
Book Review

CAMERON, Helen, Philip Richter, Douglas Davies and Frances Ward, eds. 2005. *Studying Local Churches: A Handbook*. London: SCM Press. xvi + 269 pp. ISBN 978-0-334-02960-1 (pbk). £19.99.

Studying Local Churches is about research methods in the study of Christianity at a local level. There are twenty contributors in all, including the editors, and the book is aimed at researchers from final year undergraduates to Masters-level, as well as candidates for ordination and leaders of local faith communities who wish to undertake research on behalf of their congregations. The book has a grid-like structure, drawing on four disciplinary strands, which are then brought to bear on four topics.

The disciplines are anthropology, sociology, organizational studies, and theology, and the topics are “global and local context,” “worship and action,” “resources and people,” and “power.” The inclusion of organizational studies is often neglected in the study of religion, but of course denominations and individual congregations have an institutional structure, involving people with designated roles, who utilize their property, and are concerned with income generation and the financing of projects. The theological strand is not about academic theology—which is often alien to local religious communities—but practical theology, addressing the expression of religious beliefs in action. As the editors acknowledge, the disciplines are interconnected: for example, one’s institutional structures can be determined by theological issues, such as one’s sources of authority.

The contributors deal with theoretical issues relating to the disciplinary strands. Topics like interpretative and positivist models, and quantitative and qualitative data are discussed in the context of sociology, while issues concerning theological neutrality, a community’s use of narrative and its collective memory feature within anthropology. The theme of “power” enables organizational studies to raise questions about decision-making structures, power and authority, conflict and conflict resolution. The practical theology strand makes reference to “action research”—research that involves the implementing of new strategies within an organization and assessing their outcomes. This is a type of research that is not normally encouraged within the study of religion, but it may be appropriate to ordinands or to researchers who are commissioned by congregations.

As well as theoretical issues, the editors incorporate practical advice for researchers, including the communities’ likely expectations of participant-observers and possible limits to participation, how to conduct interviews, consulting archives, maintaining confidentiality, contextualizing one’s research locally and globally, and so on. A good number of case studies also feature throughout the book, spanning a variety of topics and disciplinary areas. Potential research questions are indicated—a particularly welcome aspect, since students often find difficulty in defining their research tasks on a project.

Despite my very positive evaluation, I felt there were a number of weaknesses in the editors’ approach. It is somewhat surprising that they did not include advice on the use of the Internet in researching churches. Since many students start off their projects by consulting sources like Wikipedia, it might have been helpful to provide brief guidance on how to

evaluate web material. Also, since many congregations and most denominations now have their own websites, online research is an important aspect of contextualizing a congregation, and if they do not have a web presence, then this also tells the researcher something about them. I only found five Internet citations in the entire text, although one of these is to the book's supportive website, which has some additional useful material on questionnaires. (The site has numerous broken links, however.)

The handling of statistical data could be improved. Several statistical tables in the book do not indicate the units of measurement, and one table is completely uncalibrated (p. 148). On a literal reading, only 115 people ever attended a Baptist church in 1998! Since this is a common type of student error, the editors might have set a better example!

Finally, although the book acknowledges that the researcher may not necessarily belong to a church (p. 4), I would have welcomed greater recognition to the possibility of researchers coming from a different world faith. In some multicultural areas of Britain, as many as a third of students in a cohort can be Muslim, Sikh or Hindu, and can offer some quite distinctive observations on Christian life and worship. They might have been helped by some brief advice on Christian expectations of participant-observers, and how these might differ from other faiths.

Despite these reservations, the editors and contributors are to be commended for a thorough, wide-ranging and informative collection of material, which should prove invaluable to students researching Christian communities in their locality.

George D. Chrystides
University of Birmingham