

Ecclesiology and Receptive Ecumenism

Nicholas M. Healy,
St. John's University, New York, USA

The Receptive Ecumenism project, I take it, prompts and enables the churches to listen and learn from one another from within their respective ways of being Christian, so that each church may become a better witness to the Gospel and follow Christ more truly. Mutual reception and learning may be at the local level, as congregations engage one another, or it can occur at the level of the denomination, by means of representatives or leaders. Either way, the project itself is an expression of a more widespread sense amongst those with ecumenical leanings that discussions about doctrine alone are inadequate. What needs to be brought into dialogue, rather, are the concrete forms of Christian living – the communal practices and particular and complex habits of thought and action as embodied within the churches' cultures and histories, for these inform doctrine perhaps as much or more as are informed by it, depending upon what you mean by doctrine.

This new orientation in ecumenical activity suggests that ecclesiology, too, will need to change, as it has changed quite frequently in the past. For one thing, it will, I think, need to broaden its scope, and in a way that will make it rather more complex. If the church is constituted by all the churches, then a theological account of the church as a whole, not just a single denomination, should be attempted, and from the perspective of the whole, rather a particular denomination. That account will be adequate only if it goes beyond doctrinal analysis to bring in, somehow, the full range of diverse patterns of Christian life in the concrete, and in such a way that the differences and complexities are part of the account, rather than reduced to a common denominator.

That is, to be sure, a tall order. Yet it has already been attempted in Roger Haight's recent three volume work on ecclesiology, which clearly displays both the concern for the concrete and for the broader scope. Haight develops what he calls a 'transdenominational ecclesiology', one, that is, to which each denomination could conceivably draw nearer and nearer. He rejects the traditional starting point in doctrine because, he believes, it leads to an uncritical account of the church, one that stresses its authority structures and separates the church from the world as a unique and superior institution. Instead, he bases his ecclesiology on the history of the church, supplemented by social theoretical insights, so as to develop a rich account of Christian ecclesial experience. From this, he draws out ecclesiological principles, each rooted in the empirical church, to build up a normative view of what the church should be that each denomination should be able to accept for itself in its own way.

Haight's book is a masterful scholarly achievement, and clearly marks out a promising way forward. I've raised critical questions about it elsewhere, and won't mention these here, except to note that account brings to light a certain tension in this kind of ecclesiology, a tension in both method and substance. In taking a broad view of the

history of the church, Haight's account is certainly empirical rather than doctrinal, but it is concrete to only a limited degree, since he must pick and choose from amongst the confusions and complexities of real life to generate his account of trends and isolate general ecclesiological principles. His account, as I said, is based on history and social theory, but long-range histories and social theories tend to describe what is common in human experience. In order to present an orderly and comprehensible account, they must select the usual experience of the majority rather than describe the plural experiences of the minorities, and smooth away the exceptional as but a proof of the rule.

A tension arises, then, as we attempt to give an account of the church as a whole while at the same time keeping the focus on the concrete, on the complexity and diversity of ordinary existence. One danger of in taking a broad perspective along Haight's lines is that, in rejecting doctrine for its abstractness and uncritical authority, we may replace it with other abstractions, such as large accounts of human experience, and with other authorities, such as social theories or the experience of some particular group taken as normative. As someone once said in a somewhat different context: *latet periculum in generalibus*. On the other hand, we must generalize at some point if we are not to confine ourselves to the local and particular alone and lose sight of their theological implications for the church as a whole.

It may be that Receptive Ecumenism must also address this kind of tension. The congregational project here in the north-east and similar projects elsewhere are clearly focused on engagement and mutual learning at the local level. How, then, will what is learned from them be brought to bear within the larger church? On the other hand, conferences like this one tend to take a larger view, which raises the question as to how we may give sufficient attention to the complexities of the Christian life in the concrete so that it properly infuses our work.

