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## Book Review: Growth by Accident, Death by Planning: How Not to Kill a Growing Congregation

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**Growth by Accident, Death by Planning:  
How Not to Kill a Growing Congregation**

**Reviewed by Darrell Lamos**

*Whitesel, Bob. Growth by Accident, Death by Planning: How not to Kill a Growing Congregation. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004. 174 pp.*

Bob Whitesel is the founder of a church growth consulting firm specializing in diagnostic services for churches. He holds both a Doctor of Ministry and a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Church Growth and Evangelism from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. He has served as a consultant in several of the leading evangelical churches and ministries of North America and Europe. Whitesel is Senior Editor of "Strategies for Today's Leader" magazine and also an associate professor in Christian Ministries at Indiana Wesleyan University.

From the moment of seeing the title of this book, *Growth by Accident, Death by Planning*, I was intrigued and eager to discover what the author had to say. My interest stems from my personality that prefers a clear sense of direction and purpose in what I do and lead. Here was a thesis that appeared to challenge the validity of that approach. I wanted to know more. Building from his experience as a church consultant, the author starts by relating an observation that many times the pastor of a church is at a loss for an answer when asked the reasons for his church's growth. It is not that the pastor does not know what he is doing, but more how to answer those who feel they are doing the same things but without similar growth results.

Whitesel relates that many times these growing churches have made "unplanned strategic decisions" (10) not from knowledge of their potential for growth but more as a response to the situation at that time. Yet, by not realizing their potential, other decisions are made at a later time, again based on circum-

stances, which then lead to a leveling off of the growth pattern or plateau. The common “next step” is to look to situations of other churches or church growth resources for guidance but end up with only more of the same—plateau. This observation and the author’s experience become the basis for this book.

The author, rather than plunge us further into this conundrum, instead designed this book to be very “user-friendly”. Each chapter is based on an area where churches often have experienced growth, then a leveling of that growth to a plateau or decline. Suggestions are then offered to help the congregation get back on track. Following that there is an illustration from an actual church setting that helps bring the issue to life. The chapter ends with several helpful discussion questions that a church leadership team or board can use for further processing in order to apply these lessons. Each chapter follows the pattern of:

1. factors that cause initial growth in churches,
2. erroneous decisions that lead to plateauing, and
3. corrective steps to regain growth that are more in keeping with the factors that contributed to growth in the first place” (11).

There are eleven chapters in this treatment with each one addressing one area which previously had been a growth factor in a church that now is no longer the case. These are labeled as Missteps with: staff influence, worship celebrations, prayer, budgets, new facilities, innovation, evaluation, dysfunctional people, staff education, small groups, and the centrality of Christ. One of the clear advantages to the arrangement of this book is that it is not necessary to read every chapter to gain help and direction from this book. Church leaders could go to whichever chapter that most clearly addresses their current situation and begin to quickly assess their condition, their issues, and find useful direction for the restarting of growth.

In missteps with staff influence, one of the growth factors is that the church leaders were in touch with the needs of the community. When the leaders were less connected with these issues, staff concerns carried more weight than congregational concerns. To regain growth, deliberate steps need to be taken to stay more in tune with those issues.

In missteps with worship celebrations, a growth factor was the offering of multiple worship times while still keeping a sense of unity among the congregation. When combining services was chosen, it was the staff who were largely the impetus behind that decision. Growth can be regained when more opportunities for

worship are offered and likely there is a need for developing a large numbers of people qualified to lead the worship times.

Chapter three addresses the growth factor of the congregation staying focused on prayer and keeping that prayer for those who are unchurched. When prayer was focused on the needs of the congregation alone, and not on evangelism, a plateau in growth results. The congregation can regain the growth momentum by making what Whitesel calls 50/50 prayer the rule of thumb. 50/50 prayer keeps both the needs of the church and the unchurched as the topic of prayer requests.

