Reaching Secular Peoples: A Review of the Books of George G. Hunter, III

Gary L. McIntosh
Biola University, gary.mcintosh@biola.edu

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abstract

"Reaching Secular Peoples: A Review of the Books of George G. Hunter III" traces the development of the author's thought through his eighteen books (as of June 2011). The review demonstrates that Hunter is the primary interpreter of classic church growth thought to those in the Wesleyan tradition, but he also ably speaks to members of the larger Christian family across all theological spectrums with a spirit of grace, cooperation, and collegiality. While his early books, written between 1971 and 1980, communicated insights from the emerging Church Growth movement to Wesleyans (particularly the people called Methodists), his later books demonstrate his ability to enlarge and extend the categories of church growth thinking. To date no one, to my knowledge, has so ably integrated field research, academic rigor, and sound theology in the field of evangelism and church growth as George G. Hunter III. For the person highly interested in evangelism, reading all of Hunter's books is an enriching experience. This article first appeared in *The Asbury Journal* in fall 2011, and is used here, with slight editing, with permission.

Among those who are interested in evangelism in the United States, the name of George G. Hunter III has become legendary. No one, to my knowledge, has explored the evangelization of secular peoples as closely or deeply or broadly in the last half century. Beginning as a college student in the 1960s seeking to win secular weightlifters on muscle beach in Southern California, Dr. Hunter entered into what has become a lifelong journey of discovery. Empowered by early frustrations of being unable to communicate the Gospel of Jesus Christ to secular peoples in Venice, California, he had focused his understanding of several disciplines—communication theory, church growth theory, etc.—on the essential task of making disciples. This article will provide a brief overview of his eighteen books (as of 2011).

rethinking evangelism: a symposium (1971)

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Following his education at Florida Southern College (B.A.), Emory University (B.D.), Princeton Theological Seminary (Th.M.), and Northwestern University (Ph.D.), George G. Hunter served as pastor of two different churches. Between 1965 and 1972, he was Director of Preaching Evangelism and Advocacy of the United Methodist Church's Board of Evangelism and a leader of the New Life Mission. It was at this time that he edited his first book on *Rethinking Evangelism: A Symposium* (1971).

During the early 1970s, the General Board of Evangelism offered training for pastors called New Life Missioner Training School. The purpose of the schools was to train United Methodist pastors to lead New Life Missions. Participants in the training read several books and articles as supplemental material. Over time it became apparent that it would be profitable to make some of the supplemental readings available for wider exposure among United Methodist churches. Thus, the book was born. As editor, Hunter compiled lectures and articles written by Bishop James Armstrong, Donald Soper, Carl Michalson, Canon Bryan Green, and Harry Emerson Fosdick, while writing the introduction and chapter six, "A New Model for Christian Witnessing," himself.

Today it is fashionable to declare that Christendom is dead and that we are now living in a post-Christian age where the older forms of evangelistic outreach no longer work. However, Hunter declared such in 1971 when he wrote, "Christendom is grasping its last breaths, and fundamentalist and pietistic forms of evangelism have largely failed to confront post-Christendom man in his depths or in his systems for change."[1]

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[1] George G. Hunter III, (ed), *Rethinking Evangelism: A Symposium* (Nashville, TN: Tidings, 1971), 6.

He also pointed out that popular religion in North America was "essentially a folk religion" and one that "men approach out of a consumer orientation" for what they get out of it.[2] Thus, to effectively communicate the Good News of the Gospel, Hunter declared that evangelists must (1) take secular culture seriously, (2) communicate the authentic message so that it lodges in popular consciousness, (3) employ secular language in place of religious jargon, (4) respect the sanctity and freedom of human personality (i.e., not coerce or manipulate commitments), (5) particularize the Gospel to individual needs, (6) offer reconciliation of relationships, and (7) see evangelism as the penultimate process toward the ultimate end of making disciples.

