

# *Occasional Papers # 1*

Crediton Congregational Church's  
'Middle-C'

Rev James Gregory

Produced by the CIPT

*Alumni*   
*Association*

## CIPT Alumni Association Occasional Papers

This paper is the first of what will be a series of occasional papers sponsored by the Alumni Association of the Congregational Institute for Practical Theology (CIPT).

The papers are edited versions of project reports and other submitted work produced by individuals who have either studied on the full training course run by CIPT or taken a number of its modules for specific purposes in their journey of faith.

The Alumni Association sees the publishing of these occasional papers as one way of encouraging our students in their studies and reflections. We are making these contributions available to everyone in the Congregational Federation – and beyond – who might be interested in the subjects covered.

While not everyone may be convinced by the points of view of the writers, and though the Alumni Association is not endorsing any particular point of view expressed in any of these papers, we are confident that these views are worthy of wide consideration.

Walter Riggans  
Director of Studies

## Crediton Congregational Church's 'Middle-C'

Rev James Gregory

### Introduction

Our church, Crediton Congregational Church, is made up of members from many different church traditions and those who are new to Christian faith. Less than 15% would think of themselves as having come from a Congregational Church background. In conversations, as I told many people that I had grown up in a Federation church I was often met with the reply, 'we're not very congregational here' or similar. In the recent past we have had ministers from outside the Congregational tradition, too. Previously, Christians in Crediton may have felt a strong allegiance to a particular ecclesiology. For many people this is no longer true; much more often they have chosen to settle in this church because of the people they connect with or the quality of the music or the informality of the liturgy rather than because of how we follow the Congregational Way.

In 2011 the church leadership team began to ask what benefit there was in our affiliation with the Congregational Federation. The General Secretary was invited to spend a weekend with them, and he was able to impart some of his excitement about the Congregational Way. As a result, our leadership structure changed significantly, though this new excitement did not pass to the congregation in any meaningful way. In 2015 I presented a summary of the Congregational Distinctives report at a Church Meeting. This was met with some enthusiasm and also lots of confusion. Church Meeting asked that I take more time to explain the points that I drew from this report. I decided that the best opportunity for moving forward with this conversation was on Sunday mornings which I then followed up with discussions in Church Meeting, mid-week Life Groups, Leadership Team meetings and 1-2-1 meetings.

My project was to ask: 'Do the language and practices of Congregationalism help us name and celebrate some of the foundational values of who we are?' There were two necessary stages in answering this question: firstly, helping the congregation to explore the Congregational Way more fully; secondly, reflecting together on how helpful to us that Way is. These are not completely separate stages, and neither has a definite end point.

### Basic Approach

#### First Stage

The main way in which I pursued the first stage was by planning five Sundays of services under the heading 'Middle-C'. We call our church CCC (Crediton Congregational Church), and so this investigation is about our 'Middle-C': How relevant is the title 'Congregational' to the life of our church?

The first Sunday I took Mark 1:16-20, 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, and Ephesians 4:15,16 as my texts. The main point was to explore Paul's metaphor of the church as a body made of different parts and then consider the additional metaphor of Christ as the head of the body. During this sermon I asked the congregation to call out advantages and disadvantages in the way we organise ourselves. In order to help my listeners to grasp a picture of Congregationalism, I compared it to the idea of the '99%' in the grassroots 'Occupy' movement and introduced the idea of Multi-Voiced Church.<sup>1</sup>

The second sermon explored further the idea of 'Jesus is Lord', this time from Romans 14. Paul invites the congregation to welcome each other as Christ has welcomed them. I highlighted Paul's discussions about the validity of the human conscience and related this to some of the history of Congregationalism. I made a positive case for having no creed other than 'Jesus is Lord'.

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<sup>1</sup> Murray-Williams (2012).

In the third week another member of the preaching team spoke about ways in which members of the congregation can get more involved in the life of the church.

In the final two sermons I took Acts 2:37-47 as my text. In the first week I talked about Baptism and Communion. I made a case for an inclusive account of both sacraments which was built upon the argument I had previously made about the freedom of the individual's conscience. In the second week I talked about our heritage as a dissenting tradition.<sup>2</sup> I pointed out that Luke takes time to record the Church's provision for those in need and I asked the question: 'What would it mean for us in Crediton today to step out of a majority or established view and start seeing things from 'below'?'<sup>3</sup> My hope with these five Sundays was that they would not just inform the congregation about our heritage but that we would together be enthused by it and helped to see ways in which it could help us face the future well.

