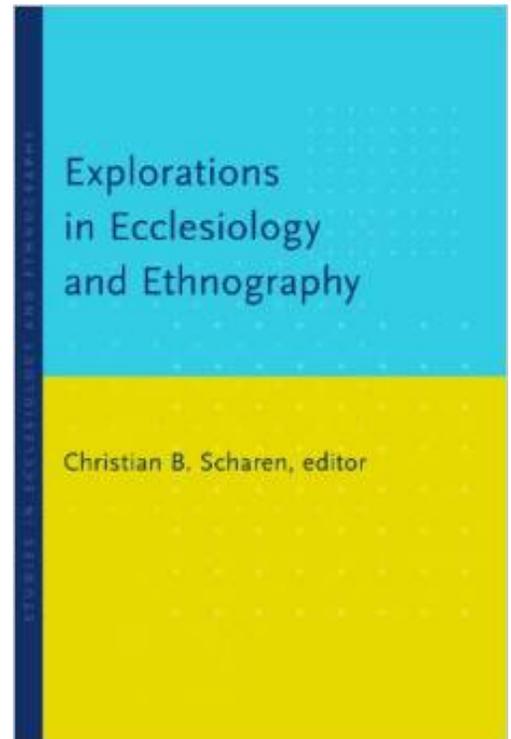


CHRISTIAN B. SCHAREN (Editor)
Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography
The Studies in Ecclesiology and Ethnography series
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Review by Darren Cronshaw

Congregational studies is a growing field drawing on different academic disciplines and methodological tools but focused on understanding the life and dynamics of faith communities. A new contributor to the field is The Ecclesiology and Ethnography Network, inviting together scholars interested in the cross-disciplinary study of the church and especially wanting to integrate empirical and theological analyses

(<http://ecclesiologyandethnography.wordpress.com/>). They are releasing a new book series, 'Studies in Ecclesiology and Ethnography', and one of their first two volumes is *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography*. The editor, Christian Scharen, who teaches at Luther Seminary in Minnesota, has drawn together thirteen other respected scholars and practitioners in the field to reflect on their research methodologies and findings.



The foundational assumption of the book, and the network, is that the best study of churches will combine ethnography (interpreted broadly as any qualitative research) and ecclesiology (reflecting theologically on what the church is intrinsically meant to be). James Nieman and Roger Haight, for example, in their introductory chapter 'On the Dynamic Relation Between Ecclesiology and Congregational Studies', appeal for both ecclesiology from above (considering the biblical ideals and normative concepts) and below (the lived reality of how churches function). They say congregations need the perspectives and mediation of theology, but theology also needs ethnography to keep it authentic to experience:

“A closer connection with congregational studies would grant the opportunity for a reality check, particularly in the area of ecclesiology. If we are interested in theology that stands in service to the church, then it is essential that it engage accurately and amply with the local realities, sorrows, and hopes of actual assemblies of the faithful. Without this check, theological study can risk becoming insulated from the world in which it tries to speak, and thus its gifts of wisdom and reflection become muted or subverted.” (p.30)

The eight chapters of the book all offer a refreshing high view of grassroots ethnographic research and normative ecclesiological study, and the integration of both to help us understand the church and point it in more faithful directions.

In two introductory chapters (part one), two chapters/ case studies of research exploring congregations and worship (part two), and four chapters/ case studies of church engagement with broader issues in society (part three), the writers appeal for analysis that grapples deeply with churches with all their complexity and nuances, sometimes messiness and confusion, as well as best practices and fruitfulness. The chapter writers guide the reader to view congregations and ministry contexts with fresh eyes, from the religiosity of Norway folk religion to an adult Baptism service in Oxford, from the apparent anti-urban geographical bias of evangelicals in North America to street pastors in the Netherlands and their theology of affirmation of all people.

One of the most intriguing chapters was Christopher Craig Brittain's 'Ethnography as Ecclesial Attentiveness and Critical Reflexivity: Fieldwork and the Dispute over Homosexuality in the Episcopal Church'. Brittain contends division over homosexuality is not just about theology, and that navigating a way forward would be helped by less emphasis on normative declarations and more interest in ethnographic analysis of the conflict and attentiveness to what God is doing that is beyond individual agendas. He comments, with the high view of ethnography that pervades the volume: 'Ethnography offers the possibility that perhaps someone will notice something new, and such newness of insight will open doors for subsequent ecclesiological reflection' (p.134).

Apart from the interest of the individual issues the researchers present, the value of the volume is in its modelling of integrating ecclesiological study and ethnographic research. The reader can learn from the diverse methods used: participant-observation, case studies, theological action research, worship service analysis, reflective ecumenism and collective ethnography. Some of the projects are by individual researchers, such as Henk de Roest's appreciative investigation of street pastors, Others are by whole teams, the largest of which being The Reflective Ecumenism and the Local Church project in the Northeast of England involving three investigative teams, nine denominations, dozens of researchers, and multiple phases of data-collection, analysis and recommendations. This reviewer especially appreciated learning from the researchers placing their local initiatives in broader historical context or in the context of the influence of broader movements, such as evangelicalism, ecumenism or the charismatic movement. And it was noteworthy to see the valuing of the voices of outsiders and people on the margins.

This volume is ideal and excellent reading for students and teachers of practical theology, congregational studies, qualitative research, and anyone interested in the latest approaches to research-based analysis of the current reality and potential future directions of churches.

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