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Book Review: The Myth of the 200 Barrier

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The Myth of the 200 Barrier

Reviewed by Phil Stevenson

Martin, Kevin E. The Myth of the 200 Barrier, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005. 135 pp. \$11.00.

Kevin Martin is a practitioner. He brings a wealth of experience to this topic. He is a leader who has both built congregations and worked with struggling churches. He currently wears two hats: He is an assistant Priest for Christ Church Episcopal in Plano, Texas and is the Executive Director of Vital Church Ministries. These two responsibilities provide him a unique perspective to address the 200 "barrier" from both the local and regional setting.

Martin, as the title indicates, believes that the 200 attendance is an artificial obstacle to local churches. When a leader views the 200 average Sunday attendance (ASA) as a barrier this results in the wrong approach to growth. "...I agree that it is difficult to grow a small church into a large one, I do not believe that the idea of a barrier helps the pastors and lay leaders develop their congregations" (7). This being stated Martin's purpose for writing is his attempt to answer: "Why is it so hard to grow a small congregation into a large one" (7)? He uses as his base of information knowledge gained from working with dozens of congregations averaging 140-225. "What I have learned from working with these congregations is the content of this book" (8).

The author divides this work into four parts: Understanding Congregational Culture; Three Types of Congregations; Types of Leaders; Making the Transition. Each division is used to build toward Martin's thesis that the barrier to growth is not a number, but the leadership capabilities of the pastor. It is the leader's ability to create an environment, or culture, where growth might occur. "...the large church is not a small church that has doubled in size. A large church is a different kind of community, a differ-

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ent system, and a different culture from a small church" (61).

The emphasis on "cultural creation" shifts a leader's energy from attempts to burst through some kind of barrier to cultivating the systems that will foster growth. At the same time the leader is free to identify the kind of church he or she is best at leading. Martin identifies three sizes of congregations: Pastoral size, Program size and those in transition. Although he uses average Sunday attendance (ASA) as one identifier of these congregations, it is the systems and their way of doing business that really set them apart. In fact he would say that their systems dictate their size, not the size their systems. And it is the Pastor's ability to develop and implement systems that will allow for growth.

The critical congregation is the one in transition. The top level of the pastoral size church is 140 and the culture of a program size church does not get established until 225 ASA. "This means that there is a large gap between the numbers of 140 to 225. Congregations in this gap are not part of a true culture" (63). This gap creates stress in both the pastor and the people. The congregation still demands the time of their pastor in the "typical" fashion. The leader who reverts to this style will see a decline in the church. The leader needs to make a choice. He or she needs to have a leadership shift in order to lead toward a program size church, or resign to return to a smaller pastoral church. Both choices will result in a genuine Kingdom win: A leader will come into the Pastoral church and lead it toward Program and the smaller Pastoral church will, in all likelihood, grow to the top level of its capacity.

A transformed leader is the foundation for congregational growth. Pastoral churches grow into larger bodies because the leader has changed. "Transformational leaders are able to grow, change, and adapt their style to meet the needs of the community" (90). The barrier to growth is not a number it is a leader.

Martin's emphasis is not on "barriers," instead it is on development. "Whereas some congregations have growth potential, all have developmental issues" (77). This is the thesis on which he builds his entire argument. It is the Pastor's ability to personally develop; and her or his ability to develop the congregations in which they serve.

The first three-fourths of the book are laying a foundation for making the transition in the local church. It is the last fourth of the book that brings home his perspective that the barrier is not numerical, but leadership.

He does an outstanding job of stripping the veneer off the lid of two hundred. He deconstructs the two traditionally held

strategies of breaching this barrier. The first is the shift of the pastor from a shepherd to a rancher. The second is the indiscriminate introduction of certain programs (e.g. small groups) that are purported to carry a church through this barrier.

Addressing growth via these two traditionally held strategies does not allow for congregational development. Instead it places an unfruitful emphasis on unrealistic dynamics. It causes pastors to ask programmatic questions as opposed to developmental ones. "...they are asking the wrong question. The first question should be, 'What has made this a successful and growing pastoral church?' The second question should be, 'How will I need to transform the present culture to allow the congregation to grow to a larger size'" (27)?

Martin seems to reserve transitional leadership to very few folks. The underlying implication is that you either can or you can't lead transition. He identifies two types of leaders: Congruent leaders and transformational leaders. The leadership type will dictate the development of a congregation.

The congruent leader functions well within an existing form of congregational style. This person can bring growth to the church, but it will be within existing boundaries. The pastor's style never changes, even though the congregation may grow. "This is the key to bringing the existing system to health and vitality without changing the kind of congregation it already is" (111).

The transformational leader is someone who can move a congregation beyond its existing way of doing things. The leader changes first and then he or she brings change to the congregation. It is the transformational leader that has the ability and skill set to develop the church so that it might change enough to grow beyond the mythical 200 barrier.

Since the transformational leader is critical to the developmental growth of the church it was surprising that Martin spent little time providing means for a congruent leader to grow into a transformational leader. He does provide a list of skill sets for a transformational leader (111), but does not describe them in a full manner. The inference is that a leader is one or the other and the best they can do is to rest comfortably in their skin. He extends a minor encouragement when he asks and answers a rhetorical question: "Can you learn these skills? I believe that many pastors can, but this is not easy to do" (112).

I would have appreciated space given to suggesting a developmental plan for a pastor. He dances around the fringe of this, but never clearly articulates a method a leader might participate to grow in this area. He mentions a book by Robert Quinn, *Deep*

Change, as a suggestion and then pretty much leaves it there. This leadership style seemed so imperative to his thesis that not fleshing it out adequately was glaring.

A huge contribution he makes in the leadership realm was an observation by Rabbi Ed Freidman. It was the Rabbi who observed, "...in nature about 10 percent of an organism's cells self-differentiate toward 'headship' functions" (99). Martin applies this to local congregations. He believes that "...in most congregations, leaders comprise about 10 percent of the average worship attendance" (99). The challenge, he continues, is that most congregations have more leadership positions to fill than "genuine" leaders. As a result one of two things can happen: 1) Leaders occupy multiple leadership roles resulting in potential leadership burn out; 2) Non-leaders are used in leadership roles. When non-leaders and leaders mix in a leadership setting, "...the non-leaders have a restraining effect upon the real leaders..." (99).

This application of Rabbi Freidman's observation was, personally, the most valuable nugget in the book. I believe all pastors can appreciate and apply this. It will mean gut level honesty as to who the genuine leaders are in the congregation and a willingness to make changes to reflect the genuine leadership base.

This book would be an excellent resource for both pastors and judicatory leaders. Martin's fresh perspective on an old assumption may provide the insight needed to leverage a next level of growth. Although, overall, I believe it is a bit short on application the framework he builds for understanding styles of both congregations and leadership is invaluable.

Reviewer

Stevenson, Phil. Address: P.O. Box 50434, Indianapolis, IN 46250. Email: stevensonp@wesleyan.org Title: General Director of Evangelism & Church Growth. To say Phil is passionate about church fitness & multiplication would be an understatement! He is dedicated to helping The Wesleyan Church become a Missional Multiplication Movement within our society. Phil has pastored in several different roles and has lead 2 of his churches to parent a total of 7 congregations! He is happily married to his wife Joni, and is extremely proud of his 3 grown children, Ryan, Megan, and Scott!