## Second Stage

The second stage (reflection and discussion on what our middle-C means to us and how it is helpful) was facilitated in three ways: Life Group notes, Church Meeting, my open-door policy.

- After each of these Sundays, notes and questions were prepared for our mid-week groups so that they could reflect on what they had heard.<sup>4</sup> At the end of the series the groups' leaders were asked to summarise their discussions and feed them back to me.
- Also, at the end of the series we had a Church Meeting in which we asked for feedback on the 'Middle-C' Sundays. There were 64 members present and three adherents. A member of our leadership team facilitated discussion in groups of four or five people. After twenty minutes the groups fed back their main points and further open discussion followed for another twenty minutes.
- During the five weeks of this series I encouraged the congregation to tell me what they were thinking, and I received emails, telephone calls, and had lots of face to face conversations.

Together these three avenues gave us the next stage of the conversation and ensuing journey and provided the research evidence on which my reflections below are based.

## Self-Awareness Is Important

I am the researcher and minister of this congregation. I am also a member of the congregation. I cannot observe objectively. I am a part of the subject. I am also aware that as both member and minister I have a limited experience here. But I am also given the privilege of a stipend that gives me the time to listen and see what is going on here in a special way. In fact, a very clear part of the remit given to me by the congregation was that I would take time to consider how all the strands of the life of the congregation fit together and then reflect that back to the church.

On average I preach to this church three Sundays out of five. My understanding of preaching is that it is an act of Bible reading by the whole church and therefore not as 'mono-voiced' as it might seem at a surface level.<sup>5</sup> But I recognise that my voice in preaching and my role in the church gives me authority and a privileged position. This privilege is furthered in this project by the fact that I conceive of myself as being able to reintroduce the congregation to a Congregational heritage they have for the most part forgotten about. The danger is that I may be using my speaking about The Congregational Way as a cover to give greater weight to what is in fact just my vision for this church – which might not be the same as God's plan!

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<sup>2</sup> I used Bebbington (2007) as an object lesson.

<sup>3</sup> I had introduced Bonhoeffer's concept of 'Theology from Below'.

<sup>4</sup> About 35% of the congregation are in Life Groups.

<sup>5</sup> 'The Church speaks the sermon' - Hauerwas (2009), p.12.

Then our 'Middle-C' project is nothing more than a useful tool by which I can pursue my ends. I was also aware of the possibility of my projecting my own ecclesiology onto the Congregational texts I was reading. Being aware of these dangers is a good first step toward avoiding mis-leading the congregation.

### Survey of Resources

The Bibliography below shows some of the resources that I used. These fall into four categories:

- I needed works that articulate the Congregational Way, in terms of ecclesiology and history.
- I needed Bible commentaries that would help me root the ideas of The Congregational Way in Scripture.<sup>6</sup>
- I also found several wider ranging books on ecclesiology useful which are listed here too.
- Finally, as the project went on, I found several works of sociology/anthropology enormously helpful.

In relation to the fourth category, I specifically valued the ideas of Spiral Dynamics, Bounded and Centred Communities, and the Church as an Open System. I outline these three ideas here so that I can refer to them more briefly in my reflections.

*Spiral Dynamics* is a theory of the development and evolution of human self-awareness.<sup>7</sup> The theory is not completely new, rather it draws together lots of earlier, similar thinking into a cohesive whole.<sup>8</sup> Spiral Dynamics marks out several stages of development, and each stage is given a colour to make it easier to talk about these concepts. Of these stages two are particularly evident in our congregation - Blue and Green. The Blue stage describes a community or individual which bases its identity around a code, law or text; for the Blue community there is only one true story, and that is *our* story. The bond that holds a Blue community together is shared belief. In the Green stage, other stories are embraced, especially minority stories, stories of the oppressed and marginalised. For the Green community those other 'tribes' all belong to our 'tribe'. Here the bond that joins and keeps us together is not common belief but rather common attitude and behaviour.

