

*Congregations at the Crossroads*, by Ronald E. Vallet

reviewed by [David McCreath](#) in the [January 6, 1999](#) issue

By Ronald E. Vallet, *Congregations at the Crossroads: Remembering to Be Households of God*. (Eerdmans, 256 pp.)

Ronald Vallet thinks the term "households of amnesia" fits many present-day congregations, for they have forgotten the purposes given them by God. Their accommodation to "modernity" has led to membership losses, inadequate financial resources, spiritual malaise and a survival mentality. Vallet's solution is to reclaim the biblical understanding of *oikos*, or household. Relying on the work of such scholars as Walter Brueggemann, M. Douglas Meeks and Robert Wood Lynn, Vallet calls on the church to remember its source and to return to fulfilling God's purposes.

As he demonstrated in previous volumes of his Faith's Horizons series, Vallet has a gift for making theology understandable through parable and storytelling. A companion to *The Mainline Church's Funding Crisis*, this volume covers a wide spectrum of topics, including biblical and theological foundations, attitudes toward money, worship and spiritual life, and suggestions for congregational planning.

That congregations are households of God has been a central motif of stewardship theology for several decades. Based on an understanding of creation as a gift of God for which humans are to exercise care (Gen. 2:15), this theology argues that our stewardship role should be that of manager. Some of Jesus' parables suggest such a role. But the implied hierarchy of owner, servant, object has been under review recently, especially by environmental theologians. Humans are a part of creation, subject to many of the same principles and natural laws as other creatures, these theologians argue. Though we have a special place and responsibility within creation, the manager-object relation has been taken too far. A search is under way for alternative images.

One such alternative stresses the place of redemption in the household of God. The people living in the household are there because God has acted to bring them in. Stewardship becomes a vocation, for it involves our total economic life. Robert Wuthnow, Loren Mead, John Mulder and others are exploring these concepts. For

Vallet, remembering the resurrection of Christ is the beginning point for reclaiming our lost purpose, but his focus on the resurrection does not stimulate him to move beyond the traditional image of church as manager.

Mainline communions are struggling to understand what it means to live as households of God. Many have engaged in long conflicts over what leadership roles gays and lesbians can play in the church. Racial diversity remains an unachieved goal for most congregations. Many feel isolated, since younger members avoid institutional commitments, especially those beyond the parish. Are only congregations to be considered households of God? How are church communions connected as households? Vallet responds to such concerns by formulating a set of household characteristics and rules.

Vallet points out that approaches to stewardship swing between two poles--at one extreme, they are limited to campaigns to raise church budgets; at the other, they are so "holistic" that definitions dissolve. For Vallet, becoming a household of God requires a broadened idea of stewardship, one that includes scripture, worship and sacraments; participation in worldwide missions; service (diakonia) to one another and the world; and defining oneself as the community of faith (koinonia). His "rules for the household" focus on a concern for the poor, expressed through tithing, hospitality, sabbath observance, not charging interest, and leaving the gleanings. Vallet stays firmly in the traditions of the church; his challenge to the church to be faithful is timeless and profound.

But Vallet neglects one major issue: how are households of God to move into the future? There is a large body of data regarding the differences between older and younger generations, and much has been written about the difficulty of attracting young people to the church. Many of the young are immersed in the present, suspicious of the past and apprehensive about the future, and uncommitted to institutions. Many describe themselves as "spiritual, not religious," concerned with transcendent values but not with organized churches. They search for new forms of worship and often reject traditional ones. The church must find ways to make the traditional values of the household of God relevant to new generations.

Vallet's book can be a beginning point for the renewal of congregational life. As we search for new ways to live as the household of God, it can help us build on firm foundations.