

Project Wangaratta: An Experiment in Church History and Church Renewal

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to describe the "Church Anniversary Project" of the Wangaratta Baptist Church, Wangaratta, Victoria. The authors conducted that project to test the proposition that meaningful change in local churches requires a clear-headed, well-defined understanding of the past of the particular congregation seeking change. It seemed to us that church renewal could not take place without church history.

Since we first came to know each other in Chiang Mai, Thailand, where Mr. Swanson worked as a church archivist and Dr. Hughes pursued his studies under the South East Asia Graduate School of Theology, we have shared a number of mutual concerns regarding theology and church history. We believe that a truly meaningful and ultimately useful theology must both arise from and be grounded in the lives of local churches and the people of the churches. Theology belongs to the whole church and not just a favored few. Therefore, it must be able to speak to the needs of the churches and the people, and in order to so speak it must first listen to the churches.¹

Furthermore, we have shared a common perception that a church and people-oriented theology necessarily begins with a careful, critical, competent study of the historical experience of local churches. The voice of the churches emerges with clarity only when their past is studied. Contemporary issues and problems in a local congregation express the continuing life of that congregation and "make sense" only when seen as such an expression. Berger and Luckman have written, "Institutions always have a history, of which they are the products. It is impossible to understand an institution adequately without an understanding of the historical process in which it was produced."² Therefore, our concern to base theology on and orient it to the local church immediately involves one in the history of local churches as a primary ingredient in locating theology in those churches.

Yet, congregations rarely see a connection between the study of the church's past and the life of their own local church, and church history has been consigned for the most part to a small, dimly lit back room with a faintly musty odor of irrelevance lingering about it. Church history appears to the average church member to have little to say about or to do with the daily struggles of local churches to create a Christian communal life and a faithful witness in society. Thus, our attraction to local church history took us in a direction that might seem unusual to many church goers.

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Finally, we share a commitment to the pastoral model not only as a model for local church leadership but also as a model for local church **scholarship**. That is, those who undertake the academic study of the churches should seek to behave not only as researchers but also as pastors. "Pastoral scholarship" like pastoral leadership focuses on the other, on the people studied and led. "Pastoral scholarship" approaches the church not as an object to be studied but as a community to be involved with both for the sake of the community and its larger witness and ministry in society. "Pastoral scholarship" seeks data in order to use it with and for others rather than using others for the sake of collecting data. The purpose of collecting such data is not the production of theses, monographs, nor articles but rather the liberation of people and congregations. The method of such scholarship is based on attitudes of listening to and participating in the "stories" of the people and their churches.

Over a period of months and years, we frequently discussed our desire to use our theological and historiographical skills pastorally. Hughes was in the midst of research on Christianity and culture in northern Thailand. Swanson was collecting and directing the care of large amounts of church history records. He wanted to avoid the trap of exercising our theological and historical skills apart from the church where only small numbers of scholars would be the beneficiaries. Our opportunity to put some of our ideas into concrete form came when Hughes returned to Australia.

The Project

In December 1982, Hughes joined the Rev. Doug Cosson in a team ministry at the Wangaratta Baptist Church in rural northeast Victoria. The church, officially established in 1903, had just over 100 resident members. Much of its historical experience has been that of a small, ingrown and socially semi-isolated Baptist church pastored by a succession of "home missionaries" of greatly varying pastoral abilities. Although the congregation felt relatively good about itself and comfortable with its image as a "warm and friendly" congregation, its life seemed to lack focus and direction. It also faced a number of difficult decisions about program and property that were a legacy of the recent past.

At Hughes' suggestion and with Cosson's support, the congregation agreed to employ Swanson to study the church's historical situation. The stated purpose of the study project was to investigate the history of the church in order to lead the church into a period of renewal. The church created a project task force chaired by Hughes which began collecting church records and preparing for Swanson's arrival. The project lasted for eight weeks in March and April 1984.

The **first phase** of the project emphasized research and dominated the first five weeks of the project. Although Swanson, with Hughes' assistance, spent a considerable amount of time researching the documents assembled before his arrival, the core of this phase was the oral history interviews Swanson conducted with a large and representative number of members, adherents, and friends of the congregation including two former pastors. The purpose of these interviews was not simply to collect "facts" but rather to provide an opportunity for people connected with the church to express their own feelings and ideas about the church through remembering its past. In some cases, the interviews virtually turned into pastoral counselling situations with deep feelings, hurts,

fears, and worries expressed. In nearly every instance, patterns of concern about the church began to emerge that seriously questioned the outward image of the church as friendly and caring.

