COMPANIONS ON THE WAY:
CREATING AND DISCOVERING THE
CONGREGATIONAL SUBJECT

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Clark Williamson pictures the church as a movement of “companions on the way.”¹ Through this image he wants us to see the church as a communion of persons “in the presence of Jesus Christ” seeking to extend the love of God and neighbor throughout all creation. Williamson’s imagery is evocative: the church is a communion of companions headed toward a goal, a goal defined by the presence of Jesus Christ among us. I want to take my lead in this essay from Williamson’s image in order to reflect on certain aspects of the concrete, historical communion that constitutes congregations. In particular, I want to examine briefly one of the effects of the process of “companioning” in congregational life and its theological significance: the emergence of a “congregational subject.”

Congregational members talk about – and exhibit in their behavior – feeling any number of different things about their congregations. They may feel “at one” with it, excluded from it, stifled by it, comforted by it, bored with it, challenged by it, longing for it, afraid of it, disappointed with it, angry/guilty/shamed/joyous/sad/jealous in relation to it. But what is the “it” in these cases? What is the referent for the intense and complex feelings people can have toward

“the congregation”? The answer to this question is not always straightforward. I will suggest in this essay that the “it” is not simply the congregation as a physical space, a location in a socio-cultural geography, a set of languages and practices or, even, particular people gathered together in a particular socio-cultural location engaged in those languages and practices. Rather, I am concerned with those dimensions of the emotional and spiritual salience of the congregation in which it is all of these as they are embedded within an affect-laden construct, what I will call the congregational subject, which is partially individually and partially communally built, sustained, and transformed.

To put it differently, my experience with congregations leads me to believe that the feelings that congregational members have toward their congregations are not only directed toward some consciously understood entity of which they can talk about directly. Those feelings must also be understood in the context of a largely unconscious, intersubjective matrix of complex relational patterns and “motivated irrationality” through which experience in the congregation is channeled in response to the emotional and spiritual challenges of congregational life. While it is no doubt true that “God works in strange ways,” it is equally true that “strange ways work with God.” Congregations, one might say, are dense with ambiguity and promise.

POLIS AND IDIOPOLIS

This emotional and spiritual density of congregational life is constituted by the coming together of two spheres of human life in the creation and sustaining of a third: the gathering together of the

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publicly intersubjective and the intrapsychic in a privately intersubjective sphere. A useful way to understand this is to borrow a distinction from, and extend the argument of, the philosopher and psychoanalyst Jonathon Lear. Lear discusses what he calls the polis and idiopolis as dimensions of human life. Polis refers to the world of public meanings and practices. It is the brute “thereness” of our common lives – the practices and institutional structures of our life together that, while they were created in part to gratify (and continue to bear on) our psychological states, are not simply psychological projections nor can they be fully understood in purely psychological terms. As Lear puts it, “Although the polis is dependent on our enduring commitment, and although it reflects our collective psychic activity, it is not just psychology. Rather, we have created an environment which our psyches can, for better or worse, inhabit.”

This shared quality of the polis means that we can reflect on, argue about, and seek to reform or transform the polis and not just be talking past one another’s intrapsychic worlds. In Lear’s words, “A social world is open to reflection, to debate, to testing in thought and action, and to the possibility of consensual endorsement.” The polis, in other words, is publicly intersubjective.

Distinguishable from the polis in Lear’s perspective, however, is the idiopolis. The idiopolis refers to the emotional inscape of our lives, the world of mostly unconscious meanings rooted in one’s particular life trajectory, peculiar to the individual. One of the implications in this is that the world of shared, public meanings does not exhaust the meaning that beliefs and practices have for the persons who share them. Rather, we bring to the polis a range of conscious and unconscious “patterns of expectation” that are not shared among the other members of the polis yet exert significant influence on the ways we experience life within the polis. Beliefs and practices carry distinct nuances, associations, anxieties, and anticipations that have

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4 Lear, 67.
5 Ibid., 68.

emerged in our individual life histories, and these things shape and are shaped by the meanings we share with others. As we speak the shared language of the polis in which we live, Lear notes, we also speak an idiolect.

Congregational life expresses dimensions of both polis and idiopolis. On the one hand, congregations “create an environment which our psyches can, for better or worse, inhabit.” They have a social quality, inviting public, intersubjective participation in a range of beliefs and practices, which are not simply reducible to their psychological functions. There is a certain kind of “thereness” to congregational life: things that we bump up against pretty much independently of our psychological state in our participation in those groups. The rituals, beliefs, institutional structures, administrative policies, and traditions that characterize congregations all have polis-like features. In like manner, theology, as the reflective activity of the church, however much it might be informed and shaped by psychology, is misunderstood if it is simply reduced to the psychological dynamics, which, in part, shape it. It addresses matters that are “open to reflection, to debate, to testing in thought and action, and to the possibility of consensual endorsement.”

