

## **Introduction: Showing Dissenting Hands**

Michael Davies, Anne Dunan-Page, Joel Halcomb

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# Introduction: Showing Dissenting Hands

**Michael Davies** *University of Liverpool, UK*

**Anne Dunan-Page** *Aix Marseille Univ, LERMA, Aix-en-Provence, France*

**Joel Halcomb** *University of East Anglia, UK*

After much seeking God by prayer, and sober conference formerly had, the Congregation did at this meeting with joynt consent (signified by solemne lifting up of their hands) call forth and appoint our brother John Bunyan to the pastorall office, or eldership; And he accepting thereof gave up himself to serve Christ, and his church in that charge; and received of the elders the right hand of fellowship.

This brief account of Bunyan's election to 'the pastorall office' of his congregation at Bedford, remains, for a number of reasons, of profound significance. On one level, it presents a vivid picture of a defining moment both in Bunyan's life and in the history of his church: a vital turning point, perhaps, for a congregation beset throughout the Restoration by harassment and persecution. Yet, on another, it also tells us a great deal about the nature of a church that can be seen putting its Dissenting principles into practice so clearly at this meeting, held (illegally, somewhere in Bedford) on 21 December 1671. It testifies, for example, to the way in which so many of the Bedford congregation's decisions – from the admission of members, to the appointment of church officers and the issuing of correspondence – would be taken corporately, 'with joynt consent': here, through a show of members' hands. Central to the polity of the Bedford Church was precisely this commitment to independence: the congregation alone would decide who would become its minister. Equally, this short description confirms a sense of church life ordered, first and foremost, *sola scriptura*. When Bunyan's brethren (and presumably sisters too) raised their Dissenting hands to confirm their choice of pastor, they did so by conscientiously following Acts 14:23 (the ordination of Paul and Barnabas as elders), though with the Geneva text's sense of 'ordination by election' (i.e. as chosen by the congregation) firmly in mind.

We begin our 'Introduction' to this special issue of *Bunyan Studies* with a reminder of this key occasion in the history of Bunyan's church because this account, at once so simple and yet so rich in detail, is not to be found in any of Bunyan's own writings, including his spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding to*

*the Chief of Sinners* (which contains an account of his early ministry but not of his later appointment as pastor). It can only be discovered, in fact, by reading a very different kind of book: the Bedford Church Book, or, to give its original title, *A Booke Containing a Record of the Acts of a Congregation of Christ, in and around Bedford*, this being the manuscript record of the congregation's meetings, dutifully recorded in various hands (including Bunyan's) from early 1656. As such, the account of Bunyan's election, minuted in the Bedford Church Book and quoted above, exemplifies a number of points that the essays published in this special issue seek to highlight about the value and importance of the original manuscript records of 'gathered' churches produced, on both sides of the Atlantic, during the seventeenth century. For what these records offer, uniquely, is an intimate insight into the lives of their individual congregations: how they first embodied and were subsequently organised; the pastoral actions and disciplinary decisions that they undertook; the disputes that they were forced to settle, within and without the church; and the hardships that they faced as godly communities, ranging from harvest-damaging weather to outright schism and, of course, religious persecution.

As Bunyan's election shows, a congregation's Church Book not only provides us with a direct view into the heart of the godly convictions shared by its members, it also embodies its experiences collectively in writing. The hands raised by the Bedford Church's members when appointing Bunyan as pastor were also the hands that subscribed letters of correspondence sent from one church to another and that contributed to the deacon's purse in collections for the poor on the Lord's Day each week. These were the hands upon whose godly actions (as well as misdemeanours) the minutes of meetings were based, and they were also the hands that composed those minutes and kept church records safe and secure during what the Bedford Church Book terms the 'troublous times' of the Restoration.

To encounter the living history of such congregations, we need to look to their manuscript Church Books and records. The essays collected in this special issue suggest, in a variety of ways, how we might do so. Indeed, one of the purposes of this collection – perhaps the first of its kind to focus its energies exclusively on manuscript records of early Dissenting churches – is to highlight the wealth of extant material available and its importance for our knowledge and understanding of the 'gathered' church tradition both across the Atlantic (in England and New England) and across denominational identities (Baptist and Congregational).

In the first essay, then, Mark Burden and Anne Dunan-Page attempt to define British and Irish Church Books and records, in relation to minutes, registers, ministerial diaries and other Dissenting documents. Other contributors address records relating to specific seventeenth-century churches, such as those at Cockermouth and Bedford, as is the case in essays by Bob Wordsworth and Michael Davies respectively. Joel Halcomb's essay revisits the debate over the origins of Dissenting denomination identity through evidence found in Congregational Church Books from the English Revolution. Margaret Bendroth and James F. Cooper then take us across the Atlantic to assess the wide array of Church Books and records held in New England, currently being harvested and digitised as part of the 'New England's Hidden Histories' project. Margaret Bendroth reveals the rationale behind this project, a programme of the Congregational Library & Archives in Boston, while James Cooper unravels the richness of the manuscripts in terms of their diversity and importance not only for our understanding of church government and the nature of congregationalism but also for their power to unearth 'the voices of women, and African and Native Americans' in relation to Puritan spirituality. Frank Bremer's essay, by contrast, argues that record keeping should also be examined alongside other godly practices, such as conferences and prophesying, to give a more balanced view of the respective roles played in churches by both the clergy and the laity.

