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Book Review: Taking Your Church to the Next Level: What Got You Here Won't Get You There by Gary L. McIntosh

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Reynolds: Book Review: Taking Your Church to the Next Level: What Got You the author issues some necessary challenges and appeals to his readers for their intentional effort to engage and empower the younger generation for the cause of Christ.

Wraight certainly makes his case and leaves his audience with no alternative but to respond in support. A collaborative effort to ride “the next wave” will be enhanced by the recommendation of this book for anyone who works with students, has a passion to reach them, or simply wants to fulfill our Lord’s Great Commission in making disciples of all nations!

Gary L. McIntosh. *Taking Your Church to the Next Level: What Got You Here Won’t Get You There*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009, 224 pp., \$16.99.

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Gary McIntosh has long been regarded as an authority in the field of Church Growth. Throughout the course of his nearly three decades as a professor and church consultant, McIntosh has published eighteen books, six manuals, and over one hundred articles in which he contributes to the fields of evangelism, church growth, and church leadership. He is a prolific speaker and has consulted over 1,000 churches across 87 denominations. McIntosh currently serves as president of the Church Growth Network and professor of Church Ministry and Leadership of the Talbot School of Theology at Biola University in La Mirada, California.

In *Taking Your Church to the Next Level: What Got You Here Won’t Get You There*, McIntosh employs his years of experience and research in helping churches both to recognize their current ministry paradigm and to determine what reaching the next level of ministry will require. He contends that three factors of ministry challenge all church leaders: first, local churches grow and decline along a predictable life cycle; second, church size plays a crucial role in a church’s health and vitality; and third, what brought a local church to its current level of ministry impact will not take it to where it wants to be in the future (11). Writing primarily for church leaders and students, McIntosh asserts that church age and size are key factors that dictate the measures required to take any church to the next level of ministry impact. In *Taking Your Church to the Next Level*, he delineates those measures and coaches church leaders in implementing them.

McIntosh structures his argument in two parts and therefore presents his book in two major sections. He deals first with his proposed church life cycle and contends that a church’s age plays a significant role in its health. Basing his life

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cycle argument both on the foundational work of others (e.g., David Moberg and Robert Dale) and his own experience, McIntosh contends the following:

Congregations tend to traverse a predictable life cycle that is similar to a bell curve. A church is prone to rapid growth in the first fifteen to twenty years of its existence, followed by a leveling off of growth onto a plateau for another twenty to forty years. Then follows a slower decline over the next thirty to forty years until the church either closes its doors (dies) or eases into an unhealthy period of stagnation (30).

158 In part one, McIntosh discusses the strengths, challenges, and characteristics of churches at each point on the church life cycle. Churches in the emerging stage (birth–5 years) are filled with highly motivated people who have a clear vision of where God is leading their church and a high level of commitment to the church’s ministry. These nascent churches must focus on starting well and developing the necessary ministries required for the church to thrive. Growing churches (5–20 years) typically experience their most rapid growth during this phase and must develop organizational structures to accommodate their rapid expansion. Morale is high in growing churches, and leaders must decide what to do with increasing manpower and financial resources.

Once they reach the twenty-year mark, most churches begin to plateau for the next ten to forty years. McIntosh calls churches that have reached this stage consolidating churches. Such churches are well established and healthy, but the leadership and congregation begin to grow weary of facing the challenges presented by rapid growth. Without renewed vision and focus, consolidating churches typically enter the declining phase. Churches in decline are characterized by a loss of vision and a desire to simply maintain the status quo. If churches do not turn around during the declining phase, they inevitably enter the dying phase. Churches in the dying stage have lost their vision, their purpose, and their hope of seeing things turn around. These churches will either be reborn or die, and without significant change, it is only a matter of time before dying churches close their doors.

McIntosh devotes the second half of his book to discussing the impact of church size on vitality. In this section, McIntosh builds upon the work of other church growth experts (including Lyle Schaller, Elmer Towns, Thom Rainer, and his own previous work) to make the following case:

Churches operate differently depending on the size of the congregation. “Right sizing” the various ministries and processes of communicating, welcoming, training, involving, and a host of other activities is crucial for smooth operation, as well as increased growth, of a church. As a church grows, it

Reynolds: Book Review: Taking Your Church to the Next Level: What Got You cannot simply employ business-as-usual practices. Larger churches are not just bigger versions of smaller churches; in reality they are an entirely different entity that requires different operational procedures (116).