On the other hand, individual congregational members bring to the congregation their own peculiar array of meanings and associations, their idiolect, to the beliefs and practices of congregational life. While the belief-full practices of congregational life clearly shape and influence the lives of its members, it is also the case that the meanings of those beliefs and practices for the individual are shaped by the more private, idiosyncratic sense-making that derives from their own emotional histories. Who God is and who we are in relation to God, what communion is about, how the pastor or priest is understood, etc. are all inevitably influenced not only by the shared resources of the polis, but also by the emotion-laden histories we bring with us to the congregation, histories that seek and demand expression within the more public worlds we inhabit.7

7See, for example, Ana-Maria Rizzuto The Birth of the Living God (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1981); William Meissner, Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); and
These distinctions are important. Yet I want to suggest that there is a third realm in addition to that of polis and idiopolis delineated by Lear: a realm that emerges from the interaction of polis and idiopolis. It is the socio-emotional world that comes into existence between and among individual persons engaged in a common task with others in a public world. It emerges, in other words, from the concrete practices of “companioning.” What I am suggesting is that there is an emotional (and spiritual) organizing process that exists in relation to, but not exhausted by, the various idio- graphic worlds of individual members of a group and that does not have the quality of being held in common by other groups within the polis, even otherwise like-minded and like-structured groups within the polis. It is this third realm, when thinking about this process in congregational life, that I mean to refer to as the “congregational subject.”


The congregational subject may be thought of as a way of talking about certain aspects of what is described in the psychoanalytic literature as the “group-as-a-whole.” The idea of the group-as-a-whole grew out of the observations of psychoanalytically-informed group workers in the 1940s and 1950s who noticed a range of phenomena within the life of groups that could not be adequately explained simply by reference to the individuals who composed the group. The group itself seemed to have a mood or atmosphere, needs and longings, anxieties, and modes of thought. Various behaviors

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and styles of emotional expression by group members, in other words, only made sense when attention was paid to two movements occurring simultaneously: the contributions individual members made to the group and the ways those contributions were channeled or differentially invited and discouraged, accepted and rejected by the group as a whole. Group-as-a-whole theorists came to posit, therefore, an emotional organizing process within the group that was not reducible to the individual or interpersonal dynamics of the members of the group.

While there are a variety of competing ways of understanding it, the idea of the group-as-a-whole is best understood, I think, in light of this premise: “The group is an integration of persons, and the person differentiates out of a group matrix.” Each half of this statement is important. On the one hand, the group comes into existence and socially reproduces itself as its members seek to integrate their diversity in relation to a common task. This integrating process defines a boundary, which both internally identifies the membership of the group and distinguishes the group from other groups within its broader environment. Critically important here is the idea that the group-as-a-whole emerges from the resources the individual members contribute to the common pool of the group’s work, as the members struggle with the problems of integrating the diversity of their persons and skills in relation to a common task. On the other hand, the group-as-a-whole functions as the matrix within which (and out of which) the individual member differentiates. The group-as-a-whole subtends the birth of the individual differentiated within the group. Thus, the processes of integration and differentiation of group mem-

bers vis-à-vis the group as a whole in relation to the group’s task is the dynamic emotional context of group life.

As can be seen, much hinges here on the group’s task, since it is the organizing focus for the processes of integration and differentiation occurring within the life of the group. A distinction especially developed within the Tavistock tradition of group relations theory is particularly useful here. Groups have a “primary task” and “socio-emotional tasks.”¹¹ The primary task is the task that the group has ostensibly gathered to do. It is the publicly understood or assumed task around which the group has gathered. The overt or “primary task” of the group, however, is rarely if ever its only task. The anxiety, fear, shame, or guilt evoked within the group’s members in pursuing its primary task give rise to socio-emotional tasks within the group; namely, efforts to cope with and defend against the individual and group-wide vulnerabilities that emerge within the group’s life.¹² Thus, it is in relation to both the primary task and the various socio-emotional tasks of the group that the group-as-a-whole functions as integrating and differentiating context. And it is in relation to this dual, dynamic matrix that much of the emotional salience, the frustration and appeal, of a group’s life is to be understood.

Perhaps it would be useful to put this another way. In his now classic collection of essays, *Experiences in Groups*, Wilfred Bion observed that we humans are group creatures by our very nature.


Yet, he also noted that we resist and resent our very “groupishness.” Our resistance and resentment derive, in part, from the fact that there is an inherent tension between certain of the needs and wishes of the individuals composing the group and the demands of social existence. Being a member of a group promises fulfillment of some individual needs and wishes and yet inevitably threatens or frustrates others. While group life is essential to human flourishing, therefore, we do not come into this world unambivalently or smoothly fitted for group life.

To put it bluntly, groups frequently evoke emotionally primitive anxieties and hopes in their members around issues of interdependence. Indeed, the group-as-a-whole functions largely to contain, express, and/or channel these anxieties and hopes. It can produce both an energizing group vitality for pursuit of its task as well as a defensive, corrosive, and usually unconscious distortion of group life. It accomplishes this latter task through a process known as “splitting.” Splitting is where the group chooses or targets some selected persons on which to discharge qualities or affects that are experienced as intolerable by the group. From the perspective of Christian faith, of course, this latter dynamic is part of the emotional mechanism of social sin; that is, sin that is carried by and through groups and social structures.\textsuperscript{13} It is one of the ways in which sexism, racism, anti-Judaism, and heterosexism, for example, are socially reproduced.

