

CSCH Presidential Address 2005

Consulting the Amateurs: What Academic Church Historians can Learn from Congregational Historians

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I must begin with a word of thanks to the Canadian Society of Church History for the honour of being the Society's President for the last year. I am humbled by your willingness to think outside the box and name as your president someone who is not a member of the academy, but is rather a parish pastor. In this address I want bring together my role as a parish pastor (teaching elder) and the study of church history. I admit that during this address the line between historian and preacher may become blurred; I hope you will forgive my inability to keep the two domains separate.

Over a decade ago Richard Mouw, the president of Fuller Theological Seminary, wrote a slim volume entitled *Consulting the Faithful: What Christian Intellectuals Can Learn from Popular Religion*.¹ Mouw posited that among the people in the pews a remarkably deep and sophisticated theology is at work, a theology that the scholarly community needs not only to be aware of, but one from which it can also learn. I want to raise a parallel challenge, namely that the amateur congregational historians who write and publish congregational histories have things to teach the academic historical community. Before going further I need to do some confessing. A number of years ago I reviewed two congregational histories written by amateurs for one of the publications of The Presbyterian Church

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in Canada. A friend of mine, a lay person with a background in geology, had read the reviews and commented over coffee, “You really didn’t like those two books, did you?” I admitted I didn’t. My academic training found the lists of names tedious, the lack of connection to larger denominational events and national events frustrating, and the use of clergy’s tenures as an organizing principle in the histories maddening. Despite those concerns, over the last ten years I have had a gradual conversion. In telling the stories of local congregations, these histories call the academic church historical community in Canada to confront an important reality. There are about 30,000 congregations of the various Christian denominations in Canada of which approximately 20,000 are Protestant. Thirty thousand organizations dedicated to worship, religious education, mission, stewardship, and fellowship – 30,000 groups of people (some as small as five or six, others with over 1,000 attendees) who meet together regularly (usually weekly) to engage one another and God. Such engagement forms people – people who are members of the broader community who make economic, social, and political decisions. Regular face-to-face contact, a hallmark of congregational life, creates an emotional connection that goes beyond shared interests or a commitment to a common cause. Congregations are complex organizations in which, as R. Stephen Warner writes, “amateurs spend disproportionate time on activities that are hard to define.”² These collections of amateurs are the local face of the church. It is congregations that engage in the life of the wider community. No matter what the influence of the denomination, it is not the denomination that exists in the local community; rather, it is the congregation that has that responsibility and privilege. At times the implied argument is that all congregations are basically the same, or at least congregations of the same size function in very similar ways; therefore, to have studied one congregation is to have studied many congregations. To have told the tale of one congregation is to have told the tale of many similar congregations. This, in fact, is not true. While there are parallels in the histories of various congregations, each congregation has found unique ways to respond to its calling as the people of God in a particular time and place. If the case can be made for Canadian distinctiveness on the political front, the same can be made on the church front. If the case can be made for Maritime exceptionalism in economic development, the same can be said for religious life in the Maritimes. If the case can be made for differences between townships on cultural grounds, the same can be said of the

congregations in those townships. All of this is to say that Canada's congregations deserve far more attention than they have received to date.

American academic historians of religion have a renewed interest in studying congregations,³ but there has been little work done on Canadian congregations by professional historians. Scanning the various on-line references reveals a growing collection of work on the architectural history of church buildings, while simultaneously revealing the paucity of material on the life of the communities that gather in those buildings to worship, pray, learn, and share fellowship. A few academic historians, such as John Moir and Geoff Johnston, upon retiring from teaching, have taken up writing congregational histories, but it is a vast collection of amateurs (using the word in its original meaning – “lovers”) who have recorded the history of local congregations. To their work we now turn.

Purpose and Method in the Writing of Congregational Histories

Congregations become interested in having a history written as they approach a significant chronological milestone. In Ontario, for example, a plethora of congregational histories appeared in the 1940s as congregations reached their centennial year, and many of these same congregations produced histories in the 1990's to mark their sesquicentennials. Some congregations used the turn of the millennium as the catalyst to record their congregational story.

