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“EFFECTIVE EVANGELISM” IN THE CITY:  
DONALD MCGAVRAN’S MISSIOLOGY  
AND URBAN CONTEXTS

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Faculty of  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

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by  
Jeffrey Kirk Walters, Sr.

December 2011

**APPROVAL SHEET**

“EFFECTIVE EVANGELISM” IN THE CITY:

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To Melanie,  
my God-given best friend and partner in ministry,  
and to  
Rachel, Jeffrey, and Daniel,  
our amazing children.  
*Je vous aime pour toujours.*

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BGC Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College

HUP Homogeneous Unit Principle

WCC World Council of Churches

WCIU William Carey International University

## PREFACE

Only by the grace of God and with much support can one complete such a task as a doctoral dissertation. I am grateful for the encouragement, patience, and correction received from my supervising professor, John Mark Terry, and from my committee members, M. David Sills and Chuck Lawless. Professors Tim Beougher, George Martin, and J. D. Payne, though not directly involved in this project, have also been a source of great support. Special thanks go, too, to the new Dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions and Evangelism, Zane Pratt, for his encouragement and support during the last two months of this project.

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I am thankful to the staff at the Latourette Library of William Carey International University for their hospitality and assistance in my research. Their collection of McGavran’s later papers and correspondence is invaluable and worthy of further research.

Above all, I thank God for my wife, Melanie, who has patiently endured what sometimes seemed an endless program of study and research. Through all of that, she

encouraged, prodded, challenged, and sympathized. Our children, Rachel, Jeffrey, and Daniel, thrived through times when their dad was thinking only about Donald McGavran.

I would not be who I am without them.

Finally, I am amazed at the calling of God to salvation and to be a part of his Great Commission task of discipling all nations. I am thankful that He is faithful. To Him alone be glory.

Jeffrey Kirk Walters, Sr.

Louisville, Kentucky

December 2011

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century church faces a new reality: an urban world. A 2009 report by the United Nations confirmed that, for the first time in history, more people live in cities than in rural areas.<sup>1</sup> The United Nations anticipates that the global urban population will double to 6.4 billion by 2050. Africa and Asia have the fastest growing urban populations; both are expected to triple over the next forty years.<sup>2</sup> Today, over four hundred cities are each home to more than one million persons. Twenty-one cities worldwide have a population of over ten million.<sup>3</sup> The majority of those cities are found in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Even though Christianity has often been an urban movement,<sup>4</sup> rapid urbanization has presented special challenges for modern evangelicals. A prevalent anti-urban mentality, the predominance of rural churches, and modern social issues such as poverty, globalization, and homelessness have slowed the evangelical

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<sup>1</sup>United Nations Population Division, *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2009 Revision* (New York: United Nations, 2010), 1.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>3</sup>United Nations Population Division, “Fact Sheet: Mega Cities” [on-line]; accessed 16 March 2009; available at <http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/wup2007/2007wup.htm>; Internet.

<sup>4</sup>Recent scholarship on the history of Christianity in urban contexts includes Harvie M. Conn and Manuel Ortiz, *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, and the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2001); Harvie M. Conn, *The American City and the Evangelical Church: A Historical Overview* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994); Rodney Stark, *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

response to the growth of cities.<sup>5</sup> Missionaries and urban pastors have increasingly asked how to impact urban centers with the gospel.

One important twentieth-century missiological movement might have answered many of these questions about urban missions, but by the end of the twentieth century, it had left its roots on the mission fields. Even as urbanization changed the face and practice of Christian missions, the Church Growth Movement has struggled with an identity crisis. Launched in mid-century by missionary Donald Anderson McGavran, the Church Growth Movement changed its emphasis after its leadership shifted from the mission field to North America in the early 1970s.<sup>6</sup> Some within the movement have called for a return to McGavran's missiological principles of "effective evangelism."<sup>7</sup> Even as scholars, pastors, and missionary practitioners recognized the importance of urban missions and others the need for a return to McGavran's missiology, they have given little attention to McGavran's own study of missions in urban contexts.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this dissertation was to examine and evaluate Donald

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<sup>5</sup>Jacques Ellul's *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) is a source of much anti-urban sentiment, but Conn and Ortiz see a long history of anti-urban feeling within Christianity (Conn and Ortiz, *Urban Ministry*). See also Robert C. Linthicum, *City of God, City of Satan: A Biblical Theology of the Urban Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles* (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 38-39.

<sup>7</sup>Gary Lynn McIntosh, "Thoughts on a Movement," *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 8 (Winter 1997): 11-52; Thom S. Rainer, "Assessing the Church Growth Movement," *Journal of Evangelism and Missions* 2 (Spring 2003): 51-62; Thom S. Rainer, "Church Growth at the End of the Twentieth Century: Recovering our Purpose," *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 6 (1995): 59-71; Ed Stetzer, "The Evolution of Church Growth, Church Health, and the Missional Church: An Overview of the Church Movement from, and Back to, Its Missional Roots," *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 17 (2006): 87-112.

McGavran's philosophy and strategy of urban missions. I sought to answer at least three questions: What was Donald McGavran's understanding of missions in an urban context? How does his broader church growth teaching apply in such contexts? Finally, how might McGavran's teachings be applied in urban contexts today, if at all? While McGavran's attention to cities is less known than his general church growth writings, the application of his church growth missiology has great importance for twenty-first century urban missions.

### **The Rise of Church Growth Missiology**

Donald Anderson McGavran was born December 15, 1897, in Damoh, India.<sup>8</sup> His parents were missionaries, as were his grandparents. As a child, the young McGavran attended the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 but did not give himself as a missionary until much later. He served in World War I, then graduated from Butler College in Indianapolis.<sup>9</sup> He became involved in the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) but believed, "My father and grandfather were missionaries. My

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<sup>8</sup>There is currently no full biographical treatment of McGavran's life. Vernon Middleton, one of McGavran's students, wrote his dissertation on McGavran's background and is working on a biography. Gary McIntosh is also preparing a book-length biography. At this point, Middleton's dissertation and two works by McGavran himself are the best biographical sources, as are several memorial articles after McGavran's death. Vernon James Middleton, "The Development of a Missiologist: The Life and Thought of Donald Anderson McGavran, 1897-1965" (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1989); Donald A. McGavran, *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1988); Donald A. McGavran, *The Satnami Story: A Thrilling Drama of Religious Change* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1990); Herbert Melvin Works, Jr., "The Church Growth Movement to 1965: An Historical Perspective" (D.Miss. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1974); Kenneth Mulholland, "Donald McGavran's Legacy to Evangelical Missions," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (January 1991): 64-70.

<sup>9</sup>Herbert Melvin Works, Jr., "Donald A. McGavran: The Development of a Legacy," *Global Church Growth* 27, no. 3 (July-September 1990): 6; Mulholland, "McGavran's Legacy." According to Mulholland, McGavran was the last living participant of the Edinburgh conference.

family has done enough for God. I am going to be a good Christian and make a lot of money.”<sup>10</sup> In 1919, however, he attended the Student Volunteer Convention where he heard John R. Mott speak. “At Lake Geneva,” he wrote of the meeting, “it became increasingly clear to me that a Christian could not thus limit the degree of his dedication.”<sup>11</sup> McGavran surrendered his own will to God’s and determined to return to India as a missionary educator. The Great Commission became what he called the “ruling purpose” of his life. Throughout his life, McGavran was first and foremost a missionary.<sup>12</sup>

After ten years as a church planter in India, McGavran became a mission administrator in 1933. He studied the mission stations under his direction and found that only eleven of 147 were growing in any way. As McGavran began to ask why churches in similar circumstances with faithful missionaries would grow or not, he encountered the work of Roland Allen and J. Waskom Pickett. Allen published *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours?* in 1912 and *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* in 1927.<sup>13</sup> Both challenged conventional missions strategy and focused on the numerical growth of the church. Pickett studied churches in India, particularly those growing through “people movements,” when large numbers from a particular people group turned to Christ. Pickett and McGavran published a book together in 1936 titled *Church Growth and Group Conversion*. It would be the beginning of an influential and controversial career

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<sup>10</sup>Donald McGavran, “My Pilgrimage in Mission,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 20, no. 2 (April 1986): 53; Middleton, “Development of a Missiologist,” 12.

<sup>11</sup>McGavran, “My Pilgrimage,” 53.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours?* (London: World Dominion Press, 1912); idem, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church and the Causes Which Hinder It* (London: World Dominion Press, 1949).

for McGavran.<sup>14</sup>

During his missionary career, McGavran worked mainly in rural areas. The only exception was during his tenure as mission administrator in Jubbulpore between 1932 and 1937. At that time, Jubbulpore was a city of approximately one million people, and McGavran worked to start a church among the lower castes. This experience proved formative in some of McGavran's ideas on urban church planting and social ministry.<sup>15</sup>

Historians date the beginning of the Church Growth Movement to the publication of McGavran's *The Bridges of God* in 1955.<sup>16</sup> In that book, McGavran outlined his thought concerning the traditional mission station approach, individualistic conversion strategies, and people movements. In *Bridges of God*, he first described his understanding of people movements, the principle of receptivity, and the Homogeneous Unit Principle. *The Bridges of God* was well received in some quarters, but controversial in others. Many in the West believed that McGavran was discounting the importance of individual conversion. As a result, McGavran published *How Churches Grow* in 1959, deemphasizing people movements but continuing to advocate for what would become church growth.<sup>17</sup>

McGavran coined the term *church growth* because of his belief that *evangelism* had lost its meaning. After World War I, the conciliar movement in missiology moved

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<sup>14</sup>Jarell Waskom Pickett et al., *Church Growth and Group Conversion* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1973).

<sup>15</sup>Vern Middleton, telephone interview with the author, December 18, 2009. See also, Donald A. McGavran, *Ethnic Realities and the Church* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979).

<sup>16</sup>Donald McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (London: World Dominion Press, 1955).

<sup>17</sup>Donald McGavran, *How Churches Grow: The New Frontiers of Mission* (London: World Dominion Press, 1959).



away from evangelism toward social concern and action. McGavran believed this to be a terrible mistake, so he began to call his approach “church growth.” He believed that numerical growth was important, as it provided a way to monitor evangelism and provide accountability for missionaries and agencies. If, as he argued, believers must become fruit-bearing disciples and members of the local church, then missionaries could count new believers and determine the effectiveness of their work.

A second phase of McGavran’s influence began after he retired from service in India in 1957. After several years as a missions consultant, he took on a teaching role when he founded the Institute of Church Growth at Northwest Christian College in Eugene, Oregon, in 1961. The Institute was designed to provide opportunities for missionary practitioners to learn about church growth methodologies from McGavran himself. Students engaged in intensive research projects on the growth of churches within their own ministry contexts. For some, this meant urban research.<sup>18</sup> The fruit of their projects not only began the application of church growth thought to urban contexts but also provided McGavran with a basis for his later teaching on urban missions.

In 1965, the president of Fuller Theological Seminary invited McGavran to join the faculty and become the founding dean of the School of World Mission. Fuller Seminary gave church growth thought a well-known platform in evangelical circles. While serving as dean, McGavran remained highly focused on cross-cultural missions as the purpose of church growth. He was a key speaker and leader in many international missions conferences and edited several collections of essays related to missiology.

McGavran was also actively involved in the development of an evangelical

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<sup>18</sup>See, for example, Donald A. McGavran and James H. Montgomery, *The Discipling of a Nation* (Santa Clara, CA: Global Church Growth Bulletin, 1980); William R. Read, Victor M. Monterroso, and Harmon A. Johnson, *Latin American Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969); Roy E. Shearer, *Wildfire: Church Growth in Korea* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966); William R. Read, *New Patterns of Church Growth in Brazil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965).

understanding of missions and evangelism during the evangelical/conciliar debates of the 1960s. He spoke strongly against efforts to call social ministry “evangelism” and to elevate Christian “presence” over “proclamation” of the gospel.<sup>19</sup> Beginning in the mid-1960s, McGavran joined a debate that would result in the 1974 Lausanne Conference and a clarified definition of evangelism and missions.<sup>20</sup>

In 1970, McGavran published *Understanding Church Growth*, the most comprehensive explanation of his church growth thought. He included one chapter on “Discipling Urban Populations” in which he outlined his thoughts on urban missions. McGavran listed eight “keys” to reaching cities:

1. Emphasize house churches
2. Develop unpaid lay leaders
3. Recognize resistant homogeneous units
4. Focus on the responsive
5. Multiply tribe, caste, and language churches
6. Surmount the property barrier

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<sup>19</sup>Advocates of “presence” evangelism believe that Christians who live out their faith in society are, in fact, sharing the gospel. “Proclamation” is the contrary: the proclamation of the gospel is necessary for evangelism to take place. The former idea developed as missionaries and national believers encountered other world religions. McGavran saw positives and negatives in presence evangelism. See Donald A. McGavran, “The Right and Wrong of the ‘Presence’ Idea of Mission,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (Winter 1970): 98-108. While McGavran included persuasion in his definition of evangelism (see the definitions section on page 10 of this chapter), he did not expand on the idea of persuasion as a third approach to evangelism alongside presence and proclamation. Later, C. Peter Wagner and Elmer Towns built on McGavran’s definition, arguing that persuasion is a necessary third approach. See C. Peter Wagner, Win Arn, and Elmer L. Towns, *Church Growth: State of the Art* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1986), 43-46; C. Peter Wagner, *Strategies for Church Growth: Tools for Effective Mission and Evangelism* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1987), 117-28.

<sup>20</sup>For further discussion of McGavran’s involvement in debates over the definition of missions, see chapter 6 below.

7. Communicate intense belief in Christ
8. Provide the theological base for an egalitarian society<sup>21</sup>

Thom Rainer identifies the publication of *Understanding Church Growth* as the end of the McGavran era of leadership in the Church Growth Movement.<sup>22</sup> After that point, McGavran returned to his original focus on the international mission field and the discipleship of all the world's peoples. Nevertheless, he remained influential. His teaching ministry expanded to conferences all over the world, many of which addressed urban missions. He provided the opening article for a newly formed journal, *Urban Mission*, published in 1983 under the leadership of one of his own students, Roger S. Greenway.<sup>23</sup>

### **Statement of the Problem**

Donald McGavran died in 1990, but he left behind an extensive body of published works on missions and evangelism as well as a wealth of personal correspondence rich with insight into effective evangelism in urban contexts. Still, his contribution in that field is little known. In his early call for in-depth study of church growth in urban contexts, Francis M. DuBose outlined McGavran's best-known contributions to urban missiology.<sup>24</sup> He lists, however, only a few articles in books that McGavran edited and the chapter on "Discipling Urban Populations" found in the first

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<sup>21</sup>Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 285-95.

<sup>22</sup>Thom S. Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles* (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 38.

<sup>23</sup>Donald A. McGavran, "New Urban Faces of the Church," *Urban Mission* 1, no. 1 (September 1983): 3-11.

