

Rainer, Thom S. *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles*. Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1993. 349 pp. \$19.99.

The church-growth movement has taken its share of criticism from evangelical circles, but it can be thankful for defenders like Thom Rainer. In expounding the history and theology of the church-growth movement, Rainer has, for all practical purposes, written a polemic for it. "In the pages that follow," he writes, "I hope to 'clear the air,'" (19) which shows the apologetic nature of his work. As a practitioner of church-growth principles (his own church, Green Valley Baptist, has grown to over 1,700), Rainer writes from a practical and pastoral point of view.

The book is divided into three sections: I. "The History of the Church Growth Movement"; II. "A Theology of Church Growth"; III. "Principles of Church Growth." In the first section, on the history of the movement, Rainer spends what appears to be a disproportionate amount of time on the life of Donald McGavran, its founder. Perhaps this was necessary because of the large part McGavran played in the development of the movement. In any event, Rainer traces the history well. The second section was the weakest one. It was certainly comprehensive, but it read like a systematic theology, leaving the impression that the doctrine of spiritual gifts occupies a relatively minor place in church-growth theology. My experience with the church-growth movement suggests that the topic of spiritual gifts is pivotal, not peripheral, to the theology of the church-growth movement. Rainer could have devoted more space to investigating and explaining the theology of spiritual gifts. In his third section, he does an excellent job of harmonizing and crystallizing the principles of the church-growth movement.

Rainer's happy combination of simple language, short chapters, and concision makes a very readable church-growth textbook. While Rainier is clearly a church-growth advocate, his book is a relatively objective and much-needed reference work on this movement that has had such a profound impact on modern Christianity. Not only teachers of applied theology, but pastors as well, should own and read this book.

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Roozen, David A., and C. Kirk Hadaway, eds. *Church and Denominational Growth: What Does (and Does Not) Cause Growth or Decline*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1993. 400 pp. \$21.95.

More often than not, research-data reports are about as exciting as a night spent reading the Yellow Pages. I found this book a refreshing exception. The authors infuse life into statistical studies. They take the scholar's tools and apply them to practical purposes. Intuitive insight brightens the chapters. Educated prognostications raise concern and hope.

Lyle Schaller's "hunches" on why churches grow are the hypothesis the book sets about to test (49). Research verifies that his hunches are on the right

track. Newer denominations do grow faster than old ones. Denominations that grow develop new congregations, and the average size of the congregations increases. There is an advantage to having 20 percent of the churches under twenty-five years old. Having 200 or more members at the first service of a new church is a growth enhancement. A high population area with rapid immigration has high potential for church growth.

Sixteen sociologists of religion dissect what ails mainline American and Canadian denominations. Their conclusions, while not based on a postmortem examination, come precariously close. The evidence collected from statistics supplied by denominational headquarters, interviews, and surveys demonstrates what even casual observers intuitively know: American mainline denominations are in trouble. By and large, they are in a downward spiral which, if not checked, may, for some, prove fatal.

Building on the earlier work from Hoge and Roozen, *Understanding Church Growth and Decline: 1950-1978*, researchers present data that shows how people's attitudes and practices affect mainline denominations in the United States and Canada. Like the earlier work, this book is an invaluable resource for denominational administrators, scholars, pastors, and others who seek insight into the fast-changing American church scene.

The chapters progress in a logical and ordered way. The authors affirm certain preconceptions, challenge others, and slay their share of sacred cows on the altar of research. They affirm that people come back to church when they have an inner need. What a congregation does to encourage their return has little effect (246). Data demonstrate that actions taken by denominational leaders do affect local congregations (37). A quota system for appointment to denominational leadership, boards, and commissions is a trade-off of competence for inclusiveness (107). Religious hype that is part of revivals and evangelistic meetings causes sudden spikes in church attendance, but the positive effects do not last (133).

Sacrificial cows: *Church consultants can turn a church around*. Data suggest this is a temporary turn (151). *Pastors make growth happen*. Sorry, colleagues, research suggests that church growth is largely in the hands of the congregation. We clergy are most effective in blocking growth (231). *Conservative churches grow, and liberal churches do not*. Conservatism is not the issue. The title to Kelly's book *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* would more accurately reflect the data reported in this study by rewording the title to read, "Why Churches Who Strongly Believe Something Are Growing" (132).

The book offers no quick fix for trouble-plagued denominations. There are, however, numerous suggestions presented to guide denominational leaders toward developing strategies to encourage growth. Rapid response to changing situations is essential. Traditions will likely inhibit growth. Restructuring and establishing priorities keep a congregation centered on its task. A clear understanding and articulation of purpose are essential. Patience is vital. The slowdown and decline in church growth did not happen overnight; they started back in the 1950s. Changing direction will take time (17). The good news is the

convincing evidence that Americans and Canadians still have a strong spiritual core. The trick is to direct this support toward the local church.

Information from five denominations, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), United Methodist, Southern Baptist Convention, Assembly of God, and Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, provides the core data for the book. Abundant tables and easy-to-read charts included in most of the articles succinctly display what the words convey. Additional statistical information from the United Church of Christ, Evangelical Lutheran Church, American Baptist Church, Roman Catholic, and Black churches affords a broad view. A section each is devoted to the Black Church in America, the Roman Catholic Church, the Church in Canada, and the Baby Boomers.

The study is not all-inclusive, but the principles presented are generally applicable to all denominations. To believe otherwise is to enter Fool's Paradise.

An excellent reference section concludes the book, but the absence of an index is unfortunate.

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LAWRENCE G. DOWNING

Scroggs, Robin. *The Text and the Times: New Testament Essays for Today*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993. xii + 292 pp. \$18.00.

*The Text and the Times* argues the importance and relevance of Scripture for the present. Every one of its 15 essays (ranging from social scientific criticism of the NT to gender issues to matters of language and reality) returns to two basic themes: (a) what it means to live as a person of faith, and (b) what a modern person is to make of the ancient texts called NT Scripture. Although Scroggs claims to sit in the position of a liberal, he has the heart of a conservative, or so it seems when one reads his book. He certainly does not value the triumphalism of fundamentalism, nor the self-assured rightness of much of conservative scholarship, but he is a conservative in his special regard for the importance of the text of scripture.

Chapter 6, "How We Understand Scripture When It Speaks with Forked Tongue," approaches gender issues in the New Testament within the problem of hermeneutics. Scroggs frames the problem of hermeneutics with brief descriptions of the approaches taken by "literalists" and by "radicals." Literalists claim their approach is entirely objective, while radicals claim their approach is entirely subjective. Scroggs objects that both fail on the same points. They dispense with discussion of the text by a simplistic yes/no dichotomy, and neither is willing to struggle with the tensions in the text, in terms either of gender issues or of subjective/objective approaches. To oversimplify Scroggs, the literalist denies the role of experience; the radical, the role of tradition. Scroggs maintains that those who are uncomfortable with either end of the spectrum must be satisfied with more complex and uncertain results. Scroggs finds egalitarianism portrayed in the historical Jesus, in the author of the fourth gospel, and in Paul, but notes that issues of hierarchy are prominent in the