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Chapter 10

‘Not Keeping One’s Place in the Church’: The Disaffected Dissenters

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On 27 January 1711, a ‘report’ compiled by three brethren—‘Br Mathews Br Achinn & Bro Lampett’—of the Baptist congregation at Cripplegate, London, was ‘read to the Church’, their findings having been previously been ‘Deliverd by word of mouth’ at a meeting ‘on y^e 30 Dec’. The purpose of this report, based on a series of visitations and interviews, was to relay to the church the reasons offered by several members for absenting themselves from communion. This is what was returned on this occasion:

B^r S[ister] Bullon having had a child lately & is excercised with it is not able to come but her spirit is savage [?] she is desirous to attend & blames her self that she does not not withstanding

S[ister] Millington

s.^d she thought we had lost her she talked seriously & is desirous for time to come to att end that she had no Objection nor taken offence at any & would attend

S[ister] Hammond

Went last Summer in to y^e Countrye B Taylor Had been Ill but was recovered & will attend

B[rother] Mercer promises he will come & has once been here since he Was vizited

B[rother] Coward

sais his mistress & he differd & he feared she would get him prest so he got out of her way to Justice Short and now can not get out to hear

B[rother] Grimes Went to hear Jos Jacobs on a subject in the Canticles on w^{ch} he has been y^e 10 weeks & when he has don he will make good his place

B[rother] Budephas was not att home but S Budephas sais y^e way is too farr yet she will attend

S[ister] Garret has been [?] keeping w^{ch} Occasiond her not attending

S[ister] Wood ~~The~~ The reason she does not come in y^e distance of y^e way she had rather come but yet goes with her husband to hear Mr Pigott

B[rother] Mathew Taylor

Has been bewildred about his soul he returns y^e Church thanks for sending to him & would make good his place

B[rother] Patrick

Took y^e Vizitt very kindlye but s^d he was willing to have some conference with the bretheren He was told when y^e Church would have a meeting yet he did not come.¹

As is clear to see, those absentee members both found at home and willing to answer for themselves pleaded variously that they were ill, had children to look after, were living too far away from the church, had had a dispute with an employer, were hearing sermons elsewhere, or were ‘lost’ and ‘bewildered’. Most expressed a desire to return to the church, their absences being circumstantial, it seems, rather than due to any conflict with either the minister or other members of the congregation.

Despite its importance as a key problem within Dissenting church life throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the question of absence for early modern Nonconformist congregations, whether from communion on Sundays or from church meetings on weekdays, has so far received, at best, only passing treatment.² In part, this is because the wealth of records detailing the motives of absenting congregants, the sanctions

¹ RPCO: MS ‘Cripplegate (Curriers Hall) Church Book’ (hereafter ‘Cripplegate CB’), fol. 68r.

² See, for example, Patrick Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants: The Church in English Society, 1559–1615* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 208–12; Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 84–124; N. J. G. Pounds, *A History of the English Parish: The Culture of Religion from Augustine to Victoria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 262–63; Raymond Brown, *Spirituality in Adversity: English Nonconformity in a Period of Repression, 1660–1689* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012), 292–97.

taken by their congregations against them, as well as the methods devised by the churches to identify neglectful members remains largely overlooked.³ The purpose of this chapter is to examine a wide range of manuscript and printed records for gathered churches, both Baptist and Congregational, dating from the 1650s to the early decades of the eighteenth century, in order to shed light on the question of absenteeism within Dissenting church life, both before and after the passing of the Toleration Act in 1689.

These records are so significant precisely because they reveal in a unique way the nature of the godly's involvement with their congregations, particularly when disciplinary matters are involved. Indeed, those church members who resisted what they saw as unreasonable demands being placed upon them by their congregations have left barely any other trace in the literature of the period. Nonconformist church records are, then, often the only means by which we might reconstruct their motives, their experiences, and their sense of a Dissenting identity: an identity that could, at times, appear puzzling, if not paradoxical. On 4 December 1692, for example, two messengers of the General Baptist church meeting at Shad Thames, London, were sent to one Brother Stevens, 'not only to returne him thanks. for. His libberal giuft towards y^e erecting o^r Meeting house but allsoe. to discourse him touching his long. abbsence from. his place. in y^e Church'.⁴ Dissenters like Brother Stevens evidently saw no contradiction in absenting themselves from their congregations, on the one hand, while still providing them with financial help on the other.

³ See further Anne Dunan-Page, 'Writing "things ecclesiastical": The Literary Acts of the Gathered Churches', *Études Épistémè*, 21 (2012), <http://journals.openedition.org/episteme/417> (last accessed 22 August 2018); Mark Burden and Anne Dunan-Page, 'Puritans, Dissenters, and their Church Books: Recording and Representing Experience', in Michael Davies, Anne Dunan-Page, and Joel Halcomb (eds.), *Dissenting Hands*, a special issue of *Bunyan Studies*, 20 (2016), 14–32. For a comprehensive list of extant Dissenting church records, see *Inventory*.

⁴ DWL: OD 15 'Shad Thames (later Dockhead and Fair Street) General Baptist Church Book, 1674–1710' (hereafter 'Shad Thames CB'), no fol. (4 December 1692).

This chapter will focus on the complex positions of those disaffected Dissenters who, while not fully committed to the communal and spiritual experience of seventeenth-century Nonconformity, nevertheless did not regard themselves either as apostates or conformists. As such, the extant church records force us to reconsider the notion of Dissenting congregations being constituted simply as tightly-knit groups of zealous believers who shared both uniformly and all of the time the same energized way of life, the same ardent spirituality, and the same degree of involvement in managing church affairs. The aim of this chapter is to think again about Dissenting *exceptionalism* in church life by addressing afresh the key issue of attendance, and with it of congregational engagement and disaffection.⁵

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As the Dissenting church records amply demonstrate, the phrases most commonly used to denote absence were ‘not to keep one’s place’, ‘to neglect one’s duty’, and ‘to withdraw oneself’.⁶ Withdrawal could be understood in different ways. First, the church could

⁵ On the concept of early modern ‘communities’, see further Alexandra Shepard and Phil Withington ‘Introduction: Communities in Early Modern England’, in Alexandra Shepard and Phil Withington (eds.), *Communities in Early Modern England: Networks, Place, Rhetoric* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 2–15; Michael J. Halvorson and Karen E. Spierling, ‘Introduction: Definitions of Community in Early Modern Europe’, in Michael J. Halvorson and Karen E. Spierling (eds.), *Defining Community in Early Modern Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 2–23; Raymond Mentzer, ‘Communities of Worship and the Reformed Churches of France’, in Halvorson and Spierling (eds.), *Defining Community*, 25–42; Collinson, *Religion of Protestants*, 268–73. On community and the Continental Reformation, see Euan Cameron, “‘The Godly Community’” in the Theory and Practice of the European Reformation’, in W. J. Sheils and Diana Wood (eds.), *Voluntary Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 131–53.