<sup>24</sup>Francis M. DuBose, *How Churches Grow in an Urban World* (Nashville: Broadman, 1978), 11-13.

and second editions of *Understanding Church Growth*.<sup>25</sup> Greenway recognized McGavran's ideas as the foundation of much of his own teaching on urban missions but addressed his mentor's thought on the matter only rarely.<sup>26</sup>

McGavran himself noted that "research in urban church growth is a department of missions which demands immediate development by all who take the Great Commission seriously."<sup>27</sup> McGavran's emphasis on urban research is the first of three broad categories found in his thought on urban missions. He believed that the key to church growth is found in accurate research on the reasons for church growth or decline, and he encouraged studies of urban churches.

A second broad category of McGavran's urban missiology is related to evangelism in urban contexts. He understood that homogenous units look different in cities than in rural areas, contending that accurate segmentation of city populations would aid the effective proclamation of the gospel.<sup>28</sup> Placing his specific teaching on urban segmentation and receptive populations within the larger range of McGavran's understanding of homogeneous units will clarify the issue.

McGavran also emphasized church planting as a vital facet of urban missions. He particularly advocated starting house churches, even though he did not restrict urban

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<sup>25</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 278-95; idem, *Understanding Church Growth*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 314-32. Unless specifically noted, all references to *Understanding Church Growth* will be to the first (1970) edition.

<sup>26</sup> Roger S. Greenway, "My Pilgrimage in Mission," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 30, no. 3 (July 2006): 146. Greenway did outline McGavran's urban missiology in the opening chapter of *Guidelines for Urban Church Planting*, ed. Roger S. Greenway (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 11-20.

<sup>27</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 285.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 243-44; 326-28.

church planting to that model<sup>29</sup> McGavran's general principles on church planting methodologies, combined with his views on urban church health, contribute to an understanding of his missiology in urban centers.

Finally, one must consider McGavran's views on social ministry in urban contexts. While he argued that evangelism is primary in all missionary endeavors, McGavran contended that churches in urban contexts must be concerned with justice and social issues. From his own involvement in a fight for equality in Indian culture to his argument that urban missions must provide a theological basis for social ministry, McGavran made an important, if little known, contribution to the field.<sup>30</sup>

The examination and application of Donald McGavran's church growth missiology have tremendous implications in light of the challenges of today's urban reality. Missionaries striving to share the good news of Jesus Christ among the masses in global urban centers need to understand more clearly how to impact peoples who are gathering in cities. McGavran's research and teaching have guided much missions strategy for the last half century. The application of his teaching in urban contexts has the potential for significant impact in the future.

### **Definitions**

Before describing the background and methodology for this dissertation, it would be beneficial to define key terms. Of particular importance are *mission*, *missions*, *missiology*, *urban*, *church growth*, and *evangelism*. Authors from differing theological and methodological perspectives define these terms differently.

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 322; Donald A. McGavran, "House Churches: A Key Factor for Growth," *Global Church Growth* 29, no. 1 (January-March 1992): 5-6.

<sup>30</sup>McGavran, *Eye of the Storm*; idem, "Missiology Faces the Lion," *Missiology* 17, no. 3 (July 1989): 335-41; Donald A. McGavran, ed., *Crucial Issues in Missions Tomorrow* (Chicago: Moody Press).

I followed A. Scott Moreau in his distinction between *mission* and *missions*. Missions is the “specific work of the church and agencies in the task of reaching people for Christ by crossing cultural boundaries.”<sup>31</sup> Those cultural boundaries might include the gap between rural and urban. Mission is a broader term comprising “everything the church is doing that points toward the kingdom of God.”<sup>32</sup> In this dissertation, I used missions to refer to the activity of the church aimed at evangelism and the extension of the church where it does not exist. Mission included that activity but also encompassed the fight for social justice, social ministry, and other ministries of the local church. *Missiology* is the study of missions.

The term *urban* is difficult to define. John Palen outlines multiple viewpoints that impact one’s understanding of the term, including economic, cultural, demographic, and geographical definitions.<sup>33</sup> None of these definitions is entirely satisfactory. The United Nations reports urban populations based on each country’s own definition. For example, in the United States, urban centers are defined by population (2,500 or more persons) and population density (1,000 persons per square mile).<sup>34</sup> In China, urban areas are designated by the national governing body. Other nations define any town with at least two hundred residents within a defined border as urban.<sup>35</sup> McGavran defined rural and urban in economic terms, saying, “I classify as rural all those who earn their living

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<sup>31</sup>A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, and Gary B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 17.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup>J. John Palen, *The Urban World*, 7th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 7.

<sup>34</sup>United Nations, *Demographic Yearbook 2005* (New York: United Nations Population Division, 2005), table 6.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*

from the soil, dwell in villages, and eat largely what they raise.”<sup>36</sup> Urban, on the other hand, were those communities of people “who live in market centers and live by trade or manufacture.”<sup>37</sup> Still, he described urban areas as having populations of at least ten thousand. For the purposes of this dissertation, I followed McGavran’s definition while recognizing that urban centers have unique cultural, economic, social, and demographic characteristics.

*Evangelism*, for McGavran, was “proclaiming Christ and persuading men to become His disciples and responsible members of His Church.”<sup>38</sup> He taught in *The Bridges of God* that evangelism had a two-fold nature encompassing both *discipling* and *perfecting*. Discipling was “the removal of distracting divisive sinful gods and spirits and ideas from the corporate life of the people and putting Christ at the centre on the Throne.”<sup>39</sup> The second stage of “Christianization” was “perfecting,” which was the “bringing about of an ethical change in the disciplined group, an increasing achievement of a thoroughly Christian way of life for the community as a whole.”<sup>40</sup>

Thom Rainer defines *church growth* as “that discipline which seeks to understand, through biblical, sociological, historical, and behavioral study, why churches grow or decline.”<sup>41</sup> Near the end of his life, McGavran frequently used the phrase

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<sup>36</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 278.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Donald McGavran, “Conclusion,” in *Church Growth and Christian Mission*, ed. Donald McGavran (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 231; Donald McGavran, “Essential Evangelism,” in *Eye of the Storm*, 57; Donald A. McGavran, “Loose the Churches. Let them Go!” *Missiology* 1, no. 2 (April 1973): 81.

<sup>39</sup>McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 14.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 15.

<sup>41</sup>Rainer, *Book of Church Growth*, 21.

“effective evangelism” in place of church growth. Positively, the shift was intended to emphasize McGavran’s long held belief that evangelism is at the heart of Christian missions. Negatively, the use of “effective evangelism” was an attempt to stem the criticism that church growth emphasized numbers at the expense of discipleship.<sup>42</sup>

### **Background**

My interest in Donald McGavran and the Church Growth Movement began during my first seminary course with Thom Rainer, then Dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. I had surrendered to Christian ministry not long before, after an education in history and museum science and a brief career in insurance sales. My family and I had relocated to Louisville in hopes of a future in either pastoral ministry or missionary service. Rainer regularly taught “Introduction to Evangelism and Church Growth” using his own text, *The Book of Church Growth*.<sup>43</sup> He introduced me to the theology and practicalities of ministry through his understanding of church growth as “evangelism that resulted in fruit-bearing church members.”<sup>44</sup> While I did not pursue my study of church growth missiology much farther during my initial seminary studies, Rainer’s definition became a key part of my understanding of ministry and evangelism.

Another important influence at Southern Seminary was Ed Stetzer, then Director of the Church Planting Center. I had numerous opportunities to study and work with Stetzer, most notably on several occasions as an intern in the Nehemiah Project church planting internship program through the North American Mission Board of the

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<sup>42</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 61, 89.

<sup>43</sup>Rainer, *Book of Church Growth*.

<sup>44</sup>Thom S. Rainer, "Assessing the Church Growth Movement," *Journal of Evangelism and Missions* 2 (Spring 2003): 67.



Southern Baptist Convention. Stetzer built on Rainer's teaching by pointing me toward the necessity of church planting in global missions. His philosophy and methodology of church planting, as later outlined in works such as *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age*<sup>45</sup> and *Planting Missional Churches*,<sup>46</sup> brought many aspects of church growth missiology to life. He convinced me personally and through his writing of the truth in Peter Wagner's contention that "the single most effective evangelistic method under heaven is planting new churches."<sup>47</sup>

In August 1999, I was called to pastor a small church in Tennessee where I began to put my education to work. I continued my seminary studies in missions, evangelism, and church growth while in the throes of "real-life" ministry. Donald McGavran's church growth missiology, as filtered through the teaching of Rainer, Stetzer, and other Southern Seminary faculty, became more applicable than I might have imagined earlier. I was forced to look at my community through the eyes of a missionary.

The intersection of McGavran's teachings and urban missiology became reality in my ministry when my family and I were appointed as church planters by the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention in March 2003. Our sending agency, which had taken on a strategy of church planting among unreached and under-reached people groups, had begun to focus on urban centers. We arrived in Paris,

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<sup>45</sup>Ed Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2003).

<sup>46</sup>Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2006).

<sup>47</sup>C. Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest: A Comprehensive Guide* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1990), 11.

France, a cosmopolitan and multicultural city of twelve million people,<sup>48</sup> well prepared to engage French culture with the gospel but with little understanding of urban contexts.

My work as a church planter and strategist for indigenous French peoples in the Paris region led me to ask several questions. It seemed that most church planting strategies were based on rural contexts. How, for example, did people group strategy (which was very much founded on McGavran's Homogeneous Unit Principle) look in a culturally diverse context?

My opportunity to find answers to some of my questions came when I joined a cohort of students in Southern Seminary's Doctor of Philosophy program in evangelism and church growth. My first group of seminars included one in urban evangelism led by Chuck Lawless. We studied Harvie Conn's and Manuel Ortiz's influential *Urban Ministry*, which addressed many of the issues with which my colleagues and I struggled.<sup>49</sup> Lawless also reintroduced me to McGavran and the Church Growth Movement. In later colloquia on cultural anthropology, Christian missions, and church planting, I consistently returned to McGavran's work for insight into key issues in those fields.

Following our first four-year term on the field, we did not return to Paris, and I joined the staff of Southern Seminary as Associate Director of Professional Doctoral Studies. Because of my experience in Paris and my interest in urban missions, I was soon appointed Associate Director of the newly-formed Wayne and Lealice Dehoney Center

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<sup>48</sup>Institut National e la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques, "Ile-de-France : en résumé" [on-line]; accessed 19 April 2010 ; available at <http://www.insee.fr/fr/regions/idf/default.asp?page=faitsetchiffres/presentation/presentation.htm>; Internet.

<sup>49</sup>Harvie M. Conn and Manuel Ortiz, *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, and the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2001).

for Urban Ministry.<sup>50</sup> The latter position has allowed me to continue my study of urban missiology.

My first in-depth doctoral level study into McGavran's church growth thought came in a seminar on the theology of evangelism. I wrote a seminar paper on McGavran's soteriology, which allowed me to read a broader range of his published material. The more I studied McGavran, the more I realized that he had many answers to my questions on urban missions.

In later colloquia and seminars, I wrote on church planting ecclesiology, the history of Southern Baptist involvement in urban missions, and the theological relationship between evangelism and social ministry. I found that these research endeavors consistently pointed to McGavran's influence on modern missions.

One of my last missions colloquia focused exclusively on urban missions. As my colleagues and I read the most current research and writing on the subject, I found myself frustrated by the emphasis on social ministry and social justice over evangelism.<sup>51</sup> While I believe firmly that the local church should be involved in ministry to the poor and oppressed,<sup>52</sup> I also believe that gospel transformation is the beginning of social

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<sup>50</sup>For more information about the Dehoney Center, see <http://www.urbanministrytraining.org>.

<sup>51</sup>See, for example, Eric O. Jacobsen, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003); Phil Mortensen, *For God So Loved the Inner City: Urban Missions and the Forgotten Church* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2008); Ronald Edward Peters, *Urban Ministry: An Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007); Ronald J. Sider et al., *Linking Arms, Linking Lives: How Urban-Suburban Partnerships Can Transform Communities* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008); Randy White, *Encounter God in the City: Onramps to Personal and Community Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006) for examples. See also Raymond J. Bakke, *A Theology as Big as the City* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997); Raymond J. Bakke, *The Urban Christian: Effective Ministry in Today's Urban World* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1987).

<sup>52</sup>Biblical support for ministry among the poor and need is strong. Key passages include Matt 25:31-46 and Jas 2. See also Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson, *The*

change. McGavran's extensive work on the relationship of evangelism to social ministry has much to say to the contemporary church.

Finally, my studies for comprehensive exams required reviewing the history of the Church Growth Movement. As I looked at the broad span of missions history in the twentieth century, I saw that McGavran was a key figure. His ideas, though often controversial, had great influence on twenty-first century missions strategy. As I noticed the lack of application of church growth missiology to urban contexts, I began to consider research into that question.

On a personal level, I agree with Rainer, McIntosh, and Stetzer that Donald McGavran's Church Growth Movement has been separated from its missionary roots.<sup>53</sup> McGavran's teaching is both misunderstood and misapplied. Today's world, characterized as it is by urbanization and globalization, can benefit from McGavran's thought correctly applied. Like his general church growth teaching, McGavran's teaching on urban missions has broad application globally and in North America. My hope is that this study will bring about such an application.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

I recognize that this study was limited by several factors. While one important collection of McGavran's personal papers and correspondence is housed at Wheaton College and is well catalogued, the majority of his post-1965 papers are held by the U.S. Center for World Mission in Pasadena and remain in the same filing cabinets in which he left them. Researchers have had free access, so the papers are disorganized and perhaps

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*Externally Focused Church* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2004); Timothy J. Keller, *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997).

<sup>53</sup>See n. 6 above.

incomplete. Nevertheless, an extensive body of primary source literature is available that will touch on the later years of McGavran's ministry.

In terms of delimitation, this study did not attempt a full study of church growth thought or the history of the Church Growth Movement beyond a survey. Many resources exist that accomplish such a task,<sup>54</sup> and any effort to cover the full extent of McGavran's thought would dilute this attempt to concentrate on his urban missiology.

Finally, this dissertation attempted to glean McGavran's understanding of urban missions from a wealth of materials, not all of which specifically address urban contexts. McGavran wrote and taught extensively on his key principles of church growth. For example, he covered his Homogeneous Unit Principle in multiple books and articles, as well as dozens of letters and lectures. Only a few of those documents specifically address urban contexts. This study attempted to apply McGavran's teaching by placing the urban material in the context of the larger body of his work, all the while attempting to avoid any biased reading of the sources.

