



## 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

**“It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.”**

— Charles Darwin

Our final post in our series on *The Fly in the Ointment* will center on the concept of change, a much discussed topic in the Church, which seems to be illusive in practice.

Change will happen even if you do nothing, but it is not likely to be growth-oriented. The Church should be familiar with this concept. Decades of doing the same things the same way have resulted in slow and steady decline. It is only recently that broadly accepted status quo operations have reached an economic crisis, and hence, the battle cry for change has sounded to a ragged and weary infantry. Change, which might have occurred slowly and steadily, is now wrenching to congregations.

Let's hope we can learn from our past.

Crabtree's book examines ALL the elements in the Church Growth equation. He concludes that change cannot be led from the middle, suggesting that the Regional Body needs to provide the leadership for change. *(But then, Regional Bodies ARE the middle management*

*of the Church. Perhaps National Bodies could be playing a bigger role!)*

Change might evolve more seamlessly when embraced by the Regional Bodies, but it can start anywhere. The Church needs to stoke the fires which are sparked by dedicated lay people, if they expect them to continue to devote time, talent and resources to "Church." As in the stories of Saul, David, and quite a few disciples and apostles — innovative leadership may come from unexpected and unpopular places. What seems unlikely to us seems to be God's standard operating procedure!

Preaching change without recognizing the initiatives of the laborers is devastatingly discouraging to the laity, upon which the entire Church is economically dependent. Remember the biblical concept of "church" — the lists of gifts in the New Testament! Often the emphasis is on the gifts of the professional leaders, while talented lay people wait quietly, looking for ways they can serve without rocking the pastoral boat. Ironically, the economic security which is often the catalyst for seeking change in the church is dependent on those with the least recognition and power within the church.

Crabtree comments:

"In my experience, regional associations have often passively ignored churches that are growing numerically or are unusually vital. There is a cultural suspicion of 'success.' This suggests to me that one of the values of

regional associations is normal, struggling churches. Again, this is not a value that any group would write on a piece of paper as its cultural norm, but it is what many of us experience as the current culture."

Crabtree provides ample statistics that struggling churches are starving for change. One congregation, working with their Regional Body, implored their interim minister, "Push us, but don't rush us!" A Regional Body might interpret this as "resistant to change." It is not. It is realistic. Lay leaders know that change is work. Change to a church in a delicate state (as so many are) is a balancing act, and the people walking the tightrope are nervous -- their spiritual lives, their community of faith, are at risk and there are holes in the safety net.

The final thrust of *The Fly in the Ointment* is an attempt at impressing Regional Bodies that change at the congregational level needs care and feeding from the Regional Body.

He describes a common approach of instituting change as a process of identifying within a congregation:

1. Key ideas
2. Language
3. Norms
4. Behaviors which are Rewarded
5. Behaviors which are Penalized

He immediately recommends reversing the order to identify factors which inhibit

change across a denominational regional body, cautioning that dwelling too soon on changing language (terminology, mission statements, etc.) will give the illusion of change, satisfying some that progress has been made and halting progress .

These can be seen in the use of slogans shouted at regional conventions or assemblies. "God's work; our hands," "God has a plan, and we are it!" They feel good. But did change result?

Change will require some bold thinking, backed up by committed actions. Crabtree concludes with the adage: You can't cross a chasm in two jumps.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is your congregation ready for change?
2. Do you feel that your Regional Body is able to lead change in your congregation? Why or why not?
3. Has your congregation been working with your Regional body to achieve change?
4. Do you feel your talents and skills are valued by your congregation?
5. If you could ask for help and expect to receive it, what would you ask of your congregational leaders, Regional Body leaders, or national body?

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