

VOL. 11 • NO.1 FALL 2019

BOOK REVIEW

McIntosh, Gary L., and Phil Stevenson. *Building the Body: 12 Characteristics of a Fit Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2018. 195 pp. \$9.03

Reviewed by Beau Lee. Beau is the planter and Lead Pastor of Hope Hill Church – a multiethnic congregation that meets at Union Square in the heart of New York City. He earned a B.S. in Organizational Leadership and Management from Regent University (summa cum laude) and an M.S. in Management, Strategy, and Leadership from Michigan State University (summa cum laude). He is currently pursuing a Doctor of Ministry degree from Talbot School of Theology in Growing and Multiplying Churches, studying under church growth leaders Gary McIntosh, Alan McMahan, and George Hunter III. During his studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (TEDS) he was Editor in Chief for the seminary newspaper, *The Graduate Scrawl*. Beau is the author of the book *Jesus Plus Nothing Equals Salvation*. Beau, his wife, Renata, and their daughter live in view of the Statue of Liberty in the ever-exciting city of Brooklyn. He also serves as the CEO of Israel Bible Trips (www.IsraelBibleTrips.com), a company that organizes large-group Israel trips for churches, couples, and individuals from around the world. Outside of ministry, Beau is the Director for the NYC Guitar Group – New York City’s largest network of guitarists with over 5,600 members (www.Meetup.com/Guitar).

Doctors easily spot indicators of fitness from one physique to the next, and each church shows signs of its level of fitness when viewed through the eyes of skilled church consultants. In Gary McIntosh and Phil Stevenson's magnificent contribution, *Building the Body*, these two "church doctors" have analyzed the successes and failures of thousands of churches, assembled the insight, and packed it into a hand-sized volume for church leaders. Through this book, these radical authors are determined to help churches perform at levels of excellence and effectiveness that push out to the limits of possibility. Is your church interested in this kind of fitness?

The book begins by helping readers imagine various runners with their individual levels of expertise, including (1) beginner, (2) novice, (3) intermediate, (4) advanced, and (5) elite. Churches, like runners, will each fall into one of these five levels of fitness. Following the introduction, the next twelve chapters lay out the twelve vital ministry factors by which a church's fitness must be assessed: (1) Outreach, (2) Effective Evangelism, (3) Community Engagement, (4) Personal Ministry, (5) God-Honoring Stewardship, (6) Leadership Development, (7) Christ-Exalting Worship, (8) Disciple-Making Strategy, (9) Pastoral Leadership, (10) Loving Community, (11) Vision-Directed Systems, and (12) Divine Enablement. Each chapter offers a "Plan of Action" for leaders of churches from each level of fitness, leaving all church leaders with unambiguous steps forward toward greater church effectiveness. *Building the Body* concludes with a thirteenth and final chapter that organizes and clearly summarizes all of the key insights from the previous twelve chapters, placing these insights into matrices that allow church leadership teams to review them easily. From these matrices, leaders may systematically employ the many practical prescriptions of the book in a way that will not get tangled up in complexity. If leaders find value when church consultants help them *apply* their many insights, then this final chapter is a gold strike for leadership teams.

Although we could spend all day discussing the particular insights this book offers on church fitness, every particular recommendation towards church fitness has an endgame goal of seeing the Great Commission realized. All twelve indicators of church fitness will lead to more Gospel proclamation and disciple-making in the end. These goals are in the heart of the authors, and this book will fulfill the authors' intended purpose well.

With church growth, church health, and (ultimately) the fulfillment of the Great Commission as foundations for this book, traditional evangelical readers will understand that the authors of this book hold to a conservative definition of *evangelism*. The chapter on effective evangelism (chapter 2) describes an evangelistic “win” in the following manner: “Salvation, forgiveness of sin, and being restored in a relationship with God is what evangelism is about” (42). The authors continue by recommending two questions for gauging effective evangelism: “(1) Did you share the gospel in a clear, understandable manner? (2) Did you provide people an opportunity to respond to the gospel? If you are able to answer yes to these two questions, then you have effective evangelism” (42-43). This book reveals a much-appreciated “bias” toward verbal evangelism that presents a clear explanation of the cross.