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Although these essays are firmly rooted in the scholarly expertise and long-term research interests of their individual contributors, nevertheless the impetus for this particular collection has its more immediate source in the 'Dissenting Experience' project (established in 2012 by Anne Dunan-Page, Michael Davies, and Joel Halcomb). Many of the articles published here first came to light, for instance, as papers delivered at the 'Varieties of Dissenting Expression' conference, held at Dr Williams's Library, London, on 8 November 2014. The second of three annual 'Dissenting Experience' gatherings, this one-day event focused exclusively on the forms of Dissenting expression available to Puritans and their congregations on both sides of the Atlantic. It examined the wealth and variety of written materials, both in print and from archival sources, relating to the experience of early Dissent across a wide spectrum of genres: from surviving Church Books in Old and New

England to letters and correspondence, poetry, and Dissenting activities in the book trade. The essays in this special issue, then, following the spirit of this particular conference, consider the methodological challenges and possibilities of using such sources to understand how the Dissenting experience was documented and communicated, and to assess too their value in terms of the literary history of Dissent and the writing of its collective past.

The wider origins of this conference lie, however, in one of the central aims of the ‘Dissenting Experience’ project: to encourage and indeed to facilitate the re-examination of surviving Dissenting manuscript sources held variously in local and national archives, specialist libraries, and – in some cases – by churches themselves. An enormously extensive range of records relating to the life and history of early Dissenting meetings has survived – from minute books (containing church covenants, confessions of faith, and letters), to financial accounts, church histories, and registers of members – providing an unparalleled view into the daily lives and collective experiences of ordinary Dissenting men and women. Yet they are largely hidden from view: scattered widely in repositories across the UK and Ireland, they often remain overlooked and under-used by scholars. In addition to those Church Books traditionally familiar to historians (usually because they have been transcribed or published) there is an untapped wealth of lesser-known records that have survived and which give fascinating insight into the experience of early Dissent, both locally and nationally.

This collection of essays constitutes for us an important branch of an ongoing, wider engagement with and promotion of scholarly interest in early Dissenting church records. In addition to the three conferences (held at Dr Williams’s Library in 2013, 2014, and 2015), ‘Dissenting Experience’ also has an established scholarly blog dedicated to the history and culture of early British Dissent (<http://dissent.hypotheses.org>), and it has recently published online *An Inventory of Puritan and Dissenting Records, 1640–1714* – the first catalogue of its kind to locate, identify, and collate repository holdings for extant early Dissenting church records held across England, Ireland, and Wales ([www.qmulreligionandliterature.co.uk/online-publications/dissenting-records/](http://www.qmulreligionandliterature.co.uk/online-publications/dissenting-records/)).

With the addition of Dr Mark Burden and Dr Rachel Adcock to the core team of ‘Dissenting Experience’ researchers, and with both a postdoctoral fellowship from the Fondation Aix-Marseille Université and a British Academy/Leverhulme small grant in hand, the project is now preparing *A Calendar of British and Irish Dissenting Church Records, c. 1640–1714*. This catalogue will provide the first complete bibliographical description of those early Dissenting church records in manuscript extant in Britain and

Ireland, with a summary of contents and key points of information for each. It aims to guide an enormous range of researchers within various disciplines – from literary studies and ecclesiastical history to genealogy and local history – to resources that have remained long unrecognised and woefully underused. The ultimate goal, though some way off yet, is to make as much of this material as possible available and accessible digitally, in the way currently being pioneered by the ‘New England’s Hidden Histories’ project ([www.congregationallibrary.org/nehh/main](http://www.congregationallibrary.org/nehh/main)).

‘Dissenting Experience’ remains, then, an ongoing collaborative project dedicated to opening the manuscript records of Dissenting history to all. We hope that the seven essays published here will serve to demonstrate in lively and invigorating ways why this project remains so vital for us to pursue. For, without doubt, the Dissenting hands to be found upon innumerable manuscript pages of congregations’ Church Books and registers – documents that will often record the names of the ‘saints’ along with their own churches’ particular trials, triumphs, and disasters – certainly deserve to be raised more visibly and prominently in current scholarship of early Dissent.

**Michael Davies** *University of Liverpool, UK*

**Anne Dunan-Page** *Aix Marseille Univ, LERMA, Aix-en-Provence, France*

**Joel Halcomb** *University of East Anglia, UK*