

THE EXTERNALLY FOCUSED CHURCH

by Rick Rusaw & Eric Swanson (Loveland, Colorado: Group, 2004)

a book review by Jack De Vries



CRCA MINISTRY FORMATION

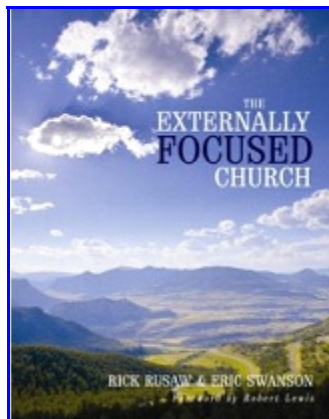
"A Church Reforming To Reach the Lost for Christ"

www.ministryformation.com.au

About the authors:

Rick Rusaw is the Senior Minister at LifeBridge Christian Church in Longmont, Colorado. He serves on the board of directors for Christian Network International and Hope International University. He is also an on-air host for "Worship," seen nightly on 80 PAX TV stations. Rick is also the driving force behind the new churchwide initiative, *Living a Life on Loan*.

Eric Swanson directs the Leadership Communities for externally focused churches, in partnership with Leadership Network. Eric served 25 years with Campus Crusade for Christ before joining Tango, a private investment company that partners with vision-led growth companies.



If your church picked up and left, how would your community feel? Would your city weep? Would anybody even notice? Would anybody care? These are the kinds of questions a church needs to seriously consider if it truly desires to reach the lost for Christ. And these are the questions which Rusaw and Swanson force readers to ask when they pick up *The Externally Focused Church*.

For a long time I have been a huge fan of Group resources and this publication has not left me disappointed. For decades Group has been publishing material which is helpful, resourceful, and easily transferable. This book by Rusaw and Swanson continues in this tradition. Not only does this book provide good content for reflection but also numerous stories

which give us "a closer look" at churches which put the principles discussed into action. This not only makes the book highly readable, but also very practical.

In my work among the Christian Reformed churches in Australia I have been emphasizing the central thesis of this book, namely, who would notice if your church disappeared overnight? Now I am sure the members of your church would notice. But what about the community where your church is situated? Would the people of your city, town, or village notice? Would the departure of your church make front page news in *The Weekend Australian*? I have my doubts. In the past 15 years more than a 1000 churches have disappeared in Australia, and hardly a person noticed. Our prime minister did not call for a national day of mourning.

So what will it take for Christians and churches in Australia to be noticed? It has to do with focus – a focus on those outside of the church. And that is the subject of Rusaw's and Swanson's book (see page 141).

There has been a huge debate in churches when it comes to being externally focused. There are those on the one side of the debate who argue that a church needs to be **internally- focused**. And for the vast majority, this defines the priority of churches. The worship services, the programs, the budgets, the staff, and the buildings are focused on those who are already members of the church.

Then there are those who stress the

importance of being **externally-focused**. These church leaders are often criticized for not ministering to the flock under their care. And so the tug-of-war takes place between these two sides.

What I like about *The Externally Focused Church* is that the authors silence this debate. It is not either/or but both/and. It is not about one to the neglect or expense of the other. They write:

“Externally focused churches are internally strong, but they are orientated externally....Because they engage their communities with the good works and good news of Jesus Christ, their communities are better places in which to live. These churches look for ways to be useful to their communities, to be part of their hopes and dreams. They build bridges to their communities instead of walls around themselves. They don’t shout at the dirty stream; they get in the water and begin cleaning it up.... Externally focused churches measure not only what can be counted but also what matters most – the impact they are having outside the four walls of the church. They ask, ‘Whose lives are different because of this church?’” (17)

In the first chapter the authors give a thorough definition of what is meant by an externally focused church and then go on in the subsequent chapter to describe the journey Rusaw’s church, LifeBridge Christian Church, took to become an externally focused church. Both chapters conclude, as do all the chapters, with helpful sections giving the reader something to think about, talk about, and act upon. In addition there are sermon or lesson ideas. This makes this book very practical and a useful resource for leadership development and/or a sermon series. I envision giving this book to each session or council member and using the chapters questions as discussion points each month. The only caution I have is this: expect that church business would no longer go on as usual.

This book not only challenges one to rethink focus, but it offers well researched and accurate discussions of key Biblical precepts. For example, in chapter three the authors discuss the power of service. They provide excellent Biblical background and a helpful discussion on how service is the “sweet spot” where all three interests (God, community, church) come together. As they write, “Service is something the community needs, God desires, and the church has the capacity to do.” (60)



Two other chapters are equally good value. I appreciate the discussion of “good news and good deeds.” As in the external - internal debate, at times churches struggle with the dichotomy of “good news and good deeds.” Do we focus on the ministry of the Word or doing works of service, good news or good deeds. But again, Rusaw and Swanson do not see these as a dichotomy. “Good works are coupled with good news through Scripture....Good news and accompanying good deeds are like the two wings of an airplane. Each is incomplete without the other. Each complements the other. Each gives ‘lift’ to the other.” (112) The authors go on to

give a number of examples how good deeds advance the gospel impact. (See pages 116ff)

Another excellent discussion is found in chapter seven which focuses on “mercy and justice.” Most church leaders are aware of the reminder found in Micah 6:8, where Micah reminds us of the three things God requires of us: “to act justly and love mercy and to walk humbly with [our] God.” Rusaw and Swanson make the observation that “most of our finest churches are in the ‘Walk Humbly with God’ column....But the efforts of many of these churches remain largely inside their four walls.” (137) In order for churches to become difference makers in their community it becomes critical for people “to move outside of ourselves and toward others in mercy and justice.” (138)

What if we as churches change our conversation? Instead of measuring our “success” by the numbers of either membership or attendance, what if we measure “success” by the impact we are making on our society around us. That is the challenge Rusaw and Swanson encourage us to consider: “It’s not about size; it’s about impact. Can you imagine the difference it would make if the more than 340,000 churches in North America all measured their effectiveness by external measures (impact on communities) rather than internal measures (attendance)? Can you imagine the difference it would make if every church around the world did the same?” (214)

This book helps you imagine this happening. It is full of examples of churches which are externally focused. But here is the drawback in this book. All

the examples come from North America, and predominantly larger churches. What about churches in Australia, where the vast majority are small? What about churches in the CRCA?

You don’t have to look far. A good example of churches which are externally focused are Penguin and Ulverstone Christian Reformed Churches. Check out their stories at

www.ministryformation.com.au¹

Discover how the focus of New Life Industries has become a wonderful example of “justice and mercy”, “good news and good deeds” walking hand in hand.

But the lack of examples outside of North America is the only drawback in *The Externally Focused Church*. This book ought to be in every pastor’s library and discussed around every session table. This book encourages us as Christians to move outside our four walls and become difference makers in our world. It might move us out of comfort zones, but the result is people becoming followers of Jesus and whole communities radically changed. So what are we waiting for?

¹ Read the articles *Capsicum*, *Jobs, and Hope* and *New Life Industries* found on the Multiply Resource pages.

