



STUDY GUIDE THREE:

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 problem is clear. The Church needs help getting from where we are to where we want to be.

Crabtree proposes the concept of “strategic coaching.” He points out that coaches abound in our society — sports coaches, academic coaches, fitness coaches, career coaches. People are willing to pay for help achieving goals they perceive as too difficult to tackle alone. But how will this be perceived in the world of ministry, where asking for help can be taken as a sign of inadequacy or desperation?

Church bodies often talk about their existence as organizations with many parts working together in witness to the world. Perhaps the Church needs to get out the oil can before its individual parts are locked in rust.

Churches *are* connected but the benevolence offerings which support broader ministries are dwindling. Congregations are, in fact, fairly isolated. Isolation is crippling.

Pastors can feel isolated. Once their seminary training is over, they are largely on their own, rarely hearing other pastors preach and joining other ministers only occasionally.

Lay people toil away, fenced off in their corner of the vast Christian vineyard. They are, however, more likely than pastors to participate in other churches as they support community efforts and visit friends and family for special occasions.

Our current church structure was helpful

when societal lines were crisply drawn. Things have changed. The modern work environment is more open than the cloistered factory or isolated farm. Changing jobs, even careers, is the norm. Marriages are measured in single-digit years rather than decades. Children get on busses, crossing neighborhood lines to attend schools. They drift between several social settings created by schools, numerous clubs, parents, stepparents and extended family. The melting pot is being stirred.

People don't quite know how to “do church” anymore. Perhaps the biggest challenge is Christian education, the foundation of active Christianity. A typical small-church educational structure today has sporadic attendance from ages three to ten. Often that's where structured education in the church stops.

Seminaries train pastors and theologians (who increasingly discern their sense of call having grown up in churches with weak educational programs). Seminaries do not concentrate on educating ... “strategists. In many cases, these skills are critical if today's church is to move from the mid-twentieth century (where we seem to be stuck) to the mid-twenty-first century. This may mean asking for help and structuring a budget to provide such help.

Historically, the church resists both. The pastor and congregation are expected to make their way on their own with all the same skills they brought to the table years before and

under the same payment structure. Asking for help is admitting you can't do everything alone. Pastors, eager to maintain stellar résumés, might not risk the stigma. As a result, volunteer lay people are being asked to bear the burden of significant change, often with little training or support. Failure, which is likely under this scenario, may cost them their church and faith.

Crabtree points out that when things aren't working, it is easy to inaccurately blame lay people as “unwilling.” He stresses, regional church bodies are ideally situated to help congregations. They *could* provide coaching, although there are significant hurdles — making it affordable, assigning responsibility, and building trust among both pastors and members. We suspect the biggest hurdle in implementing this idea is developing a pool of coaches that congregations recognize as working for them and not for the regional body.

It remains an idea worth exploring and fostering. 2x2 has a program that might be a first step at introducing the concept of “strategic coaching.” We started this program before we encountered this book. We visited congregations that had great spirit and intent, but lacked the skills to implement strategies that could turn things around. Pastors recognized their congregations' limitations. Everyone slogged along, repeating the same offerings already in place, hoping for a miracle to revive their ministry.

2x2 started a program which would be a

short-term investment for a congregation with long-term results. This program is designed to help ANY church fashion a community outreach program, using skills and energy of outside “coaches” (we called them “aides”) working with members to develop a large-scale summer outreach program. With hands-on help, pastors can concentrate on strategizing follow-up programming. We are in the pilot stage of implementing this idea. If you are interested, see www.vbsaid.com and be part of our 2012 pilot year.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would your congregations feel about hiring a “strategic coach” in addition to a pastor?
2. How would your pastor feel about working with a “strategic coach”?
3. Where would you expect to find a “strategic coach”?
 - Regional Body
 - Consulting Services Recommended by Regional Body
 - Online Search
 - Congregation's Network
4. Would your congregation/pastor be comfortable asking for help? Why or why not?
5. If using strategic coaching would revitalize your congregation, how would your congregation fund it?