### **Methodology**

A study of Donald McGavran's church growth missiology as related to urban contexts must begin with an examination of his published works. I gathered copies of most of McGavran's books in my personal library, but others were found in the James P. Boyce Library at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary or at other libraries

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<sup>54</sup>See, for example, Rainer, *Book of Church Growth*; Gary Lynn McIntosh, *Biblical Church Growth: How You Can Work with God to Build a Faithful Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003); Gary Lynn McIntosh, ed., *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: Five Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004); Robert Gale Glahn, "A Biblical Analysis of Donald A. McGavran's Church Growth Principles" (Ph.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1980); Herbert Melvin Works, Jr., "The Church Growth Movement to 1965: An Historical Perspective" (Ph.D. diss., School of World Mission, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1974); Sakari Pinola, *Church Growth: Principles and Praxis of Donald A. McGavran's Missiology* (Abo, Finland: Abo Akademi University Press, 1995).

participating in the inter-library loan program. Another important primary source held in Boyce Library was a complete run of the *Church Growth Bulletin*, which McGavran edited for much of his career.<sup>55</sup> The publication includes his own articles as well as those he chose for publication. The *Church Growth Bulletin* later became *Global Church Growth*, and Boyce Library holds a complete set of that publication.<sup>56</sup>

At the commencement of this research, I spent two days surveying the papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth (Howard) McGavran housed at the Billy Graham Center Archives at Wheaton College. The collection is an extensive one, including ninety-nine archival boxes of letters, manuscripts, lecture notes, photographs, and video tapes. My purpose in visiting was to assess the extent of McGavran's work on urban contexts. I was pleasantly surprised to find numerous letters and lectures dealing directly with urban missions.

The Donald McGavran Collection housed in the library at the U.S. Center for World Mission in Pasadena holds McGavran's correspondence and other primary source material covering the period from the founding of the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary until his death. While this collection is not catalogued or organized, it should offer a fuller view of McGavran's work during the period of his greatest influence. I spent a week at William Carey International University and worked through the majority of this collection.

McGavran's former students and colleagues are an additional source of

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<sup>55</sup>Institute of Church Growth, Northwest Christian College, and Fuller Theological Seminary, *Church Growth Bulletin*, 1964-1980. Certain volumes of *Church Growth Bulletin* have been compiled in single volumes: Donald McGavran, ed., *Church Growth Bulletin*, vols. 1-5 (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1969); Donald McGavran, ed., *Church Growth Bulletin*, 2<sup>nd</sup> consolidated vol. (1969-75) (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1977).

<sup>56</sup>*Global Church Growth Bulletin* (Santa Clara, CA: O.C. Ministries, 1980).

valuable information on his church growth missiology. I interviewed Vernon Middleton, McGavran's friend and biographer, concerning his knowledge of McGavran's urban thought. Middleton also has an extensive personal library of McGavran materials and is very familiar with the collection housed at the U. S. Center for World Mission. A second resource was Roger S. Greenway, one of McGavran's former students and a leader in urban missions. Finally, Gary McIntosh, a lifelong student of McGavran's missiology, agreed to support my research.<sup>57</sup>

Secondary sources on McGavran, the Church Growth Movement, and the movement's critics were readily available in the Boyce Library and by inter-library loan. Several doctoral dissertations have been written on McGavran's life and work, including some by former students.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>McIntosh is the author of several books on McGavran and the Church Growth Movement. Gary L. McIntosh, *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: Five Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) and idem, *Biblical Church Growth: How You Can Work with God to Build a Faithful Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003).

<sup>58</sup>Among the best are Vernon James Middleton, "The Development of a Missiologist: The Life and Thought of Donald Anderson McGavran, 1897-1965" (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1989); James C. Smith, "Without Crossing Barriers: The Homogeneous Unit Concept in the Writings of Donald Anderson McGavran" (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1976); Robert Gale Glahn, "A Biblical Analysis of Donald A. McGavran's Church Growth Principles" (Ph.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1980); William Nolan Burkhalter, "A Comparative Analysis of the Missiologies of Roland Allen and Donald Anderson McGavran" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1984); Shawn Leroy Buice, "A Critical Examination of the Use of Selected New Testament Passages in the Writings of Donald A. McGavran and C. Peter Wagner" (Ph.D. diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 1996); Patrick Julian Melancon, "An Examination of Selected Theological Topics in the Thought of Donald A. McGavran (Church Growth)" (Ph.D. diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997); John Albert Crabtree, Jr., "Donald A. McGavran's Theology of Evangelism and Church Growth as a Basis for Theological Education" (Th.M. thesis, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997); John Albert Crabtree, Jr., "The Divergence of Donald McGavran's Church Growth Movement in North America, 1955-2000" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2004); James Douglas Tucker, Jr., "Post-McGavran Church Growth: Divergent Streams of Development (Donald A. McGavran)" (Ph.D. diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 1998); Gary Lynn McIntosh, "The Impact of Donald A. McGavran's Church

## Conclusion

To accomplish the purposes of this project, this dissertation deals broadly with Donald McGavran's background and the history of the Church Growth Movement, as well as McGavran's own experience and growing understanding of missions in urban contexts. Chapters 2 and 3 engage that subject matter. The remaining four chapters address specific issues of McGavran's missiology, especially as he applied them to urban missions. Finally, in the conclusion, I consider both proponents and critics of McGavran's missiology as I seek to apply church growth thought to the future of urban missions.<sup>59</sup>

Urban missionaries and churches are in need of guidance and missiological input for their Great Commission task. This dissertation intends to contribute to that conversation from the viewpoint of the Father of the Church Growth Movement, Donald McGavran. It is my hope that God will be glorified and the Kingdom will be advanced.

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Growth Missiology on Selected Denominations in the United States of America" (Ph.D. diss., School of Intercultural Studies, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2005); Todd Alan Benkert, "A Biblical Analysis of Donald A. McGavran's Harvest Theology Principle" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008).

<sup>59</sup>For examples of McGavran's critics, see McIntosh, *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement*; Gary Lynn McIntosh, "A Critique of the Critics," *Journal of Evangelism and Missions* 2 (Spring 2003): 37-50; C. Rene Padilla, *Mission between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985); Darrell L. Guder, "Evangelism and the Debate Over Church Growth," *Interpretation* 48, no. 2 (April 1994): 145-55; Gary Bekker, "Missiological Pitfalls in McGavran's Theology," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (April 1982); Larry L. McSwain, "A Critical Appraisal of the Church Growth Movement," *Review and Expositor* 77, no. 4 (Fall 1980): 521-38; C. Rene Padilla, "The Unity of the Church and the Homogeneous Unit Principle," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 6, no. 1 (January 1982): 23-30; C. Rene Padilla, *Mission Between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985). C. Rene Padilla, "The Unity of the Church and the Homogeneous Unit Principle," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 6, no. 1 (January 1982): 23-30. Samuel Escobar, "From Lausanne 1974 to Manila 1989: The Pilgrimage of Urban Mission," *Urban Mission* 7, no. 4 (March 1990): 21-29. Manuel Ortiz, *One New People: Models for Developing a Multiethnic Church* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1995).



## CHAPTER 2

### DONALD A. McGAVRAN AND CHURCH GROWTH MISSIOLOGY

To celebrate his seventy-fifth birthday, two dozen of Donald McGavran's colleagues and former students contributed to a *Festschrift* edited by anthropologist Alan R. Tippett. McGavran had only recently stepped down as the founding dean of Fuller Theological Seminary's School of World Mission. In the volume's foreword, Fuller President David Allan Hubbard described McGavran's influence as "a stone dropped in a placid pond [that] has, through the years, moved out in circles that touch the furthest shores."<sup>1</sup> "He has been lauded, and he has been blasted," Hubbard continued, "but he has not been ignored."<sup>2</sup> In 1986, Tim Stafford, writing in *Christianity Today*, contended that "few have influenced world evangelization as much as Donald McGavran."<sup>3</sup> Stafford also quoted theologian Carl Henry, who noted that McGavran's name "belongs in the first ranks of those who have shown a concern for the lost in our lifetime."<sup>4</sup>

At McGavran's death in 1990, missionaries and scholars recognized him as one of the most influential missiologists of the twentieth century, perhaps in modern

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<sup>1</sup>Alan R. Tippett, ed., *God, Man and Church Growth: A Festschrift in Honor of Donald Anderson McGavran* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973), ix.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Tim Stafford, "The Father of Church Growth," *Christianity Today* (21 February 1986): 19.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

missions history. Kenneth Mulholland argued, “Probably no one person has influenced evangelical missions in [the twentieth] century as much as McGavran.”<sup>5</sup> Ralph Winter, founder of the U.S. Center for World Mission and former member of the Fuller faculty, wrote that McGavran’s church growth ideas were likely more discussed than any other missiological topic.<sup>6</sup>

This chapter will outline Donald A. McGavran’s life and ministry, which will necessarily be intertwined with the history of the Church Growth Movement. From his early life on the mission field in India to the years of his greatest global influence, McGavran’s story spans almost a century of change in evangelical missiology.

### **McGavran’s Life and Ministry**

No individual system of thought or theology rises in a vacuum. Donald McGavran’s theology and that of the Church Growth Movement were heavily influenced by his missionary background, his denominational heritage, his education, and his missiological studies.

### **McGavran’s Missionary Background**

Donald Anderson McGavran was born December 15, 1897, in Damoh, India. His parents were missionaries, as were his grandparents. His grandfather, James Henry Anderson, sailed for India in 1854 as a representative of the English Baptist Mission. For

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<sup>5</sup>Kenneth Mulholland, “Donald McGavran’s Legacy to Evangelical Missions,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (Jan 1991): 64.

<sup>6</sup>Ralph D. Winter, “An Insider’s View of McGavran,” *Mission Frontiers* 12 (June/October 1990): 6-9. Winter also identified one of his three key eras in missions history with McGavran in Ralph D. Winter, “Four Men, Three Eras,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, ed. Ralph Winter et al. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009), 253-61.

a time, he worked at Serampore in the seminary founded by William Carey.<sup>7</sup> Donald McGavran's father, John, who arrived in India in 1891, soon met Helen Anderson, and the two were married in 1895.<sup>8</sup> The McGavran missionary heritage was strong.

The McGavrans returned to the United States in 1910 for their missionary furlough. During the trip home, thirteen year-old Donald attended the International Missionary Conference at Edinburgh with his father. The historic gathering, which advocated better academic training for missionaries, greatly influenced McGavran's future interest in education. In the United States, John McGavran earned a graduate degree and began teaching missions in Disciples of Christ schools, both in response to Edinburgh's call to educate missionaries.<sup>9</sup>

In 1911, the elder McGavran was called to pastor a church in Tulsa, Oklahoma. There, during a revival meeting, Donald McGavran was converted at age fourteen.<sup>10</sup> Describing the event many years later to his grandchildren, he explained, "I

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<sup>7</sup>Vernon James Middleton, "The Development of a Missiologist: The Life and Thought of Donald Anderson McGavran, 1897-1965" (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1989), 1-2.

<sup>8</sup>Herbert M. Works, Jr., "Donald A. McGavran: The Development of a Legacy," in *Unto the Uttermost: Missions in the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ*, ed. Doug Priest (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1984), 232-33; Middleton, "Development of a Missiologist," 6.

<sup>9</sup>Works, "McGavran," 233; Mulholland, "McGavran's Legacy," 65. According to Mulholland, McGavran was the last living participant of the Edinburgh conference.

<sup>10</sup>Middleton, "Development of a Missiologist," 8; Donald A. McGavran, unpublished interview with his grandchildren (WCIU, 8.2). William Carey International University and the U.S. Center for World Mission house a significant collection of McGavran's personal correspondence. Unfortunately, the collection remains in McGavran's original filing cabinets and has not been catalogued. Citations of this collection will refer to the filing cabinet and drawer. "WCIU, 8.2" signifies the McGavran Collection at WCIU, cabinet 8, drawer 2.

became a Christian, confessed Christ, and was baptized in the First Christian Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma. It took a revival meeting to move me.”<sup>11</sup> McGavran described his conversion as an “enlistment” with Christ. Six decades later, McGavran wrote to his grandson, who had just accepted Christ, saying, “Nothing else you will ever do can begin to compare with this conscious intentional enlistment with the Lord Jesus, and intentional responsible membership in His Body, the Church.” “It was sixty-four years ago,” he continued, “that – a boy of 14 – I took the same step – the wisest thing I ever did.”<sup>12</sup> McGavran spoke often of his “enlistment” and credited his father as the greatest influence on his own life.<sup>13</sup>

### **McGavran the Disciple**

Donald McGavran’s Disciples of Christ heritage influenced not only his later missionary service, but also his church growth and evangelism thought. The Disciples of Christ grew out of a nineteenth-century restorationist movement led by Thomas and Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone (hence another appellation, the “Stone-Campbell Movement”). The movement had two primary goals: Christian unity, reflected in the group’s anti-denominationalism, and restoration of apostolic forms. For Disciples, all Christians are members of the Church, and only the Scripture can dictate doctrine and church structure.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>McGavran, interview with his grandchildren, 5.

<sup>12</sup>Donald McGavran to Don McGavran, 25 April 1976 (WCIU, 4.3).

<sup>13</sup>Donald A. McGavran, “My Pilgrimage in Mission,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 20 (April 1986), 53. McGavran’s reflections on his missionary call were the first in a long series of similar articles in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*.

<sup>14</sup>Sakari Pinola, *Church Growth: Principles and Praxis of Donald A. McGavran’s Missiology* (Abo, Finland: Abo Akademi Printing Press, 1995), 21-33; A. T. DeGroot, “The History of Our Brotherhood,” in *Primer for New Disciples: A Guide Book*

The Disciples reacted strongly against any creed or perceived “man-made” theology. Disciples historian and theologian A. T. DeGroot illustrates this principle well: “If anyone asks a Disciple minister . . . what do you believe about the deity of Christ, a typical reply would be ‘Show me the chapter and verse in which this term is used and discussed, and I will affirm what it affirms.’”<sup>15</sup> DeGroot summarizes the Disciples’ views on conversion, saying it is “man’s willing response to God’s gift, through a life that is nurtured in the church, which is the community of believers, the body of Christ, and the vehicle of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>16</sup> The Disciples believe conversion to be intimately tied to ongoing life in the local church.<sup>17</sup> This high view of the church is one key to understanding McGavran’s thought, especially his passion for the health and life of churches.

The Disciples’ emphasis on Christian unity is also important to McGavran’s missiology. Stone and the Campbells, all three Presbyterian pastors, had grown frustrated with division among their churches and sought to find unity and peace based solely on the Scriptures.<sup>18</sup> If, in fact, there is “no creed but the Bible,” then believers should seek common ground rather than pursue divisive issues. That doctrinal

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*for New Members of the Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ)*, ed. Samuel F. Pugh (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1963), 85-86.

<sup>15</sup>A. T. DeGroot, *Disciple Thought: A History* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University, 1965), 42; Howard E. Short, *Doctrine and Thought of the Disciples of Christ* (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1951), 14. Short argues that, for Disciples, the only possible creed is Peter’s confession of Christ in Luke 9:20.

