



Indianapolis
Center for
Congregations, Inc.

using RESOURCES

Beyond Reading: Using Books as Resources



Congregations face a variety of issues every day, including managing change, choosing the best technology and addressing the challenges of diversity. Regardless of the issue, there are books offering practical advice for congregations seeking ideas, information and solutions.

Books are purposeful resources for congregations. They can be used as inspirational study, to learn about congregational life, or to broaden your perspective on an issue your congregation is facing. This article focuses on these latter two. Following are ideas and suggestions to help you get the most out of books as resources:

Why use books as resources?

- **Homework done.** Books and articles are effective resources because the author has already researched the topic and put it into an understandable format. By reading the author's perspective and experience, you can broaden your own perspective about aspects of congregational life.
- **Constant companion.** Books are not time or location bound. They let you move at your own pace. They are portable and always available – a constant companion.

What might we look for in a resource book?

- **Finding your niche.** Some issues are more suited to a book resource than others, and some congregations may use book resources better than others. Be flexible and thoughtful, keeping in mind your issue and your congregations' personality when choosing a resource. Know what best fits your culture, such as the reading interests of your congregational leaders.
- **Look for a good fit.** Identify aspects of the book that are most applicable to your congregation in your current situation. Is this book resource a good match or a good starting point for your congregation?
- **Be realistic.** Look at the complexity and length of the book. People are busy, and it may not be realistic to expect everyone to read it.
- **Talk to a friend.** Contact other congregations who have worked with the same issue your congregation is addressing. Ask what book resources have been helpful for them.

How can we use books effectively?

- **Share it widely.** Have multiple copies of the book available. Don't purchase just one copy of the book and pass it around to the various folks who need to see it. Make sure everyone who needs a copy has a copy.
- **Read critically.** Take time to identify the theme of the book. Be selective about what is of value to your congregation or how you might modify the author's suggestions so that they might better fit your congregation.
- **Apply to your congregation.** If the book tells a story of a technique or idea that worked, think about how it worked and if it could work for you. Do the ideas presented translate to your congregation? Use insights from the book that work with your faith tradition. Create a space to disagree with the author and identify alternatives to the thesis.
- **Set a date.** Set a specific time to discuss the book. Informal discussion and hallway chit-chat are fine, but they cannot replace a scheduled gathering specifically for the purpose of reviewing the resource and the ideas it prompts.
- **Engage your group.** There are many ways to utilize printed resources. Many congregations find it helpful to assign a small subcommittee to review the book. These three to eight people can read, make notes and discern and identify the points to bring to the attention of the whole congregation or leadership body.
- **Find a leader.** Someone needs to lead the group discussion of the book. Assign someone to facilitate. If your book does not have a study guide, look for someone in your congregation who is good at facilitating a discussion and knows how to generate meaningful questions.





“Information is not knowledge. It doesn’t become knowledge until the human mind acts on it and transforms it... [knowledge requires the ability] to analyze, organize, evaluate, and apply the information for purposeful ends.”

John Chaffee, *The Thinker’s Way*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 1998.

How can we use books effectively? *(continued)*

- **Share leadership.** An alternative to a single leader is assigning willing group members to take turns leading chapter discussions. The conversation is often most successful when it is participatory and members of the group feel an ownership in the process.
- **Tools provide a visual.** Tools within the book that help folks visualize the content, such as charts, diagrams, drawings, etc., are often helpful. These tools can bring the issue to life and give it more meaning. Study guides, questions and/or exercises are also helpful tools.
- **Get creative!** Use supplemental resources from popular culture (such as a movie, song or game) to accompany the book. This will help people identify with the issue and get them thinking!
- **Take action.** Consider a hands-on approach to your book resource. More than merely talking about the book, let the book guide a process. As your group reads, take what is learned and begin putting it into action.
- **Proceed with caution.** Books are great tools to prompt discussion among congregational members. But beware of using a book as a crutch to avoid deep discussion and decisions about your own congregation. Also avoid using books as a bully pulpit to persuade others to adopt your point of view.
- **Keep it up to date.** Books can often provide solid, sound advice for areas such as administrative, financial and business management. But be sure to use the most up-to-date publications of financial books. Some issues, such as taxes, are time-sensitive. Tax laws are updated yearly and so should any book giving tax advice.
- **Maintain momentum.** Go back to the book periodically to see where you are, to determine if you completed the steps you had targeted, and to determine your next steps. The journey is rarely finished, so it is always helpful to refer back to your printed resource.

Sources: Wendy Baldwin of First Congregational Church; Glen Bell of Faith Presbyterian Church; Les Zwirn of Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation; and Nancy Armstrong, Brent Bill, Nancy DeMott, Adam Fronczek, Tim Shapiro, Aaron Spiegel and Susan Weber of the Indianapolis Center for Congregations.

The following questions can be used or adapted for many books your congregation may want to discuss:

1. In a sentence, what is the theme or main point of the book? Write the main theme, as expressed by the group, on newsprint.
2. Why or how is that theme important to you as a congregation?
3. Identify the sub-themes or points the author makes and list these on newsprint.
4. If there are graphs or visual illustrations that depict an important message in the book, duplicate them (for the use of your group only) and use them to discuss the concept depicted.
5. Are there concepts in the book that can be viewed in ways other than the way the author presents them? Explain.
6. What did you read that you felt was most applicable to your congregation in your present circumstances? Do others in your group agree? Why or why not?
7. What action steps might you and/or your congregation take in light of what you learned?
8. Are there others in your congregation who need to learn what you learned from this book? How might that happen?