Aside from individual interviews, Swanson also interviewed a number of couples. All of these interviews took place in the homes of the people interviewed and often followed a meal. The environment was congenial, comfortable, and purposely non-threatening. In a few instances, we also engaged in group discussions on the history of the church, but these group discussions tended to be more factual and less feeling-oriented. In all, some seventy individuals provided significant input for the project. In the meantime, Hughes prepared a brief questionnaire for discovering the values of the congregation, and he also worked with a small task force that prepared a sound-and-slide presentation on the congregation's history.

Very briefly, the pattern that emerged was one in which the congregation's spiritual understanding of faith in Christ and relationships within the church was in deep tension with the organizational structures of the congregation which in striking ways had failed to change since the founding of the church in 1903. Structurally, Wangaratta Baptist Church was still very much a "turn-of-the-century" Australian Baptist Church.³ This fundamental tension between the spiritual and the organizational facets of congregation life frustrated many members, but they could not articulate their frustration beyond citing very specific items that worried them. A substantial number of the church's members felt alienated from the church even as they felt close to any number of other members in the church. Women showed a particular disquiet and frustration. Everywhere, Swanson heard members expressing unrest over the ways in which the church made decisions, and particularly concerning the content and conduct of church business meetings. In nearly all quarters, the members of the church felt that their church should be more involved in the world as a witness to it. Out of discussions about their past, the church members expressed deep and earnest feelings about where they had been as a church and where they were. As one member put it, there was a "divine discontent" in the church.

In the **second phase** of the project, we reported back the findings of our research and interviews. It should be noted, however, that in fact these two phases overlapped one another chronologically and influenced each other in the content and direction of each. Informally, "reporting back" began with Hughes and Cosson, the pastors, almost immediately, and their continuing input aided Swanson in interpreting the data he collected. More formally, Swanson began to discuss the emerging patterns he discerned with the project task force which had been meeting with him weekly to act as a "sounding board" for interpreting the data. Again, their comments and reflection assisted Swanson both in understanding those patterns and in interpreting them concretely to members of the church.

Reporting the findings of the research became the primary task of the project in its last three weeks, and we programed reporting back in six different ways: first of all, as already mentioned, we reported to the project task force. Secondly, the church sponsored an all-church meeting at which we presented an audio-visual history of the church and reported the results of our findings. Thirdly, we reported the findings in more depth to the Diaconate, the chief executive body of the church. Fourthly, Swanson presented some of his conclusions about future directions more formally

to the pastoral team. Fifthly, three Sunday evening worship services were set aside for reflection on the results of the project and for discussion in the context of worship on those results. Finally, we researched and prepared a lengthy study of the history of the church in which we set forth the themes of its past.⁴

Project Results

In this article, we are able to discuss only the immediate, short-term results of the Wangaratta Church Anniversary Project. We summarize those results by saying that the project created a climate for meaningful change in the Wangaratta Baptist Church.

First of all, the project provided an opportunity for a significant number of disaffected members to voice their disaffections in a manner that freed them both from a fear of what others might think about their opinions and from a sense of guilt about "attacking" the church. Many members liked the people in their church and perceived the congregation as being more spiritual and friendly than most of the other congregations in the community. Thus, it proved difficult for them to state just why they felt so deeply disturbed about certain aspects of the church, when, in one sense, they thought it to be a fundamentally good church. Others had learned from experience that it was difficult to express opposing views or different concerns in church meetings, virtually the only time the church met together to "hear" the voice of the membership.

Disaffection with the decision-making processes of the congregation's structure was widespread, but few individuals realized how many others felt as they did. The project, then, opened up an entirely new channel of communication and called attention to the fact that traditional congregational channels were not functioning properly. The immediate result after the all-congregational meeting at which we reported our findings was enthusiastic. Individuals who had maintained silence for years began to share more publicly and openly their feelings and ideas. Women members responded with a particular sense of liberation upon hearing it said publicly that one of the continuing weaknesses of the church was that it was male-oriented. (One small immediate change took place the following Sunday when for the first time in the history of the church women took up the offering). One member of the church in a private note urged that the church establish an office of "ombudsman" to listen to the church, "...like Herb has done."

