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## Book Reviews

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### *Overcoming Barriers to Church Growth*

Reviewed by John W. Ellas

Steve Clapp published *Plain Talk About Church Growth* in 1985, looking at practical strategies for the local congregation. From his ongoing consulting work and dialogue with church leaders, he developed a strong conviction that congregations must also address growth barriers. “Neglecting the barriers,” says Clapp, “limits the usefulness of growth strategies.” *Overcoming Barriers to Church Growth* was written to compliment his first work by providing leaders with a tool to identify the barriers and suggestions for overcoming them.

The first chapter, “Facing Reality: Demographics and Growth,” gets off to a rocky start. Clapp appropriately encourages churches to look at their communities and compare the demographics of church and community. Several helpful categories for comparison are shared along with useful questions for thinking about the data. However, no descriptions are offered for defining community nor explaining demographic barriers, and obviously no steps for overcoming the barrier. This reader was left with the feeling that “facing reality” meant accepting contextual determinism.

From this point on, the road smoothes out some, and Clapp begins to deliver with his major strength—very practical ideas for ministry. A potpourri of suggested steps and “how-to’s” are presented that have the potential in helping churches overcome re-

lated growth barriers.

Numerous chapters begin with a Lyle Schaller-style dialogue or a lengthy quotation. And frequently, the author provides case study descriptions for each example that varies in length. Consequently, a fair portion of the text is devoted to such material. According to a reader's preference, it will be interesting and very helpful or very distracting.

Low congregational morale and negative attitudes are exposed for what they are—a major barrier. If members don't feel positive about their church, they certainly won't invite their friends to church activities. Clapp presents some helpful diagnostic tools to identify low self-esteem in churches, and he offers practical ideas to address the barrier.

Volunteer shortages is a critical barrier much like low self-esteem. If this one isn't solved, a church is not capable of addressing the others. But this barrier received the shortest attention with only a three-page chapter. Nonetheless, the reader is given some practical ideas for improving the condition.

Throughout his book, the author keeps the small church's struggles in mind. For example when addressing the barrier of limited advertising resources, he helps smaller churches remember the importance of basics. The larger churches will benefit more from direct mail, newspaper ads, and radio and television spots, but smaller churches can work on the basics such as the role of the minister, programs, music, and the yellow pages.

Attracting and assimilating new members requires churches to do the fundamentals well. Beginning with ports of entry for guest, visitor follow up, and culminating with assimilation, Clapp offers an abundance of ideas. While few suggestions are fully developed with step-by-step details, each can serve as a sounding board for self-evaluation and for stimulating action.

One of the most interesting chapters is on building quality and high standards in church ministry. The author introduced a study that compares members and visitors evaluations on important areas such as parking, greeters, warmth, restrooms, Sunday school, and preaching. Results revealed that members tend to give higher evaluations than visitors, and growing

churches tend to receive higher evaluations than nongrowing churches. The study has the potential to encourage greater efforts in building quality. Unfortunately, the author never documents the research, nor any other of the half dozen studies mentioned throughout the text. This is a major barrier to the quality of the book.

No broad-based church growth book is complete without discussing the minister's role. Based on his experience, Clapp believes that the pastor is the single-most important factor in determining whether a congregation reaches its growth potential. He describes eight priorities for a church growth minister:

- 1) He models quality.
- 2) He cultivates a personal relationship with God.
- 3) He takes charge of his priority setting and time management.
- 4) He trains and educates others in church growth.
- 5) He trains members in evangelism.
- 6) He trains members in visitation.
- 7) He models evangelism and visitation.
- 8) And he develops a team.

The next to the last chapter presents five different barriers. Each has the potential to explode into a major obstacle for growth. For example, church conflict or even the fear of change can shut down a church's growth progress. These barriers need more attention than a few paragraphs each or at least a suggested reading list for further study.

Clapp touches on more topics than any one book can handle. He does, however, offer some insights to the growth barriers church leaders face on a regular basis. He ends in characteristic fashion with a thirteen-week practical plan of action. It has concrete suggestions for a team, and is designed for both group study and implementation of church growth initiatives. For congregations needing their idea bank replenished this book has some value.

Reviewer

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691006, Houston, TX 77269-1006. Title: Director. John earned a B.S. degree from Northwestern State University of Louisiana (1970) and his M.S. degree in Education from Georgia Southern College (1972). He received a M.A. in Religion from Harding Graduate School of Religion in Memphis, TN (1981) and a D.Min. in Church Growth from Fuller Theological Seminary. Dr. Ellas directs the Center for Church Growth and is the author of *Church Growth Through Groups* and *Clear Choices for Churches*. In addition he is editor of *Church Growth Magazine*.