⁶ For examples of the phrases ‘neglect of dutye’ and ‘slack in their dutye’, see LMA: CLC/179/MS20228/001B ‘Memoranda and minutes of church meetings and membership lists of the congregations successively at Petty France, Westminster; Artillery Lane, Spitalfields; Walbrook; and Turners’ Hall, Philpot Lane, 1675–1727’ (hereafter ‘Petty France CB’), fol. 23; RPCO: ‘Bromsgrove Church Book’ (a facsimile of the original held at the Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service, hereafter ‘Bromsgrove CB’), fol. 6.

‘withdraw’ from a member, that is suspend him or her from communion (generally for seven communion Sundays, renewable) but without passing a sentence of excommunication. This was an act of Christian charity, the time being used to bring the sinner to repentance.

Conversely, a member could withdraw from the church, no longer attending either ordinances (such as the Lord’s Supper or baptisms) or the meetings. This second type of withdrawal is what will interest us here: cases in which members stopped participating in the daily life of the congregation and refused to communicate with its members and officers. Such matters were taken seriously by Dissenting churches. After all, full participation in the congregation’s activities was part of the covenanted duty of mutual watchfulness, and the necessity to meet together regularly was inserted in some churches’ covenants, as in the Baptist church at Bromsgrove, Worcestershire:

4 y^t wher as we have bin slacke & remis in religious duttys as in holy prayer, & in absenting from, & slighting of y^e opportunitys of grace by meeting to gether with o^r brethren in y^e worshipe of god att times apoynted by y^e church wee Couenant & agree to doe so no more but to take all oppertuities y^t posible we can to weyght ~~we~~ Vppon god heavein Vnto y^e end of o^r dayes.⁷

More often than not, failing to be present at meetings was linked to other misdemeanours, as in the case of Thomas Jacob, summoned before the church at Broadmead, Bristol, on 6 March 1677:

That *Br. Tho. Jacob*, a Member of this Congregation, had of late declined his duty, and neglected y^e assembling of himselfe with y^e Congregation, [not] only Lord’s dayes, but very *Seldome on y^e Weeke-dayes* meeting, or at dayes of *Prayer*. *And alsoe* hee had been observed to have drunck too much [the] Pastour proceeds to give him y^e Church’s Admonition.⁸

⁷ ‘Bromsgrove CB’, fol. 7.

⁸ Roger Hayden (ed.), *The Records of a Church of Christ in Bristol, 1640–1687*, Bristol Record Society’s Publications, 27 (1974), 187–88.

Being present simply on Sundays, and especially on the Sunday of communion, generally once a month, hardly sufficed either.⁹ In 1707, the Wapping congregation reminded its members of their solemn promise ‘before God and the Church’ to be present at ‘the publick worship and special Ordinances of God our Savior with the Church on Lord’s Dayes and [at] all other Church-meetings’.¹⁰ Equally, attending on Sundays without taking communion also amounted to an absence. In 1689, when the church meeting at Petty France, London, decided to exert more control over its members, it declared John Humphrey absent, although he had been ‘hearing’ on Sunday for twenty years, because he refused to take communion ‘thro’ some scruples of conscience concerning the nature of faith’.¹¹

Some churches held weekly meetings throughout the year the purposes of which could vary, from lay prophesying to the enforcement of discipline, and from Biblical exegesis by the pastor to question-and-answer sessions for the members. Most churches organized at least one monthly meeting, open to all, where the affairs of the church were discussed, where narratives of experience were delivered, officers appointed, offenders heard, letters read, and responses debated. Other meetings were also compulsory: whenever the covenant was renewed, for example, as well as on fast days, prayer days, humiliation days, and thanksgiving days. On 19 November 1712, for instance, members of the Baptist church at Ford, Buckinghamshire, agreed to meet at ‘Bro: Hunts’ in Weslington for ‘a day of fasting and prayer’, ‘And that Euery member should make good their place their or else giue a Reason why’.¹² Lay

⁹ On communion among seventeenth-century Dissenters, see Margaret Spufford, ‘The Importance of Religion in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries’, in Margaret Spufford (ed.), *The World of Rural Dissenters, 1520–1725* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1–102 (86–102).

¹⁰ Strict Baptist Historical Society Library, Dunstable, Bedfordshire: MS ‘Wapping Church Book’ (hereafter ‘Wapping CB’), fol. 176.

¹¹ ‘Petty France CB’, fol. 26.

¹² W. T. Whitley (ed.), *The Church Books of Ford or Cuddington and Amersham in the County of Bucks*. (London: Kingsgate Press for the Baptist Historical Society, 1912), 90.

members, whether men or women, were also required to assist in the daily ‘business’ of the church: that is, to call on prospective as well as sick members, deliver admonitions, visit other churches (and, in turn, lodge their emissaries), provide bread and wine for the communion and wood for the meeting house, witness a marriage or a will, or sew baptismal robes. Ordinary members were expected, therefore, not only to participate in the worship of God but also to be ‘helpfull in Church bissiness’, to borrow a phrase from the Bedford records, the notion of mutual aid being central to the concept of the visible church.¹³

In Baptist churches, being absent when new members were immersed was also considered an offence. In 1707, James Murch, the colourful leader of the church at Bampton, Oxfordshire, had to remind his members that being present at this ordinance was not optional: ‘Bro: Murch signified his Disatisfaction at persons so frequently Urging for Publick baptism and not attending it when it was so. & the more because our generall attendance might Render the Ordinance more acceptable to others & Certainly might yield advantage to our selves’.¹⁴ Murch did not fail to notice that another performance was attracting more followers on the same day:

bro: murch Did then Reprove persons in generall for attending y^e stage play sett for in y^e town particularly mentioned sister Ann ball of y^e town for her frequent attendance & y^t from y^e beginning to the End which he Conceived to be shamefull for any but Especially for a young woman professing godliness and more Especially to y^e neglect of an oppertunity of waiting on the Lord.¹⁵

Given the amount of time a member had to devote to the congregation, it might be tempting to believe that those able to perform all of the covenanted duties required of them must have formed a small, perhaps socially elite group around the pastor and other church

¹³ *Minutes*, 96.

¹⁴ RPCO: MS ‘Bampton Church Book’ (hereafter ‘Bampton CB’), fol. 97.

