

*Studying Congregations*, edited by Nancy T. Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley and William McKinney

reviewed by [Robert E. Reber](#) in the [January 20, 1999](#) issue

*Edited by Nancy T. Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley and William McKinney, Studying Congregations: A New Handbook. (Abingdon, 256 pp.)*

More individuals belong to congregations than to any other voluntary association," the editors of this book declare. More than 350,000 of these local communities of faith dot America's religious landscape. The well-being of our society is surely dependent on their character and quality of life. Congregations are complex communities that nurture and challenge millions of people through worship, education, fellowship, pastoral care and outreach. They have enormous influence on their members and communities.

Nancy Ammerman, Jackson Carrol, Carl Dudley and William McKinney provide a new handbook for understanding these rich and diverse communities of faith. The book is not only a thorough revision and update of the earlier Handbook for Congregational Studies (1986), but an expanded volume that explores theology in the congregation, presents the congregation as an open system, and sees the congregation through a frame of culture and resources. These changes reflect more than two decades of serious scholarship by the Project Team for Congregational Studies. The new volume adds chapters by Nancy Eisland, Robert Schreiter, Scott Thumma and Stephen Warner.

The handbook is a valuable resource for religious professionals, laypeople, teachers or seminarians. It is highly readable and relevant for people in a variety of communities of faith--small, medium or large, or in urban, suburban or rural areas. The "new ways of seeing a congregation" to which the book invites us require effort and discipline. The different chapters approach congregations through theology, ecology, culture, process and structure, resources and leadership. The final chapter is concerned with various methods of study. Each author presents a particular frame, gives concrete examples and offers ways of both gathering and analyzing information. The book admonishes us to maintain an attitude of "playfulness in imagination, piety in action."

The authors see congregational studies as practical theology that serves two related purposes: "First, theology is important as you locate and deepen the identity of the congregation; second, theology can help your congregation to deal with change." Their primary goal is to explore and better grasp the faith that is being lived out in particular settings. Identifying the explicit and implicit theologies inherent in what congregations say and do in various aspects of their lives is a relevant way of doing theology.

When is the best time to study a congregation--when things are going well or when there is trouble? The answer is any time. However, the temptation is to do nothing when things seem to be going well or to ignore present or potential problems. Though the book offers no panaceas, it provides a wealth of helpful and constructive resources for seeking self-understanding and making informed decisions. In the words of the authors, "It is on the basis of such self-understanding that congregations can become the faithful communities their own highest ideals call them to be."