

JAMES P. WIND and JAMES W. LEWIS, eds. *American Congregations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994. Vol. 1: *Portraits of Twelve Religious Communities*. xi; 712 pp. Notes, index, \$34.95. Vol. 2: *New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations*. ix; 292 pp. Notes, index, \$22.50.

Reviewed by Rex Cooper, Research Associate in the Research Information Division of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

*American Congregations* is an outgrowth of the University of Chicago Divinity School's congregational history project. The project's intent was "to focus fresh scholarly attention on American congregations" (1:ix). The stimulating case studies and essays published here present good reason to suppose that this goal will be achieved.

The work is edited by James P. Wind (director in the Religion Division of the Lilly Endowment) and James W. Lewis (director of the Louisville Institute for the Study of Protestantism and American Culture), who together served as codirectors of the project. They have brought together articles written by qualified scholars from such diverse fields as theology, history, ethics, sociology, policy planning, Africana studies, and philosophy. One of the work's refreshing achievements is that despite the authors' obvious academic credentials they do not become pedantic or overly technical. Anyone interested in the practical dynamics of American religious life and congregational development will find these two volumes enjoyable and highly informative.

## Themes

The editors regard the congregation as the key to understanding the American religious experience, since American religion is "persistently communal" (1:2). They maintain that through interacting with coreligionists within the congregation individuals form their religious identities and work out the implications of their religious beliefs. Each congregation must, in one form or another, deal with such issues as authority, discipline, diversity, and the appropriate public manifestation of religious faith. The congregation mediates between the secular and the sacred and

provides members with a shield against secular culture. At the same time, however, in order to persist, the congregation must react to, and thus be influenced by, elements in that culture. Congregations respond to such issues and develop over time in a wide range of ways. Thus each congregation can provide a distinctive perspective on how religion is experienced in America.

## Brief Analysis

Volume one is a series of case studies that trace the historical development of twelve American congregations. Included are the oldest Protestant congregation in New Haven, Connecticut; a southern Fundamentalist congregation; a reform Jewish synagogue; two ethnic Catholic parishes; a Greek Orthodox congregation; a Muslim congregation; a Hindu temple; and others. Of particular interest for LDS readers is the inclusion of the Sugar House Ward in southeast Salt Lake Valley. Thus the volume permits a ready comparison between a “typical” LDS ward and a wide range of congregations.

The authors of each case study were free to analyze the development of their congregations from whatever perspective they wished and to focus on those issues they felt were most important. The result is a rich tapestry of themes and variations by which the development of any religious congregation (or LDS ward) might be better understood. Despite their diversity, these case studies focus on a relatively small number of key issues, outlined above, with which most American congregations have to deal. The similarities and variations in how congregations have dealt with these issues reveal a great deal about American culture and the role of religion in American life.

Volume two contains general, interpretive essays. The first four essays develop broad contexts or “maps” by which congregations might be better understood and compared. I was particularly intrigued by E. Brooks Holifield’s attempt to provide a general history of American congregations by establishing main congregational characteristics in various historical periods. Previously, I had viewed the proliferation of auxiliary organizations and social activities in Mormon wards during the late nineteenth

and early twentieth centuries as distinctive to Mormonism. Holifield's analysis helped me understand that the same tendency was prevalent throughout America as congregations attempted to become "comprehensive" by instigating programs to address all the needs of their membership.

The remaining essays center on the roles of tradition and leadership in congregations. Dorothy C. Bass's article on the importance of congregations in transmitting tradition provides an excellent theoretical basis for analyzing the role of the LDS ward in the formation of Mormon identity. Robert Michael Franklin's excellent treatment of the role of ministers in Black congregations greatly increased my understanding of Black religious experience in America.

### **Case Study of LDS Ward**

Compared to the other eleven case studies in volume one, I personally found the treatment of the Sugar House Ward to be somewhat flat—although perhaps little could be said about the Sugar House Ward that would have appeared unexpected to a Salt Lake Mormon like myself. The authors provide a general overview of the historical development of the LDS ward and use the Sugar House Ward as a case study to illustrate this evolution. The simultaneous 1854 organization of the Sugar House Ward, the construction of the sugar factory within its boundaries, and the settlement of people to run the factory are provided as an example of the fusion of community and ward in early Utah. The interrelationship of Abraham O. Smoot's activities as the ward's first bishop and as the factory's superintendent illustrates the dual role of early bishops as both temporal and spiritual leaders. In varying degrees of specificity, the same approach is used in discussing tithing, block (home) teaching, ordinances, missionary work, the reorganization of the Relief Society in the late 1860s, the subsequent organization of the MIA and the Primary, the proliferation of organized sports at the turn of the century, the introduction of the welfare program during the 1930s, and the recent curtailment of ward-centered activities.

While the article presents an adequate overview of these and other ward-centered activities, it gives little information on how these

activities and ward callings fit together. The authors make little attempt to describe the structure of the ward as a network of interrelated callings and to note the ways this structure has developed.

Also missing is an adequate statement about the contemporary situation in the ward. What are the current roles of the bishop and the Relief Society president? How are the youth auxiliaries operating? How does the modern ward provide members with a mediating structure as they attempt to relate to one another, to the broader Church, and to American society and culture? These and other subjects could have been addressed if the authors had spent time interviewing ward members and becoming involved in ward activities as participant-observers. Such an approach would have provided important insight into the dynamics of the contemporary Mormon ward and the role it currently plays in the lives of its members.

Perhaps these flaws can be better understood by taking into account the authors' contention that the Sugar House Ward's "personality is rooted in its essential typicality" (1:299). What they seemed to be attempting in this essay was more a general analysis of the generic features of LDS wards than an examination of the Sugar House Ward as a distinctive LDS congregation. The authors view the Sugar House Ward as typical in at least three senses: (1) like most nineteenth-century wards, it was a comprehensive community in which religious and secular elements were combined; (2) it is currently suburban, as are most twentieth-century wards; and (3) its members, as are those found in most U.S. wards, are predominately from the middle class. This general approach is probably a proper strategy since the analysis was published as the single LDS example in a volume dealing with different religious traditions.

I agree with the authors that these characteristics are pervasive in those U.S. wards whose roots extend back into the nineteenth century. I do, however, take issue with their inference that the generic features of LDS wards are in some sense the essence of the LDS congregational experience. They write, "To a considerable degree . . . the history of any LDS ward is the history of every ward" (1:299). Despite an obvious cookie-cutter similarity among LDS congregations, variation exists among LDS wards in demographic composition, localized vision, leadership style, internal

dynamics, and interaction with the larger society. Marked differences exist between an inner-city ward or branch in Chicago or Philadelphia and a Utah ward in rural Paragonah or Portage. This distinctiveness is intensified as one moves away from the United States to places like Nicaragua, Sierra Leone, and India.

A very valuable work could be produced if a group of LDS scholars were to apply to LDS congregations the analytical tools employed to produce *American Congregations*. Such a work would provide keen insight into how the Saints experience and live their unifying religion in rich variations.