By basing his conclusions on current management trends, sociological findings, and church growth principles, McIntosh breaks down the differences among churches of varying sizes and the leadership styles required to help them flourish.

Having developed his own rubric for size classification, McIntosh seeks to help churches to categorize themselves and thereby determine what it will take to pass the various numerical barriers churches face. He classifies churches as Relational (15–200 people), Managerial (200–400 people), Organizational (400–800 people), Centralized (800–1,500 people), and Decentralized (1,500-plus people). Each size classification requires different leadership styles, pastoral skills, and ministry programming. McIntosh's primary contention is that churches of diverse sizes operate with vastly differing methods, so he instructs leaders in how to manage their current size while providing strategies for continued growth.

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McIntosh closes his book by giving church leaders practical tools for evaluating their current ministry context and expanding their reach. He maintains that the purpose of his book is not simply to help pastors grow a church to dwarf other churches. His purpose, rather, is “to assist you in understanding what is blocking the growth of your church and what you can do to see it reach a new level of impact” (192). By providing questions for reflection, evaluative surveys, and diagnostic tools within the book, McIntosh makes it easy for church leaders to identify impediments to growth and then to move past them.

In *Taking Your Church to the Next Level*, McIntosh has provided local churches with valuable tools for diagnosing their current ministry paradigms and leadership structures; and he has given churches methods by which they can step into the next level of impact. By bringing nearly three decades of expertise to the issues presented in the book, McIntosh has provided sound wisdom for those whose churches have either become stranded in their current ministry paradigm or reached a transition point they must navigate. McIntosh not only teaches churches how to identify strategic points in their own life cycles, but he also gives helpful, specific strategies for restructuring church dynamics and leadership to move forward in ministry. In essence, he defends well his assertion that those methods and practices that have brought a church to its current level of ministry impact will not take it to the next level.

One of the book's greatest strengths is its accessibility to both scholars and practitioners. McIntosh states at the outset that, while the book is written with church leaders in mind, “it is intended . . . for anyone who cares about the church

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 3, Iss. 1 [2021], Art. 17 and desires to see it experience biblical growth” (16). His book is therefore structured to be used either as a manual to be consulted with particular needs in mind or as a textbook to provide overall perspective in important church growth principles. McIntosh seeks to make his book more pertinent to real-life ministry by beginning each chapter with an ongoing case study detailing a church-centered conversation among three fictional pastors. The pastors’ conversation sets the stage for each discussion and engages the reader by illustrating the discussion’s practical significance. *Taking Your Church to the Next Level* thereby becomes much more inviting to those who eschew principle without narrative.

160 The primary strength of the book lies in McIntosh’s interaction with over 1,000 churches throughout his career and his practical knowledge of what happens in most churches over several generations of ministry. That same fact, however, lends itself to one of the book’s limitations—that is, the research behind McIntosh’s assertions is not always clear. Many of his observations come from his experience in consulting individual churches. However, he could have strengthened his argument by citing more statistics from the churches he has served. Additionally, much of the research he cites—particularly for the discussion of church life cycles—was published decades before *Taking Your Church to the Next Level* was released. As a result, the possibility exists that some of the findings may not be contemporarily applicable. Without doubt, many of the principles he sets forth regarding the church life cycle are relatively timeless. He could have strengthened his assertions, however, by presenting more current, widespread data as evidence for his argument.

McIntosh has provided the church with a tremendous tool for expanding kingdom impact. His thoughts are clear, well-articulated, and easy to read. He has provided a resource both for those who wish to read about, diagnose, and help their own churches, and for those who wish to better understand church growth dynamics as a whole. In the end, McIntosh has written yet another book that will appeal to a wide spectrum of readers, and will provide intensely valuable help to churches seeking to reach that often elusive next level of ministry impact.

Alan and Eleanor Kreider, *Worship and Mission After Christendom*. Scottsdale, Ariz.: Herald Press, 2011, 322 pp., \$19.99

Reviewed by Karl Dahlfred, Church Planter, Thailand, OMF International

Are worship and mission doomed to be in never-ending competition for the time and resources of the church? Must we choose between looking inwardly and