What I have outlined here is a drastic simplification of a very thorough theory, and the theory is open-ended; it expects new stages of human self-awareness to develop. It would be a mistake to embrace this thinking fully without taking time to consider the ways in which it could undermine the Christian Gospel – its non-dual, universalising direction of travel may well be at odds with Christian claims to ultimate truth. However, I have found it enormously useful in helping me make sense of what I see happening in our congregation. Like a good song it helps me put into words what I know to be true and haven't been able to articulate.<sup>9</sup>

The second theory that will become helpful as I gesture towards some possible answers to our questions is that of *Bounded and Centred communities*.<sup>10</sup> Jeremy Myers states that a Bounded community 'has a theological border, a doctrinal fence' which separates those who are inside the fence from those who are outside. This relates closely to the Blue community above. However, in a Centred community there is 'no dividing line between "us" and "them", no rule or guidelines to determine who is "in" and who is "out", but there *is* something compelling at the centre that pulls people in. By turning again to the metaphor of the Church as Christ's body we can see how the

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<sup>6</sup> Because I am much more comfortable as a preacher when I feel I am honestly presenting what I see in Scripture. Also, because the tradition in the congregation is to start with the Bible text.

<sup>7</sup> It can relate simultaneously to a human being growing from baby to maturity and the evolution of human societies.

<sup>8</sup> Maslow's hierarchy of needs is an earlier theory that informs Spiral Dynamics. It also draws heavily on Teilhard de Chardin's concepts of spiritual evolution and the 'Noosphere'. It is attributed to Clare Graves, though Don Beck and Ken Wilber have popularised it.

<sup>9</sup> And I am exhibiting my own 'Green-ness' by being so willing to take someone else's story and incorporate it into my own!

<sup>10</sup> Myers (2011).

Centred community reflects Bonaventure's words that God 'is the one whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.'<sup>11</sup>

Ilia Delio's proposal that the Church should be like the biologists' *Open System* helped me see that a Centred community does not just have Christ as its centre but is also knowingly open to Christ's newness breaking in from outside - even through the stranger. Delio states that a Closed System 'relies on internal processes and dynamics to account for the system's organisation and function'.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, an Open System 'participates in an active exchange with its world, using what is there for its own renewal.' Furthermore it 'maintains a state of non-equilibrium, keeping the system off balance so that it can change and grow'.<sup>13</sup>

### Presentation and Analysis of Data

For many people this focus on our 'middle-C' was energising and gave them a greater enthusiasm for the church. They felt their own position in the church was validated and that there was more room for their voices than they might have previously thought. Here are a couple of examples of that sort of response, sent to me in emails.

'I felt so pleased to discover the priorities and values of Congregationalism were so neatly aligned to my own view of how church should be. The importance of social justice and being part of the dissenting tradition is of particular significance to me. To have historical forbears is encouraging. (Church as part of the establishment is what drove me away from church when I was young.)'

'The series really spoke to us both at a time when we were questioning what church was about and how it's expressed in different denominations. It confirmed for me that the Congregationalist view very much fits with how we are and it's refreshing to be able to concentrate on the essentials and not worry about disagreeing or being distracted by minor issues.'

Some others were less sure about the conclusions that I was drawing but really appreciated the way in which this series opened up several areas for questions. One member in one of the Life Groups said how healthy it was that I was consistently naming the 'elephant in the room as we considered these ideas.'

Several people could not see what the fuss was about. They didn't think we were covering anything new and that what I was defining as 'distinctive' was in fact true of all Christian churches. Some of these people, and others too, were wary about us defining ourselves as being distinctive from other forms of church and thought this unnecessarily divisive. I was careful not to be seen to judge other ecclesiologies; my approach was to say that there are many authentic ways of being church, but that our distinctive ecclesiology is the one that suits my/our values well and that sets us up to face the challenges and opportunities of our changing world optimistically.

I had an ongoing conversation with a church member who works for our local Anglican diocese who felt the ways I had referred to the Church of England in my account of the roots of the Congregational Way should have been tempered by reference to what the Anglican church is like now. I agreed with him that in lots of ways everyone is more congregational than 400 years ago!

The thought that this series was a diversion from much more important things that we should be covering in Sunday services also came out in the church meeting. Here is an extract from the minutes of that Church Meeting.

[*a member of the leadership team*] led a discussion on the meeting's view on the recent series of sermons on Congregationalism. Thoughts that came out of this was that good outcomes from this

<sup>11</sup> Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey to God*, pp. 5, 8, 100.

<sup>12</sup> Delio (2015) p. 118.