¹⁵ ‘Bampton CB’, fol. 97.

officers.¹⁶ After all, pastors had to remind the godly on a regular basis that being present at meetings was at the core of their duties, which perhaps indicates that ordinary members considered extra-ecclesial activities incidental to full membership:

Bro: Murch adviseing us to Give better attendance such Days it being shamefull for soe few as Did to attend, and soe many to come soe Late as they Did and then not to tarry while the affairs of y^e church were manageing specially such who were Ready to find fault with what was Done in their absence as tho: y^e Discipline of y^e Church were not y^e concern of y^e Whole.¹⁷

In this case, the pastor did not hesitate to resort to *ad hominem* invectives again: this time, one Brother Morse was singled out by Murch for

his constant neglect of attending on y^e discipline of the Church and that in an unmeet manner whether wett or Dry hott or Cold Long or short Lords or week Days assoon as y^e Auditory Did goe off ordinaryly to rise up in Hast & goe out with them without any Regard to Church agreement to y^e contrary.¹⁸

Just as there were some Dissenters who did not mind contributing to the cost of a chapel to which they rarely went, so too, it seems, there were others who tried to leave *incognito* among the crowd of hearers to avoid hours of debate about the affairs of their church that, they felt, did not ‘concern’ them. Morse at first pleaded the long distance that separated him from the

¹⁶ See Halcomb, ‘Congregational’, 80–1. For the idea of different ‘circles’, with varying degrees of involvement in the community, see John M. Triffitt, ‘Believing and Belonging: Church Behaviour in Plymouth and Dartmouth, 1710–1730’, in S. J. Wright (ed.), *Parish, Church and People: Local Studies in Lay Religion, 1350–1750* (London: Hutchinson, 1988), 179–202; Cameron, ‘Godly Community’; Samuel S. Thomas, *Creating Communities in Restoration England: Parish and Congregation in Oliver Heywood’s Halifax* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 156–62; Ellen S. More, ‘Congregationalism and the Social Order: John Goodwin’s Gathered Church, 1640–1660’, *JEH*, 38 (1987), 210–35.

¹⁷ ‘Bampton CB’, fol. 86.

¹⁸ ‘Bampton CB’, fol. 129.

regular meeting place of the church, but finally informed his fellow saints at Bampton that God had appeared to him to ask him to remove his membership elsewhere.

Absenting Dissenters, disaffected or otherwise, were, then, a significant and also a growing problem in Nonconformist church life: one hardly resolved by Toleration. In May 1706, a recommendation of the General Baptist Association, copied into the minute book of the church at Barbican, London, acknowledged that absenteeism had become so widespread a 'practice' that it was endangering the very future of the Dissenting cause, noting rather bleakly:

y^t to make a Common Practice of deserting y^e assemblies to w^{ch} [members] belong is a great Discouragement to y^e Ministers of such Churches, a hindrance to y^e carrying on y^e work of God in y^e Churches and occasions a Neglect of y^e poor amongst 'em and y^t y^e Continuance of such a practice hath a tendency to week and will perhaps in time Issue in y^e Dissolutions of some Churches.¹⁹

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When joining a gathered church and accepting its covenant, believers assumed duties and obligations that went far beyond attendance on the Lord's day alone. Time and again, however, the disciplinary cases preserved in the church records reveal that members could quickly forget their 'solemn promise' and start deserting the weekly or monthly meetings, if not also communion and the Sunday service, due either to practical or economic obstacles, or simply because the congregation had failed to engage fully their time and attention as busy employers, husbands, and wives. Some disciplinary cases involving absentees could, moreover, rumble on almost interminably, it seems. The Glass House Yard congregation in London, for example, examined cases of brothers and sisters who absented themselves for

¹⁹ RPCO: MS 'Barbican Church Minute Book, [Paul's Alley], August 1699 to September 1739' (hereafter 'Paul's Alley CB'), fol. 115.

‘several years’ (1683), for ‘a long time’ (1685), and for a ‘considerable time’ (1692),²⁰ the church at Petty France welcomed back in July 1680 a sister who had gone to Ireland eleven years earlier;²¹ the meeting at Barbican requested in 1716 that a sister be reintegrated after sixteen years;²² while at Bury St. Edmunds, in 1687, one John Gipps had not been seen for two decades,²³ and at Bury Street, London, an old man, ‘Mr Quealch’, presented himself to the church again after a gap of some thirty years.²⁴

Members such as these appear, in certain cases at least, to have had no information about or awareness of either their status within or their obligations towards the church. In 1696, for example, Robert Steed, pastor of the large congregation of Baptists meeting in Cripplegate, inserted this entry into his meeting’s records:

27th 3^m [i.e. May] 1696

One the day aforesayd the Church being assembled the Case of Bro: Provo was before the Church presented that He had been formerly a member of this Church and had been dealt with for neer twenty yeare^s since or more and had been ever since absent from the Church till of late He came to the Church and without giving any account of himselfe attempted to break bread. For which he being called to an account. He denyd that ever He was withdrawn from by the Church and could give no reason for his long absence and no sense of his miscarriage in these things. Therefore the Church reckon^d it their concernment no longer to beare with such miscarriages but by an un^{ani}mous consent He was excluded and putt out of their

²⁰ RPCO: ‘Barbican, Goswell Street, Glasshouse Yard, 1680–1740’ (hereafter ‘Glasshouse Yard CB’), fols. 30, 32, 80, 95, 128, 139.

²¹ ‘Petty France CB’, fol. 16.

²² ‘Paul’s Alley CB’, fol. 187.

²³ SRO (Bury St. Edmunds): FK3502/1, ‘First Minute Book, Congregational Church, Whiting Street, 1646–1801’, fol. 74r.

²⁴ CL: II.a.38 ‘Bury Street Chapel, 1673–1778’ (hereafter ‘Bury Street CB’), fol. 108.

communion as an impenitent person which was ~~declared~~ solemnly declared at the time before mention'd.²⁵

Clearly, Brother Provo did not remember that the church had suspended him some twenty years before, let alone on what basis, and could neither explain his absence for such a long time nor what made him suddenly decide to take communion again. Although Steed still persists in calling him 'Brother', since Provo had not been excommunicated,²⁶ it is difficult to surmise what sense of a Dissenting identity church members such as Brother Provo might have had in the interim, where they worshipped during and after the Restoration, or how they interacted with their Nonconformist congregations, if at all. Despite the churches' injunctions, which treated with equal severity absences from Sunday services and weekday meetings, the likes of Brother Provo tended to dissociate communion from a practical involvement with the congregation and had 'no sense' that church life meant more than breaking bread. For this reason, the church would probably have never attempted reconciliation had not Brother Provo suddenly reappeared.