Since there is no normative way that people come to Christ, Hunter reminds his readers that "What matters is *not how* men make the great transition *but, that* they make it."[3] Thus, evangelists must not look for the one way to evangelize secular people, but to adapt their evangelistic approach to each person. Adaptations must be made so that the evangelistic pitch relates to the needs, wants, and desires that motive people.[4]

Hunter sees this adaptive approach to evangelism as moving from particular to general rather than from general to particular. The old form of evangelism, according to Hunter, was a deductive one that moved from a general commitment to Christ to particular understandings of how such a commitment impacted war, race, community needs, pollution, or even personal needs. However, secular mankind has changed their way of thinking so that an inductive approach that moves from the particular to the general is more effective. Effective evangelistic approaches start with a person's individual needs and moves from there to a general commitment to Christ as Savior.[5]

The heart of Hunter's thought in *Rethinking Evangelism* is "that evangelism is not an end in itself, but is the handmaid of mission."[6] In using an inductive approach to witnessing, the evangelist invites non-believers to join in following Jesus Christ at a particular point of mission. As the non-believer participates in a particular mission along with a group of Jesus' disciples, he or she experiences a taste of the kingdom. This loving exposure to Christians on a particular mission acts to draw the non-believer toward a general commitment to Christ as Lord and Savior. In many circles today, Hunter's inductive approach from the particular to the general is being called missional, but he was advocating it forty years ago.

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[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid., 7.
[4] Ibid., 52.
[5] Ibid., 53.
[6] Ibid., 53–54.

From 1972 to 1976, George Hunter held the McCreless Chair of Evangelism at the Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University before taking on the role of Secretary for Evangelism of the United Methodist Board of Discipleship. Shortly thereafter he edited *Focus on Evangelism* to bring together helpful resources on evangelism that were not readily available to the average church member. While some Christians felt comfortable using a "canned" approach to evangelism, Hunter recognized that some, perhaps many, church members desired to think it through for themselves. Thus, Hunter pulled together twelve insightful articles to help church leaders "think it through."

The book offers an anthology of ideas by twelve authors answering key evangelistic questions, such as: What is evangelism? What is the matter with preaching? Would Jesus stoop to use canned evangelism? They also look at practical issues, such as the context today for producing Christians, the need to master the art of communication, and how to counsel the seeker.

While he does not contribute any chapter to the book, in the introduction Hunter shows his passion by encouraging the reader to start reaching out to people and "Avoid like the plague this debilitating paralysis of analysis."[7] "The harvest is great," he declares, "and many 'lost' people are receptive, searching, . . . waiting to be 'found' by Christ's holy flock and brought as new disciples into his fold."

Hunter concludes the introduction admonishing readers, "Don't wait until you have everything straight and all of your questions answered before your church reaches out. . . . Above all, do not neglect that empowerment promised by the same Spirit who is now preparing people in the world to hear the Great News and to receive Him and the life of the kingdom."[8]

the contagious congregation: frontiers in evangelism and church growth (1979)

Donald McGavran wrote the foreword to *The Contagious Congregation* and stated, "Here is a rich book couched in pungent English. It talks good sense, makes needed distinctions clearly, and disagrees with erroneous positions courteously. It is good reading." McGavran describes precisely the way George Hunter writes and

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[7] George G. Hunter III, (ed), *Focus on Evangelism: Readings for Thinking It Through* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1978), 8.

[8] Ibid.

speaks, as those who have studied with him and listened to him can attest. Hunter's language is always "vivid, colorful and readable."[9]

As the subtitle explains, George Hunter draws upon his study of church growth thought to present an assertive strategy for reaching people for Christ. During 1977, he had taken a sabbatical to study church growth with McGavran at Fuller's School of World Mission (now intercultural studies). While there he sat in on courses with McGavran, C. Peter Wagner, and Charles Kraft, while also spending much time in private discussion with each. Following the sabbatical, church growth thought started appearing prominently in his writings, as evidenced in *Contagious Congregation,* where he strongly calls attention to the fact that a lack of evangelism coincides with a lack of growth in most churches in the United States. "This is one reason" he writes, "why so many congregations do not grow— they do not engage in intentional 'evangelism.' The other reason is that they do engage in evangelism—but in ways which are outmoded, or not 'indigenous' to the culture of the target population."[10]

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Hunter's purpose in writing *The Contagious Congregation* was to "inspire and equip the leaders of congregations to evangelize in ways that with integrity really do attract people, that make new disciples, that expand Christ's church, and that make evangelism a credible word and enterprise again."[11]

To fulfill this purpose, Hunter defines evangelism in church growth terms of making disciples and incorporating new believers into Christ's body, a local congregation. He reiterates the importance of using an inductive-mission model, first described in *Rethinking Evangelism,* which begins with people's motivational needs as described in Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Motives.