<sup>13</sup> Delio (2015) p. 125.

included thinking about our corporate responsibility; affirming some important truths that we agree on; seeing our identity as part of a dissenting tradition; the virtue of seeking the mind of Christ; and discussing matters where there is disagreement between genuine believers. We also agreed that the lack of a creed can create some confusion about what the essentials of faith are, especially for young believers. Another thought was that the series might have been better introduced in Life Groups, so that the good news of Jesus is introduced in most or all Sunday messages.'

Our church meetings are normally positive and even fun. This discussion started very well but became less enjoyable as it went on! On reflection it was not very well led in the last ten minutes and some voices dominated that part of the discussion in a way that did not reflect the mind of the congregation. This was shown to be the case the following day when I received three emails from people who felt their perspective was not being represented.

In the meeting it became clear that the discussion about our Middle-C helped some members articulate and vocalise their wider concerns about the way the church was going. Specifically, a few were very concerned that if someone had wandered in off the street in one of these services, they would not have heard the gospel and would have left un-saved. What was implicit in this perspective was that 'the gospel' (as understood in that mode) is preached far too rarely anyway! Secondly, several members were very uncomfortable that they didn't know if others in the church believed the same things as them.

### Reflection

This time focused on our 'middle-C' brought some concerns and grumbles to the surface. These concerns mostly came from those with a conservative evangelical background who I would also suggest are 'Blue', bounded-community, people.<sup>14</sup> I might have caricatured them as ideologically small-minded and judgemental (though often very gracious and loving in their actions). I could have considered them closed to change (and therefore closed to the new-ness of the Spirit). The characteristics of the 'Blue' stage in the Spiral Dynamics theory names judgementalism and resistance to change as potential pitfalls for 'Blue' communities / people and therefore could be used to back up these assessments.

But when I self-identified as 'Green' I began to have a little more insight into why I might have reached those conclusions. The criticism of the Green stage is that it is so desperate to hear all the voices and be open to all that it doesn't want to judge anyone and so it cannot entertain the idea that some voices are just more intrinsically 'right' than others. I recognise that the strength of feeling I have previously had about Blue dogmatism says more about me than about dogmatism per se - I am desperate to keep lines from being drawn in the sand to the point of overlooking the need for discernment. I need to find ways of 'hearing all the voices' without also forgetting that some stories are just better than others. This balance of charitable listening and wise discernment is intrinsic to the Congregational Way.

In trying to challenge the dogmatism I had also overlooked the way in which fear of forsaking our heritage can influence people's behaviour and speech. For many of these people church has been a place where they have been told what they need to believe to be saved. By intentionally leaving some issues unresolved I was shaking something at the very heart of these peoples' Christian identity. By saying 'you can think for yourselves', and 'this is a matter for your conscience before God' I was assumed to be communicating 'our leaders don't know what they are doing!'

Certainly, I had underestimated the felt need to preserve the heritage of faith from any outside corruption; but there was something deeper than this that was stoking that fear too. Though I didn't have the terminology at the time I realise now that I had been instinctively trying to move our church beyond being a Bounded Community to become a Centred Community. I still think this aim is good and I think we are already making this transition. However, in true Green fashion I was

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<sup>14</sup> A majority group in our congregation.

avoiding making truth claims too assertively. The result of this was that I was asking people to forgo their boundaries without helping them see that we do have a clear Centre of commonality that will draw us together.

When I heard someone in Church Meeting say, 'but I don't know that others believe the same as me' I first heard Blue being exclusive and controlling. On reflection I think perhaps the question behind this statement was 'is there a centre that draws us together?'

As we explore these issues further, I need to be mindful of answering that question confidently to reassure people. There would be different ways of articulating that Centre and it would be appropriate to use a variety of them. However, there was one linking idea throughout the discussions we were having together. This is the idea that God really is with us, and that he has committed himself to us, as individuals and as a community, to follow him faithfully. In place of the security of a codified law or creed that gives us (self-)confidence that we are in the right, The Congregational Way gives us a mode of being in which our confidence has to be built on the reality of God's present work among us.

For us to trust that God could be speaking to us and guiding us through the voices of all of us, and even that he is revealing himself in our disagreements and through the voices of the dissenters among us, will require humility and faith, but it is a stance that opens us to greater growth and maturity. This is what I found so helpful about Ilia Delio's proposal that the church is an Open System. By learning to live with being off-balance and by participating in active exchange with those who see differently – in our congregations and in the world around us – we make ourselves open to the ongoing change which is the work of the Spirit.

