

Book review

Dana R. Wright

Transforming Congregational Culture, by Anthony B. Robinson. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

Not long ago I preached a sermon that offended several people who felt I had overstepped the bounds of homiletic propriety. They complained about my reference to street language (I didn't use it) and about my reading from a contemporary play in which unsavory young men ask religious questions of each other (I deleted all expletives). Ironically, my sermon had to do with overcoming our bondage to a civic religiosity that focuses almost exclusively on the proper roles we play at the expense of being gripped by the presence of God. I urged that God calls us to an "odd" vocation in the world, one that offers a despairing culture something more life-giving than conventional social protocols.

Anthony Robinson's book *Transforming Congregational Culture* helped me discern meaning in this ironic experience. In a straightforward but not simplistic way, Robinson provides church leaders with concrete means for guiding congregations to embrace a more truthful vocational identity in light of seismic shifts in consciousness that threaten to render so many communities of faith irrelevant to the culture that is emerging. A seasoned pastor, he describes how contemporary congregations might navigate the crisis Phillip Hammond called "the third disestablishment" of Protestantism in the United States—without losing either integrity or relevance. Not only does Robinson help church leaders understand *that* there is a problem and *what* that problem means, he also offers them a splendid primer for considering *how* to "transform congregational culture" with theological integrity.

Robinson's strategy is interrogative. First, he specifies lingering assumptions about what constitutes religious identity for so many in North America who regard religion as a civic and moral obliga-

tion and the church as a democratic, socially established community-service and missionary-sending organization bent on upholding conventional moral authority in a rudderless culture. He then asks what the presence of “the Other” (God revealed in Christ) and “others” (our pluralistic context) means for reconstructing an ecclesial identity not enslaved to civil religiosity. Under “interrogation,” the congregation understands itself anew as the called-out community, a missionary work-in-progress of sinner-saints whose vocation to discern and to participate in the *Missio Dei* becomes more fully realized in ecclesial practice.

Robinson is not necessarily saying anything new. But he is saying it in such a winsome, accessible, and pastoral way that his book begs to be used as a resource to equip congregational leaders to take up the task of transformation. His is a how-to book that stands out from those promising ready-made techniques for rekindling church effectiveness. Robinson’s interrogative strategy actually places congregations in theological conflict about what it means to embody the gospel of Christ in today’s world. He challenges congregations to see themselves as if for the first time as they “re-question” themselves—“Who are we?” “Why are we here?” “What is our purpose?” He leads congregational leaders out from stale habits of mind and practice that tend to distort the gospel, into more compelling forms of ecclesial self-understanding and service that reveal the gospel’s true meaning for today. *Transforming Congregational Culture* provides an excellent means to encourage the journey toward theological renewal.

The streamlined argument and clarity of style mask Robinson’s profound understanding and integration of insights from various disciplines with his years of pastoral experience. And his strategy moves beyond simple technique, because it requires churches to reform themselves theologically and so to embody their intrinsic mode of being the church. Robinson is asking congregations to do what he has done—renew their minds. Why not include in the book a bibliography indicating the sources of instruction and inspiration that led Robinson to his own transformed understandings?

About the reviewer

Dana R. Wright (Seattle, WA) teaches Christian education at Fuller Theological Seminary (Northwest). His interests are centered in the area of adult discipleship and leadership formation in congregations.