Congregational histories are often written with an agenda. Sometimes the goal is to remember the past along with the sacrifice and commitment of those who have gone before. The writing team from Madoc, Ontario expressed their hope, “If *Pilgrimage of Faith* deepens your awareness of the Christian experience of preceding generations, then our purpose in writing this book has been fulfilled.”⁴ In these histories the past is a vocal participant in congregational life. The past speaks to the present. As Sandra Arlein, a church historian at Knox Church, Listowel, Ontario notes, “I am aware of the importance of the roots which our predecessors nourished and made strong.”⁵ These roots impact the present, becoming points of reference for any discussion about the church and its purpose. For other writers, the past challenges the future. Jack Hayter of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Stratford made this point clearly: “we hope that this record of the past will give future members a challenge to carry on St. Andrew's noble tradition.”⁶ Thus any move into the future will necessitate a conversation about the past, and the nature of the “noble

tradition” that is to be carried on. The past, the present and the future can not be neatly separated from one another. Janet Muirhead reasons this way in her history of Knox Church, Agincourt:

As we celebrate our sesquicentennial let us remember those who have preceded us in this place. Let us be thankful for those who are today carrying on the Presbyterian tradition. But let us also look to the future with a determination that the Presbyterian Church will continue and the gospel of Christ will be proclaimed.⁷

Congregational histories are written with a purpose, and their authors express those purposes clearly. Some, in telling the story of their congregation, express their purpose in clear theological language. The not-so-subtle subtitle of the history of Essa Road Church in Barrie reveals a great deal: “The dealings of God with the people of Allandeale/Essa Road Presbyterian Church, Barrie, Ontario, and their responses to Him.”⁸ Similarly, a clear theological statement of purpose is made by the History Book Committee from First Church, Chatham, who note that “Our purpose in compiling the material for this congregational record is, above all else, to acknowledge that all history is HIS-STORY, the story of God, revealed in Christ, and ever calling to men, women and youth to be His servants and His witnesses.”⁹ While the reference to history as “His-story” may seem trite, in the hands of congregational historians it carries power and significance. It gives a deeper meaning to the actions recorded, for they fit into a larger story the story of God’s redemptive work in the world. Many congregational historians, not shy about their faith, write with a clear purpose in mind.

Researching and writing congregational histories tends to be a group process since this reflects the corporate nature of congregational life. Much historical research focuses on the actions and reactions of individuals or explores the thought and writing of a single individual. But congregations do not function that way. While there may be key leaders within a given congregation, the decisions and direction of congregational life are corporately set and followed. Even in selecting the writing process, congregations highlight the corporate nature of their life.

There are three group approaches in the writing of congregational histories. The first is the committee research approach.¹⁰ Committee members do research on the various areas of congregational life, bringing their findings to committee meetings and together deciding what prominence to give each item. Then a single hand writes the entire book using

the outline derived from the committee's work. The resulting book often has a central theme, since the writer can shape the telling of the history. It is worth noting that the single hand rarely identifies itself as the author of the history, but rather as its editor or compiler.

The second method divides the congregation's life into sections (which often become chapters) and individual committee members are assigned to write various sections of the book. These sections are then placed together to form a single historical narrative. If little editorial work has been done to bring about a consistent writing style, this can produce a stylistically choppy book since as many as ten different authors may have been involved. The strength of this approach is the way in which it reveals the diverse, patchwork-quilt nature of even the smallest congregation.

The third method is "the witness of the saints."¹¹ With this approach the author uses the work of previous congregational historians, simply adding to what has gone before, sometimes making small changes or adding editorial comments on the previously published and now re-published material. This provides the reader with layers of history, which can be compared and contrasted, giving insight into how the meaning of past events has changed.

Many of the writing teams, whatever approach they use, are changed by their experience of researching and writing their congregational history. The History Committee at Cooke's Presbyterian Church, Chilliwack, put it this way:

The whole process has been one of fascinating discovery of the rich heritage of a congregation of God's people, and a far deeper appreciation has been gained for the faith, commitment and sacrifice made by earlier generations on behalf of their church. Being able to collect and share this story with all the congregation has been a privilege.¹²

The deep appreciation for the past and a genuine humility about the present is often reflected in the work of the congregational history committees. The communal nature of the church is reflected not just in the respect and care shared by members of the writing group, but also across time as past congregants (even if long-dead) are shown respect and honour.