### Conclusion

My initial question was: 'Do the language and practices of Congregationalism help us name and celebrate some of the foundational values of who we are?' I think the short answer is 'yes!' But the question could be better formed. Instead, I would ask something like this: 'Given the position we are in, do the language and practices of Congregationalism give us tools with which to grow in love and maturity?' And the answer to this question is also a resounding 'yes'.

Considering these issues with the congregation has given us all a better perspective of the theological and ideological breadth that there is here. To move on from here we need to find ways of identifying God at work in this diversity and of receiving the revelation of him in the 'other'. By referring back to our heritage (which is indeed still in our 'DNA' and not as forgotten as I had assumed) we are given precedents and practices to walk together in unity that goes beyond uniformity. Instead of needing to refute the boundaries that we might have used to define ourselves, we are given a better and more compelling vision of God's centring work which empowers and values us all.

But in some ways I am *less* convinced now than I was at the beginning of this project that applying my understanding of the Congregational Way is best for our church, because I am more aware of how my claim to a superior understanding of this Way (or any other 'knowledge') could become a power-move which helps me to parachute in my own ideals onto the church. That said, I am more convinced that the health and ongoing discipleship of our congregation depends on us being willing to challenge our own stratified ways of thinking and being. It is precisely through our differences in opinion and priorities that we are learning what it means to follow Jesus together in love.

For those of us whose significant grounding is in conservative evangelicalism, an exploration of The Congregational Way is an opportunity to step aside from the worldview we have inherited and assess it from a new perspective. For some this is a frightening thing to do, but for others it becomes a remarkably releasing move in which all sorts of unarticulated questions and issues are able to be expressed and addressed. By listening more carefully to the voices of fear, those of us

who are 'Green' are reminded that there is a Centre to our community that needs to be clearly named.

As the Pastor of this congregation, my role is not to use my articulation of Congregationalism or any other '-ism' as a means to control people; rather I need to bring before our congregation ideas and ways of being that inspire us and motivate us. I do not need to be the originator of these ideas, just another vehicle through which they are given a hearing. Most of all I need to trust that God is at work amongst us and I need to have my eyes opened to the ways in which he is provoking his people into growth and new-ness. I can name and embrace that new-ness and give others the confidence to follow the questions it brings.

There are three things that we must do as we look forward together.

- We need to keep this conversation going. This can be done more effectively than we have done by finding other ways of facilitating group discussion. World Cafe is certainly one way we need to try properly.
- Secondly, we need to keep coming back to the Bible. For most of the congregation (and me!) the Bible has a foundational place in our faith and to try to move on without it would just lose those people. But more than that, the Bible is the subversive text that will keep us off balance and will provoke us and shake us.
- So the third thing is that I want us to be able to wrestle with these biblical texts, to push back against some of them, to find the stories between the lines, to point out the dissonances in them and then after all that to still affirm that God is fulfilling his promise of meeting us here in these words.

By taking the values and priorities of our heritage seriously and working them out alongside an honest and thoughtful reading of the Bible, we will equip ourselves to face the controversies and opportunities that will come our way in the next decades without needing to anathematise each other.

I am left with more questions to explore:

Having seen how powerfully I am drawn to egalitarianism, I need to find a way to hold the tension of that ideal with the practice of pastoral leadership within the church.

Secondly, I see how much I crave accord and agreement. I need to not feel disillusioned or hurt by disagreement and instead recognise that it is often a necessary step in growing into maturity.

Finally, I see that our leadership team is more open to these discussions just because I have given them more time and opportunities to chew them over. I need to find avenues for others in the congregation to explore big ideas more freely and thoroughly than we can on a Sunday morning.

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## About the Author



James is the Senior Pastor of Crediton Congregational Church where he was called in 2013. As he says: 'This is a vibrant, diverse and loving congregation and I am delighted to be a part of it!'

He has been able to help the congregation to engage more fully in serving the needs of their community and recently obtained funding for a Community Worker to grow this work. He recently ran a local GIFT course.

James is the Secretary of the South West Area of the Congregational Federation and also works closely with the other churches in Crediton.

He is currently studying for a Masters degree in Theology from the University of Exeter.