<sup>16</sup>DeGroot, *Disciple Thought*, 78.

<sup>17</sup>Warner Muir, “Our Beliefs and Practices,” in *Primer for New Disciples*, 97-99.

<sup>18</sup>DeGroot, “History of our Brotherhood,” 81-82; Short, *Doctrine and Thought*, 90-91.

background led McGavran to look beyond denominational affiliation in his ministry. The Church Growth Movement has been interdenominational and has, therefore, downplayed differences on doctrinal matters such as the proper mode of baptism and church structure. Advocates stress unity on the Great Commission and on the growth of churches rather than denominational differences.<sup>19</sup>

Early in the history of the Stone-Campbell movement, Alexander Campbell led the formation of the American Christian Missionary Society – a surprising development considering Campbell’s opposition to all organization outside of the local church. By 1875, the Society had missionaries in a dozen countries.<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, Campbell had fairly advanced views of the missionary task. He advocated the clear proclamation of the gospel among unreached peoples and the planting of new churches in the “darkest” areas. Campbell encouraged missionaries to adjust their lives and methods to suit their specific fields.<sup>21</sup>

Unfortunately, the Restorationist ideal of unity lasted neither in the American churches nor in their missions endeavors. In 1929, Disciples churches worked through over forty different societies.<sup>22</sup> Six groups joined together in 1919 to form the United Christian Missionary Society, with whom Donald McGavran would eventually serve.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Donald McGavran, *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1988), 106-08.

<sup>20</sup>Woodrow Phillips, “Missions in the Restoration Movement,” in *Unto the Uttermost*, 1-2.

<sup>21</sup>William J. Richardson, “Alexander Campbell’s Conception of Mission,” in *Unto the Uttermost*, 111-12.

<sup>22</sup>Phillips, “Missions in the Restoration Movement,” 3.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 8.

## McGavran the Scholar

Upon their return to the United States in 1910, McGavran and his siblings adjusted slowly to life in their “home country.” Growing up on the mission field gives one a different outlook on life and culture, a fact that would impact McGavran’s education and later work. After high school, he enrolled at Butler College in Indianapolis with no intention of becoming a missionary. McGavran served in the army during the First World War and then returned to Butler, where he was involved in the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA). He also met his wife, Mary Elizabeth Howard, who was preparing for missionary service. During this period, McGavran believed, “My father and grandfather were missionaries. My family has done enough for God. I am going to be a good Christian and make a lot of money.”<sup>24</sup> He considered his family “over-enlisted.”<sup>25</sup>

That Christmas, however, he attended a YMCA conference where he heard John R. Mott speak. “At Lake Geneva,” he wrote of the meeting, “it became increasingly clear to me that a Christian could not thus limit the degree of his dedication.”<sup>26</sup> McGavran surrendered his life to ministry and determined to return to India as a missionary educator. The Great Commission became the “ruling purpose” of his life.<sup>27</sup> McGavran revealed his calling and passion many years later in a journal entry where he wrote, very simply,

I wake at nights thinking of thousands needlessly blind, diseased -- of 250,000

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<sup>24</sup>McGavran, “My Pilgrimage,” 53; Middleton, “Development of a Missiologist,” 12.

<sup>25</sup>McGavran, interview with his grandchildren, 5.

<sup>26</sup>McGavran, “My Pilgrimage,” 53.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

women and girls, of 200,000 children without a chance, 500,000 without knowledge of God. I thank God for the restless stirrings.<sup>28</sup>

Following his graduation from Butler, McGavran enrolled at Yale University to pursue a graduate degree in religious education. The prevailing liberal ideals at Yale had a lasting, though not permanent, effect on the future missionary. “While there,” McGavran later wrote, “my professors, all of whom had studied in Germany and were theological liberals and ‘modern scholars,’ had convinced me of the truth of the liberal position.”<sup>29</sup> For fifteen years, he followed the tenets of higher criticism, even in his own personal Bible study.<sup>30</sup> McGavran’s liberal outlook persisted while he pursued a doctorate at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.<sup>31</sup>

McGavran identified theological liberalism as one important “stream” of influence on his theology and missiology. That influence was a reaction that drove him to belief in the authority of Scripture. The turning point came during a Sunday School class in India after McGavran’s graduation from Union Theological Seminary. He asked the class what they believed to be the most important question to ask when studying the Scriptures. One man replied immediately, “What is there in this passage that we cannot believe?” McGavran later described his own reaction:

I had never before been confronted so bluntly with what the liberal position means to ordinary Christians in multitudinous instances. It shocked me, and I began at that moment to sense that it could not be the truth. Despite all the difficulties, I began to feel my way back toward convictions concerning the Bible as infallible revelation. It is God’s Word. It is entirely dependable. It is the rule of faith and practice of every true Christian.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Donald A. McGavran, Notebook, 1939-40 (BGC 178.30.5).

<sup>29</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 55.

<sup>30</sup>Middleton, “Development of a Missiologist,” 12-14.

<sup>31</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 55.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 56.



McGavran's educational background had both positive and negative influences. He was exposed to problematic theologies that he later said had hindered much missionary activity. At the same time, McGavran learned much that would bear fruit in his future ministry.

### **McGavran the Missionary**

A final influence on Donald McGavran's thought and theology was his role as a missionary and missiologist. By 1923, John McGavran had returned to India and led the Disciples' mission efforts as field-secretary. That year, the United Christian Missionary Society commissioned Donald and Mary McGavran as missionaries to India. They began their service in Harda, in the region where Donald's parents had worked for many years. The Disciples missionaries had started a high school in the town, and McGavran served as its principal, working mainly with high-caste boys in Bible classes.<sup>33</sup>

McGavran was named to the newly formed post of Director of Religious Education for the India Mission in 1928. He focused especially on training Christian teachers for mission schools.<sup>34</sup> In the same year, McGavran published his first book, *How to Teach Religion in Mission Schools*. The book reflected the missionary educator's concern that children not only become Christians but also that they grow in faith.<sup>35</sup>

In 1930, the McGavrans suffered a devastating loss when their oldest daughter, seven-year-old Mary Theodora, died after her appendix ruptured. McGavran was away from home at the time and suffered greatly. Many years later, he still reflected on that

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<sup>33</sup>Tippett, "Portrait of a Missiologist," 21; McGavran, "My Pilgrimage," 54; Middleton, "Development of a Missiologist," 5-6, 20.

<sup>34</sup>Middleton, "Development of a Missiologist," 25.

<sup>35</sup>Donald McGavran, *How to Teach Religion in Mission Schools* (Jabalpur: Mission Press, 1928); Middleton, 21-22.

loss with terrible grief.<sup>36</sup> After a two-year study leave from 1930-32, McGavran and his family returned to India where he was named Secretary-Treasurer of the mission. The leadership position required a move to Jubbulpore, a city of two hundred thousand people where McGavran not only worked in the administration of 178 missionaries and numerous churches but also engaged the untouchable Dumar caste of sweepers.<sup>37</sup>

During this period of mission leadership, McGavran came under the influence of Methodist missionary and bishop J. Waskom Pickett. In 1933, Pickett published his influential *Christian Mass Movements in India*, a massive study of people movements throughout the nation.<sup>38</sup> McGavran was heavily influenced by Pickett's work, even to the point of later saying that he "lit his candle at Pickett's flame."<sup>39</sup> The relationship and Pickett's passion for research proved to be pivotal for McGavran. Speaking of this period, McGavran described the turning point in his life:

Prodded from without and stimulated from within, I was galvanized into action by a remarkable discovery. In the section of India where I worked, 145 areas were scenes of missionary effort by denominations from America, England, Sweden, and on and on. I discovered that in 134 of these areas the church between 1921 and 1931 had grown at only 11 percent a decade. It was not even conserving all its own children. But in the other eleven areas the church was growing by 100 percent, 150 percent, or even 200 percent a decade. Why was this happening? A vast curiosity

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<sup>36</sup>Donald McGavran to Mary McGavran, 8 September 1978 (WCIU 4.3). On the occasion of their fifty-sixth wedding anniversary, McGavran praised Mary for her strength and faith at Mary Theodora's death.

<sup>37</sup>Nelle Grant Alexander, *Disciples of Christ in India* (Indianapolis: Missionary Education Department, 1946), 16-17; Middleton, "Development of a Missiologist," 45-46; 56. Middleton relates that McGavran started his Dumar ministry when the sweeper employed by the family told McGavran that, even though she had worked around missionaries for many years, none had ever asked her about a relationship with Christ.

<sup>38</sup>J. Waskom Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1933).

<sup>39</sup>George G. Hunter III, "The Legacy of Donald A. McGavran," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 16, no. 4 (October 1992): 158-59.

arose within my breast. There must be a key to Great Commission mission, and I resolved to find it.<sup>40</sup>

In 1938, Pickett published a follow-up study, titled *Christ's Way to India's Heart*.<sup>41</sup> McGavran reviewed the book in *International Review of Mission* the same year.<sup>42</sup> He described the contrasting philosophies of missions represented in traditional mission station approaches and Pickett's mass-movement concept. The review showed McGavran's early use of "growth" as a key component of his missiology. "Without using the following terminology," McGavran wrote referring to Pickett, "he has in our estimation written a 'philosophy of the growth of churches which grow.'"<sup>43</sup>

After only three years in mission administration, McGavran suffered what Middleton called "the great reversal" when he was removed from his role as secretary-treasurer.<sup>44</sup> Middleton gave several reasons for the change, including McGavran's passion for evangelism and church growth.<sup>45</sup> McGavran seemed better suited for evangelistic work, but he struggled with the adjustment. Still, the years following his transfer to work with the Satnami people proved to be the foundation for his future.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>McGavran, "My Pilgrimage," 56.

<sup>41</sup>J. Waskom Pickett, *Christ's Way to India's Heart* (Lucknow, India: Lucknow Publishing House, 1938).

<sup>42</sup>Donald McGavran, "The Rural Church in India," *International Review of Mission* (1938): 667.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 668.

<sup>44</sup>Middleton, "Development of a Missiologist," 60.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 61-62. Middleton also mentioned financial problems associated with the Great Depression and McGavran's lack of administrative abilities as reasons he was not re-elected.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 60.

## Origins of Church Growth

Even before the transition to Chattisgarh and the Satnami work, McGavran was involved in a series of research projects with Pickett. The fruit of these efforts was *Christian Missions in Mid-India*, later published as *Church Growth and Group Conversion*.<sup>47</sup> In the opening essay, McGavran outlined the “people movement point of view” and many of the foundational arguments for his church growth missiology.

From this point, it is difficult to separate McGavran’s life and ministry from the history of the Church Growth Movement. In fact, McGavran traced church growth back to the earliest days of the church and viewed himself as only one small part of the movement’s history. “The first ten chapters of Acts,” he argued, “are full of church growth dynamics and of multitudes becoming Christians and organizing themselves into churches.”<sup>48</sup> In *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, McGavran defined church growth as

a process of spiritual reproduction whereby new congregations are formed. The Church in New Testament times grew in this fashion. New congregations by the score sprang up where there had been none before. In our use of the term, a Church grows when it multiplies its membership and its congregations and then with ever-increasing power takes into itself converts in a widening stream.<sup>49</sup>

One key to understanding church growth thought is the tie between church growth and evangelism. McGavran saw no distinction. He believed that the word

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 71-72; J.W. Pickett et al., *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1973). Originally published in 1936, A. L. Warnshuis’s essay was a later addition to the original work.

<sup>48</sup>Donald McGavran, “The History and Development of the Church Growth Position,” presentation to the faculty seminar, Union Biblical Seminary, India, 17 January 1972 (BGC 178.83.2). BGC refers to the Donald A. McGavran and Mary McGavran Collection, Billy Graham Center in Wheaton, Illinois. 178.83.2 refers to collection number 178, box 83, folder 2.

<sup>49</sup>Pickett et al., *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, 98.

*evangelism* had lost its meaning in twentieth century missions and that a new term was necessary. Good works, such as education, orphan care, the fight for social justice, and medical work had become confused with the proclamation of the gospel. McGavran believed that good works were necessary for Christians, but he refused to classify them as evangelism. Later in life, he returned to the phrase *effective evangelism* to describe his missiology.<sup>50</sup>

Throughout the history of the early church, McGavran believed, one could see the growth of churches. Movements in North Africa and Asia Minor brought thousands into the church, as did the spread of the gospel into Europe.<sup>51</sup> The history of church growth continued through the work of William Carey and the growth of missionary societies. Another important milestone was Rufus Anderson's work in the mid-nineteenth century. McGavran cited Anderson's belief that "the great object of foreign missions is to persuade men to be reconciled to God" and "the organization of churches."<sup>52</sup>

After Anderson, a second key figure in the history of church growth was Roland Allen. Allen, an Anglican missionary, "saw the whole intricate and complex apparatus of mission, achieving so many good things, and exclaimed 'no. there is a better goal.'"<sup>53</sup> In two important but controversial works, Allen argued that Paul's model of

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<sup>50</sup>Donald McGavran, "Church Growth and Evangelism," unpublished manuscript notes, 1971 (WCIU 1.1); idem, "Conclusion," in *Church Growth and Christian Mission*, ed. Donald McGavran (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 231; idem, "Social Justice and Evangelism," *World Vision* 9, no. 6 (June 1965): 9; idem, *Effective Evangelism*. For more on this issue, see chapter 6 below.

<sup>51</sup>McGavran, "History and Development."

<sup>52</sup>In "History and Development," McGavran cited *To Advance the Gospel: Selections from the Writings of Rufus Anderson*, ed. R. Pierce Beaver (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 138.

<sup>53</sup>McGavran, "History and Development."

evangelism and church planting should supersede the tendency to philanthropic work by missionaries.<sup>54</sup> McGavran saw many similarities between Allen's missiology and his own, notably Allen's emphasis on indigenous churches and, to a lesser degree, his teaching on spontaneous expansion of churches and voluntary clergy. At the same time, McGavran went further with his own teaching on people movements and the "mosaic" of societies.<sup>55</sup>

McGavran outlined five periods in the development of church growth thought. The first, from 1934-1936, included his experience as field secretary for the India mission. He explained that while he was working with wonderful Christian people, little growth was taking place in the Disciples mission. His exposure to Pickett's teaching and research, along with his own studies in Mid-India sparked the question that would guide his future: Why do some churches grow and others do not?<sup>56</sup> McGavran described *Church Growth and Group Conversion* as "where my church growth thinking started."<sup>57</sup>

The second period spanned McGavran's seventeen-year ministry in Satnami evangelism, from 1937 to 1954. He continued with church growth surveys and developed the ideas that led to *The Bridges of God* in 1955.<sup>58</sup> McGavran's ideas caused a

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<sup>54</sup>Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (London: World Dominion Press, 1912); Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church and the Causes which Hinder It* (London: World Dominion Press, 1927).

<sup>55</sup>Donald McGavran, "McGavran Speaks on Roland Allen" *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (Spring 1972): 165-74.