We should not imagine that churches simply kept patience with such long-term absences. Rather, and this was especially true of the larger congregations, they were often ill-informed about how things stood. Indeed, they may have had no accurate record of who had joined and when (or had only been 'proposed' without a formal incorporation), who had been suspended from communion, or who had changed residence, either temporarily or permanently, even though a letter of dismissal was in theory necessary to join another church. Internal evidence shows, in fact, that Dissenting churches had great difficulty maintaining the registers that should have been used to check absences and monitor the spiritual status of their members. Some records do include alphabetical lists, with the names,

²⁵ 'Cripplegate CB', fol. 11r.

²⁶ For similar language in the church at Bedford, see Michael Davies, 'Spirit in the Letters: John Bunyan's Congregational Epistles', *The Seventeenth Century*, 25 (2009), 323–60 (332–36).

addresses, and occupations of members at the time of their incorporation.²⁷ Others tried to update the status of their members, but in ways that proved largely ineffective: efficient means of indexing and cross-referencing the entries of the church books, following disciplinary cases, excommunications, and dismissions, were often lacking.²⁸ In 1700, the Shad Thames congregation asked Brother Tangett to ‘search this book throughout’ (some three years’ worth of entries, that is) to see whether one Mrs Ketch had been admitted or not.²⁹ Elsewhere, when dismissal letters were sought to effect the transfer of members between churches, the relevant information was not always available, due to the deterioration of some of the records. In 1701, for example, when one ‘Mrs Hix’ asked to move from the congregation of John Belcher at Bell Lane, London, to that of Henry Scrosby at Mill Yard, officers answered that ‘they found nothing about her in their Book but [...] they had 2 Bookes that were Torn and therefore they could not tell but her Case might be thereby lost’.³⁰ In these two particular instances, it is clear that the officers did not use lists of members but the minutes of their meetings to resolve the matter.

Absenteeism was, of course, a problem in Dissenting church life long before the early eighteenth century. In the 1650s congregations can be seen having to devise means of identifying absent members, and the sheer variety of methods employed suggests that none of them was, in the final instance, deemed wholly adequate. One solution was to cry out the names of congregants in church by way of a roll-call. To do so, however, required an up-to-date list of full church members (including those suspended from communion who were nevertheless encouraged to attend the Sunday service): to do this efficiently must have been

²⁷ See, for example, ‘Glasshouse Yard CB’; ‘Petty France CB’; LMA: CLC/179/MS20230 ‘Devonshire Square, register of members’.

²⁸ See, for instance, ‘Wapping CB’, fols. 195–212.

²⁹ ‘Shad Thames CB’, no fol. (April 1700).

³⁰ DWL: 5333. B.1, ‘Mill-Yard Minutes being the Church Book of the Seventh Day General Baptist Congregation 1673–1840, with Registers and Records’, fol. 121.

rarely possible. Despite the fact that this practice would also have been time consuming, it was nevertheless attempted in 1665 by the church meeting at Broadmead, Bristol, which instructed Edward Terrill, its record-keeper, to take down the names of all the members ‘in Parchment’ and to call them out on Sundays.³¹ Julius Saunders, pastor of the church at Bedworth, Warwickshire, evidently had the same idea: ‘Being the Lords day I read over the Names of the Church to see who were present & filled up their places.’³²

A change of pastor, or the renewal of a covenant, presented a good opportunity to update a church’s registers. In Bedford, for example, the successor to John Bunyan, Ebenezer Chandler, proposed early on in his pastorship undertaking more systematic checks when it came to identifying the membership. As a minute notes for the church business discussed in January 1692:

At the same meeting the names of members inserted in the Church Book was read over, and ordered that brother Crocker and brother Hawkes so make an inspection how those members stand that are under the senshures of the Church, or have at any time been admonished, and to know what there offences are and who do absent from the Church meeting.³³

Given the difficulty of identifying those who did not show up, dutiful members were often asked to assist the pastor and officers: absenteeism was, in other words, a problem for the whole church to tackle, not just the minister and senior brethren. In July 1650, the church at Canterbury led by John Durrant even solicited neighbours to report on members living near them.³⁴ By contrast, at Ilston, in 1657, the ‘brethren and sisters of the seuerall meetings of the

³¹ Hayden (ed.), *Records*, 121.

³² Warwickshire County Record Office: MS ‘Julius Saunders’ Diary being the diary or minute book of the Bedworth Congregational Church’ (hereafter ‘Julius Saunders’ Diary’), fol. 88.

³³ *Minutes*, 95; and see further Chapter 9 in this volume.

³⁴ CCAL: U37/1 ‘Canterbury Congregational Church, Watling Street, Canterbury, Church Book, 1645–1715’ (hereafter ‘Canterbury CB’), fol. 16r (15 July 1650).

church' were required to 'giue in their names to the deacons of euerie the sayd meetings, yt soe they may know whom to call to account for their absence', and so that 'the sayd deacons' in turn could:

within one month send or deliuer to the pastor a note of all their names within the places of their abode as alsoe what persons of their seuerall quarters are deceased, noted disorderly, or cast out.³⁵

Yet another solution was to establish a network of correspondence, as was the case at the church at Broadmead, Bristol, after it had been noticed that many absences were in fact due to unrecorded changes of residence. The following entry, in May 1672, reveals the degree of confusion that reigned, with members being scattered from Ireland to the West Indies:

Y^e Church took into Consideration y^e severall Members belonging to this Congregation that, by God's providence, they were removed to remote habitations; some in *Ireland*, some in *Nevis* Island, some to *London*, some to y^e West countrys of England, and other parts. It was ORDERED that a *Generall* letter should be writt, and a Cobby thereof signed by y^e Brethren in y^e name of y^e whole, and soe a letter sent to Every one of those Scattered Members, To Inquire into y^e state of their soules, and to know whether they did keepe close to their duty *In Walkeing* with some church, and *With Whome*? That soe if they had not, nor will not hearken to Exhortation therein, that they should be cast out of this Church. And, accordingly, there were letters sent to Each, and we had answers from them.³⁶

Churches also attempted to manage their meetings more efficiently, either by fixing their dates and times once and for all, or by agreeing to meet less frequently. In 1659, the Bedford Church decided that a quarterly general assembly should be attended by all members, men and women, 'without any delay or excuse'.³⁷ In August 1711, the Baptist church at Maze

³⁵ B. G. Owens (ed.), *The Ilston Book: Earliest Register of Welsh Baptists* (Aberystwyth: National Library of Wales, 1996), 30.

