



## STUDY GUIDE FOUR: 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 Fly in the Ointment* recognizes from its opening pages that transforming the Church is a process that involves change at the congregational AND regional levels. As the book progresses it increasingly addresses leadership. He points out that the qualities that make a good pastor at the parish level will not necessarily translate to quality leadership at the regional level. Effective regional leaders must give up many of the roles that may have attracted them to ministry — the satisfaction of shepherding individuals. Many times the leaders of regional bodies never recognize that their job has changed. They find new people to lead on their spiritual journeys and those people are often pastors. Pastors can demand a regional leader's every hour!

Crabtree points out that regional bodies actually serve **church congregational boards** — the elected representatives of the congregations. Dwelling on the needs and problems of the ordained or of individuals served by church boards creates a very wide chasm within the church.

This is not an uncommon scenario. When regional leaders have an issue with a congregation, they often immediately demand a congregational meeting, bypassing the congregation's leaders. This is defended as democratic and efficient, but to lay people it is intimidating and it makes lay leadership very difficult. The congregation has no regular access to the regional leader. They

must address their concerns through their elected leaders. Lay people will communicate feelings to their elected leaders that they would not dare say in a rare meeting with the denominational leader. If the regional body does not recognize the elected lay leaders, there is a serious breakdown in communication and relationship. The regional leaders seem to be unaware of such dynamics as they attempt to solve issues expeditiously. They risk eroding a congregation's ability to function creatively and independently. Church leadership suffers.

Crabtree writes, "Though unintended, the result is the effective neutralization of many of the gifts that lay people bring to the table from their experiences in the world, the world filled and held together by Christ."

With local leaders stripped of influence, false impressions are communicated. Crabtree lists them:

- *Church members lack the desire for church growth.*
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- *Church members have lost their faith and are spiritually depleted.*
- *Church members are "unfriendly."*
- *Churches do not have enough facility space.*
- *Churches lack the know-how to grow vital, healthy churches.*

Regional bodies often come to congregations with a "bag of tricks" they've tried with success in their own parishes or in

different locations and expect enthusiastic adoption. Regional leaders should instead be constantly honing their skills and experience so that they have many strategies for congregations to choose from. They must make time to grow in their leadership roles.

Parish leaders, too, must find time to identify opportunities for ministry. He notes, The owner of your local McDonald's is more aware of what is happening in the community than most clergy. Churches traditionally expect the community to come to them. Change will only occur when the church reaches out to the community. This starts with professional leaders (pastors and regional leaders).

There may have been a time when families flocked to church for stability and comfort. Today, people are less likely to join a church when they perceive things will not change them. They know they are expected to retrain and grow in their jobs and they want the same satisfaction of learning and growth in the time they invest in belonging to a church.

For example, people who have given up attending church are likely to be volunteering to raise money for causes, working with youth, traveling to help at disaster sites, adopting a favorite charity, or wielding a hammer on weekends to build a home for the poor. They get personal satisfaction from "service projects." A congregation that recognizes this will provide service projects, with or without the help of the regional body.

Regional bodies often limit their efforts to seasonal outreach or appeal for money for causes without realizing that today it is possible for people to do more directly.

Congregations can make these changes independently of any hierarchy but Crabtree points out that often congregations that tend toward innovation are penalized. True leaders are often threatening to the system.

Building leaders is a long-term, strategic commitment. It may begin with training clergy, but it must "cascade down into other levels of the church." If it does not, Crabtree points out, it either encourages a dependency on the clergy or sets up a conflict.

If you want to transform the church, begin working with and empowering congregational leaders.

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### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you feel your church membership makes a difference **in your life**?
2. Do you feel your church membership makes a difference **in your community**?
3. Do you feel your church membership makes a difference **in the world**?
4. Do you feel you have the training you need to effectively help your church grow?
5. Do you feel that church growth is a priority in your congregation?
6. Do you feel that church growth is a priority to your pastor?
7. Has your church been penalized for innovative ministry?