This book was written backward. We began writing a book to report on a research project we designed to describe the field of congregational social work. As we wrote our findings, however, the manuscript grew into a much broader description of this field as we reflected backward on (1) what we have learned from our own professional experiences; (2) our understanding of the culture of congregations developed from living more than six decades grounded in congregational life; (3) what our students have taught us as they have practiced social work in congregational settings; and (4) what we have most recently learned in our field research.

Congregational social work has been around since the beginning of the social work profession, but very little ink has been used to describe or define it. We define congregational social work as providing social work services in and through a religious congregation, whether the employer is the congregation itself or a social service or denominational agency working in collaboration with congregations. Over a three-year period, with a generous grant from the Louisville Institute, we interviewed a convenience sample of 51 congregational social workers to develop a full-orbed description of congregational social work.

As we studied the stories these congregational social workers told us about their work, we came to understand that congregational social work is a field of practice as diverse as the social work profession itself. The congregational social workers we interviewed serve people in poverty and people who are not. They work with young children and pregnant women; they work with older adults and families grieving the death of a member; and they work with individuals and families in all the stages between birth and death. They provide crisis intervention and counseling and prevention services; they lead support and educational groups; they train members in service; and they organize and lead community development programs in their congregations’ neighborhoods and on the other side of the world. As congregational leaders, their work has taken them into the fields of health and mental health, child and family services, aging services, economic and social development, criminal justice, community development, and education. Moreover, we discovered that many of these social workers lead worship and Christian education, preach and teach Bible studies, and weave congregations into communities of support and care.
Their stories caused us to reflect on the 40 years of each of our own professional lives in which we have both worked in and consulted with congregations, religiously affiliated organizations, denominational agencies, and Christian schools of social work. As we learned about the work of these social workers, we developed new frames for seeing our own experiences. We had expected simply to tell their stories, and did not expect to have our understanding so dramatically altered as we studied the stories of 51 social workers finding their way into this field of practice and how they grew and changed as they served. As we listened, we felt the tug of connection to our own stories that surprised us.

We also began to reflect back onto other research we have conducted with congregations, on our experiences as denominational employees, as consultants with congregations, as well as teaching and supervising congregational social workers. We backed into writing a much broader book than we set out to write, based on our own experiences as well as our research.

Through the stories of these social workers as well as our own, this book will attempt to define how social work in the setting of a congregation is both like other settings where social workers serve as well as how congregations are unique settings for doing social work. We have shared our experiences with you, our understanding of what those experiences have taught us about working with congregations, and the meaning we have found in Christian scriptures for understanding our work. This book is a mix of reporting what is, that is, what we learned as the actual realities of social work practice from several of our research projects, with our own opinions of what ought to be, or our own distillation of what we have formed into principles for practice.

We interviewed social workers in a wide range of congregations from different traditions and worldviews. The social workers in these diverse settings have defined their practice in very different ways and probably would differ with one another—and with us—on any number of issues. We will try to express their voices as well as our own—and to be clear when those voices differ. We do not agree with how all these social workers have squared their work with best professional practices and the ethics of the profession, and no doubt, they would disagree with one another. You may disagree with us as well. We encourage you to read this book critically. We hope that you will use our work to craft a vision for what congregational social work can be in your faith tradition and community.

We set out to define this field across religions, hoping to interview social workers in not only Christian congregations but also those in other traditions as well. One social worker in a synagogue volunteered for the project. We have included what we learned from her. The remainder of the sample consisted of social workers in Christian congregations. As we steeped ourselves in their stories, we realized that it was enough of a challenge to describe congregational social work from a Christian perspective,
one where our own professional experiences have occurred. We found it important to
ground our work in our understanding of the culture of Christian congregations and
our knowledge of Christian history and texts. We trust others to determine far better
than we can what we have done and said that is adaptable in other religious contexts.

We are grateful for the lives of C. Anne Davis, Alan Keith-Lucas, and David
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They were our colleagues as well as courageous pioneers in defining social work from
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the relationship of social work and Christian faith, and for our understanding of social
work practice in a congregational setting. We continue to use their work to teach our
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Terry have been important contributions to this book, in addition to how we have ben-
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Despite this wonderful host of friends and family, mentors, colleagues, and editors, responsibilities for the limitations and errors in our thought remain with us. We offer this book to you as a beginning effort. So much more needs to be done. But the time has come to share our thoughts and experiences with you, in the eager hope that you will respond and build upon our work and replace it with greater insight and best practices for congregational social work.

Diana Garland
Gaynor Yancey
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