Hunter tips his hat to McGavran's church growth theory by including the concepts of resistant-receptive peoples, the need for multiple evangelistic contacts, and the importance of relationships (what McGavran called bridges), but extends the understanding of each as to its empowerment of effective evangelism. He taps into his knowledge of rhetoric, particularly Aristotle's understanding of *ethos, logos,* and *pathos,* to build a proven model for communicating the Gospel to secular resistant people.

Finally, after declaring that "The Church Growth Movement's greatest contribution to this generation's world evangelization will be its stress upon receptivity," Hunter outlines practice indicators to know when people are open to the Gospel and are thus winnable to Christ.

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[9] George G. Hunter III, *The Contagious Congregations: Frontiers in Evangelism and Church Growth* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1979), 15.

[10] Ibid., 20.

[11] Ibid., 21.

finding the way forward **(1980)**

In the late 1970s, the Board of Discipleship produced the film *Finding the Way Forward,* to which George Hunter wrote a companion study guide by the same name. As a simple and practical guide, the book offered ideas for implementing evangelism and church growth strategies in local congregations. Specific steps are given on how to identify new people with needs a church might meet. It also offers insights on providing points of entry for newcomers, as well as clear ways to assimilate them after they are reached. Hunter made good use of the most relevant church growth insights of the time.

church growth: strategies that work **(1980 with Donald McGavran)**

Donald McGavran was invited to address a congress on evangelism for the United Methodist Church being held in Miami, Florida, in the late 1970s. About that time Lyle Schaller was editing a popular series of books called the *Creative Leadership Series* published by Abingdon Press. Since McGavran was not well known among Methodists in the United States at the time, Schaller suggested to George Hunter that he coauthor a book based on the lectures McGavran had presented at the congress on evangelism.

With McGavran's cooperation, Hunter took the four manuscripts that McGavran had used to lecture at the congress and turned them into three chapters on the history of church growth, training laity for church growth, and reaching new people through new congregations. Hunter then wrote an additional three chapters on using existing social networks for evangelism, motivating people for church growth, and helping smaller churches to grow. Hunter edited the chapters to make a very useful tool for local congregations. The book was widely read throughout the United States.

Hunter used his chapter in the book to continue introducing United Methodists to the research and discoveries of the Fuller Church Growth School of Thought. Building on research by C. Peter Wagner, McGavran, and Win Arn, he added his own examples from field research among Methodist congregations and further insights from the pen of Lyle Schaller. The book presented in simple terms the emerging strategic thinking about evangelism at the time.

. . . and every tongue confess: toward a recovery of our essential mission **(1983)**

In 1981, Hunter received the Philip Award from the National Association of United Methodist Evangelists for his work in evangelism with the Methodist

church. His years of ministry as an evangelist, consultant, and denominational leader, however, led to his belief that the United Methodist Church no longer had a consensus understanding of its mission. Hunter suggests in . . . *and Every Tongue Confess* that the answer is found in the Bible.