<sup>56</sup>McGavran, "History and Development."

<sup>57</sup>McGavran, "McGavran Speaks on Roland Allen," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 8 (Spring 1972): 165-74.

<sup>58</sup>Donald McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (London: World Dominion Press, 1955). The content and influence of *Bridges of God* will be discussed more fully below.

great deal of tension with his colleagues, most of whom were engaged in ministries other than evangelism. He saw clearly that hospital, school, and orphanage work – much of which had been his ministry in the early years of his own career – “would not effect great discipling.”<sup>59</sup>

With the publication of *The Bridges of God*, McGavran’s ministry changed substantially. During an extended furlough, he continued church growth studies in the Congo, the Philippines, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Thailand, and Mexico under the commission of the United Christian Missionary Society. Back in the United States, McGavran served as a “peripatetic professor of missions,” teaching in several seminaries about his ideas. At the same time, he sought an institution that would be willing to start a “graduate school of church growth and mission.” Four different seminaries turned him down, leading McGavran to consider retirement.<sup>60</sup>

Finally, in 1961, Northwest Christian College in Eugene, Oregon, agreed to host the Institute of Church Growth. McGavran’s focus became the training of field missionaries in church growth theory. Men from Asia, Africa, and South America spent nine months in seminars and research on their own fields. Through these projects, McGavran found affirmation of his key principles, including both the opportunities for and the opposition to church growth.<sup>61</sup>

### **The Church Growth Movement on the Global Stage**

McGavran’s influence continued to grow during his tenure in Eugene. The

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<sup>59</sup>McGavran, “History and Development.”

<sup>60</sup>Ibid. McGavran told the faculty seminar that he almost bought ten acres of walnut trees for his retirement.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

leadership of the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association invited McGavran to address its annual meeting at Winona Lake, Indiana, in 1962. That invitation led to the annual Church Growth Seminars, which Herbert Works calls “one of McGavran’s most effective means of reaching the evangelical segment of Protestantism.”<sup>62</sup> In 1963, the World Council of Churches held a conference on church growth at Iberville in Canada. The resulting “Iberville Declaration” affirmed many of McGavran’s church growth principles, but it was largely ignored.<sup>63</sup> The appearance of *Church Growth Bulletin*, also in 1964, offered McGavran an even larger audience. In the first issue, McGavran encouraged his readers to read church growth materials abundantly.<sup>64</sup>

The Institute of Church Growth remained in Eugene for four years before moving to Pasadena and Fuller Theological Seminary. For many years, Fuller founder Charles E. Fuller and Seminary President David Hubbard had sought to launch a graduate school of missions. They recruited McGavran as the founding dean, and the School of World Mission was inaugurated in 1965. McGavran insisted on retaining the Institute of Church Growth as part of the name of the new school.<sup>65</sup>

With the greater resources offered at Fuller, McGavran recruited faculty and students from around the world. Alan Tippett, a cultural anthropologist and the first faculty member at the Institute, moved to Fuller Seminary with McGavran. Over the

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<sup>62</sup>Herbert Melvin Works, Jr., “The Church Growth Movement to 1965: An Historical Perspective” (D.Miss. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1974), 238-41.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 233-35.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 243; Donald McGavran, “How Can You Make Sure?” *Church Growth Bulletin* 1 (September 1964): 4.

<sup>65</sup>Charles H. Kraft, *SWM/SIS at Forty: A Participant/Observer’s View of Our History* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2005), 59-60. For a fuller discussion of the background to the formation of the School of World Mission and McGavran’s call as the founding dean, see pp. 51-66. See also, McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 81-87.



years, the school added men like Ralph Winter, Charles Kraft, Arthur Glasser, and Peter Wagner to the faculty, all of whom became influential in their own right.<sup>66</sup> McGavran later called his Fuller years “the best years of my pilgrimage.”<sup>67</sup>

Throughout his career at Fuller Seminary, writing and publication became an important part of McGavran’s work. He considered his own writing and the future publication of regional church growth studies an important part of the Church Growth Movement. Even though McGavran saw the genesis of church growth thought much earlier, many historians have viewed the publication of *The Bridges of God* as the beginning of the Church Growth Movement.<sup>68</sup> *Understanding Church Growth*, published in 1971, is the most complete description of McGavran’s missiology, but other writings like *Ethnic Realities and the Church*, while less known, are equally significant.<sup>69</sup>

Thom Rainer notes that McGavran’s influence diminished after the publication of *Understanding Church Growth*,<sup>70</sup> but McGavran continued to travel, research, and teach for the remainder of his life. He stepped down as Dean of Fuller’s School of World Mission in 1971 but continued to teach until 1980.<sup>71</sup> Far from declining, McGavran’s influence increased as he helped lead the Lausanne Conference on World Evangelization in 1974.<sup>72</sup> His final book, *Effective Evangelism*, appeared in 1988. It was part memoir,

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<sup>66</sup>McGavran, “History and Development;” Kraft, *SWM/SIS at Forty*, 89-109.

<sup>67</sup>McGavran, “My Pilgrimage,” 57.

<sup>68</sup>Rainer, *Book of Church Growth*, 21-22.

<sup>69</sup>Donald A. McGavran, *Ethnic Realities and the Church: Lessons from India* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979).

<sup>70</sup>Rainer, *Book of Church Growth*, 38.

<sup>71</sup>Kraft, *SWM/SIS at Forty*, 286.

<sup>72</sup>Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), 108-15.

part vision for theological education.

Donald McGavran died at home in 1990 at age ninety-three. He had continued his practice of correspondence almost to the end, even in the face of failing eyesight. He left a legacy of church growth missiology that continues far beyond the centennial of his birth.

### **McGavran's Church Growth Missiology**

Various students of church growth have attempted to distill McGavran's missiology into a handful of key points. In *God, Man, and Church Growth*, Alan Tippett contended that "the three great conceptual contributions of McGavran to missiology in our day are (1) the notion of the people movement, (2) the notion of evangelistic opportunity, and (3) the differentiation of discipling and perfecting."<sup>73</sup> After McGavran's death in 1990, Kenneth Mulholland identified five significant contributions:

1. The Christian church is divinely intended to grow significantly in number;
2. Church growth is a legitimate measuring rod for theological extension;
3. Missionary expansion must be understood principally as crossing cultural rather than geographic barriers;
4. Urban populations must be given priority; and
5. Research is a vital part of missions strategy.<sup>74</sup>

George G. Hunter, III, another significant scholar of church growth and evangelism, counted as many as twenty themes in church growth missiology,<sup>75</sup> but he identified three significant contributions. First was the Church Growth Movement itself, especially its key questions related to the growth (and non-growth) of the church. McGavran's second legacy was his emphasis on research. Finally, according to Hunter,

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<sup>73</sup>Tippett, *God, Man, and Church Growth*, 20.

<sup>74</sup>Mulholland, "McGavran's Legacy," 64-66.

<sup>75</sup>George G. Hunter III, "The Theological Roots, Vision, and Contribution of the Church Growth Movement" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Society for Church Growth, Indianapolis, IN, 11-13 November 1999).

McGavran left a heritage of paradigm shifts represented in his church growth thought, including group movements, challenges to the mission station approach, and the Homogeneous Unit Principle.<sup>76</sup>

In a church growth seminar held in Vancouver in 1974, McGavran himself listed “ten prominent elements in the church growth point of view.”<sup>77</sup> With some variation, he included the same ten “emphases” in a chapter on church growth in Robert Priest’s 1984 book, *Unto the Uttermost*.<sup>78</sup> McGavran touched on both theological and practical issues.

First, McGavran argued, “Church growth is born in theology.”<sup>79</sup> McGavran did not view himself as a theologian, although he certainly believed that church growth thought was solidly theological.<sup>80</sup> He was first and foremost a missionary. McGavran recognized that some critics of church growth thought accused him of being “inadequately theological.”<sup>81</sup> Darrell Guder has noted that “the Church Growth

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<sup>76</sup>Hunter, “The Legacy of Donald A. McGavran,” 158-60.

<sup>77</sup>Donald McGavran, “Ten Prominent Elements in the Church Growth Point of View” (unpublished notes from the Canada Church Growth Seminar, Vancouver, British Columbia, 20-22 February 1974, WCIU 10.1).

<sup>78</sup>Donald A. McGavran, “Ten Emphases in the Church Growth Movement,” in *Unto the Uttermost*, 248-59.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*, 248. See also, McGavran, “Ten Prominent Elements,” where he wrote, “God wants church growth. God wants his lost children found. Church Growth is theologically required.”

<sup>80</sup>Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 8. There, McGavran says, “Church growth is basically a theological stance,” and “Church growth rises in unshakeable theological conviction.”

<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*, 8.

Movement addresses evangelism more methodologically than theologically.”<sup>82</sup> Gailyn Van Rheezen contends that “the focus of the movement has been primarily methodological, and its theology developed in the heat of controversy when its methodological postulates were disputed.”<sup>83</sup> While there is certainly some truth to the notion that McGavran started with methodological rather than theological questions, it is not accurate to say that McGavran was “light” on theology. In his most important summary of church growth, McGavran responded, saying that “church growth is basically a theological stance,” and that “from the beginning the Church Growth Movement has been rooted in biblical, evangelical, conversionist theology.”<sup>84</sup>

Tippett called McGavran “essentially a biblical missiologist,” saying, “the basic presupposition in all his writing and debate is the authority of Scripture and his view of authority is evangelical.”<sup>85</sup> For Donald McGavran, the only adequate source for theology was the Scriptures. In church growth thought, he obtained information from many different places: statistics, cultural analysis, interviews, and the like. For doctrine, however, he turned to the Bible.

In spite of his early history with theological liberalism, McGavran held firmly to the authority and reliability of the Bible. In an article on the central tenets of an

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<sup>82</sup>Darrell L. Guder, “Evangelism and the Debate over Church Growth,” *Interpretation* 48, no. 2 (April 1994): 147.

<sup>83</sup>Gailyn Van Rheezen, “Reformist View,” in *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: Five Views*, ed. Gary L. McIntosh (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 180.

<sup>84</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (1990), 8. Others who supported McGavran in his claim included J. Robertson McQuilkin, *Measuring the Church Growth Movement: How Biblical Is It?* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1973) and the essayists in *Theological Perspectives on Church Growth*, ed. Harvie M. Conn (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976).

<sup>85</sup>Tippett, *God, Man, and Church Growth*, 20.

evangelical theology of mission, McGavran listed first, “The Absolute Inspiration and Authority of the Bible.”<sup>86</sup> He continued, “All the books of the Old and New Testaments, given by inspiration, are the written Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice for all peoples in all ages.”<sup>87</sup> McGavran believed strongly in the inspiration, infallibility, and authority of the Scriptures.<sup>88</sup> In addition, the Scriptures, translated into every language, were the only source of an “accurate knowledge of the truth.”<sup>89</sup>

Not only were the Scriptures the only source for theology of mission and evangelism, they were the true source of inspiration to evangelize. “Wherever Christians have come to hold a low opinion of the Bible,” he argued, “eternal God’s command to proclaim the gospel to *panta ta ethne*, leading them to obedience in faith, is greatly damaged, if not destroyed.”<sup>90</sup> Following his awakening to the ramifications of liberal theology (described above), McGavran determined that no true evangelism could take place apart from belief in the authority of God’s Word. The only source of truth, theology, and strategy was the Bible.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>86</sup>Donald McGavran, “Contemporary Evangelical Theology of Mission,” in *Contemporary Theologies of Mission*, ed. Arthur F. Glasser and Donald A. McGavran (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1983), 101.

<sup>87</sup>*Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>88</sup>Donald McGavran, ed., *Crucial Issues in Missions Tomorrow* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 25; *idem*, “Why Neglect the Gospel-Ready Masses?” *Christianity Today* 10, no. 15 (April 29, 1966): 18; *idem*, “A Missionary Confession of Faith,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 7, no. 2 (November 1972): 135; *idem*, “Church Growth Strategy, Continued,” in *Eye of the Storm: The Great Debate in Mission*, ed. Donald McGavran (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972), 179-82; Donald McGavran and Win Arn, *Back to Basics in Church Growth* (Wheaton: Tyndal House, 1981). In this work, McGavran wrote that “the Bible is the inspired, authoritative, infallible rule of faith and practice.”

<sup>89</sup>McGavran, “Contemporary Evangelical Theology,” 102.

<sup>90</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 31.

<sup>91</sup>*Ibid.*, 57. See also, pp. 37, 54-56.

Most of McGavran's church growth keys found their first clear voice in *The Bridges of God*. As he began to apply his thinking on a more global scale, he adjusted and corrected his principles but always remained faithful to his early ideas. The heart of his earliest writing dealt with people movements, including related issues such as the principle of receptivity and the Homogeneous Unit Principle. All of these foundational principles revolved around the priority, meaning, and practice of evangelism.

McGavran's perception of evangelism provided the theological foundation for his more pragmatic church growth ideas, though there is certainly overlap. In order to understand his ideas of discipling, perfecting, harvest, and search, one must first grasp McGavran's beliefs on the lostness of mankind, the solution to lostness found only in Jesus Christ, and the means of conversion.

### **The Priority of Evangelism**

Most importantly for McGavran, evangelism is the primary task of the Church and Christian missions. He spoke clearly in *Effective Evangelism*, saying,

while the church ought certainly to carry out other activities, such as worship, the instruction of Christian children, the feeding of the poor, and the promotion of justice, for example, it must devote a larger share of its resources, its prayers, and its power to proclaiming the gospel, finding the lost, and bringing them home to the Father's house.<sup>92</sup>

This emphasis on the priority of evangelism was not new. In *How Churches Grow*, McGavran outlined the New Testament "unequivocalness" of mission, declaring that mission is, simply, "proclamation or witness of a life or death message."<sup>93</sup> Speaking to Canadian church leaders in 1974, McGavran listed as one of ten keys to the church growth school of thought, "finding the lost and bringing them back to the Father's House

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<sup>92</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 103.

<sup>93</sup>McGavran, *How Churches Grow*, 60.

is a chief and irreplaceable purpose of the Church in the modern world.<sup>94</sup>

While on the mission field, McGavran decried the loss of meaning in the word, “evangelism.” He believed that the term “had been emasculated” by those who thought evangelism to be “decisions for Christ that never reached the stage of baptism and church membership” as well as by missionaries who “had gutted it by confining its use to the good deeds done in schools and hospitals and leprosy homes.” The phrases “church growth” and, later, “effective evangelism,” were McGavran’s effort to counter those who sought to diminish in one way or another the biblical call to proclaim the gospel.<sup>95</sup>

Over his career, McGavran grew increasingly concerned with the emphasis on social ministry and justice over evangelism. More specifically, he reacted strongly against efforts to equate social ministry and evangelism and to elevate Christian “presence” over “proclamation” of the gospel. McGavran argued that Christian presence without the proclamation of the gospel was incomplete, although he recognized certain instances (such as areas of intense persecution) where “presence” evangelism might be necessary. “Please note,” he wrote, “that I endorse presence when the goal is that Jesus Christ according to the Scriptures be believed, loved, obeyed, and followed into the waters of baptism.”<sup>96</sup> Proclamation of the gospel is a necessary component of evangelism. Other activities such as worship, feeding the hungry, and caring for those in

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<sup>94</sup>McGavran, “Ten Prominent Elements in the Church Growth Point of View” (WCIU 10.1).

