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Book Review: Strategies for Change

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Strategies for Change

Reviewed by Jeff Mansell

Schaller, Lyle. Strategies for Change. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993. 127pp. \$15.00.

Helping church leaders achieve success in effecting planned change is the goal of *Strategies for Change*. The author, a veteran student of the church and organizational structure, brings decades of local church consultation experience to print providing a primer on obstacles to effective change and a tested blueprint for overcoming them. A thorough study of the text will leave the reader overwhelmed by the complexity of the task yet encouraged by the guidance of the author.

The author, Lyle Schaller, is known as the dean of church consultants and has been voted the most influential Protestant church leader in North America by 43% of respondents in a 1998-9 national poll. He is a prolific writer, having published more than 55 books with Abingdon Press, and has edited numerous others. Schaller is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin and a 1957 alumnus of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. A former City Planner and assistant to the mayor in Madison, Wisconsin, he is now an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church. He is also an associate with the Yokefellow Institute, an organization that serves congregations through programs of education, consultation and research.

Strategies for Change is the fourth in a five book series written by Schaller on the subject of planned change. Tapping his vast reservoir of experiential knowledge, Schaller guides the reader through the intricacies of accomplishing successful change in an array of contexts. Teaching points intertwined with case studies effectively tell the story of congregational life, its aversion to change and the steps needed to alter its course.

Schaller begins by dividing churches into two distinct

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camp: covenant communities and voluntary associations. Accomplishing change is vastly different between them, covenant communities experiencing greater fluidity and less tension during transitions. In either church the climate for change must be assessed and factored into the plan. In some instances, a proposed change must be postponed in deference to healing a dysfunctional congregation.

Strategies for change must also consider the personality and gifts of the leader. Three pastoral leader-types are identified: the founding pastor who birthed the congregation and is typically looked upon as a "benevolent dictator"; the charismatic, highly personable leader who is a skillful student of people and possessor of persuasive powers; and the faithful plodder who is noted for their trustworthiness, competence and character. Knowing who you are is essential in estimating the difficulty and time involved in accomplishing change and the amount of support needed from others.

The book outlines sequences for introducing change, provides check lists to insure that all details have been addressed and through the use of case studies describes the potential scene that might be played out as the change is introduced. Reader beware: Schaller's lists become tedious at times and far too exhaustive in his attempt to identify every possible thought associated with the subject at hand. Further, the reader must take a leap of faith in trusting the many undocumented statistics and ratios that are used. Schaller's reputation for truth-telling, however, provides a high degree of authentication for these facts. The reader will be better served by discovering the principle implied in the statistic rather than accept them all as literal facts.

What is undisputable is the enormity of the need for the nearly 80% of North American churches that are either statistically plateaued or in decline to re-engage their community. "The number one issue facing Christian organizations in North America today is...The need to initiate and implement planned change from within an organization (10)". Schaller attributes some of this decline to the apathy, or worse, complacency, that infects many congregations (36-38). Fault is also laid at the feet of the leader who abdicates his role as an agent of change serving in the midst of passive congregants.

Schaller would indicate that the majority of congregations today are "voluntary associations." These congregations possess an historical record, long-term friendships, institutional loyalties, affection for former pastors and a powerful past-orientation (19). They are more supportive of perpetuating the status quo than initiating change (20). It is unlikely that proposals for substantive

or radical change, level 2 or level 3 respectively, will be introduced or easily embraced by its membership. That may be as simple an explanation for the declining situation they are in as any.

Leaders who find themselves in complacent voluntary associations are urged to be agents of change. I believe Schaller is perhaps too optimistic when he suggests that the pastoral leader will always win out over the lay member when change is introduced (32). A firmly entrenched, lay, benevolent dictator in a small congregation is a formidable foe in fighting back the attempts of change by a skillful pastor typically forcing the pastor to accept compromises or indefinite postponements. The pastor who is willing to accept the challenge should know three things: 1) it isn't be easy; 2) patience and perseverance are valuable qualities; and 3) the environment for change must be improved to a more optimal level (43).

Though Schaller is a United Methodist minister and by his admission is on the authoritarian end of the Authority Continuum of congregational life, he is very knowledgeable about lay led congregations at the other end of the continuum and those that fall in the middle. He is occasionally guilty of speaking directly to his Methodist colleagues (24, 64), identifying issues that are germane to their denomination. These brief glimpses into the United Methodist Church, however, allow the reader to view another branch of the Christian church family and draw assessments concerning their own.

The methodical and analytical approach to understanding the church and the process of institutional change has to be attributed to Schaller's background as a City Planner. It is further postulated that Schaller's undergraduate work is in the field of engineering or political science, disciplines given to extreme detail and painstaking analysis. This background influences his writing style which is characterized by the many lists contained in the book and their logical progression of thought. Schaller stops short, however, of suggesting that all problems can be solved by carefully following the enclosed directions. He even suggests that some situations are beyond remedy (48). I am especially impressed that this pseudo-scientist also sees the work of ministry as an art form that draws upon the interpersonal skills of the leader as well as the application of carefully researched methods.

Potentially boring in its composition, Schaller is able to add energy to his instruction by use of case studies. The absence of disclaimers creates the question as to whether these studies are from some of the thousands of church consultations he has con-

ducted or merely fictional representations of situations he has encountered. Either way they create interesting interludes in what can be otherwise laborious reading.

The vast consulting background that Schaller possesses is a strength of the book. He does not write as a theorist, rather as one who has been in the trenches with pastors from a vast background of denominations, congregational sizes and issues, theological distinctions, and demographic peculiarities. His writing possesses the authority of a person who has carefully studied the subject and whose conclusions have been widely published for public scrutiny. The scrutiny and subsequent defending or reassessment of his positions has served to further refine and validate his statements on the church.

Personally I found the book beneficial at many points. As a judicatory leader who is often called upon to diffuse tensions caused by the absence of a strategy for change it provides insights for understanding the dilemma at hand as well as excellent teaching material to be used in coaching and training the pastors under my supervision. The book flirted occasionally with comments regarding denominational leaders such as their reaction to statistical reports indicating institutional decline (41). I was challenged by his observation that the top priority for outside resource persons, like myself, is not to share our wisdom. "The first priority is to win the trust and confidence of the insiders" (70). Only then will they be heard as a person who is truly interested in the health of that local congregation and not just the survival of the denominational institution.

This book, however, is purposefully written to address the broader base of local church leaders, the dynamics of the local church in transition and how to effectively bring about change. He states that "the distinctive focus of this volume is on the institutional context and climate for change and sources of the authority required to initiate change" (11). That being the purpose of the book I would conclude that Schaller has been successful.

This book is a valuable resource for every local church leader, but especially the multitude of local church pastors who inherit an established congregation. Careful study and application of the principles taught in this book, wed with the diligent assessment of their new congregation and community will increase the potential of fruit-bearing ministry that captures the heart of their people and results in the salvation of many from the unbelieving community. It will also spare the heartache of many well-intentioned, but lesser equipped pastors who desire to minister well but are not endowed with the natural leadership

tools required to do so.

Reviewer

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