So I, for one, think that local project here in the north-east of engaging congregations in mutual learning is exemplary in its focus on the concrete, enabling Christians really to learn from one another through their differences rather than set up a dialogue between broad generalizations. But the tension remains, since somehow this local engagement should be reflected in theological reflection on the broader church. Yet there is nothing necessarily wrong with tensions in theology, since we cannot do everything all at once and systematically. So let's by all means keep on doing what we're doing: transdenominational ecclesiologies, like Roger Haight's, and local work, too, doing what we can to preserve both the practical focus and the bigger implications.

But I'd also like to suggest a rather different way we might bring the concrete into accounts of the church as a whole, a way to some extent influenced by the Receptive Ecumenism project and what I have learned from people like Mat Guest who do congregational studies. I'll sketch it out in four points.

First, to describe the concrete church, we begin with and stay at the very local level, not seeking an account that smooths out differences between congregations or ignores the conflicts and pluralism within each of them, but, on the contrary, actively looking for

both. If we use social theories, we do so only in an ad hoc manner, for the members of the congregation should control the description as much as possible. A participant-based ethnographic or social anthropological approach is thus the most suitable, since these tend to study congregations for its their own sake, without an ulterior agenda, unlike some more sociologically-oriented congregational studies, particularly in the USA amongst practical theologians, which often seek to do more than inquire and describe. They may have an interest in developing theories of how to promote church growth or its more rational organization, or in drawing up social principles and insights that may contribute to a theory with wider application. Such extrinsic concerns, though reasonable in their way, can distort the description.

Congregations, furthermore, are part of the church, and so are not like other communities, even though the dynamics of social interaction may be very much the same. They differ because their self-understandings and their actions depend upon doctrinally-informed language and practices, and that in itself, aside from how wonderful or how gormless their understandings may actually be, differentiates them from other groups. What they are and do cannot be fully described in some generic language, such as that of academic history or social science, without transforming their own description into a more generic kind.

This brings me to my second point, which approaches the matter from a different angle and ups the ante, as it were, on this issue of doctrinally-informed language and action. The very enterprise of congregational description – if it is to be part of a theological project – needs a theological warrant. That is – and here is one of the places where I would disagree with what I understand to be Haight’s position – empirical or concrete studies of congregations and churches *do* need to be grounded from the outset in doctrines about the church, for doctrines state the conditions of the possibility for being the church, and set out the basics of its nature and function. Receptive ecumenism requires similar doctrinal warrants, too, I would think, for whilst it is clearly academically reasonable for some people to spend their time working up descriptions of congregations if they can get the funding for it, and probably morally a good thing if they get people to talk to and learn from one another, such reasons do not make their work theologically meaningful or worthwhile. As a theological enterprise, it depends upon a set of beliefs, held by the churches and most of their members, I venture to say. They believe something like the following. The Holy Spirit works in a special way in the church, to the extent, at least, of making it possible for it to *be* the church. This doesn’t mean that the church is necessarily superior to other groups, just that it has a distinctive function. Churches’ members are called in faith, and are made, often in spite of themselves, more or less faithful witnesses to Jesus Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit. And the churches themselves are preserved in the truth, in spite of their failings, sinfulness and finitude. Again, this doesn’t mean we’re better, morally or in any other way. Just that we try to live in relation to a very particular person, Jesus Christ. Without these kind of beliefs – essentially the doctrines of grace, election and indefectibility – it is difficult to see the point – the theological point – in coming together as Christians, in constructing ecclesiology and in the project of receptive ecumenism and mutual learning. Bishop Tom Wright mentioned something along these lines earlier this morning.

Third, armed thus, we face two possibilities. We can stay local, with the ethnographic descriptions of congregations and with receptive ecumenism's efforts to get to know themselves and one another, to reconsider their practices and beliefs, perhaps to experiment in ways of Christian living learned from others. This is very good indeed, but unless it happens in most places, the church might be left largely unchanged, nor would the theological implications of such movements be fully worked through. So a complementary approach would be to work inductively with the results of such local inquiries, drawing from what is concretely the case in the congregations to essay more general reflections. This is important, too, but unless we keep in contact with the concrete congregations, we can wander off into abstraction very easily. The tension remains, in other words.