Place

The material covered in congregational histories can be defined around three axes – place, people, and the practice of the faith – creating a full-orbed view of the church. Place is a multi-faceted reality for congregational historians who are conscious of their place in time, their place in the community physically and socially, and their place spiritually. This latter reality is a powerful undercurrent writers have trouble expressing but sense is important. It helps them to appreciate the motivation that caused the decorators of Knox Church’s sanctuary in Mitchell in the 1930s to paint “This is the House of God, this is the Gate of Heaven” above the organ. The experience of meeting God in the place called “church,” is summed up simply by an unnamed parishioner from Metropolitan United Church, London who said, “This is where I found Christ.”¹³

Most congregational histories spend a great deal of time telling the early history of the congregation, locating the congregation’s origins. William Sherwood Fox uses eleven pages of his eighty-five page history recording events prior to the arrival of the first minister at Talbot Street Baptist Church, London. In the history of Grantham United Church, the focus on the early history is overwhelming; fully one-third of the text tells the history of the churches amalgamated in 1879 to form the congregation.¹⁴ Rudy Platiel and Helen Goggin take fifty-two pages telling the story of the first thirty years of Knox Presbyterian Church in Oakville, and eighty-seven relating the next one hundred and twenty years.¹⁵

Why the extended focus on the early years of a congregation? In his history of Talbot St. Church William Sherwood Fox wrote:

The first task of anyone who undertakes to write the history of any local institution is to ascertain its beginning and then to set them forth clearly. The vital importance of the narrative that results lies in the fact that, generally, in the origin and early stages of an institution one may plainly see the reason for the distinctive character of its later history.¹⁶

This is an important insight with which any historian would agree for the past shapes the present in significant ways. Such awareness, however, does not completely explain the extraordinary interest in a congregation’s early years. The deeper truth is that the authors implicitly understand that the Church, not just universal but also local, is called into

being by the Holy Spirit. Exploring the early history of the local congregation gives writers and readers a glimpse of the work of the Holy Spirit, that most illusive member of the Trinity. The early history of the congregation is most clearly seen as having been formed by God out of nothing. It is to this theological truth that the telling of the early history of congregations point time and again.

These early stories are often told with wonder and awe. Wonder and awe not only at the drawing together of the congregation, but also at the conditions under which congregational members lived and worked at that time. In the strange world of the past, people worshipped God, celebrated the saving act of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, and exercised the Spirit's gifts in their communities. While the past is foreign terrain, these congregational histories remind readers that the present worship life of the congregation, no matter how different it seems, is in continuity with the worship of the past. At times this view of past worship practices feels nostalgic. More often there is a clear-eyed recognition that the actual practices of the past can not be transported unchanged into the future, but their deep meaning and purpose remains constant.

Place is not just spiritual, but also physical. Worship is an embodied activity; the God who is to be worshipped in spirit and in truth is also the God who became incarnate in flesh and blood. The concrete reality of congregational life is evident in the titles of the congregational histories such as *This Place of Worship; Pillars, Pulpits and Pews;* and *Gargoyles and Gentlemen*.¹⁷ Sometimes titles carry double meanings, blending physical and spiritual place as in *Building in Faith* and *Beyond the Builder's Plan*.¹⁸ Congregations become identified with a particular building located on a particular piece of property. Members speak of going to church, not as going to worship or going to be with the people of God, but rather going to a building. The building is clearly understood to be like no other building that the people of the congregation frequent. This building, this place is holy ground. Even for congregations with unadorned sanctuaries and for authors of low church persuasion, there remains a sense that there is something sacred about the building – a sacredness beyond the architectural lay out, and the symbolism of the stained glass windows and other artwork. In writing about the plainest of sanctuaries, authors express the belief that this place, geographical as it is, is where people come to meet God. The conflicts which arise concerning changes to the church building, are not therefore conflicts about bricks and mortar, they are

conflicts about the sacred meaning of the space and how the changes will change the experience of meeting with God.¹⁹

Congregations expend an extraordinary amount of energy and resources on their buildings, and the work involved in raising the funds necessary to maintain and enhance the place of worship is often a dominant part of congregational histories. When the church building is understood as holy ground, the work of raising funds for its maintenance is not mere fund-raising, it is holy work. To such work the Levites were called in the Old Testament and to similar work the many people who organize and participate in congregational fund-raisers and work bees are also called. Money becomes a holy object for its end use is holy. Sustaining the financial operation of the local congregation is a sacred task.

A third aspect of place impacting congregations' histories are the communities in which they are located. How congregations understand this sense of place affects the way ministry is lived out. Metropolitan United Church in London entitled its history, *On this corner*.²⁰ This choice of title is overlaid with history. The building burned in the late nineteenth century and, within two days of seeing their church building destroyed, the leadership had decided to rebuild on the same corner in downtown London, even though there were other viable options open to them. In putting together the history of Ratho Presbyterian Church, the committee recognized there was no way to separate the history of the church from the history of the community.²¹ The two flowed into one another so seamlessly the reader is at times uncertain which, church or community, is the focus. Congregational life is lived out in a particular location, the connections and the impacts go both ways. The congregation grows out of a location, and the soil in which it is planted affects its development. At the same time, the congregation will, hopefully, impact the community, bringing about the transformation of the community out of which it grows.

