

7-1-2013

Book Review: The Recovery of a Contagious Methodist Movement by George G. Hunter, III

Randy Willis

Centre Grove United Methodist Church

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/gcrj>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Practical Theology Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Willis, R. (2013). Book Review: The Recovery of a Contagious Methodist Movement by George G. Hunter, III. *Great Commission Research Journal*, 5(1), 129-131. Retrieved from <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/gcrj/vol5/iss1/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Commission Research Journal by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

Hunter, Ill., George G. *The Recovery of a Contagious Methodist Movement*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2012. 80 pp. \$11.99.

Reviewed by Randy Willis. Willis is pastor of Centre Grove United Methodist Church in Clearfield Pennsylvania. He has a D.Min. (2008) with an emphasis in leadership from Asbury Theological Seminary.

One of the highlights for me in the Doctor of Ministry program at Asbury Theological Seminary was taking a course by Dr. George Hunter. I have read some of his books and value what he has to say to the church.

Hunter's most recent book is *The Recovery of a Contagious Methodist Movement*. The premise of the book is that Methodism, which was "once a great contagious movement in North America," now is a "mess" (xii). While Methodism "started out as a missional alternative to establishment Christianity," Hunter contends it "has now become the establishment Christianity that it once critiqued" (6). Hunter holds hope that the future of Methodism can be even greater than its past, but to experience a brighter future, Methodists need to make the right choices moving forward.

129

Methodism began in England under the leadership of John Wesley. According to Hunter, there were 140,000 British Methodists by the time of Wesley's death in 1791. In America, Methodism grew from 1,200 in 1784 to 214,000 in 1816, a span of only thirty-two years. This growth continued for a long time. In one twenty-five year period, 1880–1905, "American Methodism averaged planting over seven hundred new churches per year" (27). This missional fervor carried over into foreign missions as well. Hunter reports, "As late as the 1920s, the world mission of American Methodism was deploying twenty-five hundred foreign missionaries" (27). Following in the spirit of John Wesley, early Methodists viewed the world as its parish and took the gospel wherever people lived.

Methodism began as a missional movement, but it has lost its way. Hunter argues that Methodism has become an institution. Once viewing the world as its parish, institutional Methodism is more likely to "regard our parishes as our world" (62).

Hunter points to the time of the merger of The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren in 1968 as a key turning point in the demise of the denomination. Hunter, who served as a staff member of the Board of Evangelism and later the Board of Discipleship, reports firsthand on the efforts to become a "New Church" (9). As a result of this intentional transition, "[O]ur church would

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 5, Iss. 1 [2013], Art. 13
become much less Methodist and much more mainline” (9). Hunter believes that if Methodists recover their Methodist identity, the future of Methodism can be even greater than its past.

Hunter believes the way forward must begin with a recovery of Wesleyan theology. While not suggesting that Wesley is “our ultimate authority” (4), Wesley does have much to teach us about apostolic vision. Wesley believed in the “supreme importance of the Scriptures” (7). Hunter reminds readers that Wesley’s “magnificent obsession was simply to recover the gospel, the theology, the vision, the mission, and the contagion of early Apostolic Christianity” (4). Hunter concludes, “It is hard to imagine any way that American Methodism will ever recover its mojo without recovering John Wesley’s theological vision” (8).

130

In looking for a way forward, Hunter critiques three current approaches to transforming churches: Natural Church Development by Christian Schwartz, Beyond the Ordinary: Ten Strengths of U.S. Congregations (a Presbyterian study), and the Call to Action by the Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church. After reviewing these approaches, which Hunter believes are inadequate, Hunter highlights three key strategies to recover a contagious Methodist movement.

First, Hunter suggests the need to embrace lay ministries. Hunter argues, “[E]arly Methodism . . . was essentially a lay movement. In Methodist Societies, most of the ministry that mattered was entrusted to laity” (12). Over time, ministry has transitioned from the activity of the laity to the activity of the clergy. Hunter states, “In the last two centuries, we have experienced no greater shift than in our assumption about who does most of the ministry” (13). Recovery of a Methodist identity will require an emphasis on lay ministry.

In his discussion of small groups, Hunter relays conversations he once had with Korean pastors during a visit to South Korea. One pastor, who recognized little of Classical Methodism in American Methodism, asked, “Can there be real Methodism without class meetings?” (15) Another pastor revealed, “If our people were not shepherding each other in their class meetings, the pastors would have to shepherd everyone” (15). Korean Methodists have successfully used small groups as a primary strategy.

Hunter states that early Methodists viewed small groups as a way for people to gather with others who “wanted to live a new life,” “to engage in ministry with one another,” and to welcome “pre-Christian people who also wanted to live a new life” (16). Recovery of a Methodist identity will require a return to an emphasis on small groups.

Willis: Book Review: The Recovery of a Contagious Methodist Movement by G

Along with lay ministries and small groups, Hunter calls for a recovery of missional Christianity. Hunter believes, “[E]arly Methodism was an extravagant expression of missional Christianity” (17). According to Hunter, “John Wesley redefined Christianity’s main business. He taught Methodist leaders, ‘You have nothing to do but save souls’” (18). Leaders of a contagious Methodist movement will have the same apostolic urgency. Early Methodists not only saw themselves as “an ecclesia—the called out people of God,” but also “an apostolate—the sent out people of God” (18). It is the aspect of being sent out that particularly separates a movement from an institution.

Hunter offers helpful points, particularly for leaders of movements, regarding communication. First, he suggests “effective movements communicate their message and mission in distinctive ways” (33). Second, “[E]ffective movement leaders keep the vision, and its supporting narrative, ever before the movement’s people” (33). Third, “[T]o some degree, an effective movement’s leaders are embodiments of the movement’s message and purpose” (34). Finally, “[C]redible movement leaders define the people’s identity” (34). Today, Methodist leaders play a key role in helping Methodism regain its missional identity. Dr. George Hunter’s book is helpful in bringing clarity to what Methodists must focus on so their future will be greater than their past.

131

Finke, Roger and Rodney Stark. *The Churching of America 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006, 283 pp. \$26.95.

Reviewed by Charles Salmon. Salmon is lead pastor of a church plant in Snoqualmie, WA (Church on the Ridge), which started in 2004 with 19 members and today has over 1200. He has a B.A. from Northwest University, an M.A. Re from SWBTS, and is working on a D.Min at Biola University’s Talbot School of Theology. Email: Charlie@churchontheridge.org

The Churching of America 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy takes an interesting approach to church growth in the USA and Canada over a 229 year period. This unique concept comes from the marketplace and not from the typical anecdotal church growth mode. Finke and Stark show relentless research and dogmatic consistency throughout the work. They go to great lengths to demonstrate how and why American churches succeeded and failed through this time frame.

Finke holds a Ph.D. in sociology and is a university professor who has authored numerous articles and works on the “science” of religion. Stark also