³⁶ Hayden (ed.), *Records*, 137–38.

³⁷ *Minutes*, 35.

Pond, London, dedicated a long discussion to the question of absenteeism and agreed on what the church book calls a ‘method’. First, the congregation adopted a fixed day and time for its monthly meetings—five o’clock sharp on the Monday preceding the Sunday of communion—before then making sure that its members were ‘accountable’ by declaring in public their reasons for being absent.³⁸ This church thus favoured a dual approach: facilitating the availability of members by informing them well in advance when the meetings would take place, and by forcing those who had deemed it acceptable to appear only intermittently to answer to their more assiduous peers face to face.

In the end, the most common strategy was to divide the territory from which the congregation was drawn into several zones to be visited, at regular intervals, by a couple of members. These visiting brethren were supposed to report on absent and sick members, on those who had been admonished, and on those suspended from communion. Such measures were instituted at Bedford, for example, as early as 1656.³⁹ Here, members were first appointed to visit Bedford and Kempston, Houghton Conquest, Wilshamstead, Elstow, Cardington, Oakley, Stevington, and Radwell. Later ‘Fensom’ (Fenstanton?) and Haynes were added and, finally, Cotton End, Bletsoe, and Gamlingay.⁴⁰ At the end of the seventeenth century, those sent by the Bedford Church to visit absent members were even given a little questionnaire to complete when interviewing them: ‘first, how the work of God goes on in their souls; secondly, whether they are in charity with all the members; thirdly, whether they duly come to the Lords’s Table’—an imitation, it seems, of the kind of visitations conducted in the national church.⁴¹ A few years later, a question touching upon the situation of the

³⁸ RPCO: MS ‘Maze Pond 1/2, quarto, 1696–1712 [“Minute Book”]’, no fol. (2 August 1711). On punctuality, see Max Engammare, *L’Ordre du temps: L’invention de la ponctualité au XVIIe siècle* (Geneva: Droz, 2004).

³⁹ *Minutes*, 23, 28, 29, 32, 38.

⁴⁰ *Minutes*, 30, 38, 104.

⁴¹ *Minutes*, 101.

poorest members was added, suggesting that such visits had social as well as spiritual objectives.⁴²

Updating the registers and calling out the names of members on a weekly basis, sending out letters, enlisting the help of deacons and neighbours, altering the frequency and timings of meetings, organizing visits—all of these empirical methods might have helped to identify absent members and persuade them to return. Or they might not. After all, there are few indications that more efficient record-keeping among Dissenting churches occurred before the mid eighteenth century, and even then evidence from the records suggests that, in the end, some churches abandoned any attempts at outright coercion in order to go back to the fundamentals of congregational life: those of a godly society based on the mutual ‘helpfulness’ of members who strove to get to know each other better, perhaps even with a list of their fellow members’ names in hand. This is certainly what happened at Bedford in 1755, when it was agreed:

that all the members should endeavour to know one another; and in order to it as many as could should get and keep by them a list of the brethren and sisters, and make such alterations in it from time to time as should be necessary, according as any died or any were added; that they should converse more frequently and freely together, should more consistantly attend meetings for prayer, and especialy the Church meetings, whether there is any other business than that of prayer or not.⁴³

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Despite growing anxiety about scant attendance at both Sunday services and weekday meetings, gathered churches accepted from their members ‘reasonable’ excuses. Football, however, was not one of them. The church at Fenstanton was dismayed to hear that this particular pastime was behind one John Blowes’ absence on a fast day and that he had

⁴² *Minutes*, 120.

⁴³ *Minutes*, 187.

initiated the game in question with a group of friends.⁴⁴ In 1687, following the death of one especially sedulous member, Julius Saunders recalled the physical hardships that had to be overcome simply to participate in church life as one of the saints: ‘Elizabeth Ridgly of Hazelbitch Northamptonsh.’ died, he recorded, on ‘M. 2. d. 21. [i.e. 21 April] 1687 she was a diligent saint, who came to our Church-meetings 17 long miles, 12 times a year, & that on foot.’⁴⁵ Most Dissenters did not enjoy the robustness of Elizabeth Ridgly and pleaded, often successfully, the distance between their place of residence and the meeting place of the church,⁴⁶ the difficulty of finding good horses,⁴⁷ the coldness of the season, and various ailments, either diagnosed or simply feared, by way of excuse for non-attendance.⁴⁸ When circumstances became too problematic, members might be granted permission to worship elsewhere or efforts were made to gather a new church. The first folio of the manuscript of the church meeting at Hart Street, Covent Garden, specifies that it was founded because, in the absence of a Calvinistic Baptist church nearby, ‘age and infirmities’, as well as distance, had forced members to switch denominations.⁴⁹

Linked to physiological excuses of all sorts was poverty: ‘[Sister Whine] pleaded her Lameness at first as the onely cause why she did not keep her Place but afterwards she said it

⁴⁴ Edward Bean Underhill (ed.), *Records of the Churches of Christ, Gathered at Fenstanton, Warboys, and Hexham, 1644–1720* (London: The Hanserd Knollys Society, 1854), 244.

⁴⁵ ‘Julius Saunders’ Diary’, fol. 61

⁴⁶ For instance, DWL: 201.11 ‘A Copy of the First Minute Book of Tacket Street Congregational Church, 1686–1791, Ipswich’ (transcript by John Duncan, 1960), 19; ‘Shad Thames CB’, no fol. (4 September 1693); ‘Petty France CB’, fol. 18; ‘Bury Street CB’, fol. 72r; NRO: FC 11/1 ‘Guestwick Independent Church Book, 1694 to 1854’, fol. 52; ‘Wapping CB’, fol. 145.

⁴⁷ Leonard J. Maguire (ed.), *Early Records of the General Baptist Church Meeting in or about Bessels Green, Kent* (London: The General Baptist Assembly, 2001), 8.

⁴⁸ ‘Bampton CB’, fol. 31; Underhill (ed.), *Records*, 232.