Appreciating this multi-dimensional nature of place can be a helpful matrix through which to approach the question of congregational life. The ways in which a spiritual and physical place forms people of faith, and the interplay between geographical location and the life of the congregation in that geographical location are both worthy of further study.²²

People

There is a children's finger game that says, "Here is the church and here is the steeple, open the doors and see all the people." If congrega-

tional histories are about place, they are also about people – ordained and lay, young and old, well-known and obscure.

Many congregational histories give significant space to their ministers. Often these histories use ministers' tenures as a way of organizing the material; they tell us what happened when Rev. Smith was there, and follow that with a chapter recording the events of Rev. Park's ministry, and so on.²³ There are significant challenges inherent in this approach. It substantially downplays any sense of the congregation having a culture and purpose independent of the ministers who serve it. By focusing on clergy, it becomes easy for the congregation's history to be an account of the community of faith adjusting course this way and that by the differing interests of successive ministers. Congregations, in fact, are far less malleable than some congregational historians indicate. In the history of Presbyterian worship in Perth, Ontario, J.R. Ernest Miller, the compiler, breaks the story up into sections using the length of ministry of each successive minister.²⁴ Each section opens with a brief paragraph outlining the arrival and departure of each minister. The rest of the section makes virtually no mention of the minister, giving the impression that the congregation had a life that the minister was invited to join, but was little changed by his or her action or inaction. While Miller's approach may leave the reader wanting more, it does highlight the transient nature of the clergy in the face of 175 years of congregational history.

Two things stand out in the descriptions of clergy in virtually every congregational history – where they came from and where they went following their time in a given congregation. The congregation sees itself being imprinted on the life of the minister. The history of Knox Church in Listowel, Ontario, proudly notes that the Rev. A. Gordon Macpherson went from Listowel to Toronto to serve "faithfully his city charge (of Riverdale Church, Toronto) for twenty-seven years."²⁵ This vignette reveals how congregations influence clergy. A great deal of work has been done exploring how theological colleges and pre-theology courses have functioned in the formation of Canadian clergy. But an equally important formative role is played by the congregations a minister serves, particularly those early in a minister's career. There needs to be far greater attention paid to the significant role that congregations play in the development of clergy.

In congregational histories clergy are evaluated on their personality, their ability to provide pastoral care, and their administrative and leadership skills in initiating new projects. The Rev. Bruce Miles was

lauded for “His Christian compassion and understanding enabled him to be a solace to those whose loss was so great.”²⁶ The Rev. Dr. Charles H. MacDonald was described as “a friendly warm hearted and sincere Christian minister . . . willing and able to walk and talk with his people.”²⁷ On the other hand, the Rev. W.R. Bell is noted for having “guided the congregation towards the erection of a new sanctuary.”²⁸ In contrast to these interests, there is little recorded about preaching or worship leading, especially when the history was written primarily by lay people.

Why is so little attention is paid to worship leading and preaching, tasks that dominate clergy thinking and time? While pastoral care and administration/leadership play have a prominent place in congregational histories, these are tasks that many clergy downplay. Congregational histories are usually written by people on the inside of the congregation. They are well-known or they would not have been chosen to serve on the history committee of their church. They are most likely people for whom attending church is a habit and the preaching and worship are so much part of their lives they have become routine. Only anniversary services or those commemorating other significant events are considered worthy of note (just as banquets and dinner parties are). On the other hand, pastoral care is most evident at moments of crisis, when all of life is heightened and support is especially noticed. Further, since congregational life is primarily relational or expressive, it is difficult to record; therefore moments when things happen – when programs or buildings are launched – are unusual and gain notice. The functional components of congregational life can be told much more easily than the relational components. Constructing a building is much more understandable than discipling people in the faith.

