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## Book Reviews

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### *The Interventionist*

Reviewed by R. Daniel Reeves

The accolades on the jacket of Lyle Schaller's *The Interventionist*, do not overstate the importance of his latest book. Lyle Schaller is without peers in the field of church consultation. He has traveled more miles, observed more churches, and written about more situations than any other living person. *The Interventionist* is essential reading for change agents (pastors and church leaders) who aim to impact congregations favorably.

Schaller is especially strong in this culminating textbook as he overviews types of churches, alternative approaches to interventions and questions to ask by category. In a single volume we have the dean of consultants providing various lists of the "rocks" that need to be turned over in order to discover and concentrate on the issues that matter. Although Schaller's language and style are distinctive and non-transferrable, his views in *The Interventionist* continue to be consistent with the framework and domi-

nant themes of church growth.

From a church growth perspective the following ten insights struck me as significant:

1. The most effective way to influence both individual and institutional behavior is to ask questions (p. 15). More can be learned by asking questions than by giving answers (p. 24).
2. A key tool for regional judicatories that have a core purpose of challenging and resourcing congregations as they plan for the new day in ministry that includes identifying, reaching, attracting, serving, assimilating, and challenging a new constituency, is partnering with skilled parish consultants (p. 17).
3. The capacity to be an effective change agent is a gift from God, but it also includes skills that can be learned. Schaller lists 10 components, or skill-sets, including the ability to formulate relevant questions, an eagerness to learn, and a larger conceptual framework for analyzing the data from one particular congregation (p. 21)
4. Short lists of major recommendations are far superior to long lists, and a greater number of future scenarios provided are better than a fewer number. As a general rule, two recommendations are better than four, four are better than eight, and eight is too many. By providing five to fifteen scenarios for a new tomorrow, ranging from those that require modest changes to those that require radical changes, the issue becomes one of degree of change. How much change can this particular congregation tolerate? (p. 51-52)
5. His distinction between congregations influenced primarily by tradition, and those influenced primarily by the needs of those not active in any worshiping community. According to Schaller this basic difference in orientation helps to explain why the former are so critical of market-driven approaches, and why the latter are often so eager to learn from the experiences and wisdom of their competitors (p. 86).

6. In the dysfunctional church, the decision-making process often is identified as the primary battlefield over control. In clear contrast are the indicators found in healthy churches, such as obedience to the gospel, a sincere search to learn the will of the Lord, prayer and cooperation, listening rather than screaming, the call to be faithful rather than the urge to prevail, or reason rather than exclusion (p. 125).
7. In order to be helpful, it is often necessary for the interventionist is to push congregational leaders to focus on what is their top priority. Schaller refers repeatedly to this challenge as identifying the central organizing purpose. (p. 129). He is correct in recognizing the need to press for clarity on one of the most critical growth determining variables. He is asking leaders to identify their most significant core issues, or primary focus, or greatest opportunity. Schaller clearly implies that best results will occur by concentrating a disproportionate amount of their energy on the one priority that will make the most difference.
8. The central issue for most congregations today is the capability to change. How much change can this congregation accept without being overwhelmed or immobilized or polarized? The primary role of the parish consultant in these settings is that of an outside agent of planned change (pp. 141-145).
9. Radical change for the smaller congregation usually means accepting the proposal that they should place reaching the unchurched ahead of taking care of today's members. For the large, multiple-staff parishes, radical change more likely means accepting the proposal to replace individualized assignments for paid program staff members with a central strategy supported by staff teams (p. 147.)
10. Intervening in the ongoing life and ministry of three-quarters of the long-established congregations on the North American continent is not only a strategic and no-

ble calling. It is, according to Schaller, a legitimate expression of evangelism, one that is often undervalued alongside planting new missions and holding revivals and rallies (p. 149).

Among the most surprising statements in *Interventionists* were Schaller's reasons for rejecting 19 out of every 20 requests for help. Each of these factors are worth reflection as church growth consulting continues to develop in the 21st century. Schaller claims that by accepting most consulting invitations he would be expected to:

- a) sprinkle some magic dust over a complex problem and cause it to disappear
- b) help put out a fire that already burned the house down several years earlier

The third reason he gives for declining invitations is that the potential client does not present a clear reason for seeking an interventionist (p. 37).

Many of us who labor full time in intervention ministries do not have the luxury of being this selective. An even greater rationale for accepting a higher percentage of these difficult assignments is the belief that intervening is the right thing to do. The reality is that most churches will remain stuck without someone from the outside helping them to discover the truth about themselves and their potential. Is it not better to attempt to breakthrough, even though we may often fail? Indeed, Schaller seems to suggest later on that realigning expectations and clarifying the purpose of an intervention are normative consultant skills:

"Congregational leaders have a right to expect the interventionist to bring a fair level of competence in designing strategies for planned change. The need to change, sometimes a greatly overdue need, is the most common motivation for seeking the help of an interventionist. Therefore, the interventionist should be equipped to help design a strategy for planned change initiated from within an organization." (p. 78)

Often times, this commitment to planned change will require challenging other common notions which Schaller cites, such as how to respond when a growth curve flattens out into a plateau.

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Should this leveling off be seen as “normal”, as many do, and therefore nothing to be concerned about? Or should it indicate the need for a change in pastors (which is the option which many leaders often choose)? Or should it serve as an indicator that it is time to learn how to practice a new role in a new approach to ministry in a larger and more complex setting (p. 113)? Though this third option is more difficult, it is where our strategic emphasis must be placed in the majority of instances for maximum growth.