Secondly, the project provided a model for the church. As the weeks went by, we began to hear in different quarters of the church the statement that, "We haven't been listening to each other." After a lengthy discussion between two individuals representing differing views on how to structure church meetings, one commented privately, "We've been working on communicating." It was striking to many that Swanson, supposedly the American "expert" from overseas, could so quickly fit into the church and be so easy to talk to (in spite of his peculiarities of accent). The report Swanson presented to the church reinforced this model since nearly every member in the church could identify at one level or another with its contents.

Thirdly, the project confronted those who had been generally comfortable with the church as it was, particularly a few of its leaders, with a challenge

to “business-as-usual” that was unusually difficult to refute. Even those who felt that the findings of the project were too negative could not deny the validity of the process by which those results were obtained. Nor could they deny that for many members of the church, including people that these “spokesmen for continuity” respected, the results were exciting. A number of lay leaders were caught off guard by the findings, but as most of them began to understand those findings they increasingly accepted them. In the end, only one or two lay leaders seriously questioned the need for the church to make some fundamental changes in the way it went about its business and related to the Wangaratta community.

Fourthly, through the interviews and other research, the project pinpointed a number of specific concerns that the church had to deal with in order to change. Not only did it point to the inadequacy of communications within the church, but it also questioned the roles of important groups within the congregation, beginning with the role of the pastors. The project described the reasons why nearly everyone was uncomfortable with the role of the Diaconate. It also strongly underscored the need for a change in the relative roles of men and women. Relationships within the church at the level of roles had drifted along without changing fundamentally in decades while Australian society changed rapidly and the spiritual perceptions of many people in the church itself moved to a deeper plane. Furthermore, the project identified congregational meetings, their form and their content, as being a prime concern that could be changed relatively quickly and easily. One of the exciting aspects of the project was that individual members of the church began to identify other elements of the program that worried them and that they felt should change.

Fifthly, the project was of particular use to the two pastors of the church. It helped them to identify pastoral problems and leadership issues more clearly. In some instances, it gave them guidance regarding things that they themselves had to change in their work. By-and-large, it assisted them in more clearly articulating their own understanding of the church and gave them more confidence in that understanding because the “data base” was more empirical, more solid. At the end of the project, they assembled with Swanson an agenda of items that they could help the church work through in making actual changes.

In summary, there was hardly an aspect of the church’s program or a group in the church that was not influenced by the project. Individuals from both ends of the theological spectrum embraced its influence and its report enthusiastically. A climate for meaningful change had been created without creating a crisis, without creating party conflicts, and without further alienating any segment of the church from the entire congregation. In the six months after the project ended, the church took particular steps to make congregational meetings more open, to create more responsive structures for church governance which included a larger voice for women, and to become more involved in ministry to Wangaratta.

Reflection

In Thailand, we (the authors) spent considerable time reflecting upon the meaning of the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ in the Thai cultural situation.⁵ At one point, Hughes wrote:

The process of communicating and understanding the Gospel is a dynamic one. Our ideas and concepts, in terms of which we think about God and the Gospel, are limited, human tools. They are products of our culture, acquired in the processes of socialization. Yet they are the only tools we have for understanding. The incarnation demonstrates God's willingness to communicate within the context of language and ideas bound by culture and limited by human understanding. If we are to communicate successfully to others, we must use their ideas and concepts, despite the risks of miscommunication.⁶

The Incarnation is an attitude and a way of relating to others. As would-be church scholars, the Incarnation means for us that if our research and writing is to be "for others" it must first be "with others."

The Wangaratta project tested this incarnational approach to the study of local church history for the sake of the church and largely justified the approach. One woman interviewed by Swanson asked why we were studying the history of the church, and when he replied that it was because knowing the history of the church would help the church find new directions her response was, "How odd!" Yet, after several interviews this woman and her husband were among those most enthusiastic about the entire project and also among those who shared some of the deepest feelings about the church. The theoretical statement about the relationship of church history to the church bemused her, but the incarnational methodology of the research involved and excited her. One Deacon said to Swanson on his last Sunday in Wangaratta, "You have helped more people than you know." In fact, all Swanson did was to sit, listen, and reflect for the congregation what they said to him in the context of their own congregational historical experience. The Wangaratta project sought to listen to and give voice to their deepest anxieties.

