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## Book Review: Testing the Claims of Church Growth by Rodney E. Zwonitzer

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

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## Testing the Claims of Church Growth

Reviewed by Gary L. McIntosh

*Zwonitzer, Rodney E. Testing the Claims of Church Growth. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002.*

Criticism of Church Growth is nothing new. Since the founding of the Church Growth Movement in 1955 with the publication of Donald McGavran's landmark book *The Bridges of God*, debate over the theology, theory, and principles of the movement has come and gone almost yearly.

The newest book to offer a criticism of Church Growth is *Testing The Claims of Church Growth* by Rodney E. Zwonitzer. As a former marketing executive, Dr. Zwonitzer, now pastor of a Lutheran church in Michigan, draws upon thirteen years of advising and leading corporations. From 1971 to 1984 the author worked as a marketing executive for companies such as Westinghouse, Storage Technology, and United Technologies Mostek. After becoming a pastor, he began to question whether or not his marketing experience was transferable to church ministry. His study of the Bible led him to conclude, "I do not believe that God wants or needs much of what I did as a marketing executive to carry over into His church (8)."

The author's stated purpose for writing the book is to "test the claims written by both sides of the Church Growth controversy in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. The goal is to reveal which side is pleasing God and which is pleasing people (9)." The "both sides" referred to by Zwonitzer are the anti-church growth Confessional Movement and the pro-growth Church Growth Movement. For those not familiar with the con-

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trovery surrounding Church Growth within the LC-MS, a short overview might be helpful.

Like many denominations, the LC-MS found itself in decline in the 1960s and early 1970s. Naturally, questions began to be raised as to how to stop the decline. Mission-oriented voices within the denomination began to encourage a new ministry paradigm that included greater emphasis on fulfillment of the Great Commission, evangelistic outreach, and empowerment of laity for the work of ministry. These voices were not specifically Church Growth ones, but they did speak out of a mission orientation that paved the way for Church Growth thinking to be birthed with the LC-MS.

Sometime between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s the Church Growth Movement took visible form within the LC-MS. Lutheran-related organizations, such as the Aid Association for Lutherans and Lutheran Brotherhood, sponsored church growth-related projects to stimulate growth thinking among Lutherans. A number of LC-MS pastors, who were looking for answers on how to grow a church, enrolled in Fuller School of Theology's Doctor of Ministry program. Exposure to Church Growth principles and theory began to take root within the LC-MS through the writings of Lyle Schaller, C. Peter Wagner, Win Arn, Kent Hunter, David Luecke, and others. Gradually Church Growth thinking became visible in LC-MS churches, seminary and denominational positions, and in widely read publications.

The 1980s saw both acceptance and resistance to the Church Growth approach to ministry. While Church Growth training, books, and conferences proliferated, criticism slowly became more open and public. By the late 1980s and through the 1990s, it became apparent that a division existed with the LC-MS between the Confessional Movement and the Church Growth Movement. Today the LC-MS is a conflicted denomination where the controversy over Church Growth has taken on theological, political, and practical dimensions.

It is clear that the context out of which *Testing The Claims of Church Growth* flows is one of controversy. While Zwonitzer attempts to "test" the claims of Church Growth in a balanced manner, his point of view is that of the anti-church growth Confessional Movement. Unfortunately, his bias is evident throughout the book in numerous ways.

Zwonitzer's approach is to compare what he labels "Church Growth Claims" to "Confessional Lutheran Claims." The Church

Growth Claims are drawn mostly from the writings of Kent R. Hunter and David S. Luecke, both prominent LC-MS Church Growth authors. The Confessional Lutheran Claims are drawn primarily from the writings of Kurt Marquart, professor at Concordia Seminary (Ft. Wayne, IN), and from a denominational Church Growth study titled *For the Sake of Christ's Commission* (2001).

The author's core concern is that "In its underlying philosophy, CG [Church Growth] is very much about marketing (18)." He believes that the Church Growth Movement has shifted from letting the Bible be the determiner of a church's ministry paradigm, to allowing the customer to "become the driving force behind everything done by churches . . . (20)." Simply put, Zwonitzer contends that Church Growth puts the unchurched [the customer] at the center of the church rather than God's Word and His Gospel of grace.

The author further contends that Church Growth seeks to please people rather than God, supplants the doctrine of justification by faith with outreach strategies, condones carte blanche accommodation to culture, dilutes the pure Gospel to increase membership, seeks effectiveness rather than faithfulness, believes the Gospel is not sufficient for salvation, misinterprets the priesthood of believers, and misunderstands the office of pastor. To Zwonitzer, the Church Growth Movement is an unholy leaven that has been allowed to spread for over two decades within the LC-MS. Church Growth is a "scandal" that "must be addressed now before it is given more time to spread." As he exhorts, "It's time to be Lutherans (140)."