Supposing, we pursue the broader line. How might such congregational studies effect an ecclesiology of the whole church? Here I think it better to give examples rather than sketch out a method – better, frankly, because I haven't worked out a method would be adequate, since the process is more one of negotiation and experiment than something more clear and distinct. So, an example.

If you look over some of the congregational studies in the UK, certain things strike one immediately; I'll mention two. The first has informed some of what I've already said: that it is evidently very difficult to describe the 'identity' of a congregation, because the members of congregations are too diverse in their outlook to be captured in a generalization. A congregation may have tendencies towards a particular style, but its members have diverse construals of Christianity and how to live it. If this pluralism can be found within all, or at least most congregations, as I suspect it can, then an ecclesiology that fully appropriates the concrete will likely want to reconsider some typical ecclesiological assumptions. Amongst these would be the belief that substantial pluralism amongst the members in the pews need not affect the theological account of the church, that if pluralism need be mentioned at all, it can be dealt with simply by exhortations to greater conformity to the official or the communal line on the basis of a supposed necessity of us having the same mind and heart. If such conformity is not present, and has likely not been present for some time, if ever, and if we no longer think it is necessary for salvation, then we may want to reconsider our understanding of authority and doctrine. By this I don't mean get rid of either a doctrine of authority in the church, which I believe is necessary, nor drop doctrine as a vital aspect of Christian life, but rather reconsider their meaning and application.

A second example. Some congregational studies – I'm thinking particularly of the brilliant work of Timothy Jenkins – have found that the boundaries of a specific congregation cannot be clearly marked out. The congregation is affected, even partly constituted, not only by those who are active members, but by those, too, who exist on its margins, perhaps as family members, or those who work in organizations connected with the congregation, or those who live in a community in which the congregation is active. This penumbra around the churches and congregations and the church more generally in its various societies suggests that an ecclesiological account of the church as a whole should

expand to include this, as Harald Hegstad suggested in a paper given at a Oxford conference on Ecclesiology and Ethnography last September, in arguing too restrictive notions of church identity. The notion of clear and distinct church boundaries has informed and still informs much ecclesiological discussion, leading to confused and confusing problematics such as the relation of church and culture, or church and society, or indeed church and church, by consturing them as two separable entities, rather than as variably confused.

And I would draw from all of this – admittedly far too prematurely, but I'm running out of time, anyway – the conclusion that ecumenical efforts should not be limited to engagement between churches and congregations. Something like the same engagement should be a common practice within churches and congregations as much as between them. It usually isn't. Congregations I'm familiar with don't regularly talk about what they do and think with one another, and rarely freely. Nor does the ecclesiology of many of the main line churches support such discussion, for it tends to foster, as Haight rightly says, a kind of top down approach, in which right doctrine and good practice are taught authoritatively by the leadership, to be learned and appropriated by the rest. I don't think that's entirely wrong, by the way, in itself. Something of the sort has to happen. But it may be – for the good functioning of the leadership, too – that a complementary engagement amongst those in the pews, and between them and the leadership, should occur regularly and with some effect, and not just through representatives.

I don't mean to suggest that the point of such discussions would be to have everyone conform to the official view nor, on the contrary, to celebrate our diversity as the expression of something wonderful in itself. It suggests, to me, that for renewal and reform, we can look as much inside as outside the church, to what Jeff Astley has called the ordinary theologies of members of the congregations, for it is here that relatively free experimentation, renewal, contextualization and localization is already occurring as the grassroots. This gets us back to Receptive Ecumenism, for mutual learning should, to my mind, be an ongoing, constitutive practice of the church. If Christian lives are always diverse, perhaps even necessarily so, neither receptive ecumenism nor anything else would be able to put the church back together again, because it never really was perfectly one. Both receptive ecumenism, and ecclesiology, in a different ways, must rely heavily and rightly upon a doctrine of the Holy Spirit to help the church's common quest for more truthful, holy and felicitous ways of being in Christ.