⁴⁹ RPCO: ‘Proposals for the Settling of a Baptist Meeting in the westerne parts of the Suburbs of London’, in MS ‘The Church Book att Covent Garden Anno: 1691 to Anno: 1699’ (hereafter ‘Covent Garden CB’), no fol. (1691).

was her Poverty, and because y.^t she had not money to give where it was expected, was the reason why she absented; but y.^t She would for the future keep her Place better'.⁵⁰ If exceptions were frequently made for indigent or sick members, this was not always the case for those who feared punitive responses (economic or otherwise) from their masters or employers for worshipping at a Dissenting meeting. On 17 September 1713, for instance, Sister Powell failed to pacify the congregation at Maze Pond: 'Str Powell appear'd this day before y.^e Church, and being charged w.th. great negligence in not keeping of her Place for a long season, she justified her selfe ag.^t. The said Charge, and pleaded her Buisness was such, y.^t she could not attend, nor keep her Place better on the Lords-day, w.th.-out incurring the displeasure of her Master.'⁵¹ Powell, in the church's view, should not have feared her master so much. The same objection was raised by gathered churches against timid wives. In Fenstanton, when one Jane Adams mentioned her husband's 'reproaches', the church admonished her because she had not been detained from attending 'by force'.⁵²

Absences could be linked not only to geographical, economic, physical, and either marital or familial difficulties but also to spiritual problems, whether disputes or 'scruples' of conscience, or even despair.⁵³ When members were in the midst of a quarrel with other members or officers, they could not participate in the ordinances and the churches recommended reconciliation and forgiveness.⁵⁴ Some of these quarrels were directly linked to a difference of views with the minister. At Bedford, John Fenne absented himself following a

⁵⁰ RPCO: MS 'Maze Pond Quarto, 1713–1722', fols. 11r–11v.

⁵¹ 'Maze Pond Quarto, 1713–1722', fol. 7v.

⁵² Underhill (ed.), *Records*, 242. See similar cases in 'Shad Thames CB' (4 September 1682), and Whitley (ed.), *Church Books*, 230.

⁵³ See Donald A. Spaeth, 'Common Prayer? Popular Observance of the Anglican Liturgy in Restoration Wiltshire', in Wright (ed.), *Parish, Church and People*, 125–51. For the presence of Dissenters in the parish, see Margaret Spufford, 'Can We Count the "Godly" and the "Conformable" in the Seventeenth Century?', *JEH*, 36 (1985), 428–38.

⁵⁴ 'Wapping CB', fol. 75. See also 'Bampton CB', fol. 67.

quarrel with Ebenezer Chandler; at Bampton, James Murch was criticised for his treatment of disciplinary cases; at Canterbury, one Buckhurst violently criticized John Durrant and insinuated he was a millenarian.⁵⁵ At Axminster, the choice of Stephen Towgood as minister, following the death of Bartholomew Ashwood, had profoundly affected one Robert Batt:

There was only one brother, named Robert Batt, being one of the deacons in this church, he being dissatisfied with the proceedings of the church in this election, because they would not comply with the dictates of his judgment and reason, broke off from communion with them. Albeit he could urge nothing of reason against the choice of his pastor, and, after all endeavours, both by the eldership of this church and others of the brethren, to convince him of his duty, and to persuade him to return to his place, persisting in his opinion and, as was too evident, supposing by the death of the former pastor he was now loosed from those bonds which engaged him to maintain fellowship with this church and take his liberty to go where he list, so quitted his station in this house of God.⁵⁶

Having nursed Ashwood in his illness, Batt's behaviour testifies to a strong, personal attachment to his former pastor. In this case, Batt's membership seems to have depended almost entirely on his relationship to Ashwood: following the latter's death, he felt no obligation, it seems, either to the church or to its new minister.

Churches were attentive to members who absented themselves from communion because of spiritual troubles and, provided they were informed, they strove to help those afflicted by spiritual desertions. At a meeting of the church at Covent Garden on 23 January 1695, for example, it was agreed:

y^t y^e Pastor & Deacons of y^e This Church do make it there business to Enquire into y^e
Ground & Reason of any Members Neglect of their Duty in not Setting Down Att y^e Lords

⁵⁵ *Minutes*, 95 (and on Fenne's dispute with Chandler, see further Chapter 9 in this volume); 'Bampton CB', fols. 13, 57; 'Canterbury CB', fol. 12r.

⁵⁶ K. W. H. Howard (ed.), *The Axminster Ecclesiastica 1660–1698* (Ossett: Gospel Tidings Publications, 1976), 72.

Table Every Time any person misses y^l if under any Temptation we may contribute w:^t lyes
in our Power towards their escape out of it & if under any Moral Impossibilitie of
performing their Duty excuse it to y^e Church.⁵⁷

Despairing believers, however, occasionally feared that they might contaminate the whole
community.⁵⁸ The church book of the congregation at Bromsgrove contains copies of moving
letters sent to the pastor, Thomas Eckells, in this regard. James Piggott, a congregant there,
asked for the prayers of the church to cease and pleaded to be excommunicated: ‘so Iudg it
yo^r dutty to Cast me out of [your Camp] that A blessing may attend you: for ’tis my desire to
preserve the Cause of y^e great god that is offen[d]ed with Me above and beyond Life: tears
prevent my sight soe must break of who am Like to haue my Portion with the Hypocrits:
James Piggott’.⁵⁹ Bromsgrove did excommunicate Piggott in the end, but for ‘the sin of
drunkenness and a suspicion of some Immoralltys’, although he was reintegrated ten years
later.⁶⁰ As a pastor, James Murch did not approve of members who chose to absent
themselves without talking to him and seeking proper help and guidance. Indeed, as a note
from 1705 makes clear, he was suspicious of believers who diagnosed themselves, shunned
the company of their minister, and underestimated the power of the Gospel ordinances, in
particular the Lord’s Supper:

which made him wonder to think what the[y] made of the ordinances or their own word to
him that if any things Lay on their Spirits the[y] Could not remoue of them selves they could

⁵⁷ ‘Covent Garden CB’, no fol. (23 January 1695).

⁵⁸ See Anne S. Brown and David D. Hall, ‘Family Strategies and Religious Practice: Baptism and the
Lord’s Supper in Early New England’, in David D. Hall (ed.), *Lived Religion in America: Towards a
History of Practice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 41–68.

⁵⁹ ‘Bromsgrove CB’, fol. 37.

⁶⁰ ‘Bromsgrove CB’, fol. 39.

seasonably acquaint him: and if the[y] Refrained the ordinance because of their unfitness he thought the[y] did not take the Right Course to mend.⁶¹

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In all the previous examples, absenting church members seem to have continued to think of themselves still as Dissenters, whether it was the cold, the distance, an illness, a marital dispute, the death of a beloved minister, or despair that prevented them from either being present at their church's ordinances or attending its meetings. More problematic, however, were those members who claimed that they were not worshipping regularly with their congregation because they were attending the parish church at the same time. This particular problem was linked both to the voluntary nature of Dissenting religion and the non-separatist stance of early modern Congregationalism, although examples can be found equally among the records of both Congregational and Baptist churches. On 3 May 1665, for instance, the printer Henry Hill informed the Baptists of Devonshire Square, London, that 'he did looke upon his station in y^e Church to be an Act of his will rather then by way of Injunction either to keepe among them or leaue them when he thought good and further said that Churches were rather kept together and Gouverned by Rules of Poillicie then Matter of Nessesity with much more'.⁶² Unsurprisingly, church members were frequently both admonished and excommunicated for participating in 'false worship'.⁶³ Distinctions had to be established,

⁶¹ 'Bampton CB', fol. 82.

