

Champion churches?

by [Carl S. Dudley](#) in the [July 18, 2001](#) issue

Excellent Protestant Congregations: The Guide to Best Places and Practices. By Paul Wilkes. Westminster John Know, 258 pp., \$18.95.

Paul Wilkes's book on Protestant congregations and its twin, *Excellent Catholic Congregations*, are well written, appealing and instructive--but their seductiveness is potentially dangerous. Wilkes has divided the book on Protestant churches into three major sections, each both helpful and problematic. The first, about two thirds of the book, spins out dramatic stories describing aspects of life and ministry in nine "excellent congregations." This is followed by the author's reflections on the "points of excellence" these stories illustrate, points which first appear as sidebars in each story. A final section, called an "Index of Excellent Congregations," lists 300 best churches.

Wilkes and his two associates used a procedure commonly called "reputational research" to identify the "very best" congregations. They asked about 30 informants to name such congregations, informants "in congregational renewal, those who studied church life, denominational and nondenominational experts, religion reporters, and those who addressed certain constituencies (Asian or African American, rural, inner-city, for example)." From these, they chose nine churches to profile, a panorama of vital congregations that have a clear impact on the lives of their members and their communities.

Each church is inspirational in a different way. Wilkes shows how each uses its unique gifts to communicate the gospel in its particular setting. Two of the churches follow the model of older, established congregations: the Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., and Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois. Some reflect creative responses to typical conditions faced by mainline churches, such as the networking of a Lutheran ministry in rural Oklahoma, and the rerooting of a once-elite Episcopal parish in Worcester, Massachusetts. Some, like the immigrant Chinese congregation in Chicago and the frontline ministry of the Full Gospel Church of God in Christ in inner-city New Orleans, tell timeless American

stories. Some, like the United Methodist Church in California led by a woman senior pastor; the large, multiniched Baptist church of Denver; and Warehouse 242 (from Acts 2:42), a cutting-edge ministry for Gen-Xers in Charlotte, North Carolina, reflect unique aspects of contemporary church life. Each is anchored in "excellence," yet each stretches the meaning of that word in different directions.

Since these stories are so compelling, we may miss the problems with Wilkes's approach. Although diverse and instructive, the churches he has selected are not representative. For example, all the congregations that Wilkes profiles are significantly larger than typical Protestant churches, since the average Protestant congregation has fewer than 100 active members (see the recent research: www.fact.hartsem.edu).

Congregational age is also skewed. Two of the nine congregations were formed in the past five years and two more are less than 20 years old, while the great majority of mainline Protestant congregations are older by half a century. Wilkes writes almost exclusively about young churches and new ministries, organized within the past ten years. One implicit message to readers might be "Don't grow old" or, better, "Reinvent yourself often."

Wilkes has a gift for recognizing and celebrating the drama in strong, young, new ministries. All the congregations whose stories he tells faced and conquered a great crisis. But churches do not typically stand on the edge of such dramatic circumstance. These are stories of heroes of faith, inspirational but not generally comparable--and we should beware of inappropriate comparisons.

Wilkes next suggests what churches can learn from the stories he tells. These learnings appear first as "points of excellence" highlighted in each story, such as "creativity in worship," "modular Christian education" and "pre-evangelization." He then goes on to list and explore "common traits of excellent parishes" and to provide an annotated and expanded "points of excellence index."

These points and traits are not a framework for systematic analysis but various approaches that readers can translate from Wilkes's stories to their own. The "points" describe particular congregational programs, while the "traits" reflect the way the congregations approach those programs; it's the difference between what's done and how it is done. These lists are meant to challenge and change many current approaches to ministry.

Comparing the points and traits presented in the Protestant and Catholic books offers two insights: Wilkes let the stories of individual churches speak to him--that is, he made no noticeable effort to correlate the lists within or between the books. Second, he implies a fundamental difference between Catholic and Protestant approaches to ministry. He sees excellent Catholic churches as organic institutions working from within to strengthen their communities, and excellent Protestant churches as outsiders seeking to break down the walls to transform their communities. If Wilkes is correct, adapting to these differences would mean making major adjustments to further neighborhood ecumenical cooperation.

The long list of churches with which the book concludes raises a major question: Are these really "the best"? The author's geographical index of 300 "excellent congregations" seems to be meant to serve two purposes: to allow people to find and visit these congregations, and to encourage conversation among them--as happened at a recent conference in New Orleans. But the dangers of creating such a list of nine champions and 291 "honorable mentions" (as one reporter called them) is obvious. Are the country's 325,000 unmentioned Protestant churches really all inferior to these? The Catholic book carried a disclaimer at the beginning of the list, stating that "there are other congregations we have not found, but these, we feel, are representative." Why does the Protestant book have no such disclaimer?

The "winners" have not been shy about their new status. Episcopal and Presbyterian press releases noted that their denominations each are represented by about 10 percent of the churches on the list, a percentage several times larger than their share of Protestant churches. Even more out of proportion: ten of the 500 congregations of the Association of Vineyard Churches are on the list, and megachurches make up 25 percent of the list--although less than 1 percent of Protestant churches in U.S. belong to that category. Meanwhile, Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist, Hispanic and historic black denominations are significantly under-represented. This inequality of distribution raises serious questions about how full and careful Wilkes's research has been.

Beyond the obvious limitations of all reputational research, which depends completely on which informants one chooses, this study presents the danger that inspirational stories and imaginative practices will be converted into correct behaviors imposed by ambitious leaders and copied by hungry churches. Clearly some excellent congregations are missing from this list, and the churches that are listed are not excellent in every way. These congregations are stellar because of

their continuing contextual creativity, a quality destroyed by making them into models for others to duplicate.

Wilkes lends himself to this seduction of "excellence" when he calls his book a "Michelin Guide of Excellent Churches throughout America," "the cream of the best of the best," and "THE guide to best places and practices." The churches he includes may all be excellent in some ways, but when Wilkes claims they are "the best" he clearly reaches beyond his research, freezes the definition of "excellence" and inhibits the creativity of others.

There is a story about a farmer who was frustrated by the size of eggs his hens were laying, so he purchased an ostrich egg, put it in the middle of the barnyard, and announced to his chickens, "I just wanted you to see what others are doing." We do not need to hoodwink the hens in order to inspire greater productivity. But we do need to hear the stories Wilkes tells and to be inspired--not inhibited--by the examples of what he calls "reproducible excellence."