This book is the most direct Bible study that Hunter has written. In it he goes straight to Scriptures—Philippians, Romans, Acts, Haggai, Ezra, and Romans—to build a case "that every person's birthright is to have the opportunity to know the one true God whose Word and presence is mediated through Jesus, and to obey this God in life supremely, through the support and power of the messianic community."[12]

This book is a hidden treasure of theological and biblical rationale for God's mission of seeking and saving the lost. It is a treasure because it offers rich insights into well-known (Philippians, Acts, and Romans) and not so well-known (Haggai and Ezra) writings. It demonstrates effective strategies for communicating the Gospel in a time of religious pluralism, and debunks significant excuses for a lack of evangelistic practice in our churches. It is a hidden treasure because most leaders are unaware of, and certainly few have read, this challenging book. . . . *and Every Tongue Confess* clearly demonstrates that Hunter's understandings about effective evangelism are rooted solidly in biblical truth. While Hunter is not a "desk" theologian, his field theory rests on a solid theology.

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to spread the power: church growth in the wesleyan spirit (1987)

Beginning with *To Spread the Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit,* Hunter moved into a new phase of publications. While his early books mostly grew out of his work as a denominational leader, this book signaled a focus on a wider audience. As his earlier books had, to a great extent, reflected McGavran's church growth theory, this book incorporated more of Hunter's own research and thought.

Growing out of his own graduate and post-graduate studies of communication and applied behavioral sciences, *To Spread the Power* was a second-generation text on church growth. It was a groundbreaking book in that it was the first to seriously integrate John Wesley's strategies with modern church growth thought. Chapter two appropriately is titled, "John Wesley as Church Growth Strategist."

The book also extended and added fresh insights to the growing body of church growth knowledge by defining, explaining, and applying six mega strategies

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[12] George G. Hunter III, *. . . and Every Tongue Confess!: Toward a Recovery of Our Essential Mission* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1983), 3–4.

for church leaders: identifying receptive peoples, reaching out across social networks, multiplying recruiting units, ministering to people's needs, indigenizing the church's ministries, and strategic planning for a church's future.

In this book, Hunter introduces the beginning of a theme that he unpacks in future books: apostolic ministry. Here he writes of restoring apostolic confidence, advancing the apostolic movement, and the importance of evangelism in apostolic ministry.

how to reach secular people (1992)

If Hunter has been obsessed with anything, it is the desire to communicate the Gospel of Jesus Christ to truly secular people. When this book was released in 1992, he had been at it, that is studying how to reach secular people, for thirty years! The book opened the eyes of numerous church leaders to see and understand the secular peoples of Europe and North America.

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How to Reach Secular People informed pastors that the Christian West (Christendom) was lost. It declared that modernity was spent. The book offered hope by defining and profiling secular people, offering useable insights on how to communicate to them, and describing how apostolic congregations and apostolic Christians could reach them.

As was his growing practice, Hunter inculcated church growth theory, ideas from John Wesley, and fresh perspectives from communication theory to the complicated task of reaching secular men and women. While his earlier books positioned Hunter as a specialist in church growth, this one established his credentials as the leading exegete of secular people for the church. The book is honest, comprehensive scholarship at its pragmatic best.

church for the unchurched (1996)

By the mid 1990s, what came to be known as seeker churches were in full bloom. Some churches that targeted seekers, another word for the unchurched, had grown to mega church size, capturing the imagination and press coverage of Christian and secular publications. Along the way, the seeker church approach to ministry gathered its share of criticism, which brought pain to some saints who fostered seeker strategies for church growth.

When *Church for the Unchurched* was released in 1996, it was immediately hailed as an apologetic for the seeker church movement, or rather what Hunter prefers to call apostolic congregations. Indeed Hunter did offer support for seeker

services as a reemergence of what churches had always done: target special services toward the nonchurched. However, Hunter presented his views by expanding on a theme he had introduced in previous books: the apostolic church.

Hunter defined an apostolic church as one where the leaders believed they and the church were called and sent "by God to reach an unchurched pre-Christian population."[13] He built on the concept of an apostolic church by relating old forms of ministry to this new concept. Specifically, he explained the features of an apostolic congregation, as well as how it could reach secular people, employ small groups, communicate the gospel, and be culturally relevant. If *How to Reach Secular People* was the more scholarly book, this one was the more popular in its applications.

the celtic way of evangelism: how christianity can reach the west . . . again (2000)

Using the story of the fifth to ninth century Celtic Christian movement, Hunter advances his thought on the recovery of apostolic mission. In this popular book he captivates the reader through the telling of the story of Patrick's mission to Ireland. Throughout the story, Hunter demonstrates clearly that a new kind of church, an apostolic church, replaced the Roman parish church and thereby succeeded in winning the Celtic peoples to faith in Christ.