<sup>95</sup>Donald McGavran, “Church Growth and Evangelism,” unpublished manuscript, WCIU 1.1.

<sup>96</sup>Donald McGavran, “Presence and Proclamation in Christian Mission,” in *Eye of the Storm*, 209.

need are necessary in Christian ministry, but they are not evangelism.<sup>97</sup>

McGavran developed a definition of evangelism that he believed accorded well with the Scriptures and encompassed much of his church growth thinking. Evangelism, for McGavran, was “proclaiming Christ and persuading men to become His disciples and responsible members of His Church.”<sup>98</sup> Elsewhere, McGavran used the expanded definition developed by the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States:

So to present Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit that men shall come to put their trust in God through Him, to accept Him as their Savior from the guilt and power of sin, to serve Him as Lord in the fellowship of the church, and to follow Him in the vocations of the common life.<sup>99</sup>

McGavran’s definition, taking in both conversion and church membership, is key to understanding his theology of evangelism. Perhaps stemming from his high view of the church and Disciples background, McGavran believed that evangelism is incomplete if new believers do not become active participants in church life.

For Donald McGavran, the definition of evangelism comprised three central ideas. First, it is searching and finding. It is not enough that the gospel be told; men and women must be persuaded to turn from their sin and idols and place their faith in Jesus Christ. God wants his lost children found. Second, evangelism must include new believers becoming responsible church members. Evangelism is incomplete if converts do not become integrated into an indigenous church. Finally, evangelism requires the

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<sup>97</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 103; McGavran, “Missionary Confession of Faith,” 138.

<sup>98</sup>Donald McGavran, “Conclusion,” in *Church Growth and Christian Mission*, ed. Donald McGavran (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 231; Donald McGavran, “Essential Evangelism,” in *Eye of the Storm*, 57; Donald A. McGavran, “Loose the Churches. Let them Go!” *Missiology* 1, no. 2 (April 1973): 81.

<sup>99</sup>McGavran, “Evangelism,” in “Dictionary of Church Growth Terms” (WCIU 7.2).



proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ. It is to the content of this proclamation that we now turn.

### **The Evangelist's Message**

McGavran believed firmly in the biblical truth that men, women, and children without Christ are hopelessly condemned. He frequently used the word, "lost," when describing those for whom God is searching. Although McGavran sometimes differed with his colleagues on matters such as the proper mode of baptism or the structure of the church, he once wrote, "on one thing there is total agreement: men and women without a personal relationship with Jesus Christ are doomed to a Christless eternity."<sup>100</sup> Perhaps he spoke most clearly when he described "the doctrine of the lostness of the human race" as one of five "key axioms" for an evangelical theology of mission:

God, by His Word and His glory, freely created the world out of nothing. He made Adam and Eve in His own image as the crown of creation, that they might have fellowship with Him. Tempted by Satan, they rebelled against God. They were estranged from their Maker, yet responsible to Him. Therefore, apart from grace, we humans are incapable of returning to God. We are fallen beings. Unless we turn in faith to the Redeemer, we are lost.<sup>101</sup>

McGavran held an orthodox evangelical understanding of mankind's relationship to God outside of Christ. He believed firmly Romans 6:23, which proclaims that "the wages of sin is death" (ESV).

The second part of Romans 6:23 adds that "the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (ESV). Donald McGavran believed that it is only through Jesus Christ that lost mankind could be reconciled with God. "The only mediator between God and the human race is Christ Jesus our Lord," he wrote, "God's eternal Son."<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 9.

<sup>101</sup>McGavran, "Contemporary Evangelical Theology of Mission," 103.

<sup>102</sup>*Ibid.*

McGavran reacted strongly to efforts to recognize “other ways” to God. He affirmed as “magnificent” the Frankfurt Declaration on Mission of 1970, which strongly challenged “all non-Christians, who belong to God on the basis of creation, to believe in Him and to be baptized in His name, for in Him alone is eternal salvation promised to them.”<sup>103</sup> The same declaration condemned the notion that “Christ himself is anonymously so evident in world religions, historical changes, and revolutions that man can encounter Him and find salvation in Him without the direct news of the gospel.”<sup>104</sup>

McGavran believed and taught the substitutionary atonement of Christ. Following his education at Yale and Union Theological Seminary, he advocated the moral view of the atonement, but later rejected that notion.<sup>105</sup> In India, McGavran asked students to memorize the truth that Christ was God incarnate and “that he died in our place there on the cross.”<sup>106</sup> That sacrifice provided the way for mankind to be reconciled to the Creator. “There is therefore no way to be reconciled to God,” he wrote, “other than believing and trusting in the atonement He has wrought by Christ.”<sup>107</sup> McGavran’s changing views on the Scripture were reflected in his changing understanding of the atonement.

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<sup>103</sup>Donald McGavran, “Background of the Declaration,” in *Eye of the Storm*, 283; “The Frankfurt Declaration on Mission,” in *Eye of the Storm*, 289.

<sup>104</sup>“Frankfurt Declaration,” 289.

<sup>105</sup>The Moral Influence Theory of the atonement, generally associated with liberal theologians, contends that “when we look at the cross we see the greatness of divine love, which delivers us from fear and kindles in us an answering love” that inspires us to turn from sin to God. L. L. Morris, “Atonement, Theories of,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 117.

<sup>106</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 56.

<sup>107</sup>McGavran, “Contemporary Evangelical Theology of Mission,” 103.

Repentance, for McGavran, was also a necessary part of conversion. He argued that the good news of the gospel is “that sinners by repentance and baptism in the name of Jesus Christ are saved by grace through faith.”<sup>108</sup> While this relationship between baptism and repentance could reflect McGavran’s Disciples of Christ background, nowhere else did he advocate baptismal regeneration. McGavran did, however, indicate in other writings the necessity of repentance.<sup>109</sup> For Donald McGavran, the evangelist’s message was based on the biblical truth that mankind is separated from God because of sin, but that because of Christ’s substitutionary sacrifice, lost mankind may be reconciled to God by faith in Christ and repentance from sin, enjoy the presence of the Holy Spirit, and be a part of God’s family, the church, for all eternity.

### **Discipling and Perfecting**

McGavran’s understanding of the dual nature of evangelism first took shape in *The Bridges of God*. Following Christ’s command to “make disciples of all nations” and “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded” (Matt 28:19-20 ESV), McGavran argued that the first step in evangelism requires that a people be “discipled,” which he defined as “the removal of distracting divisive sinful gods and spirits and ideas from the corporate life of the people and putting Christ at the centre on the Throne.”<sup>110</sup> The second stage of “Christianization” is “perfecting,” which is the “bringing about of an ethical change in the discipled group, an increasing achievement of a thoroughly Christian way of life for the community as a whole.”<sup>111</sup> In *The Bridges of God*, McGavran explained these two elements in the context of “people movements,” or mass

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<sup>108</sup>McGavran, *Bridges of God*, 14.

<sup>109</sup>See also, McGavran, “Missionary Confession of Faith,” 133.

<sup>110</sup>McGavran, *Bridges of God*, 92.

<sup>111</sup>*Ibid.*, 15.

conversions to Christ, in cultures where community and group decisions trump individualism. Nevertheless, this two-fold understanding of evangelism played an important role in all of his later church growth thought.

McGavran expanded on the stages of discipling and perfecting in his second major work, *How Churches Grow*, published in 1959. There, he clarified that the two stages are often intertwined and indistinguishable. As men turn to Christ, they grow in faith even as they lead others to Christ. Both are the work of God and the fruit of faithfulness to biblical teaching.<sup>112</sup> Even though the two-stage concept of “Christianization” or conversion is problematic from an exegetical point of view, McGavran’s emphasis on including church membership and Christian growth in the conversion process was a significant contribution to missiology.<sup>113</sup>

Sakari Pinola argued that McGavran’s stress on the two stages of discipling and perfecting was but a “pragmatic and strategic Church Growth principle utilized in order to emphasize as strongly as possible the importance of actual disciple making” rather than a precise theological statement on conversion.<sup>114</sup> McGavran’s later writings supported this contention. In his most explicit statement of theological principles of evangelism and mission, McGavran condemned modern theologies that define conversion as anything other than “turning from other gods, self, and sin to belief in

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<sup>112</sup>Donald McGavran, *How Churches Grow: The New Frontiers of Mission* (London: World Dominion Press, 1959), 98-99.

<sup>113</sup>Charles Van Engen, *The Growth of the True Church* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1981), 515-17; Charles Van Engen, “Centrist View,” in *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement*, 142. Van Engen calls McGavran’s distinction between discipling and perfecting “unfortunate.”

<sup>114</sup>Pinola, “Church Growth,” 135.

Christ as Lord and Savior and becoming a member of His body, the church.”<sup>115</sup>

“Through faith in Jesus Christ and His atoning death,” he added, “we are justified by God, our sins are forgiven, we receive eternal life.”<sup>116</sup>

In 1979, McGavran raised again the issue of discipling, noting that contemporary thinkers had given new meaning to the term he had coined.<sup>117</sup> Where he had used discipling to describe conversion, later authors used the word to refer to the post-conversion process of growing in faith. As long as the various uses of the term preserved an emphasis on evangelism, McGavran was happy to see discipling take hold in Christian language.

### **Search and Harvest**

Another important image of evangelism for McGavran was that of “finding the lost.” In *Understanding Church Growth*, the author spoke of evangelism and missions in terms of reconciliation. The goal of evangelism is to bring lost men, women, and children back into relationship with God. God, wrote McGavran, “beyond question wills that lost persons be found – that is, be reconciled to himself.”<sup>118</sup> The biblical image of lost sheep and a seeking shepherd fits well with this understanding of evangelism (Matt 18:12-14). McGavran continued, “The finding God wants them found – that is, brought into a redemptive relationship to Jesus Christ where, baptized in his name, they become

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<sup>115</sup>Donald McGavran, “New Mission: A Systematic Reinterpretation of the Concepts of Mission,” in *Contemporary Theologies of Mission*, 54.

<sup>116</sup>McGavran, “Contemporary Evangelical Theology of Mission,” 103.

<sup>117</sup>Donald McGavran, “How about that New Verb, ‘To Disciple?’” *Church Growth Bulletin* 15 (May 1979): 265.

<sup>118</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 21.

part of his household.”<sup>119</sup> God seeks, McGavran argued, but he seeks and finds through believers. That is evangelism.

McGavran elaborated on his “harvest theology” concept most fully in *Understanding Church Growth*. Harvest theology was the belief that God is a seeking and finding God and that the mission of believers is to be about finding the lost and persuading them to follow Christ and become responsible church members. “Search theology,” on the other hand, is the belief that “in evangelism the essential thing is not the finding, but going everywhere and preaching the gospel.”<sup>120</sup> Proponents of both viewpoints consider proclamation to be vital, but harvest theology adds the importance of persuasion. McGavran acknowledged that there is biblical support for search theology. Search theology is not false, he argued, but it is only partial; search theology is not complete evangelism. “It is false,” wrote McGavran, “only insofar as it claims to be the sole theology of evangelism and applicable to all.”<sup>121</sup>

### **People Movements and Group Conversion**

*The Bridges of God* was in many ways a pragmatic book rather than a theological text. McGavran’s purpose in writing the volume was methodological rather than doctrinal.<sup>122</sup> He described the ways that peoples come to Christ and analyzed the factors influencing that decision rather than prescribing how peoples *ought* to become Christian. At the same time, McGavran argued that missionary evangelists should as

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<sup>119</sup>Ibid.

<sup>120</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>121</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>122</sup>McGavran, *Bridges of God*, 109. The thesis of the book listed here is that modern mission strategy should “hold lightly” all mission station work where growth is less than 50 percent per decade – most definitely a pragmatic approach.

much as possible facilitate such movements. The people movement concept was a reaction to traditional models in which new believers came one by one and were removed from their culture and networks.<sup>123</sup> That model, according to McGavran, was one reason for the slow growth of churches in India. If new believers cut their ties to family and community, then they were unable to communicate the gospel across those natural networks.<sup>124</sup>

People movements are made up of born again individuals. In what seems to be an understatement, McGavran wrote,

Obviously the Christianization of a people requires reborn men and women. A mere change of name accomplishes nothing. While the new convert must remain within his people, he must also experience new birth. . . . The power of any People Movement to Christ depends in great measure on the number of truly converted persons in it. We wish to make this quite clear. The Christianization of peoples is not assisted by slighting or forgetting real personal conversion. There is no substitute for justification by faith in Jesus Christ or for the gift of the Holy Spirit.<sup>125</sup>

McGavran believed that for some cultures (and culture is a key factor), participation in the group decision to follow Christ was true conversion. When a group took the decision to turn away from idols and to Christ, all who participated in that decision were converted. Some in the group, however, would not decide to follow Christ, and those would not be saved. “In the initial discipling of a people,” wrote McGavran, “participation in a group decision is a sufficient following of the light to confer salvation on each person participating in the decision. It is *not* ‘membership in the group’ but

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<sup>123</sup>McGavran defined a *people movement* as the conversion of numbers of a people, usually in small, well-instructed groups, that achieves larger numbers over a period of time. He rejected the idea of “mass movements” in favor of “people movements.” (Pickett et al., *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, 4).

<sup>124</sup>McGavran, *Bridges of God*, 10.

<sup>125</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.

‘participation in following Christ’ which is the vital factor.”<sup>126</sup> McGavran defined conversion, even in groups, as turning and “following Christ.”

In terms of people movements and group conversions, McGavran clarified his earlier writings by arguing in *Understanding Church Growth* that group conversions are “multi-individual” and “mutually interdependent.”<sup>127</sup> While this explanation may seem to be a semantic adjustment, it is significant. Conversion, in these cases, “means participation in a genuine decision for Christ, a sincere turning from the old gods and evil spirits, and a determined purpose to live as Christ would have his followers live.”<sup>128</sup> McGavran here addressed concerns that people movements produce nominal believers and argued that every individual must decide for Christ.

### **The Homogeneous Unit Principle**

Closely related to the idea of people movements and group conversion is the principle that “men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers.”<sup>129</sup> In *Effective Evangelism*, McGavran identified three “rivers of thought” that influenced his own beliefs.<sup>130</sup> The first was the theological liberalism of his education, as discussed above. The second stream of influence was the rise of cultural anthropology, the study of world religions, and the practice of contextualization. McGavran believed that all of these fields make a significant contribution to the proper practice of evangelism

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<sup>126</sup>Ibid., 97.