Zwonitzer is clearly a godly man who sincerely cares about the LC-MS and its direction for the future. No doubt he has given the issues he writes about a great deal of thought and is passionate about his cause. Unfortunately, I believe he has seriously misrepresented the Church Growth Movement. In my view he has made several errors.

First, the author has mistakenly defined Church Growth as marketing. From a popular perspective, marketing has been aligned with Church Growth in the minds of many people. However, a more careful study of Church Growth would have shown that Church Growth is actually about being faithful to God, His Gospel, and His mission in the world. While Zwonitzer may be correct in criticizing marketing the church, he is not correct in labeling it Church Growth.

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Second, the author has allowed his emotions to cloud his thinking. His passion to prove his point leads to overstatement. For example, he writes that Church Growth has allowed the customer to “become the driving force behind *everything* done by churches under this new paradigm (20, emphasis mine).” In another place he says, “... the motivation for CG is numerical growth *at all costs* (38, emphasis mine).” Again he writes, “CG is primarily interested in growth *at any cost* (70, emphasis mine).” Does Church Growth honestly desire growth “at any cost?” Does it really allow the unchurched to drive “everything” a church does? Unfortunately, this unbridled passion for overstatement surfaces throughout the book.

Third, the author has not done his homework. While he writes primarily to people within the LC-MS, I was surprised at his limited acquaintance with Church Growth writers from outside the Lutheran tradition. He does quote George Barna, which is no surprise given the fact that Barna is the leading proponent of church marketing. However, at the best Barna is only a quasi Church Growth representative. i.e., Barna has no training or roots in the historic Church Growth Movement. Other than Kent Hunter and David Luecke, the author just mentions in passing anyone with any solid Church Growth background. I kept asking myself what Church Growth authorities like Charles VanEngen, Thom Rainer, Robert Logan, Eddie Gibbs, Charles Arn, Carl George, and others would add to the debate.

Fourth, the author reflects an arrogant bias in favor of his religious tradition. I am aware that we all believe our own religious tradition is the right one. Whether one is Lutheran, Baptist, Presbyterian, Independent, or whatever, it is natural to think we are correct while others are less correct. However, it took me by surprise at the level of arrogance expressed throughout *Testing the Claims of Church Growth*. For example, the author writes, “Blending bits of Baptist or Pentecostal worship with Lutheran worship doesn’t take the best from these other confessions—it injects their false theology (49).” Again he says, “Lutheran Law and Gospel proclamation has been derailed, replaced, repackaged, and retooled with Evangelical, Pentecostal, Pietistic, and Revivalist preaching emphases and techniques (63).” Apparently, Zwonitzer thinks God only works within Lutheranism. Ugh! How about a little humility?

Fifth, the author writes with a tone of anger that undermines his purpose. As I read the book, I kept sensing that the author

was upset, angry, and thoroughly ticked off. This is not a good way to present one's case. Every author writes from a particular "point of view." But, allowing one's frustration to infiltrate the text, leads to stretching the point. Throughout the book, I continued to write in the margins words like "What?" "Ridiculous!" "Really?" "No!" "Give me a break!" "Whoa!" and "Oh, come on." For instance, he writes, "The CG emphasis on growth alone ignores the biblical admonitions to maintain purity of doctrine for the sake of salvation (83)." Does such a statement honestly reflect Church Growth theology? I do not think so. Church Growth does not emphasize "growth alone," nor does it ignore doctrinal purity. Give me a break!

I must admit that the author made some points to which I am in agreement. In fact I wrote in the margin in several places the word "True!" He does make some good points concerning the danger of making the customer king, etc. Unfortunately, his good points are overshadowed by the shortcoming of the book mentioned above. It is difficult to push away all the "ughs" to get to the "trues."

Therefore, I cannot recommend this book. It is simply too unbalanced. Written in the heat of what is becoming a bitter battle within the LC-MS, the author's case is overstated and stretched to the point of unfairness.

Reviewer

McIntosh, Gary L. Address: Talbot School of Theology, 13800 Biola Ave., La Mirada, CA 90639. Title: Professor of Christian Ministry & Leadership. [www.mcintoshcgn.com](http://www.mcintoshcgn.com) He earned a B.A. degree in Biblical Studies (1970), a M.Div. in Pastoral Studies (1975), and a D.Min. in Church Growth Studies (1982). Dr. McIntosh is the author or co-author of numerous books. His newest book, *Biblical Church Growth* will be released by Baker Books in May 2003.