⁶² LMA: CLC/179/MS20228/001A 'Devonshire Square Church Book', no fol. (3 May 1665). See also Danièle Hervieu-Léger, "'What Scripture tells me": Spontaneity and Regulation within the Catholic Charismatic Renewal', in Hall (ed.), *Lived Religion*, 22–40.

⁶³ See, for instance, the Rothwell church book where attendance at the parish church is frequently indicated: 'Church Book of Rothwell Congregational Church, 1655–1707' (hereafter 'Rothwell CB'), microfilm of the original MS held at DWL, fols. 7, 9, 12, 14, 17. See also H. G. Tibbutt (ed.), *Some Early Nonconformist Church Books*, PBHRS, 51 (1972), 50; DWL: 38.78 'The church book, anno 1717': 'Canterbury Particular Baptist Church', fol. 26; DWL: 38.81 'Canterbury General Baptist

moreover, between those Dissenters who were ‘seen’ at Church of England services (baptisms, burials, or weddings, including their own), those who took the sacrament ‘occasionally’, and those who entered ‘into full communion’ with the Established Church, either permanently or temporarily.⁶⁴ Some members evidently vacillated for years over such things, as in the church at Speldhurst, Kent: ‘Suzanna Harford Married to Abraham Herman and after his death fell back again to y^e Church of England to which she had fell once before since her baptism.’⁶⁵ On occasion, to put an end to such backslidings, a member might be drawn more deeply into the affairs of the congregation. On 28 November 1687, the church at Glass House Yard decided to reintegrate Clement Halsey, who had returned to the Established Church in order both to hear the minister and to receive the sacrament, by appointing him deacon, whose responsibility it was to look after poor members of the church and keep the accounts of the congregation.⁶⁶

Church Book, 1663–1695’ (hereafter ‘Canterbury General Baptist CB’), fols. 17r, 18r, 19r; Underhill (ed.), *Records*, 16, 181, 213; ‘Shad Thames CB’, no fol. (5 January 1680); ‘Paul’s Alley CB’, fol. 164.

⁶⁴ Anne Whiteman (ed.), *The Compton Census of 1676: A Critical Edition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1986), xxxvii–xli, lxxvii–ix; John D. Ramsbottom, ‘Presbyterians and “Partial Conformity” in the Restoration Church of England’, *JEH*, 43 (1992), 249–70; John Spurr, *English Puritanism, 1603–1689* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 134–37; Alexandra Walsham, *Charitable Hatred: Tolerance and Intolerance in England, 1500–1700* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 192–93, 201–3, 207–14; Mark Knights, ‘Occasional Conformity and the Representation of Dissent: Hypocrisy, Sincerity, Moderation and Zeal’, *Parliamentary History*, 24 (2005), 41–57; Brent S. Sirota, ‘The Occasional Conformity Controversy, Moderation, and the Anglican Critique of Modernity, 1700–1715’, *HJ*, 57 (2014), 81–105; R. A. Beddard, ‘Vincent Alsop and the Emancipation of Restoration Dissent’, *JEH*, 24 (1973), 161–84 (171); Mark Goldie and John Spurr, ‘Politics and the Restoration Parish: Edward Fowler and the Struggle for Saint Giles Cripplegate’, *EHR*, 109 (1994), 572–96 (581).

⁶⁵ Leonard J. Maguire (ed.), *A Transcription of the Church Book of Speldhurst and Pembury (later Tunbridge Wells)* (London: The General Baptist Assembly, 1998), 10.

⁶⁶ ‘Glass House Yard CB’, fol. 67.

Not only did some members hover between attending services held at the chapel and the parish church, but Dissenting churches themselves hesitated when having to decide on the cases of members who, during the Restoration, had tried to spare themselves some thirty years of hardship, harassment, and persecution either by no longer attending or by conforming. The church at Hexham, for example, observed a general ‘decline’ in its membership as early as the summer 1660.⁶⁷ The Baptists at Canterbury started excommunicating absent members in the same year.⁶⁸ Axminster had only harsh words for turncoats:

Information also was brought to the church of the scandalous fall of P—S—, a member of this society, who in the time of the late trouble was one of those that did abscond with many others, and whilst he hid himself from the hands of cruel men that could only kill the body, he was taken captive in the snare of the devil, that murderer and destroyer of souls.⁶⁹

This does not mean, however, that upon proper repentance the reintegration of such members post-Toleration was never envisaged, although precise statistics are impossible to draw from the extant records. In 1696, for instance, the Speldhurst church decided to grant a letter of dismissal to one John Humphrey who had not been seen for twelve years. Humphrey had first returned to the Established Church during the Restoration, and had then gone over to the Presbyterians. Although he had a wife who was not a Baptist, he was able nevertheless to persuade the church, ‘reasonably’, of his sincere repentance for all three offences.⁷⁰

The likes of Suzanna Harford, Clement Halsey, and John Humphrey had gone back and forth between a Dissenting congregation and the Established Church at different times of their lives, following either personal or political reversals of fortune. Others claimed that their

⁶⁷ Underhill (ed.), *Records*, 297.

⁶⁸ ‘Canterbury General Baptist CB’, fol. 12v. At Bristol in January 1665, three women were excommunicated not only for unspecified crimes but also because they failed to attend the meeting ‘through fear’: see Hayden (ed.), *Records*, 121.

⁶⁹ Howard (ed.), *Axminster Ecclesiastica*, 131.