<sup>127</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 302.

<sup>128</sup>Ibid., 227-28.

<sup>129</sup>Ibid., 198. McGavran wrote in *Church Growth and Group Conversion* that “basic to the entire point of view is the concept of a people” (5).

<sup>130</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 54.



and missions. “An effective discipler of *panta ta ethne*,” he wrote, “must know the religions, cultures, occupations, and ways of living of those to whom he preaches Christ.”<sup>131</sup> Thom Rainer includes the influence of “biblical, sociological, historical, and behavioral study” as part of his definition of church growth.<sup>132</sup>

The Homogeneous Unit Principle, as his philosophy has become known, is one of the most foundational and controversial tenets of church growth thought. The principle begins in the sociological and anthropological concepts of “peoples” and “segments,” which McGavran drew from his interpretation of the Great Commission. He argued that *ta ethne* in Matthew 28:19 should be used “in the sense of the mosaic of tribes, clans, and peoples, each held together as a homogeneous unit by cultural ties.”<sup>133</sup> While he did not view the use of *ta ethne* in the New Testament as demanding the Homogeneous Unit Principle, he clearly believed that evangelizing ethnic units was vital to world evangelization.<sup>134</sup>

McGavran’s Homogeneous Unit Principle was the result of his study of people movements around the world. He argued that “the idea of the homogeneous unit is very elastic,” saying that in various places it might be based on ethnicity. In other locales, the “common characteristic” might be geography, language, or class.<sup>135</sup> Homogeneous units looked differently in rural or urban environments and in Western or non-Western

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<sup>131</sup>Ibid.

<sup>132</sup>Rainer, *Book of Church Growth*, 21.

<sup>133</sup>McGavran, “Dictionary of Church Growth Terms.”

<sup>134</sup>Donald A. McGavran to David J. Hesselgrave and Donald Carson, 13 May 1980 (WCIU 8.2).

<sup>135</sup>Donald A. McGavran, “The Genesis and Strategy of the Homogeneous Unit Principle,” paper presented to the Lausanne Theology and Education Group, 30 May 1977 (WCIU 8.4).

societies. The HUP affected not only evangelization, but it also impacted church planting as missionaries worked to reach out to “the fringes” of each group. Effective people movement strategies required working through people who would reach out to their own.

### **Receptivity**

One final area of McGavran’s church growth missiology that must be discussed is his understanding of God’s work in the salvation of individuals and peoples, especially election and regeneration. While he did not address the issue often, McGavran believed in the doctrine of election. In an article responding to the new Presbyterian confession of faith in 1967, he argued that any confession or creed claiming to be true to biblical revelation must “express the overriding intention of God that men, in answer to God’s choice of them, believe on Christ, repent, and live in him.”<sup>136</sup> McGavran’s understanding of the work of God in salvation may also be seen in his practical application of the “principle of receptivity.” People movements are a “gift of God” and peoples become open to the gospel only when God opens their hearts to the gospel. “Receptivity does not arise by accident,” McGavran argued, “Men become open to the Gospel, not by any blind interplay of brute forces, but by God’s sovereign will. Over every welcoming of the Gospel, we can write, ‘In the fullness of time God called *this* people out.’”<sup>137</sup> While he never went into detail regarding the specifics of election or regeneration, McGavran believed firmly that God is the power behind the conversion of men and the growth of the church. “God gives the growth,” he proclaimed, “God ripens

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<sup>136</sup>Ibid.

<sup>137</sup>McGavran, “Why Neglect the Gospel-Ready Masses?,” 18.

the grain. God chooses the workmen. God commands them to reap.”<sup>138</sup>

McGavran’s receptivity principle went far beyond a theological precept; it had significant practical implication. *The Bridges of God* was written to encourage missionaries, particularly those working in India, to move beyond the traditional mission station approach.<sup>139</sup> McGavran argued that “the era has come when Christian Missions should hold lightly all mission station work.”<sup>140</sup> In the face of dwindling financial resources, he advocated a flexible approach that allowed mission leadership to shift personnel and finances to receptive fields and peoples.<sup>141</sup>

McGavran expanded on the receptivity principle in *Understanding Church Growth*. Receptivity, he argued, should be a guiding factor in determining mission strategy. “Correct policy,” he wrote, “is to occupy fields of low receptivity lightly.”<sup>142</sup> He added boldly, “that receptivity determines mission method is obvious.”<sup>143</sup> Church growth advocates research the fields and use the information gleaned to determine where resources are best used to accomplish the Great Commission.

### Conclusion

Although Rainer argued that the “McGavran era” of the Church Growth

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<sup>138</sup>Donald McGavran, “The God Who Finds and His Mission,” *International Review of Missions* 51 (July 1962): 315.

<sup>139</sup>McGavran, *Bridges of God*, 67.

<sup>140</sup>*Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>141</sup>*Ibid.*, 112-13.

<sup>142</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 230.

<sup>143</sup>*Ibid.*, 231.

Movement ended with the publication of *Understanding Church Growth*,<sup>144</sup> it is difficult to discuss missiology in the twentieth century without mentioning Donald McGavran. His life spanned almost a century, overlapping the ministries of men like John R. Mott and Billy Graham. Between his numerous books, dozens of articles, and thousands of pages of correspondence, McGavran left a significant legacy of scholarly study and passionate advocacy. He participated in the most important gatherings of the century – from Edinburgh in 1910 to Lausanne in 1974. He spoke wisdom into many of the important debates over missions and evangelism that took place in his lifetime.<sup>145</sup>

McGavran's church growth missiology influenced much of his century's missions strategy, as well as the next. Ralph Winter, himself considered one of the most important voices on behalf of unreached peoples, credited McGavran with calling attention to "lost peoples" long before Winter's famed Lausanne speech.<sup>146</sup> McGavran's call to abandon the traditional mission station approach has born great fruit as sending agencies sought ways to be more flexible in their strategies.<sup>147</sup> While no major study has been undertaken on the topic, the largest American sending agency, the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, has been clearly influenced by church

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<sup>144</sup>Rainer, *Book of Church Growth*, 38. I would argue that Rainer is correct about McGavran's lower involvement in North American church growth, but he is incorrect if considering McGavran's work on a global scale.

<sup>145</sup>Kent R. Hunter, "Core Values: Backbone of a Movement," *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 6 (1995): 6.

<sup>146</sup>Winter, "Four Men, Three Eras," 12-13. At the 1974 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, Winter delivered a speech entitled, "The Highest Priority: Cross-cultural Evangelism," in which he argued for a people group focused approach to missions as opposed to the traditional geographical view. See Lausanne Committee, *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, 213-58.

<sup>147</sup>Hunter, "Legacy of Donald A. McGavran," 158-60.

growth thought.<sup>148</sup>

Unfortunately, however, some newer leaders in the Church Growth Movement have identified a trend away from McGavran's emphasis on evangelism and church growth. In an address to the American Society for Church Growth in 1995, Thom Rainer, founding Dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth<sup>149</sup> at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, called church growth thinkers back to McGavran's evangelistic passion. He argued that many of McGavran's critics had been correct when they worried that church growth placed too much emphasis on large churches and transfer growth. "I would be exceedingly joyful," he declared, "if but one critic accused us today of too much evangelism."<sup>150</sup> Instead, he suggested, "the future of the Church Growth Movement may rest on our decision to return or not return to the Church Growth Movement that is truly in the spirit of its founder."<sup>151</sup> More recently, Ed

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<sup>148</sup>One can see the influence of McGavran's emphasis on church planting, unreached peoples, receptivity, and homogeneous units in the IMB's "New Directions" strategy. See Jerry Rankin, *To the Ends of the Earth: Empowering Kingdom Growth: Churches Fulfilling the Great Commission* (Richmond, VA: International Mission Board, SBC, 2005). In a telephone interview, Rankin confirmed McGavran's influence on his own missiology, as well as that of other leaders in the International Mission Board. Jerry Rankin, telephone interview with the author, 8 March 2011.

<sup>149</sup>Southern Seminary has removed the phrase "Church Growth," from the name of the Graham School for many of the same reasons that McGavran coined the term. Seminary and school leadership recognized that "church growth" had lost its meaning, much as had "evangelism" in McGavran's day.

<sup>150</sup>Thom S. Rainer, "Church Growth at the End of the Twentieth Century: Recovering Our Purpose," *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 6 (1995): 65. For a study of the development of North American Church Growth, especially as it relates to McGavran, see John Albert Crabtree, "The Divergence of Donald McGavran's Church Growth Movement in North America, 1955-2000" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2004). See also Gary Lynn McIntosh, "Thoughts on a Movement," *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 8 (Winter 1997): 11-52.

<sup>151</sup>Rainer, "Church Growth at the End of the Twentieth Century," 59-60.

Stetzer spoke even more clearly of McGavran's heart when he argued that church growth began with missions and must return to the missionary spirit.<sup>152</sup>

While the future of the Church Growth Movement remains in question, the need for the study and application of McGavran's missiology remains, especially as the world moves from rural to urban. McGavran's principles hold much value for those seeking to reach global urban centers and the peoples living there.

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<sup>152</sup>Ed Stetzer, "The Evolution of Church Growth, Church Health, and the Missional Church: An Overview of the Church Growth Movement from, and Back to, Its Missional Roots," *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 17 (Winter 2006): 87-112.

CHAPTER 3  
MCGAVRAN AND THE CITY

In spite of the influence of the Church Growth Movement on twentieth-century missiology, missionaries in urban contexts have not often considered Donald McGavran's teachings on reaching urban peoples. In his 1978 volume dedicated to urban church growth, Francis M. DuBose listed several contemporary applications of church growth thought to city missions. He bemoaned the fact, however, that only a fraction of church growth writing had been dedicated to "the urban situation."<sup>1</sup> A survey of DuBose's list and bibliography indicates that he found few references to urban contexts in McGavran's writing.<sup>2</sup> While it may be true that few of McGavran's published writings dealt specifically with urban contexts, it is incorrect to argue that McGavran had little to say on the subject.

Over the course of his career, Donald McGavran wrote or contributed to some sixty books. He wrote dozens of articles and edited two journals. His published work is extensive.<sup>3</sup> From its inception in 1964, McGavran served as editor of *Church Growth*

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<sup>1</sup>Francis M. DuBose, *How Churches Grow in an Urban World* (Nashville: Broadman, 1978), 12-13.

<sup>2</sup>DuBose lists only a handful of McGavran's works on urban contexts along with several books and articles by other church growth writers.

<sup>3</sup>For bibliographies of McGavran's work, see Middleton, "A Bibliography of Donald Anderson McGavran," *Global Church Growth* 27, no. 3 (July-September, 1990): 24-25; Alan Tippett, ed. *God, Man, and Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973); and the bibliography of this dissertation.

*Bulletin*, which served as the most important regular publication on church growth missiology. In addition to his published work, McGavran was a committed correspondent. His letters and unpublished papers comprise two significant archival collections.

This chapter will consider McGavran's general contributions to urban missiology through his published books and articles and his teaching. While later chapters will delve further into the detailed application of church growth thought to urban contexts, a general survey will reveal that McGavran's interest and study of missions in cities developed during his later career. In addition, one must consider his influence on students who applied church growth missiology to their own urban contexts.

### **The City in McGavran's Time**

In order to understand McGavran's developing urban missiology, one must see the historical rise of cities, especially over the course of his lifetime. Harvie Conn and Manuel Ortiz identified four great waves of urban development throughout history. The first city recorded in the Scriptures was Enoch, probably built by Cain and named after his son (Gen 4:17). After the Flood, the descendents of Noah built the great cities of the ancient world, including Nineveh, Sodom, and Gomorrah, as recorded in Genesis 10. Later, "as people migrated from the east," they settled and declared, "Come, let us build for ourselves a city" (Gen 11:2,4 ESV). These "shrine city-states" were the beginning of the urban development of Mesopotamia and are the forbears of all urban history.<sup>4</sup>

While Nineveh, Babylon, Sodom, and Gomorrah came to represent all the evil associated with cities, Jerusalem became the image of God's urban mission in the world.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Harvie Conn and Manuel Ortiz, *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, and the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 34-35. See also, Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970).

<sup>5</sup>Conn and Ortiz, *Urban Ministry*, 87-94.



In contrast to Babel, Jerusalem, home of the temple of God, symbolized hope and peace. Other cities provided peace and safety for their citizens. Jerusalem, however, “was to be the ‘joy of the whole earth,’” representing God’s mission of salvation for the nations (Ps 48:2).<sup>6</sup>

That mission was fulfilled as the gospel spread from Jerusalem after the resurrection of Christ. Greek cities provided the means of communication and commerce, a feature continued in the Roman Empire. Christianity spread by way of cities. “Within twenty years of the crucifixion,” wrote Rodney Stark, “Christianity was transformed from a faith based in rural Galilee, to an urban movement reaching far beyond Palestine.”<sup>7</sup> Stark joins other historians who recognize that urbanization fostered, or at least aided, the expansion of the Christian faith.<sup>8</sup> The Roman Empire was urban, and Rome, itself, was home to more than one million people.<sup>9</sup> While scholars have argued whether or not Paul intentionally used cities in a strategic manner, there is little question that he worked primarily from urban areas.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 91.

<sup>7</sup>Rodney Stark, *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 25.

<sup>8</sup>See, for example, Kenneth Scott Latourette, *The First Five Centuries*, vol. 1 of *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1937), 72-74; Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies, and Methods* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 258-86; Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 27.

<sup>9</sup>Ray Bakke, *The Urban Christian: Effective Urban Ministry in Today’s Urban World* (Grand Rapids: IVP, 1987), 28.

<sup>10</sup>For opposing viewpoints, see Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) and Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies, and Methods* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008). See also, Conn and Ortiz, *Urban Ministry*, 140ff.

The second great wave of urban history took place from the fall of the Roman Empire through the Protestant Reformation. The era was characterized by the close relationship between the church and the city as the parish and diocese became the principal political divisions in society.<sup>11</sup> Also notable is the fact that the Reformation was primarily an urban event.<sup>12</sup>

Colonization and industrialization precipitated the third wave of urbanization. During this period, the United States rose to prominence on the world stage. Cities were important in American history from the beginning. While the first settlers built small villages surrounded by farms, cities soon provided the security, both physical and financial, that paved the way for tremendous growth. New York was home to 3,900 people in 1690 but grew to twenty-five thousand by 1775. Philadelphia grew ten-fold, from four thousand to forty thousand, in the same period.<sup>13</sup> The Industrial Revolution brought further population growth, especially by way of newly arrived immigrants in the Northeast. One development from this period was a rising anti-urbanism spurred on by conditions in European and American industrial cities. Even as urban churches grew rapidly, some believers determined that cities were the source of social evils and sought to remove themselves into an idyllic country life.<sup>14</sup>

The most rapid period of urban growth in the United States took place between the end of the Civil War and 1920. Over five decades, the urban population grew from just over six million to more than forty-two million. By 1920, a majority of the American

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<sup>11</sup>Conn and Ortiz, *Urban Ministry*, 39.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 42.