While clergy play a prominent role in any congregation’s telling of its story, conflicts or difficulties involving clergy do not get much coverage. Congregations avoid difficult stories, like the suicide of ministers²⁹ or internal conflicts when the protagonists are still alive and present in the congregation. It would be easy to accuse congregations that do this of painting a false picture or of writing boring history, without the friction and conflict which are the drama academic historians relish. However, in portraying a relatively peaceful picture of congregational life, the writers remind readers that many people within congregations are largely unaware of its conflicts. Maintaining solid relationships is more important than detailing the opposing sides in a conflict. The quarrels, which are the flash points of interest in stories and movies, are not of interest to the congregational historian who knows a deeper truth: the

conflicts are but points on a time-line covering often more than a century. The storms of the past were weathered, so there is no need to recount the storm. They also know every story has another side, and any attempt to tell the story will create yet another round of revisionist congregational history.

Clergy are not the only people whose names appear in congregational histories. Many other names are scattered throughout the narrative: men and women, committee members, Sunday school teachers, elders, organists, choristers, leaders of the Mission Band, Boy's Brigade, or Canadian Girls in Training. These are names that readers outside the congregation don't know, names that are often unidentified in any way, names that many within the congregation only barely recognize. What is the point? Clearly for congregations their story is not just history, it is a memorial. It is the pile of stones to which they and their children and grand-children can come and ask, what do these stones mean? The point is not that readers know everyone on those lists; the point is that readers know who one or two of those people are, and are able to say, "I knew them, I remember them." Suddenly the life of the church is not just about here and now, it is filled with a great company of witnesses who watch and cheer on the present congregation. The names say that ordinary people met here to worship the Triune God, and the present generation is invited to keep faith with them.

The names say the congregation has a flesh and blood reality in this place; the faith was incarnate here in the lives of people. In a world where faith is often perceived to be a matter of the mind or of the spirit, the names say faith is about an embodied life. The named had a flesh and blood reality in this place, living their faith through their bodies. The names challenge those who tell the story of the church to move outside the narrow confines of the world of the mind, or the world of the spirit, to write about a fully embodied faith, a faith where the names matter. As J. Stanley Sharples wrote in his history of St. Paul's Church, Clinton, Ontario: "For us it is a prelude to our own continuity and responsibility . . . to mobilize our emotions and enlarge our imaginations as worthy successors of those whose names and activities, individually and corporately, are record in this booklet."³⁰ The names bear witness to the fact that ordinary people matter to God. The story of the local congregation will include few whose names will appear in the pages of the denominational reports, but in the congregational history is evidence that their faithful

lives mattered. They are examples to be followed, challenges to be remembered, sacrifices to be emulated.

A great deal of demographic work has been done linking faith commitment with occupation and household living patterns.³¹ What is needed now is to try to merge that work with the names of people who served as Sunday school teachers and in church choirs and so on. One wonders how did the Sunday go-to-meeting faith change the Monday go-to-work life? And how did the work-a-day rough and tumble of life impact what happened in the Sunday school class and the worship life of the congregation? Creating fleshed-out sketches of these “ordinary” individuals will require painstaking work. As demographers and congregational historians work together in this way, they will bring to life the names recorded in the congregational histories.

Practices of the Faith

The people of God live out their faith in a variety of practices. These practices include, but are not limited to, worship, fellowship, mission, community engagement, study, and prayer. Two important questions must be prominent in the minds of congregational historians: How do the dimensions of place and people impinge on the congregation’s practice of the faith? And conversely, how do the practices of the faith bring about the transformation of the people who engage in these practices and the place in which they practice their faith?³² These are vast questions far beyond the scope of this paper. Instead I want to use the constructs of technology and denomination as windows to look at congregational practice.

The authors of congregational histories are aware of the impact of technology on the life of the congregation. Technological changes impact congregational practice.³³ The introduction of the automobile is an obvious example, as Sherwood Fox wrote,

The advent of this quick, cheap and easy means of transportation has affected all churches progressively to a degree that has altered their composition, their activities and their attitudes. It has introduced a serious problem . . . One who reads the annals of any church during this modern period without making allowance for the impact of the common use of the automobile as an explanation of many recorded figures and events, fails to catch the whole story.³⁴

The car has obviously had an enormous impact on the life of all congregations, but so ubiquitous is that impact, it is virtually impossible for modern researchers to imagine a world before cars. Less than a ten minute drive from my home is a congregation which has maintained its driving shed, built more than 100 years ago to house the horses and carriages of parishioners coming to church. The maintenance and cleaning of that shed were tasks the congregation needed to ensure took place.

Technological changes have occurred that have directly impacted worship. The congregation I serve used to pay a young man to operate the organ bellows each Sunday. The introduction of electricity not only changed the way the building was lighted, but ended one person's part-time employment.