⁷⁰ Maguire (ed.), *Church Book of Speldhurst*, 33.

joining a Dissenting congregation had never meant that they should sever all links with the Established Church, asking for the ‘liberty’ to maintain if not a full communion with the parish then at least some relationship with it. In 1653, at Fenstanton, ‘one [...] King propounded himself to be baptized; but he desired liberty to hear the priests of England as often as he should think fit’.⁷¹ Four years later, Henry Smith was questioned by the church about his absences, and he agreed to return, but on condition that he might be granted, like King, complete freedom of movement: ‘If he might go when he would, and whither he would, and come to us when he thought good, he would then continue with us; but otherwise, he said he would not.’⁷² The widow Saunders, from the village of Sutton in Bedfordshire, answered to the messengers who had come to visit her, including the pastor Henry Denne, ‘that she did walk in the ways of God, and so did we; so did those people that did live under episcopal and presbyterial government, and those that walked under no ordinances; they all walk as God would have them’.⁷³

When Sister Harman likewise declared to the Speldhurst church that ‘she could not see her going to the Publick Worshipe was any sin against God in any other sence than as it was an offence against the Bretheren’⁷⁴ she perhaps expressed the feelings of many who did not understand, or at least pretended not to understand, why Congregational or even Baptist church life should exclude all other forms of religious involvement. Such attitudes are summed up in a statement made by William Whitbread, a member of the Bedford congregation, before the church when defending his pluralism of worship following the Restoration: ‘I did not by joyning my self to the Church intend a restraint upon me, in the exercise of my liberty and duty in hearing and having converse with either ministers or

⁷¹ Underhill (ed.), *Records*, 82.

⁷² Underhill (ed.), *Records*, 220.

⁷³ Underhill (ed.), *Records*, 21.

⁷⁴ Maguire (ed.), *Church Book of Speldhurst*, 83.

Christians that were pious and sober'.⁷⁵ Believers like these did not necessarily wish to return 'in full communion' to the parish but to find a congregation that was more open and tolerant. One Brother Williamson, then, could declare on 4 April 1689 that he wanted to leave the Petty France congregation 'because there was no singing of psalmes in the church & no allowance to heare a minister of the Ch of E'.⁷⁶

One hidden motive for such contradictory habits of attendance was possibly economic: Dissenters fearing, that is, to be exposed and thrown out by a master or a landlord, or shunned by neighbours or even customers. On 20 July 1677, the church at Bury St. Edmunds accepted a member who had freely admitted such fears:

Peter Layman a marryed man living in this town, after much Conflict wth his own spirit least his joyning wth to y^e Church might prove disadvantagious to him in his wordly concerns, being come to a full resolve through to y^e help of C^t. to deny all to follow him, as also coming to some good settlem^t as to his Sp^{tt}. state, was upon his relation given to some of us, & by them to y^e Church, received into to y^e fellowship of this Congregacon.⁷⁷

Given that the candour of those church members seeking permission to worship both within and without their Dissenting congregations could be striking, some churches decided to legislate once and for all in order to return the same answer to any prospective candidate who came to them thinking that they could negotiate dual attendance: 'a Member coming in with Proviso's of goieng to the Publick worship', note the records of the Congregational church at Rothwell at one point, 'that is noe incorporation, and that member noe member. For they cannot be for God and Mammon nor have concord with Christ and Belial.'⁷⁸ Recalling here both Matthew 6:24 and 2 Corinthians 6:15, the church evidently suspected that the reasons for

⁷⁵ *Minutes*, 45; see also the case of one 'Mrs Freeman' who asked to be able to hear 'a godly sound church-man preach a sermon occasionally' (*Minutes*, 118).

⁷⁶ 'Petty France CB', fol. 23.

⁷⁷ 'Bury Street CB', fol. 51r.

⁷⁸ 'Rothwell CB', fol. 21.

wishing to be seen at parish services were not entirely spiritual, but motivated instead by more ‘worldly concerns’ inspired by ‘Mammon’.

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Conversion, the willing acceptance of a covenant (and in some cases baptism), the many church activities that regulated the believers’ weeks, months, and years, the duty of care and vigilance that members owed to each other—these are the factors that contributed to the forging of a collective identity within a Dissenting congregation. But a gathered church, despite the commonly shared architectural metaphor that can be found in so many of the foundation narratives set down in the records of these meetings, was a temple of carefully-hewn ‘living stones’ (1 Peter 2:5) in a limited sense only. As we have seen, the ideal of Dissenting church life, defined by godly fellowship and mutual watchfulness, had long been troubled by disorderly ‘walkers’ among the saints, including those who, as we have seen, offended their congregations by remaining persistently absent or even by seeking to attend simultaneously the parish church. Such absenteeism was, moreover, a major concern of congregational life as early as the revolutionary years of the 1640s and 1650s.

Yet, when considering disaffected Dissenters—a nebulous, heterogeneous group that formed the very outer circle of congregational involvement—it is helpful to remember that attachment to a Nonconformist church was necessarily one, but only one, aspect of the early modern experience of Dissent. Indeed, such affiliation inevitably fluctuated in the course of life, given that any number of factors might affect how and when church attendance was possible, testing the bonds of fellowship and commitment to church life quite profoundly at times—when children or relatives had to be cared for, when illness or bankruptcy struck, when a landlord was offended or a husband threatened his wife, when a good and sober Anglican minister was preaching nearby, when a horse could not be mastered, when bad

weather prevented a long journey to a meeting, when a beloved pastor died, or when an itinerant troupe of players arrived in town.

We have seen how, in these terms, Dissenting men and women variously claimed their liberty, the freedom to make their own choices, when it came to participating in church life, often in the face of their covenanted obligations. They kept away from the church without leaving it and, when they felt it necessary, they renewed their interest in its activities and would continue to partake of its ordinances accordingly. Ministers refused to condone such intermittence, of course, but in practice sincere repentance was always accepted and reintegration common, with links being permanently severed only in extreme cases. These members did not live their lives as Dissenters, then, wholly in opposition to their social, religious, or domestic environments, despite the contractual bonds of the church covenant that were exalted in the writings of their ministers. Dissenting church life was, in the end, always more complex than this, and no more clearly so than when believers had to negotiate a way, sometimes painfully, between ‘church’ and ‘life’. Getting right a ‘church/life balance’ was never easy.

We cannot hope to reconstruct any kind of Dissenting experience, however, before the many forms of spiritual and affective engagement that constituted the daily lives of early modern Nonconformists are more thoroughly revealed and considered in all their diversity. To do so, however, requires a more concerted effort to recover the experience of Dissent as it is recorded in the vast array of extant church books and registers. These records should not necessarily be considered, of course, as inherently more faithful witnesses than other sources of early modern communal life. They were often heavily redacted, sometimes abridged, sometimes written well after the events they record, and many of them bear the idiosyncrasies of successive scribes.⁷⁹ They are not, in other words, flawless documents granting us

⁷⁹ See further Burden and Dunan-Page, ‘Puritans, Dissenters, and their Church Books’, 25–7.

immediate and transparent access to the congregational lives of ordinary Dissenting men and women. Yet, these manuscripts are still the most valuable resources we have in any attempt to develop a more nuanced picture of the daily involvement of the godly with their congregations, and of the multifarious and complex nature of Dissenting church life.