In the area of budgets, the churches that grew had operated conservatively working only with the money they had in hand. When the church over-projected the prospects for resources, money quickly became tight and a scramble for resources disrupted the unity of the workers. An interesting suggestion is for the church to practice what is called 80-10-10 budgeting. Eighty percent of the budget goes to regular expenses, ten percent is a tithe for charitable giving, and the remaining ten percent is for saving. This is what we desire the individuals and families to practice. The church then becomes a model and encouragement for that type of monetary management and placing themselves in the place where God can bless both individual families and the church.

In the chapter dealing with building of new facilities, one growth factor was constructing church facilities with the goal of multiple types of uses. Plateau seemed to come from a church building too big, too soon, and with the expectation that a larger facility would encourage a larger attendance. It is a "If you build it, they will come." type of mindset. One of the suggestions of the author was to wait longer than you think you should to build and make sure you get your advice from the right type of experts, people who understand church dynamics, not business dynamics, and from churches that are growing not those who are big, but in a plateau.

Chapter six tackles the topic of innovation in the congregational ministries. Growth was seen in congregations where ideas were new, responsive to the current needs, and creative. Plateau seemed to come to those churches that then relied on the past innovations to address the new issues. It became a type of "quick-set" traditionalism. Some ways to move out of this difficulty is to engage in brainstorming sessions and be brave enough to evaluate the church's ministries for quality and quantity.

Chapter seven deals with the difficult topic of evaluation. This tends to be a sensitive area in the church. The church expe-

rienced growth when the programs that were promoted based on their effectiveness. Plateau often comes when a church encourages people to minister and start new ministries without some kind of feedback for effectiveness. Busy activity gives the feeling of success but does not guarantee it. Growth can be reestablished when the overall program and ministry picture of the church is viewed through a results-oriented filter rather than a personality-oriented one. There are ways to graciously “retire”, “reinvigorate”, or “reengineer” tired and ineffective ministries.

An area that I believe is often overlooked was addressed by the chapter on dysfunctional people. This chapter found that churches that helped dysfunctional people become functional is a church that grows. Plateau came when dysfunctional people were seen as the mission field and not allowed the opportunity to become the missionaries and when expertise was valued over willingness. There is a very helpful discussion in this chapter concerning the leadership being available for all and not allowing the leaders to become viewed as either rescuers or persecutors (114-117).

Chapter nine deals with missteps with staff education; where the leadership initially encourages a learning environment through classes and “laboratory” or “on the job” experiences. When the learning became more intellectual and academic, there was a sense that it was out of touch with the local context and therefore was of less impact to the community. For more of a growth-friendly environment, Whitesel recommends a 50/50 (between theological and practical, and between local and national) treatment of issues and training of ministry leaders.

Chapter ten considers the area of small groups. In a growing congregation, the excitement and energy of the worship and practical sermons make the closeness of small groups seem unnecessary. With the attention and energy being given to the seeming source of growth, plateau sets in when small groups are then not developed. Sometimes, when the leadership is already involved in a small group, there is not the awareness of need to keep this area expanding. The main issue is to emphasize the need for small groups for closeness, for ministry, and for leadership development. A very practical chart is available to help the congregation determine how many groups they do need. From ministry groups, to learning groups, to leadership groups, there is an easy to use formula to figure these out proportionally for any size congregation (142, 143).

The last chapter deals with the centrality of Christ in a congregation. This refers to the pressures vying for priority, and all the things that come along with an effective and more visible

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ministry. The plateau can come as the congregation and its leadership become distracted by popularity, pressures, or problems. The lordship of Christ needs to be deliberately kept at the forefront of the planning, programming, and vision. Both leadership and congregation must keep themselves in the Word, prayer, ministry with accountability, and God's will and kingdom as the ultimate goal.

This book would be extremely helpful as a handbook for church leadership to study, discuss, and seek new ways for the kingdom to advance in the community where their church ministers.

Reviewer

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