The authors also warn against becoming a leader who “believes everyone who attends their church is already in a relationship with Christ” (44). The belief that even church folk must understand and believe the Gospel impacts the type of ministry these consultants recommend. The book stresses the consistent proclamation of the Gospel message throughout each and every ministry without and *within* the church.

A major strength of *Building the Body* is found in its structure. The book is well-designed for leadership teams to study together for use in catalyzing movement toward higher levels of church fitness. The structure’s division into twelve primary chapters aligns perfectly with a three-month, chapter-per-week reading to be discussed at weekly staff meetings. After the twelve chapters are completed, the leadership team will reach chapter 13 with its church health measurement matrix. Here the team members will find a list of fifty key indicators of church health that each require a “grade” to be issued. For example, one key indicator is “Creates a leadership pipeline” (202). The leaders must select where they stand, checking off either *beginner* (“Pastor is the sole leader in the church”), *novice* (“Leaders are the ones already in place”), *intermediate* (“Begins to identify potential leaders in the congregation”), *advanced* (“Invites potential leaders to participate in a development process”), or *elite* (“Has a process to develop leaders who develop leaders”) (202). The team will be required to admit which level of fitness they are currently operating on and do so with each

of the fifty key indicators of church health. If the team realizes they are only at a novice or intermediate level for a particular indicator, they will look to see the descriptors for the higher levels, clearly noting what they must do to reach the advanced or elite level. By consistently revisiting the health measurement matrix in chapter 13, churches will find a roadmap toward what will be, for many, unprecedented mission advancement. I find the ease of use with teams to be a great strength of this book.

A second strength, among many others, is that this book has a great depth of insight, yet it is an easy and enjoyable read for busy ministry leaders (and easily-distractible readers as well). Chapters are short – straight to the point. The bullet points for recommended action steps in the second half of each chapter keep the reading interesting, particularly for many contemporary digital readers who are used to scanning the headers in a two-minute blog read.

Several aspects of this book may not be immediately applicable for new church planters, house church leaders, pastors of very small churches, missionaries on foreign fields in impoverished countries, and ministry leaders in difficult urban environments. Readers that fall into one of the aforementioned categories should not feel inadequate or frustrated when they cannot assess their congregation at the advanced or elite status in one or more church health indicators. For example, while on chapter 13 and going through the church health matrix, it is not practical for a faithful first-time church planter to check off the elite boxes of “4+ daughter churches,” “Full-time pastor of ministry is responsible for recruitment,” “Full-time professional accountant on staff,” etc. (200-201). Each church’s situation is unique, and legitimate reasons may exist for lack of resources. In any case, it is important to prepare for growth phases ahead.

Although *Building the Body* is loaded with the cream of church consulting insight, several key items stood out to me for immediate application in our congregation. First, McIntosh and Stevenson recommend that any formal disciple-making process should be founded on an already established description of a disciple. Three questions are recommended: “What qualities and behaviors are we trying to develop in disciples? What do we want them to do? What do we want them to be?” (134). A targeted disciple-making plan should be built on these answers.

Second, the book recommends that churches develop a leadership “ladder” that shows all available positions in the church from the lowest entry-level positions (such as parking attendants) to the positions at the top (pastors/elders). This ladder should be presented visually, with a clear outline of steps a prospective leader might take to go from bottom to top (80-81). This procedure improves retention of talented leaders as it provides them with a realization that they can go up, a vision for where God could take them, and motivation to move in that direction.

Finally, the authors remind readers that church growth is a biblical *mandate* – not a superficial, prideful, human goal (143). The Great Commission demands that the Gospel be preached so people can trust in the Savior and be made into new disciples, and these goals cannot be accomplished without church growth. Church leaders are recommended to measure three baselines related to church growth: (1) salvations, (2) baptisms, and (3) funds invested in disciple-making initiatives (146). From these numbers, a leader may discern church effectiveness, stir up dissatisfaction to motivate growth, and focus resources (time, talent, treasure) on the Great Commission that Jesus left the church. *A fit church is a growing church.*

My copy of *Building the Body* is covered in pen and highlighter marks with hand-written notes filling the margins. My undergraduate and graduate education were in the area of organizational leadership and management, and despite my large library of leadership books, I can say this book easily falls into my top ten books for leaders. As senior pastor of Hope Hill Church in New York City, our leadership team is now making our way through the book, applying recommendation after recommendation, and watching the results with excitement. Get your hands on this book.