The project also involved a very real sense of the prophetic as well, but it was a prophetic element that arose from the people themselves. The pattern of their concern was that in spite of their being a friendly and warm church the church somehow was not living up to Christ's will for it. In the members' attempts to articulate their frustrations, the element of prophecy, of calling the People of God to task for failure to be faithful, was very much present. In fact, the Wangaratta project was nothing less than an exercise in self-examination and self-evaluation even though it was not billed as such. And out of the ferment of divine discontent in the church a very clear and prophetic message of the need to change and become more faithful arose.

What is particularly significant is that the demand for change did not come from an outside agency pronouncing judgment. It did not arise out of the emotional frustration of a pastor whose agenda for the church was not being met. It did not come from professional cynics who wander around the churches. It arose, rather, out of a concrete congregational situation and the Christian concerns of the people in that congregation. It was the most **effective** instance of a prophetic call to repentance and change that we have witnessed.

Finally, we learned truly to accept a new attitude about research and data in which the correctness of the data in its content is secondary to the correctness of its usage. The centerpiece of this project is neither Wangaratta Baptist's published history nor this article. The centerpiece came when the church heard the feedback from the project and responded in their various ways that together

created a climate of change in the church. Using scholarship for people is ultimately what pastoral/incarnational scholarship is all about.

Let us hasten to add that such scholarship demands, if anything, a more rigorous methodology and stringent demand for collecting fair, accurate data. It demands the highest standards of excellence in scholarship, for anything less is a betrayal of the people with whom the scholar engages in study. Yet, the first and most important result of such study should be seen in the lives of people rather than in lengthy tomes or learned articles. Those might come later. They might not.

Theologically, then, the Wangaratta project became a congregational exercise in redefining the nature and the role of the church. Biblical concepts formed the often referred to context of the congregation's reflection/discussion. The massive social change Wangaratta experienced in the last fifty years was the fundamental problem facing the church: how should it respond? How can it best tell the Good News in Wangaratta? It is striking that the basic issues that worried the members of the church were, in fact, the very same issues of contextualization, indigenization, localization, and apologetics that face the churches in Thailand. Although these lay people did not use this terminology, we found them quite articulate about basic ideas and issues.

The point of their frustration, then, was not an inability to describe what the church **should** be. The frustration of many members was that their congregation was not what it should be. This is where church history as a method and a perspective proved to be highly useful. It cut across the sense of frustration and identified actual historical reasons why the church was what it had come to be. Thus, the sense of frustration could be given substance and the feelings of alienation explained. Equally as important, strategies for change were given a solid base which meant that the church would not confuse mere cosmetic changes (such as electing one woman as a Deacon) with correcting fundamental weakness in the church (such as the role of women).

For us the summary of the project is this: a pastorally-oriented, incarnational approach to church history in the historical study of the Wangaratta Baptist Church gave the members of the church an opportunity to wrestle with concrete theological issues arising out of their own historical context. Out of this opportunity the church created for itself a new climate in which those concrete issues challenged the congregation to seek both a new organizational life and a new relationship with the larger community. A church history project brought liberation for some frustrated with the bonds of archaic structures, reconciliation for some who felt alienated from the Christian community they belonged to, and discomfort to a number of people who had grown secure in things the way they were.

The true home of theology and church history is in the local churches. The true goal of theology and of church history is reconciliation and liberation in the churches for the sake of their larger ministries beyond the community.

Footnotes

- 1 see Philip J. Hughes. *Christianity and Culture: A Case Study in Northern Thailand*; Chiang Mai: doctoral dissertation, The South East Asia Graduate School of Theology, 1983, as a model for basing theological reflection upon

the empirical study of Christian and Buddhist values, that is, on the actual needs and beliefs of the people.

- 2 Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. *The Social Construction of Reality*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1966: 72.
- 3 see J. D. Bollen. "Religion in Australian Society: An Historians View." The Leigh College Open Lectures, Winter Series 1973. Enfield, New South Wales: Leigh College, 1973.
- 4 Herbert R. Swanson. *Wangaratta Baptist Church: An Inquiry into Historical Themes and Patterns*. Edited by Philip J. Hughes. Wangaratta: Wangaratta Baptist Church, 1985.
- 5 see *To What Extent? Incarnation and the Thai Context*. Edited by Herbert R. Swanson. Chiang Mai: The Manuscript Division, Payap College, 1982.
- 6 Philip J. Hughes. "Incarnation and the Communication of the Gospel in Thailand." in *To What Extent?* 32.