



## STUDY GUIDE TWO:

### 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

The imagery of the wake up call is often used in the church. Congregations need a wake up call to realize just how bad things are going. Crabtree proposes that this approach is obscuring any chance at solving the challenges facing the Church as a whole.

His research shows that reaching new people is a universal priority in congregations. Spending time issuing wake-up calls to people who are dressed and ready to head out the door is a waste of energy and focus. "I would urge that we cease upon that particular bugle. Church members are awake! they don't need more 'pow'! They need more 'how'!" he writes.

But where do congregations turn for the "how"? They are entering territory that centuries of tradition have explored under very different circumstances and with a structure designed to create continuity while fostering and rewarding long-term relationships. Today's congregations face fast-moving change—socially, demographically and economically.

Lay leaders naturally turn first to their pastors for leadership. Pastors are called to serve ministries at one point in time. It does not take long for things to change. Any congregation identifying new missions to achieve new goals may be turning to their

**Wake up calls are often panicked pleas for people to work harder at what doesn't work.**

**Church members are awake!  
They don't need more 'pow'!  
They need more 'how'!"**

pastor to solve a problem beyond his or her training, experience or expectations. Asking your pastor to retrain may create hard feelings. Engaging additional expertise to achieve a ministry goal is likely to be unsettling and cause anxiety or conflict. It may also challenge the budget.

National bodies traditionally publish resources, but they are somewhat removed from the realities congregations face. Crabtree asserts that the best resource with the best potential for helping congregations with strategic planning and training of leadership is the regional body. Historically, this is not how they allocate their time and resources. This is where the wake-up call should be sounded, Crabtree stresses.

Regional bodies tend to address individual congregational concerns on a crisis basis. They are most actively engaged with congregations that are between pastors or are experiencing major conflict or financial challenges. This may create a viewpoint that presumes congregations asking for help are deeply troubled.

Regional bodies are not structured to provide day-to-day help with congregational training and ministry. Yet this is what is sorely needed. It is no wonder that Crabtree's research

indicates that as few as one third of church members are dissatisfied with their relationship with their regional body.

Try it! Call your regional body and ask for a meeting to address training your pastor and lay leaders to provide a specific outreach ministry that your congregation has identified as vital. We suspect you will get an appointment several months away and the resulting meeting will provide nothing concrete in assistance.

This is precisely what Crabtree is setting out to change, and in this instance, the onus for change is on the regional bodies.

The leaders of some regional bodies are appointed. In others they are elected, usually by a forum of representatives. There is rarely a campaign identifying interests, skills or the vision of candidates. Often, the talent pool is restricted to regional members. The names proposed are often unknown to many clergy and most lay voters. Denominations should address this, but things will not change without serious rethinking.

**What congregations seem to be telling their denomination systems is this:  
We are willing to sacrifice to make a better world in the name of Jesus; we are not willing to sacrifice for ecclesiastical systems that absorb our time, our energy, and our money and then seek to justify it as the price of being a "community,"**

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What is your vision for how your congregation will look in 3-5 years?

Do you have a plan for how to achieve your mission goals?

What roadblocks to you foresee in implementing your mission plan?

Do you have confidence that you can bypass the detours and achieve success?

Is your current leadership equipped to face the challenges in achieving your mission or vision?

Has your denomination been helpful in identifying mission opportunities?

Identify five things your congregation needs if you are to reach your goals. How could your denomination help?

Has your denomination been helpful in providing resources to achieve your mission?

How can your congregation advocate for new thinking at the denominational level?

When was the last time your regional body was helpful to your congregation? How?

If your regional office were to close tomorrow, what effect would that have on your congregation?