

METHODIST RECORDER

BOOK REVIEW

by

Tom Stuckey

If you like books with tables of figures, diagrams, pi-charts, diagrammatic pictures then **What makes Churches Grow?** (Church of England Publishing 2015 £??) is for you! Bob Jackson used to be economic advisor to the Government, is an Anglican priest and after 20 years in parish ministry joined 'Springboard' - the Archbishops' initiative to mobilise the church for evangelism. He is now Director of the Centre for Church Growth at St John's College Nottingham. This book, says Archbishop Welby 'is a wind-sock to point out the directions in which the Spirit is blowing'. There are important lessons here for the Methodist Church as we attempt to discern what the Spirit is saying.

The book unashamedly uses numbers and percentages as the author seeks to measure the health and holistic growth of the body of Christ. In part 1 he reviews growth patterns in the Church of England and charts developing trends. He states that the balance of evidence suggests that the Church of England 'has probably stopped shrinking numerically'. Church growth is happening in London, in the cathedrals across the country and in small churches (many of them rural).

Fresh Expressions of Church and particularly 'Messy Church' has become a key factor. Although 25% of the members of fresh expressions are church going Christians, 40% have never been churchgoers before!

Part 2 has ten chapters reviewing the various initiatives needed in different context to effect growth. They deal with intention, leadership, training, work with families and church

planting. The final three chapters of this section look at budgeting, growth in Cathedrals and reshaping the Dioceses.

Certain key principles keep popping up; focus on children, young families, work in schools, Messy Church, discipleship courses, lay leadership, prayer, changing the times and location of services and the deployment of clergy in the local community. Churches making changes grow and those that don't shrink. The author notes that church growth is as much about stopping existing members leaving as it is about helping new people to join. He thinks that 'families and children are the most responsive and promising demographic for numerical growth today.'

Part 3 leaves diagnosis behind and attempts a theological overview. Its reflections on guidance, prayer and the Holy Spirit are appropriate as is its call for repentance and confidence. He concludes that 'the wind of the Spirit is blowing. Whether we can rise to the opportunity presented to us remains to be seen'. I do not disagree with that.

The statistics assembled by the writer do not come from every diocese. I would have liked a more balanced picture and a little more about the growth taking place in small rural churches. However the book is already long enough (nearly 300 pages) and the inclusion of more material could have wearisome.

This is certainly a useful handbook for growth yet it did not fire me up although it was laced with personal stories, anecdotes and a few Biblical references. When are we going to get a similar book from the Methodist Church? Now that would really be helpful!

The Rev Tom Stuckey is a former President of the Conference.

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