In June 1905 "some ladies of the congregation" of Knox Presbyterian Church, Walkerton, offered to donate trays of individual communion cups to replace the use of the common cup at the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The basis of their argument was hygiene. The elders (all men) buried the matter for nearly a year, until they received a letter from the Women's Association that stated:

Since pathological science has discovered that the microbes of consumption, and other diseases, can be carried from one person to another by drinking from the same cup, our society [the Women's Association] feels that there is added reason why individual cups should be substituted for the present practice.³⁵

The letter went on to say that the women were distracted from a proper meditation on the meaning of communion due to worrying, "Are any of the persons around me afflicted with disease or unclean?" Not only should there be no common cup, but also "for hygienic reasons, the bread be cut into small cubes."³⁶ Needless to say, the women won, leaving an intriguing record of change in worship practice driven by increased scientific knowledge.

Congregations are often accused of being unwilling to change their practices. Yet congregational histories suggest otherwise. Congregations appear remarkably adaptable to changes in technology and scientific understanding. Certainly they do not rush into new things, but they are willing to explore the incorporation of technological advances. Further work on the ways in which technology has changed the practices of congregations might yield interesting results. Some areas that would be interesting to explore include: the introduction of ditto and gestetner

machines; the addition of sound systems; and the construction of elevators and wheelchair ramps.

While congregational historians are interested in the impact of technology on congregational life, they are not interested in exploring a congregation's connection with the denomination's pronouncements and policy shifts. Only major changes at the national or international level filter down into the life of the congregation. Changes in the wake of Vatican II appear in the histories of Catholic parishes, but with little reference to the events of Vatican II itself; the focus instead is on the local changes. The decision to ordain women within The Presbyterian Church in Canada, similarly receives little attention except to note that the General Assembly's decision opened the door for the congregation to ordain women to the eldership; the names of those women then follow. Retired professors of history who have taken up the task of recording their church's story, on the other hand, give significant space to denominational shifts. John Moir's histories of Alexandra Presbyterian Church in Brantford and of St. Andrew's, Ottawa move beyond the local to place the congregations in a bigger matrix.³⁷ It would be easy to assume this disinterest is rooted in a lack of knowledge and that congregational historians are simply unaware of denominational actions. But a scan back through the sources used in the writing of these congregational histories produces a different analysis. Most congregational historians lean heavily on local congregational records. For Presbyterians a major source is the session minutes. Denominational policy statements do not appear to have been widely discussed by most sessions, unless there was a clear directive that brought changes to the life of the congregation. This raises significant questions about how much influence the words and actions of denominational leaders have on the life of congregations. This link, or lack thereof, requires more careful study for it raises profound questions about the importance of denominations in the history of the Canadian church.

Postlude

Throughout this paper I have noted potential research areas suggested by reading congregational histories. One further area desperately needs attention: the remarkable growth and stability of many non-European Christian congregations in Canada over the last fifty years. The challenge of dealing with sources in a variety of languages and the fact that these congregational beginnings are very recent creates problems for

any researcher. Historians of Christianity in Canada need to do further work on the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual reality that is the church in Canada.

Amateur congregational historians can teach academic church historians three things. First, the amateurs, by definition, love their subject. Making no claim of objectivity, they wear their faith in their congregation and in the God who called their congregation into being on their sleeves. When the congregation they love does well, they are pleased; when the congregation they love fails, they are disappointed. While the lack of analytical rigor can be frustrating, the passion these writers have for their subject is attractive. The sense of wonder and awe provides a powerful antidote to jaded researchers who may have forgotten the first love that brought them to this vocation in the first place. The amateurs remind us all to have fun in serving the discipline we call history.

Second, most congregational historians have never engaged in sustained historical research and writing prior to working on their congregation's history. The sheer accessibility of history is a strength that must not be lost. In an increasingly professionalized world, where specialized knowledge is a prerequisite for entering into serious conversation, history in general, and congregational history in particular, remains a field open to all. It is incumbent upon those tempted to close the doors, to limit access, to resist such a temptation. It is remarkably winsome to enter an archive's reading room and recognize at the tables academic researchers with numerous books and articles to their credit and at those same tables researchers from a local congregation making their first foray into the world of history.