\textbf{GOD AND THE CONGREGATIONAL SUBJECT}

In the light of the above, I hope it can be seen how the congregational subject is an emotional organizing process within congregations that emerges from the concrete, historical practices of “companioning.” As congregational members continually bring their own individual emotional histories (the idiopolis) and the larger,\textsuperscript{13}K. Brynolf Lyon, “Paranoid-Schizoid Phenomena in Congregational Conflict: Some Dilemmas of Reconciliation,” \textit{Pastoral Psychology} (March 1999): 273-292.
public resources of the faith (the polis) into their life with one another in congregations, a third emotional reality emerges: that organizing process I am calling the congregational subject.

The congregational subject is, importantly, born of the vulnerability of desire. This is true because desire is itself a relational notion. It reflects both the fact that we are constituted through and with others and the inevitable fear, joy, shame, guilt, and envy that accompanies the expression of the depth of our interdependence. That the congregational subject has this relationship to the vulnerability of desire means that it always also bears on, and exists in relation to, a larger eternal horizon. As the theologian Edward Farley has put it:

Desire can, of course, be trivial, passing, and fulfillable, but the birth to death passions for meaningful existence or for understanding by the personal other are always only partially fulfilled. Accordingly, no specific entity, no person, no event or cause, no instance of value, beauty, or reality ever satiates these passions. All elemental passions refer beyond themselves. They take place, we might say, on a horizon that is no actual or finite thing. This situation of enduring tragic nonfulfillment, passionate existence, and eternal horizon is part of the dynamic of human evil and redemption.14

In this sense, it would be a mistake to see the congregational subject simply as an emotional organizing process. It is more fully and deeply an emotional and spiritual organizing process. While the notion of spirituality is a notoriously slippery one, I am using it here simply to refer to the ways in which the edges of desire reach into that final mystery which surrounds our existence. The congregational subject, I would finally say, is the private intersubjective organizing process within the congregation that weaves, and is woven by, the vulnerability of desire and the divine reality into the congregation's peculiar ways of being in the world as it pursues its mission. It is this

subject (though perhaps not the only one) that congregational members create and discover in their companioning of one another. And it is through this subject that we may discern something of the disturbing and exhilarating, immobilizing and transformative features of devotion’s detail, that “bright imprint our lives unshadow on” in communities of faith.\(^{15}\)

The bearing of the congregational subject on the vulnerability of desire and of the latter on the divine reality suggests, therefore, the full range of spiritual issues we must face in our companioning of one another. We are led, for example, into that complex arena of community within which God’s blessing and the ambivalence of our response meet; where the idolatries created within our ways of being together create the brutalities of everyday life and are, occasionally, overcome; where hatred gives way to and resists gratitude; where God’s love is both revealed and obscured; where forgiveness and contrition are offered, accepted, and rejected; where (in James Madison’s phrase) the “pleasures of animosity” and the pleasures of charity co-mingle; and where the persistence of God’s mercy is the ineluctable condition of our redemption. We are led, in other words, into those large and small processes of our being together where sin and salvation are disclosed and realized as fully social and relational phenomena.

**IMPLICATIONS**

Much of what is seen as congregational practical theology today refers to the congregational polis: the ways in which the shared public resources of the congregation shape, or ought to shape, this or that aspect of congregational life or this or that aspect of Christian life in the world. From the perspective I am developing here, of course, this remains an important part of the picture. Yet to focus only on the polis is to miss the fuller reality of the congregational subject and,

therefore, the fuller reality of the witness carried by congregational life. I have suggested that this fuller reality is better captured by focusing on that emotional and spiritual organizing process within the congregation that emerges from particular people engaging in a common task in a public world; that is, the ways in which the congregational subject shapes and is shaped by its polis and idiopolis in the midst of the divine reality.

I hope it is clear how fully social and dynamic the congregational subject is. To the extent that I have made this clear, I suspect there is some resistance to it as well. Many mainline Protestants in particular prefer to imagine that they are basically in control of their participation in their congregations, that the meaning of their ways of participating do not extend beyond their individual meanings and that, as such, they serve no master but God. However, congregations (and groups in general) present us with the disturbing fact that we are all more profoundly and mysteriously related than we normally imagine, that we “live more deeply” through the manner of our participation in congregations than we consciously know, that the ways we are drawn into congregational life serve a larger, more ambiguous function in relation to how congregations go about their business than most of us would like.

In congregations we live both within and beyond ourselves, inhabiting them and inhabited by them, taken up by purposes (for good or ill) that extend beyond our knowing in the moment. This is, amongst other things, a call to mutual accountability as well as joy in one another. The church is in the deepest and richest sense, as Clark Williamson would have it, a communion: “... this communion of love and blessing is not static, it is a communion on the move. The church is a movement of ‘companions on the way.’”

\[\text{Williamson, 275.}\]