Patrick's mission to the Celtic people focused on being and doing church in a manner that suggests a mission ecclesiology for reaching the West again. Hunter describes five themes that may be helpful to evangelizing post-modern peoples today. First, Celtic Christians evangelized as a team. Second, Patrick's mission "prepared people to live with depth, compassion, and power in mission."[14] Third, Celtic evangelization incorporated imaginative prayer that engaged people's feelings as well as their minds. Fourth, the Celtic approach placed a high value on hospitality by welcoming strangers, guests, and refugees into the communion. Fifth, Patrick reversed the Roman model (presentation, decision, fellowship) and thereby created a Celtic model (fellowship, presentation, decision).

It was this last strategy that captured the essence of a new way to reach secular people. Hunter describes this approach as follows. "(1) You *first* establish community with people, or bring them into the fellowship of your community of faith. (2) Within fellowship, you engage in conversation, ministry, prayer, and

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[13] George G. Hunter III, *Church for the Unchurched* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 28.

[14] George G. Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West . . . Again* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000), 47.

worship. (3) In time, as they discover that they now believe, you invite them to commit."[15] At the time of writing, this Celtic way of evangelism was startling to the minds of church leaders in the West, but today it is considered the wise approach.

leading & managing a growing church (2000)

The challenge of doing ministry in an apostolic manner is formidable. Transitioning an older congregation steeped in doing church the Roman way to doing church in a Celtic way is fraught with unprecedented barriers. Thus, Hunter wrote *Leading & Managing a Growing Church* to fill in the missing link of how to lead and manage a turnaround church.

Hunter writes the book in three sections. The first four chapters help Christian leaders "get on board" with management principles. Chapters five through nine describe essential management concepts of analyzing, planning, organizing, delegating, appraising, and controlling. Finally, in chapter ten, a "Breakthrough Project" model for turning around a church is presented. The Hunter Congregational Health Questionnaire is offered as a resource for discovering the current situation of a congregation.[16]

While *Leading and Managing a Growth Church* at first appears to depart from the theme of apostolic ministry, it fits naturally into the flow of change management. Moving a church into an apostolic frame of mind takes significant leadership and management skills. This book is a tool to help church leaders move congregations into a new paradigm of apostolic ministry.

radical outreach: the recovery of apostolic ministry & evangelism (2003)

In *Radical Outreach,* Hunter continues to unpack the concept of apostolic ministry in greater detail. The book was written to be a textbook for a three-hour Master of Divinity course in Apostolic Ministry at Asbury's School of Theology. Using a composite fictional congregation called Old East Side Church, Hunter challenges all churches to reach three categories of populations: pre-Christian secular people, those often thought of as hopeless, and recent immigrants.

Hunter builds the book on Paul's prescription for church renewal in First and Second Corinthians. While the Corinthian church was dysfunctional, it was also a church on mission. In contrast to current books on church health and/or renewal,

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[15] Ibid., 53.

[16] George G. Hunter III, *Leading & Managing a Growing Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000), 10.

Radical Outreach declares, "Churches are not called to become 'renewed' or 'healthy' first, and then to reach out. Pathological churches experience renewal and greater health as they abandon their narcissism, reach out, and experience new people who have just discovered grace entering their ranks."[17]

Many of the standard church growth themes—cultural relevance, empowered laity, hospitality, and evangelistic conversation—are restated in new ways. However, the importance of ministry with so-called impossible people is introduced in chapter five. In this chapter, Hunter deftly describes the use of recovery ministries for outreach to secular people. Paul Rader, who wrote the forward to the book, says, "This chapter on addiction alone is worth the price of the book."[18]

christian, evangelical & . . . democrat? (2006)

At first glance, *Christian, Evangelical & . . . Democrat?* appears to be way out of the mold of a George Hunter book. A close read, however, discovers that it carries the same desire as all of his books, that is, to reach secular people.