Third, many congregational historians have learned to tell the story of their congregation in a way that gives meaning to the present day life of the congregation. In so doing they have made a powerful connection between the past and the present, a connection that is often difficult to make. All historians cross the bridge from now to the strange world of the past. That trip, while difficult at times, is very enjoyable for there are wonderfully exotic things to explore. The difficulty arises in trying to return from the past. Sometimes it is easier to let the past remain in the past and not seek ways to have it speak to the present. Congregational historians remind us that the past does speak to the present and the stories we tell about the past have a meaning now. With care we must think through the meaning of the past to our time and place.

Amateur congregational historians should be invited to sit at table with the professional historians of Christianity in Canada. The history of Christianity is not just the story of individuals and of national organizations and movements; it is also the story of groups of people gathered together in congregations scattered throughout Canada. The stories amateur congregational historians bring to the conversation must inform the work of academic church historians, just as the research of the academics must inform the work of the amateurs, the “lovers” of history.

Endnotes

1. Richard J. Mouw, *Consulting the Faithful: What Christian Intellectuals Can Learn from Popular Religion* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1994).
2. R. Stephen Warner, “The Place of the Congregation in the Contemporary American Religious Community,” in *American Congregations: Volume 2: New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations*, eds. James R. Wind and James W. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 61.
3. See, for example, Wind and Lewis, *American Congregations* (2 vols), (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1994); N.J. Demerath III, Peter Dobkin Hall, Terry Schmitt, Rhys H. Williams, *Sacred Companies: Organizational Aspects of Religion and Religious Aspects of Organizations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); and Charles D. Cashdollar, “The Recent Turn to Congregational Studies among Church Historians: A Review Essay,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 77, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 107-118.
4. Alma Blackburn, Blanche Sandford, and Alma Moorcroft, *Pilgrimage of Faith: 150 Years of History of the Churches in Madoc Township and Village, 1824-1974* (Madoc, 1974).
5. *Knox Presbyterian Church, Listowel, Ontario, 1857-1982* (Listowel: Knox Presbyterian Church, 1982), 2.
6. *Ever Forward: An Adventure in Faith – A History of St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, Stratford, Ontario, 1838-1988* (Stratford, ON: St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, 1988), 7.
7. Janet Muirhead, *The Changing Scene: 150 Years of Faith and Witness: Knox Presbyterian Church, Agincourt, 1848-1998* (Scarborough, ON: Knox Presbyterian Church, 1998), ix.

8. Keith McGown, *The Church at the Junction: A History of Essa Road Presbyterian Church, Barrie, Ontario, 1892-1992* (Barrie, ON: Essa Road Presbyterian Church, 1990), iii.
9. *First Presbyterian Church, Chatham, Ontario: A History* (Chatham, ON: First Presbyterian Church, 2000), xvii.
10. See, for example, *The Faith is Strong: Knox Presbyterian Church, Embro, 1832-1982* (Embro, ON: Knox Presbyterian Church, 1982).
11. See, for example, *Lucknow Presbyterian Church, Centennial 1873-1973* (Lucknow: Lucknow Presbyterian Church, 1973); and *We Must Tell the Stories: The Presbyterian Churches of Bradford, West Gwillimbury* (Bradford, ON: St. John's Presbyterian Church, 2001).
12. *A Century of Faith: The Story of Cooke's Presbyterian Church, Chilliwack, B.C.* (Chilliwack, BC: Cooke's Presbyterian Church, 1988), 6.
13. S. Gail Browne, "On this corner . . ." *1896-1996: A History of Metropolitan United Church, London, Ontario* (London, ON: Metropolitan United Church, 1996), 34.
14. "Our Story in His Story": *Grantham United Church, 1879-1979* (415 Linwell Road, St. Catharines) (St. Catharines, ON: Grantham United Church, 1979).
15. Rudy Platiel and Helen Goggin, *A Goodly Heritage: A History of Knox Presbyterian Church, Oakville, 1833-1983* (Oakville, ON: Knox Presbyterian Church, Oakville, 1984).
16. William Sherwood Fox, *A Century of Service: A History of the Talbot Street Baptist Church, 1845-1945* (London, ON: Talbot Street Baptist Church, 1945), 1.
17. Pat Hamilton Ingraham, *This Place of Worship: One Hundred and Fifty years in the history of Central Presbyterian Church, Hamilton, Canada, 1841-1991* (Hamilton, ON: Central Presbyterian Church, 1990); Thomas Melville Bailey, *Pillars, Pulpits and Pews: A History of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, 1794-1994* (Hamilton, ON: Eagle Press, 1994); and Orlo Miller, *Gargoyles and Gentlemen: A History of St. Paul's Cathedral, London, Ontario, 1834-1964* (Toronto, ON: Ryerson Press, 1966).
18. *Building in Faith: Tolmie Memorial Presbyterian Church, Port Elgin, Ontario, 1926-1996* (Port Elgin, ON: Tolmie Memorial Historical Committee, 1996); and *Beyond the Builder's Plan: Centennial History: Knox Presbyterian Church, Flos, Ontario, 1878-1978* (Flos, ON: Knox Presbyterian Church, 1978).

