

Book Reviews



Where 20 or 30 are Gathered: Leading Worship in the Small Church
Peter Bush and Christine O'Reilly
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In Dying We Are Born: The Challenge and the Hope for Congregations
Peter Bush
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It is a thrill for me to review these books! It is wonderful that they are Canadian resources, deftly speaking to our own context with poignancy and realism. That they are carefully edited Alban Institute resources is a bonus. I'm also blessed to know both the authors and to have seen them practice what they 'preach' about in these books. They bring a wonderful depth of knowledge from their own research, wisdom and experience.

Our own 2008 Centre participant survey results raised many of the anxieties, frustrations and concerns addressed in these books. What is the answer for numerous rural churches who are struggling financially and emotionally to survive? How do we encourage clergy to hear calls to small churches and to recognize that bigger is not necessarily better? How do we remind members of these congregations that they are vital, gifted by the Holy Spirit collectively and individually, and have a unique purpose? What creative solutions exist for congregations who are perpetually vacant or on the brink of closure? How do we address the decline of the church in this post-modern era? How do we avoid complacency and pat answers and renew our vision through the eyes of Christ rather than tradition?

Where 20 or 30 are Gathered begins with recognizing that ministers must embed themselves in the culture of each church they serve. Bush and O'Reilly encourage a new way of thinking about the small church, focusing on its strengths. Differing models of ministry are considered (single point, multiple point and clustered) and the gifts and challenges of small churches are acknowledged. With practicality, wisdom and gentle humour, the idiosyncrasies of rural ministry are unpacked and perspective is offered. Anecdotal stories and illustrations will resonate with anyone who has ministered in or otherwise experienced the small church setting. These stories provide grounding in reality while offering compassion and honour to the many they represent.

While the book is highly pastoral, it also issues a challenge. In particular, the whole issue of who is qualified to lead worship is raised. What does it mean if the minister is not always in the pulpit? How do we encourage and acknowledge the gifts of the laity? A fictional Presbytery objects to what appears to be a mere survival patchwork approach to pulpit supply during a vacancy using retired clergy and laity. The interim moderator of the church and its representative elder are quick to share reasoned theology for allowing

this approach. We face the challenge to recognize our own voices in this and other similar dialogues and to consider church in a different way.

Bush's *In Dying We Are Born* raises broader issues which affect churches of all sizes. Our anxiety and fascination with models of congregational renewal is mentioned with the hope that the right program or package will kick-start what needs to happen to 'save' us. While these models are not inherently wrong, there is a sense of trying to control and secure success rather than perhaps being still and listening to what God might be saying to our context. This may include preparing for a death of some kind. With helpful biblical examples, Bush walks us through grief stages at a congregational level. Ways of leading churches through this time are highlighted, including relevant spiritual practices, and different kinds of resurrections are considered.

This book on first blush may seem morbid or somehow lacking in faith. The opposite could not be more true. We are challenged to relinquish our own control and plans to the One who created the Church. We are urged to cultivate obedience and care in our way forward so that we are faithful, even to the point of death. Bush reminds us that when we start to become too comfortable, often this is a sign that we are stagnating and not fully alive. For something new to live, something needs to die, whether a program, aspect of congregational culture, bias or a congregation. Yet God promises to renew and bless us and never let us go. This is a very practical, hopeful and critical read for those who desire to be God-honouring in their practice of ministry.

As we face the realities of retirement of many of our current clergy and existing in a post-modern culture, we will need to keep considering creative ways of being and doing church. We will also need to grapple with our own biases and those of our parishioners. While there is no quick fix or one size fits all solution to the challenges we face, we can find hope, possibilities and understanding in both of these resources and a renewed vision for ministry.

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