The book does challenge the idea that Christian Democrat is an oxymoron, similar to "jumbo shrimp," "just war," or "working vacation." However, Hunter's concern is not just to make a social commentary. Rather he is "concerned for the soul and the credibility of evangelical Christianity."[19]

Specifically, Hunter writes to encourage Christians to remain active in all political parties, indeed all segments of society, in order to bear testimony to the availability of new life in Jesus Christ. He writes, "My 'agenda' is to encourage evangelical Christians to (once again) love Democrats as well as Republicans, and to be involved as 'salt' and 'light' in both parties (once again), and to invite pre-Christian Democrats (and Republicans) to become followers of Christ."[20]

the apostolic congregation: church growth reconceived for a new generation (2009)

With *The Apostolic Congregation,* Hunter connects full circle his church growth roots and his apostolic passion for extending the grace of Christ to all peoples. He "restates core Church Growth principles and insights, but he also extends the

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[17] George G. Hunter III, *Radical Outreach: The Recovery of Apostolic Ministry & Evangelism* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2003), 26.

[18] Ibid., 11.

[19] George G. Hunter III, *Christian, Evangelical & . . . Democrat?* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2006), 4.

[20] Ibid., xiv.

categories and enlarges the knowledge about conversion evangelism beyond what is already known."[21]

The Apostolic Congregation does not simply dress up old ideas in new garb but offers original designs for making disciples. Catalytic growth, proliferation growth, movemental growth, and apostolic growth provide increased understanding on how to reach secular people in today's post-Christian context.

Hunter not only explains what church growth really means and why it is needed, but he also describes apostolic Christianity's main business—making disciples of the nations for Jesus Christ!

summary thoughts

Looking back from today's vantage point, it is surprising to see how far ahead of his time George Hunter was in his understanding of evangelism and other church issues. Note the following examples.

First, today it is fashionable to declare that Christendom is dead and that we are now living in a post-Christian age where the older forms of evangelistic outreach no longer work. However, Hunter was declaring this as far back as 1971, when he wrote, "Christendom is grasping its last breaths, and fundamentalist and pietistic forms of evangelism have largely failed to confront post-Christendom man in his depths or in his systems for change."[22]

Second, he was one of the first writers to note the prevalence of a consumer-orientation in churches, while highlighting its impact on evangelism and church growth.

Third, he is the first person to thoroughly interpret church growth thought for a Wesleyan audience.

Fourth, he weds sound theological understanding and academic rigor in the cause of evangelism, while combining careful field research with cogent language to express ancient principles for reaching secular peoples.

Fifth, while he works out of a Wesleyan theological and historical tradition, Hunter engages readers across all theological spectrums with an irenic spirit of grace, cooperation, and collegiality.

Sixth, Hunter likes to approach today's evangelistic challenge historically. This is another of his contributions to the literature and practice of mission

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[21] George G. Hunter III, *The Apostolic Congregation: Church Growth Reconceived for a New Generation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2009), xi.

[22] George G. Hunter III, (ed), *Rethinking Evangelism: a Symposium* (Nashville, TN: Tidings, 1971), 6.

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ecclesiology. His strong affinity for ancient apostolic movements—Celtic and Wesleyan—roots his insights solidly in Christianity's historic past.

While many popular works from the church growth school of thought will quickly fade from use, it is likely that the writings of George G. Hunter III will stand the test of time. Each publication offers significant insights for fruitful evangelism and church growth for anyone seriously interested in making disciples.

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Gary L. McIntosh, D.Min., Ph.D., is Professor of Christian Ministry & Leadership at Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, located in La Mirada, CA. The author of twenty-two books and numerous articles. Two recent books of note are: *What Every Pastor Should Know: 101 Indispensable Rules of Thumb for Growing Your Church* and *Being the Church In a Multi-ethnic Community: Why It Matters and How It Works.* He can be reached at cgnet@earthlink.net. For Dr. McIntosh's resources go to www.churchgrowthnetwork.com.

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