19. See, for example, *History of the Church of Our Lady Help of Christians, Wallaceburg, Ontario, 1878-1978* (Wallaceburg, ON: Standard Press, 1978), 106: “. . . the initial changes in the Sanctuary [were made] following the 1964 Liturgical Reform.” These modifications would have greatly changed the way in which people experienced worship.
20. Browne, “*On this corner . . .*” 1896-1996.
21. *Ratho Presbyterian Church and Community, 1852-2002* (Ratho, ON: Ratho Presbyterian Church, 2002).
22. My thinking about place in relationship to congregations has been influenced the church historian Dorothy Bass who is doing some important thinking about the spiritual dimensions of place.
23. J.S.S. Armour, *Saints, Sinners and Scots: A History of the Church of St. Andrew and St. Paul, Montreal, 1803-2003* (Montreal, Church of St. Andrew and St. Paul, 2003); and Ingraham, *This Place of Worship*.
24. J.R. Ernest Miller, *175 Years of Presbyterian History: First Presbyterian Church and St. Andrew’s Church, Perth* (Perth, ON: St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, 1982).
25. *Knox Presbyterian Church, Listowel, Ontario, 1857-1982* (Listowel, ON, Knox Presbyterian Church, 1982), 11.
26. *Knox Presbyterian Church, Listowel, Ontario, 1857-1982*, 16.
27. *Lucknow Presbyterian Church*, 30. It is worth noting that congregational histories in which clergy have had an influential hand are more likely to talk about the preaching style, worship preferences, and theological outlook of the ministers who served the congregation.
28. *A Century of Faith: The Story of Cooke’s Presbyterian Church, Chilliwack, B.C.* (Chilliwack, BC: Cooke’s Church, 1988), 60.
29. See, for example, John Moir, *Sowing the Good Seed: St. Paul’s Presbyterian Church, Simcoe, Ontario, 1793-1993* (Simcoe, ON: St. Paul’s Presbyterian Church, 1993), 66. Moir deals sensitively with the suicide death of The Rev. J.S. Wright in 1954, but is clearly treading very carefully. And *Westmount Presbyterian Church, 521 Village Green Ave, London, Ontario: 1968-1993* (London, Westmount Church, 1993). The Rev. John Fox committed suicide while serving the congregation, the only mention that appears in the history is to Rev. Fox’s “sudden death.”
30. J. Stanley Sharples, *St. Paul’s (Anglican) Church, Clinton, Ontario: 1835-1975* (Clinton, ON: St. Paul’s (Anglican) Church, 1975), 5.

31. See, for example, Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Social Reform in Canada, 1914-1928* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1973); Lynne Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure and Identity in Late-Nineteenth-Century Small-Town Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); and Nancy Christie, ed., *Households of Faith: Family, Gender, and Community in Canada, 1760-1969* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002).
32. As an opening discussion of these important questions, readers are encouraged to delve into Dorothy Bass, ed., *Practising Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997). While *Practising Our Faith* does explore corporate practices of faith, more could and should be done on understanding how corporate practices work in spiritual formation and communal transformation.
33. See Michel Lagree, "The impact of technology on Catholicism in France (1850-1950)," in *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000*, eds. Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 163-183.
34. Fox, *A Century of Service: Talbot St. Baptist*, 73.
35. Frederick Neill, compiler, *A History of Knox Church, Walkerton, Ontario, 1886-1986* (Walkerton, ON: Knox Presbyterian Church, 1996), 27.
36. Neill, *Walkerton*, 27. A question that remains unanswered, where did the women get this information from? Is this an example of knowledge acquired at Women's Institutes meetings having a broader societal impact?
37. John Moir, *Unto The Hills Around: A History of St. Andrew's Church, Ottawa: In Celebration of 175 Years of Christian Witness* (Ottawa, St. Andrew's Church, 2003); and John Moir, *The Labour Not in Vain: A History of Alexandra Presbyterian Church, Brantford, Ontario, 1845-1995* (Brantford, ON: Alexandra Presbyterian Church, 1994).