being. The word church or ecclesia describes a group of people who are called to be one people, the Body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit, the vine, to name but a few of the Biblical images. These images affirm both the individual within the community and the priority of the community as well. You would not be surprised then to discover that a congregation is the Body of Christ in a particular place. Yes, that definition is complicated by all of our denominational background. Nevertheless, each congregation is just that, a congregation not an aggregation of individuals.

A Sea Change in Religious Allegiance

The results of the National Church Life Survey have indicated that there is a sea change in people's understanding of their religious allegiance. Those born since World War II have little allegiance to the denominational structure. All indications are that the effectiveness of the congregation they attend is all important. The sea change is the move from the individual relating to the institution, to the individual asking how any activities help them in their own spiritual pilgrimage. The democratic revolution has finally come to the religious area of people's life. This is part of the culture of the mission field which focuses on the individual searching for words and experiences of hope.

Thus from the perspective of those in society the expectation is that the Church will be a gathering of individuals rather than an extended family in which all are related. The definition of the congregation as the Body of Christ, or the Temple of the Holy Spirit, is an invitation for individuals to make discoveries about community. So, asking about the congregation is asking about the participation in group life of the people of God in a time of individualism.

Basis of Union

There are many ways that the congregation is described. It helps us to look at the definition of the congregation in the Basis of Union and the Constitution of the Uniting Church for there the understanding of the congregation is spelled out in some detail. It is fascinating to see that a congregation meets to perform four specific group functions. The order, in fact is dependent upon the perspective of an internal view of the church not necessarily the way in which it will be experienced by people in the community.

Nevertheless the four primary group functions are -

1. Services of worship.
2. Small group nurture – caring of people in the congregation and sponsoring care in the community.
3. Mission teams through which people are served in the name of Christ.
4. The meetings that the congregation has with other congregations so that each congregation plays its part in the Uniting Church in the various councils especially with regard to the presbytery. So the congregation meets in these four ways when it is a congregation. It does not necessarily mean that each person or individual in the congregation is involved in all four sorts of meetings but it does mean that the congregation itself owns that to be a congregation it needs these particular expressions of its corporate life.

Two consequences emerge. The first is this:

What do members of the church understand the church to be? And second:

What are the ways that a congregation organises itself so that these four expressions are integrated to the life of the congregation?

Perceptions of the Congregation

Members in our congregations have been dramatically affected by the core values of our society which are primarily individualistic when it comes to the matter of religious belief. Even more so with those born since World War II. The common way of speaking presumes that a congregation is actually equivalent to a service of worship. The terminology betrays an understanding of the spiritual that is divorced from the rest of ordinary life. We come apart from life to a service of worship in the building. If it is the service of worship that constitutes the congregation then for many it is the place rather than the community to which they belong that becomes primary.

Within the congregation there may be numbers of services of worship on a Sunday or other days of the week. These then in the minds of those who attend can easily be seen to be different congregations with no real relationship to nurture or service in the community. The Christian life is then limited to that of a spiritual worship experience.

That is why it is vital that we in fact understand the theological terminology of what it means to be the people of God and be quite explicit about the need for the people of God to be clear about what it is that constitutes the congregation in its various aspects and life. How then are the people of God to be organised so that they are actively involved in services of worship, in caring for and nurturing people and in serving Christ in the world as part of a world wide church.

Social Form of the Congregation

It is at this point that the critical nature of the mission field raises important opportunities for us. A new term that has come from the churches meeting in Europe after the unification of Germany is helpful. The meeting emphasised an awareness of the social form of the congregation. The congregation can take many different forms in very many different settings.

It is most helpful to discover that the congregation has three primary group expressions that may take different social forms in various contexts, depending upon the gifts of the people of God and their understanding of mission.

- (i) In many congregations the emphasis is upon the service of worship and the relational nurturing component and mission team component are only there informally.
- (ii) The primary focus could be on the nurture and care of a group of people within the community as an extension of a caring Christian core that will have worship times and may be concerned for specific mission questions in the community.
- (iii) The mission team caring for pre-school children in a new housing development may be a primary focus of the congregation with some of that group of people worshipping together and knowing great fellowship in the task.

All three are embryonic forms of the congregation and in all of them may be the beginning for a new congregation. So often the expression "house church" is used to describe a new neighbourhood congregation, but the term says too much, subsumes too many possibilities in one term and conjures up images of formal worship services in a restricted setting for those who have never had any experience of it.

It is clear from this description that the social form of the congregation will be dependent upon the priority planning of a congregation which seeks to develop any of these aspects of its group life, namely worship services, small groups or mission teams, or an embryonic congregation may take in all these possible courses of action and apply them in such a way as to utilise the gifts of the group and relate to the mission context of which they are part. In the second case, wisdom is needed to discern what is the best course of action

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