

Book Review:

Gary L. McIntosh, *Church That Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).
by Michael R. Jones

Gary L. McIntosh's book *Church That Works* is a tool box of sorts for the minister. He describes it as such in the introduction where he likens it to a doctor's black bag. It is when viewed that way that one gets the most benefit from it. Though this reviewer was required to read it from front-to-back, it would be equally as effective when used as a reference guide for problem areas in one's church (though this reviewer thinks it would be beneficial to read Parts 1 and 2 together and prior to the rest of it as he tends to see them as foundational). *Church That Works* has 52 chapters grouped into seventeen sections. The sections flow from welcoming visitors to assimilating new converts and then take a turn toward church life exploring such issues as worship, renewal, and planning. Smattered in between are sections that deal with various issues of interest to leaders like pastoral compensation, personal development and managing change. Some of them seem a little disjointed or out-of-place. For example, this reviewer was uncertain why the section on pastoral compensation was placed in Part 8 between sections about renewal (Part 7) and developing ministry (Part 9). Also, the chapters are all only two to three pages and so do not allow for much development and almost no details or outworking of the points raised.

The reviewer was very interested in the sections on renewal (Part 7), personal development (Part 11), and planning (Part 12) simply because of the position where his church is right now. (These sections also serve as comments on the rest of the book as they are representative of the other sections.) The section on renewal left much to be desired as only one of the three chapters (each section has three chapters) were even relevant (this church has not burned down nor is it planning on relocating) and they were sparse, more skeletons than fleshed-out. The test in chapter 19 (pp. 112-113) "The Mirror Test," was helpful in terms of starting the thought process of evaluation, but there is no guidance about how to measure the importance of each aspect or how to see changes carried through. Consider, for example, the last question is "What changes must be made?" A reader coming to this book would be looking for the writer to give some guidance about how to determine what changes must be made. Some changes may be obvious, some not so obvious, still others one might not think of at all. The tips offered in the rest of the chapter (pp. 113-115, also pp. 117-119 in chapter 20) are more like lists one might find in a newsletter or a blog than in a book marketed as a "doctor's bag" with the words "your one-stop resource" on the front. That is not to say that they weren't helpful, they just require the reader to do still more work to determine which of these is truly relevant and, therefore, helpful and then yet more work to find information about addressing the issues concerned.

Some tips were very helpful and may be used beyond the context in which McIntosh gives them. For example, on p. 118 the second tip for helping a church through a crisis is "Take control of the cash." This tip gives quite a bit of information in a few sentences and even addresses a concern one might have about it. This is very helpful and might be to a church who is struggling in many different circumstances, not just a disaster. The third and fourth tips, however, "Find the positives" and "Create a new vision for the future" are really so obvious that one feels silly paying for a book to be told them.

Some problems in the book are more theological than practical. In chapter 16 in the section on worship (pp. 98-101), McIntosh pushes his own form of worship, what he calls "celebrative worship" on to reader as if that were the only way worship can or should be done.

He assumes too much in doing so. He also suggests (pp.108-109) that Thursday, Friday, or Saturday worship services are “a good option for people who work on weekends and/or prefer to use the weekend for travel or recreational activities” (p. 109). This is a pragmatic solution to a theological problem. While one must be sympathetic to those who work on the weekends, the church must be clear about the teaching of Scripture that Sunday is the Lord’s Day and must be set aside for worship and service. The church must not engage the culture by becoming like the culture, in this case, by valuating convenience more than faithful obedience.

These drawbacks and criticisms should not be taken as a wholesale condemnation of the book. It is understandable that a book this size would not be able to present the detail that a large book or conference would be able to provide. (One does wonder, however, if this introduction is to whet the appetite for one of the conferences advertised on the back flyleaf of the book.) This book has been very beneficial to this reviewer. While it has not been challenging, it has been thought-provoking and this reader has been able to balance its views against other works and has pushed him on to consider some issues further. In that respect, it has been helpful and he is certain to keep it handy and to consult it again and again.

Church That Works also fits the classroom niche perfectly. It seems tailor-made for a class on ministry as it is easy enough for students at various levels, undergraduate to doctoral, to read and interact with and allows for the professor to engage it and either accept or reject its various pieces of advice and conclusions. One hopes, however, that McIntosh will one day take some time and expand this book, making it twice (or three times!) as big with much more detail. One would also like to see further resources so that the reader can go directly to the resources that will help in their specific ministry issues. Then it truly will be a “one-stop resource for effective ministry.”