



The Fly in the Ointment: Why Denominations Aren't Helping Their Congregations and How They Can

by J. Russell Crabtree, published by Church Publishing Incorporated

This is a 2x2 experiment in prompting dialogue on important issues by posting book reviews. This review will span 4 posts. Readers can use the posts and questions to guide conversation in their congregations over several sessions. This printable PDF is provided for use as a handout for group study. We recommend that you provide your study group with copies of the book. (amazon.com) The reviews are intended to prompt conversation and will be topical. However, topics will follow the progression of the book, so that readers can plan to cover a few chapters a week.

Review: Introduction

The Fly in the Ointment is a striking contrast to the book we reviewed last month, *Transforming Regional Bodies*, by Roy Oswald and Claire S. Burkat.

Both books are about "Regional Bodies" or middle management in the church. For Lutherans this is the regional synods. Methodists have "conferences." Catholics have "dioceses," etc. Both books are about "transforming" Regional Bodies. The Oswald/Burkat book advocates that most of the needed change take place in the congregations. Crabtree's book, makes many of the same points, but focuses on changes desperately needed in the regional bodies that provide shepherding care to the congregations they serve.

The motivation for writing each book is the same. Church statistics have been in steady decline since the 1960s and are reaching a perilous state – not only for many

congregations but for the regional bodies, whose major, if not only, source of income is congregational support.

The first book we reviewed called for stronger "tough-minded" middle management, making triage-like determinations about which congregations have a chance at survival and which should be left to die.

J. Russell Crabtree's book takes a much more comprehensive look at church statistics and church practices. He draws on his own experience as a pastor and consultant to churches, businesses and non-profits — notably hospitals and libraries — and leads his readers in their own analysis of their situations. He does less prescribing of solutions than he does nudging us toward finding our own solutions.

He points out that there are some congregations with 20 worshipping members that will die and some congregations with 20 worshipping members that have what it takes to grow.

His approach merits a close review and the questions he proposes should be widely discussed.

Congregations, pastors, and regional bodies might be tempted to resist such self-analysis and dismiss failing ministries of many sites.

Crabtree's study of statistics shows that more people are satisfied with their libraries and emergency room visits (85%) than they are with their relationships with their church

regional bodies (55%).

Congregations might dismiss comparisons. "But the church is different." This book recognizes differences between secular organizations and even differences between denominations. However, it does not allow those differences to blind readers to finding useful parallels for solving what everyone recognizes are problems.

The opening chapters discuss the tendency of the church to accept poor performance and statistics with platitudes:

*"That's just the way it is in the church."
"Accepting struggle is part of Christianity.
We are supposed to 'bear the cross.'"*

He challenges both congregations and the regional bodies to look carefully at their relationships to help find answers.

Before we go any further. Let's ask some of his questions and a few more. We'll pose them here for you to ponder alone or we invite you to be part of an online survey. Your participation in the survey is anonymous.

2x2 will report the results periodically. The survey will remain available for participation through April 2012.

We will forward results to the author of this book to add to his statistical work.

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- How many members in your congregation?
 - Fewer than 150 members
 - 150 to 500 members
 - 500 to 1000 members
 - More than 1000 members
- How concerned are you about the future of your congregation?
 - We are growing! Things are great!
 - We're holding our own!
 - We're starting to see some losses.
 - We're losing members faster than we are gaining.
 - We'll soon have trouble making our budget.
 - We've had to cut back on ministry.
 - We're worried sick that we may not be able to continue.
- How satisfied are you with your congregation's relationship with your regional body?
 - We are partners in ministry.
 - We get along just fine.
 - They've been there for us.
 - They are hard to reach or work with.
 - We are not sure they care about us.
 - We are afraid to see them at the door.
- How often is your congregation in touch with your regional body?
 - Monthly Several times per year
 - Once a year On a crisis basis
- What is your congregation's highest priority?
- If you could ask for just one thing from your regional body and be assured of receiving it, what would you ask for?
- What is your denomination/regional body?