

Edifying discourses: Recommended reading

Books in the [May 20, 1998](#) issue

What books illuminate the organizational side of church life and practical dimensions of parish leadership? Four church leaders offer recommendations.

Melvin W. Henrichs, pastor of Salem United Methodist Church in Waukesha, Wisconsin, comments:

A landmark book for me a couple of years ago was Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* (Currency Doubleday, 1994). After initially noting five new "component technologies" of a "learning organization"--personal mastery, mental models, shared vision-building, team learning, and systems thinking--Senge launches into a detailed yet very readable, description of systems thinking, which, he maintains, integrates the other four elements.

Senge reminds us of the necessity of understanding the overall dynamics of a situation in order to intervene appropriately. Usually that means using a wider angle lens than we would normally choose. He cautions us to maintain the focus on dynamic processes, not static details.

Guiding congregational change is a complex undertaking at best. Well-meaning leaders can easily be distracted by the most pressing details. Reading Senge encouraged me to help my church committees rise above the immediate and obvious and take a look at the underlying dynamics of the situation.

A companion field book of intervention strategies and a newsletter network are also available for those choosing to pursue more intensely the creation of "learning organizations."

Frank Thomas, pastor of New Faith Baptist Church in Matteson, Illinois:

The single book that has most influenced my thinking is *Generation to Generation*, by the late Jewish Rabbi Edwin H. Friedman (Guilford Press, 1985). Chapter nine,

“Leadership and Self in a Congregational Family,” is must reading for any clergyperson who seeks spiritual and emotional health in the midst of the ebb and flow of congregational life. It has had the effect of saving my sanity and my spirituality if not my ministry.

Friedman’s work contains two seminal ideas. The first is that there is an intimate connection between the family life and the congregational life of most clergy. Specifically, Friedman believes the emotional position that we occupy in our families of origin is probably the same emotional position that we occupy in the congregational family. As we mature in our emotional functioning in the family of origin, our emotional functioning will mature to that same extent in the congregation.

Second, mature functioning by the leader is defined by taking clear and well-defined positions in congregational life. Friedman suggests that the leader must (1) stay in touch with the congregation, (2) take nonreactive, clearly defined positions, and (3) maturely deal with active sabotage. Friedman believes that this emotional maturity in the leader will allow the healthy and mature leaders to set the agenda in congregational life rather than allowing the most dependent and emotionally immature to call the shots.

Friedman suggests that if one can work on one’s self-differentiation both in the family of origin and in congregational life, then leadership will become a “healing modality.”

Inagrace T. Dietterich, director of theological research at the Center for Parish Development in Chicago:

Robert E. Webber and Rodney Clapp’s small but insightful book, *People of the Truth: A Christian Challenge to Contemporary Culture* (Harper and Row, 1988), is an example of good “practical theology.” It is a resource that is both truly practical and genuinely theological. Claiming that what the church has to offer the world is the unique truth it proclaims and celebrates in worship, Webber and Clapp make connections between worship and politics, vision and reality, identity and community.

Advocating a “depth-political ethic,” they suggest that the church will have its intended and most powerful effect in and on the world by moving and working at the deep social levels where identities and visions are formed. As the only people

charged with proclaiming Christ--a people of the truth--the church presents the world with an alternative not by trying to change the world on the world's terms but by being a community prepared to live according to the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Far too many books dealing with organization and leadership neglect the distinctiveness of that which is to be organized or to be led--the community of faith. While many of these resources emphasize the importance of vision, the most difficult thing for most churchpeople to do is to envision the church in new, exciting and compelling ways. Webber and Clapp make a major contribution in a chapter which sketches four images of the church: a community of giftedness, an eschatological community, the community of forgiveness, and the community of presence. Not idealistic pie-in-the-sky, these images invite clergy and laity into a substantive but relevant vision of church. An eminently readable book, good for study groups, and quite preachable, *People of the Truth* is a resource that will provoke thought, stimulate imagination, and enrich the life and ministry of local congregations.

Carl Dudley, co-director of the Center for Social and Religious Research at Hartford Seminary:

James F. Hopewell's *Congregations, Stories and Structures* (Fortress, 1987) is not easy reading, but his approach has helped pastors get in touch with one of the most powerful and perplexing dimensions of parish ministry, namely, how to hear to congregational stories in ways that crystallize identity, create coherent history and generate the energy of congregational renewal.

Congregational stories for Hopewell appear in three dimensions. Initially he introduces the reader to the "worldviews" of congregation members by way of a questionnaire and, more important, interviews. These personal stories are helpful for understanding parishioners and providing pastoral care, but they are two steps removed from communal history.

In the second dimension Hopewell invites members to share their memories of crises and expressions of hope. Here individual perspectives are melded into congregational "character"--stories that can be used, as members say, "to explain ourselves to others, and even to ourselves."

In his third dimension Hopewell offers ways to link these stories into a narrative that members can claim as “the story of our church.” He shows how congregational plots are woven from the thickness of internal tension, twisted by new challenges and tempered by character. By naming the drama, church leaders generate a powerful resource to celebrate their past and intentionally shape the story yet untold.

Another book that must be mentioned is *U.S. Lifestyles and Mainline Churches*, by Tex Sample (Westminster John Knox, 1990). Sample has provided the most accessible and adaptable guide not only to understanding cultural differences within the church but to building programs and developing leaders that draw on the strengths of diversity.

Sample’s folk theology is focused on the bonding within families and between family and friends, and on people’s sacred relationships with significant places and established rituals. Believers sustain these ties by hard work, mutual loyalty and shared values. He calls it “retail religion” because of its particularity and rootedness in the lives of believers.

Sample’s explanatory theology combines self-denial with self-fulfillment: believers expect religion to explain the world and measure themselves (and others) against bottom-line achievements. He marvels at the ways that this perspective produces both conservative managers and liberal professionals.

Sample’s theology puts such emphasis on experiencing fulfillment within each person that believers are more naturally tolerant of others. From this viewpoint, social and sexual diversity simply reflects the different choices people make, without heavy moral implications. Although Sample suggests examples from a wide spectrum of ethnic, cultural and social groups, he appreciates that these theologies have helped to explain the generations in his own family. Perhaps it’s his sensitivity to personal experience that makes his book universal.