<sup>13</sup>Harvie Conn, *The American City and the Evangelical Church: A Historical Overview* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 17.

<sup>14</sup>Conn and Ortiz, *Urban Ministry*, 52-63.

population lived in cities.<sup>15</sup> The growth of the Social Gospel movement and the ministries of urban evangelists like D. L. Moody and Billy Sunday continued to emphasize the darker side of cities even as they sought to bring truth (in the case of Moody and Sunday) and justice (in the case of the Social Gospel) to American urban centers.<sup>16</sup>

Conn and Ortiz describe the fourth wave of urban history as a “global explosion.”<sup>17</sup> In North America, the urban population had shifted from 5 percent in 1790 to over 75 percent in 1990.<sup>18</sup> That growth slowed in the second half of the twentieth century even as global urbanization expanded rapidly. In 2000, over 80 percent of the American population lived in metropolitan areas. Of that number, 93 percent lived in urban areas with populations greater than 250,000. More than half lived in cities of larger than one million persons.<sup>19</sup>

McGavran’s century was one of tremendous change not only in evangelical missions, but also in urbanization. In 1900, less than 15 percent of the global population lived in urban contexts.<sup>20</sup> Today, that number is over 50 percent. Most urban growth in the West took place over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and has now leveled off. In the developing world, however, urbanization and urban growth have occurred not only

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<sup>15</sup>Conn, *American City and the Evangelical Church*, 49.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 60-62; Conn and Ortiz, *Urban Ministry*, 54-57.

<sup>17</sup>Conn and Ortiz, *Urban Ministry*, 64.

<sup>18</sup>Conn, *American City and the Evangelical Church*, 76.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Todd M. Johnson, David B. Barrett, and Peter F. Crossing, “Status of Global Mission, 2011, in Context of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 35, no. 1 (January 2011): 29.

more rapidly but also on an even greater scale.<sup>21</sup> “Population changes that took a century in Europe and North America,” contends John Palen, “only take a decade in cities of the developing world.”<sup>22</sup> Mexico City reached one million in population in the 1930s but has over twenty-one million residents today.<sup>23</sup> Such factors are especially important to missiologists, as many of the globe’s unreached peoples reside in these same developing (and rapidly urbanizing) regions.

Sociologists have identified several patterns that characterize cities in the developing world. The largest and fastest growing urban areas tend to be young in age demographic, highly diverse in population, and informal in their economies.<sup>24</sup> Rapid population growth can be partially attributed to high birth rates, especially among the urban poor. As Western nations level out or even decline slightly in population growth, less-developed countries, where between 32 percent and 45 percent of the population is under age fifteen, populations grow rapidly.<sup>25</sup> The majority of that growth is taking place in cities.

An additional characteristic of urbanization in the developing world is the “primate city.”<sup>26</sup> While developed nations generally exhibit a “balanced urbanization” in which urban populations are spread across several cities, many non-Western nations have

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<sup>21</sup>Conn and Ortiz, *Urban Ministry*, 64-67.

<sup>22</sup>J. John Palen, *The Urban World*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2008), 306.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 295.

<sup>24</sup>Mark Gottdiener and Ray Hutchison, *The New Urban Sociology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2006), 288-98; Palen, *Urban World*, 300-02. Informal economies are based on systems such as barter, independent services, street trading, etc.

<sup>25</sup>Palen, *Urban World*, 300.

<sup>26</sup>Gottdiener and Hutchison, *New Urban Sociology*, 291.

a central city that far outweighs any other. For example, Gottdiener and Hutchison mention that Bangkok, the capital city of Thailand, is thirty times larger than the second largest city in that country, Chiang Mai.<sup>27</sup> The results of primate city development include inequity in economic distribution and investment, infrastructure problems, overcrowding, and poverty. Most such cities are surrounded by slums and squatter settlements. Calcutta is an example of a primate city in India, both today and in McGavran's experience.<sup>28</sup>

Approximately one billion people worldwide live in so-called "shantytowns" or squatter settlements today, a phenomenon that existed in McGavran's day, as well, though not on today's scale.<sup>29</sup> While this number comprises all types of people living on property that they do not own or rent, the "overwhelming majority are simply people who came to the city, needed a place to live that they and their families could afford, and, not being able to find it on the private market, built it for themselves on land that wasn't theirs."<sup>30</sup> Squatter settlements often begin on farmland at the fringe of cities. Families and individuals construct temporary structures, improve on those dwellings, and eventually develop permanent communities. Schools are rare, as are public services,

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Moonis Raza and Atiya Habeeb, "Characteristics of Colonial Urbanization: a Case of Study of the Satellitic 'Primacy' of Calcutta," in *A Reader in Urban Sociology*, ed. M. S. A. Rao, Chandrashekar Bhat, and Laxmi Narayan Kadekar (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1991), 49-72.

<sup>29</sup>K. Ranga Rao and M. S. A. Rao, "Cities, Slums and Urban Development: A Case Study of a Slum in the City of Vijayawada," in *Reader in Urban Sociology*, 314-15. According to Rao and Rao, 20 percent of urban dwellers in India in 1951 lived in slum areas. That number had increased to 25 percent by 1961, when McGavran left India.

<sup>30</sup>Robert Neuwirth, *Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, A New Urban World* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 9.

such as security and utilities.<sup>31</sup>

Between 1921 and 1961, a period that covered most of McGavran's missionary experience in India, the urban population of that country increased from 11 percent to 18 percent of the total Indian population.<sup>32</sup> By 1961, half of the urban population lived in 105 cities of one hundred thousand persons or more. Most of those migrants moved to the city closest to their home and maintained contact with rural family members and networks.<sup>33</sup>

Donald McGavran's missionary career, which lasted from 1923-1961, spanned the end of rapid Western urbanization and industrialization and the early rise of cities in Asia. His focus on Christian education and on village evangelism caused him to spend most of his years in rural areas, but he was certainly aware of the changes taking place. While critics like DuBose may have a point when they say that McGavran's interest in urban contexts came late or was under-realized, McGavran's contribution to the field was nonetheless significant.

### **Church Growth and the City**

McGavran's only significant period of ministry in a city was during his tenure at Jubbulpore from 1932 to 1935, but he later recognized the growing importance of cities to world evangelization. His most important contributions to urban missiology came through his writing and teaching. A survey of both areas will reveal both a growing emphasis on cities and a mature application of general church growth missiology to urban contexts.

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<sup>31</sup>Palen, *Urban World*, 302.

<sup>32</sup>Mahendra K. Premi, "Migration to Cities in India," in *Reader in Urban Sociology*, 101.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 137-38.

McGavran's earliest missiological influence was J. Waskom Pickett, a Methodist bishop in India and author of *Christian Mass Movements in India*.<sup>34</sup> Pickett's monumental study of people movements among Indian villagers was the impetus for McGavran's first studies of church growth. During Pickett's study, nine out of ten Indians lived in rural villages, and the research took place exclusively in that context.<sup>35</sup> In fact, Pickett argued that "in neither Calcutta nor Bombay has there been a mass movement."<sup>36</sup> He recognized that movements influence cities, however, in that most urban Christians at that time came from village movements. "An independent union congregation, in a provincial capital," Pickett pointed out, "was found to contain in its membership, or constituency, people whose entrance into the Christian community could be traced to mass movements in nine different areas."<sup>37</sup> Pickett's later work, *Christ's Way to India's Heart*, reflected the same rural emphasis.<sup>38</sup>

In 1936, McGavran joined Pickett to write *Church Growth and Group Conversion*. The work was intended to further the discussion of people movements among caste-conscious villagers. McGavran contributed four chapters, including two that addressed general issues of church growth. His other two contributions were specific studies of movements in Mid-India. Both took place in rural contexts.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>J. Waskom Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India: A Study with Recommendations* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1933).

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 13-15, 17-19.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup>J. Waskom Pickett, *Christ's Way to India's Heart* (Lucknow, India: Lucknow Publishing House, 1938).

<sup>39</sup>J.W. Pickett et al., *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1973).

McGavran's friend and biographer, Vernon Middleton, also a missionary in India, recalled that McGavran's interest in cities began in the mid-1960s as he was transitioning to Fuller Seminary and the global stage.<sup>40</sup> Middleton and McGavran discussed opportunities in the rapidly growing Indian cities. McGavran suggested that missionaries were badly needed in rural contexts, but that older missionaries who were no longer able to serve in villages could perhaps be effective in urban contexts. During the same period, McGavran visited Mexico City with Roger Greenway, one of the most influential urban missiologists today, and told him, "in the future, the frontier of missions will lie in the city. I challenge you to direct your efforts here."<sup>41</sup>

McGavran's correspondence also revealed his growing interest in cities and recognition of the importance of missions in urban contexts. In a brief 1970 note to Dick Hillis, director of Overseas Crusades, McGavran wrote, "It is not enough to go to the cities. We must perfect urban evangelism until we baptize multitudes in the city."<sup>42</sup> The following year, McGavran received an article on African urbanization from David Langford of Africa Inland Mission. McGavran responded that he was concerned that most missionaries lived in cities but that they spent little time evangelizing urban dwellers.<sup>43</sup> "The phenomenal growth of cities," McGavran wrote, "everywhere poses one

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<sup>40</sup>Vernon Middleton, telephone interview with the author, 18 December 2009.

<sup>41</sup>Roger S. Greenway, "My Pilgrimage in Urban Mission," *Urban Mission* (March 1999): 12.

<sup>42</sup>Donald McGavran to Dick Hillis, 16 September 1970 (WCIU 9); William Carey International University and the U.S. Center for World Mission house a significant collection of McGavran's personal correspondence. Unfortunately, the collection remains in McGavran's original filing cabinets and has not been catalogued. References in this collection will refer to the filing cabinet and drawer. "WCIU, 8.2" refers to the McGavran Collection at WCIU, cabinet 8, drawer 2.

<sup>43</sup>Donald McGavran to David Langford, 15 September 1971 (WCIU 7.4).



of the greatest opportunities which the church has ever faced.”<sup>44</sup> “We must find ways to baptize the cities,” he continued, “It is not enough to reach them.”<sup>45</sup>

Much of McGavran’s correspondence regarded his desire to help missionaries apply church growth missiology to their particular urban contexts. In July 1971, he exchanged letters with New Testament professor Paul Benjamin of Lincoln Christian Seminary. Benjamin expressed his excitement about the future of missiology at Lincoln but also his concern about his own doctoral studies in church growth.<sup>46</sup> McGavran responded by pointing him to the city. “With that great strip city developing slightly to the west of you, all the way from St. Louis to Chicago,” McGavran began, “your opportunities for multiplying churches of Christ there are fantastic.” He continued,

I have hoped that as part of the Church Growth team at Lincoln Seminary, *you would be harnessing the best sociological and anthropological training possible to the multiplying of churches in American cities.* If you do that, whether you get a degree or not is really inconsequential.<sup>47</sup>

James Wong, then the Director of the Church Growth Centre in Singapore and one of McGavran’s students, presented a report on multi-housing church planting at the International Conference on World Evangelization held at Lausanne in 1974. After the report was published the following year, McGavran wrote to encourage Wong in his ministry.<sup>48</sup> “Urban evangelism,” McGavran wrote, “continues to be a matter of very

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>Paul Benjamin to Donald McGavran, 26 July 1971 (WCIU 7.1).

<sup>47</sup>Donald McGavran to Paul Benjamin, 30 July 1971 (WCIU 7.1). Emphasis McGavran’s.

<sup>48</sup>James Y.K. Wong, “Evangelism in High-Rise Housing Apartments,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, ed. J.D. Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), 938-44; Donald McGavran to James Wong, 12 November 1975 (WCIU 9).

great importance.”<sup>49</sup> He encouraged Wong in his vision for fifty new house churches started and functioning in Singapore.

In a similar conversation some years later, Charles Tipp, a professor at Ontario Bible College, sought McGavran’s advice concerning church planting among the Italian population of Toronto. McGavran suggested a “consortium” of several evangelical denominations that would send twenty-five missionaries to areas in Italy represented by the immigrants in Toronto. There, the missionaries could learn the local dialect then return to Toronto to “plant dozens of storefront and house churches.”<sup>50</sup> McGavran further suggested a rapid turnover of the new churches to Italian leadership so that the “house cells” would “look, sound and smell Italian.”<sup>51</sup>

McGavran’s correspondence between 1965 and his death in 1990 reveals his growing appreciation for the strategic nature of cities. At the beginning of that period, he could write, “As you know, my philosophy of missions is that we must get those village churches growing again.”<sup>52</sup> Fifteen years later, however, McGavran mourned the fact that cities “are where the battle is mostly being lost.”<sup>53</sup>

India today remains a majority rural country, but cities like Mumbai and Kolkota were and are examples of the rapid urbanization taking place in the developing world.<sup>54</sup> In the face of such change, McGavran always maintained his love for village

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<sup>49</sup>McGavran to Wong, 12 November 1975.

<sup>50</sup>Donald McGavran to Charles A. Tipp, 24 March 1980 (WCIU 8.2).

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Donald McGavran to Rex A. Bicks, 11 May 1965 (WCIU 7.1).

<sup>53</sup>Donald McGavran to Alan Walker and George Hunter III, 2 August 1980 (WCIU 8.2).

<sup>54</sup>Palen, *Urban World*, 312-15; Deyan Sudjic, “India’s Urban Shift,” *Urban Age* (November 2007): 1-2.

peoples. In 1978, McGavran wrote from Bombay to his wife, Mary, describing the city. “Bombay is more crowded than ever,” he wrote, “Driving in a taxi is a hair raising experience. To arrive alive and without killing anyone is an unexpected joy.”<sup>55</sup> Even with his love for the villages, McGavran saw the opportunities in those megacities. His research showed that many of the believers who moved from village to city remained associated with their rural churches.<sup>56</sup> He chided pastors and missionaries in India saying, “The multiplication of churches in cities, the placing of a small congregation in every major development, is not being done by the missions and sleeping Indian churches.”<sup>57</sup>

### **The City in McGavran’s Writing**

As noted above, application of McGavran’s church growth missiology to urban contexts was noticeably absent from his earliest published works. In his first major book, *The Bridges of God*, McGavran advocated the philosophy that people movements (the central emphasis of the book) take place in rural village contexts. As he traced the biblical and historic development of the people movement concept in *Bridges of God*, McGavran noted that the early expansion of the church took place in cities and contrasted rural and urban contexts. “In many places,” he wrote, “the Church grew in the cosmopolitan melting pots in which many peoples lived close together.”<sup>58</sup> McGavran argued, however, that the “people consciousness” required in a people movement faded

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<sup>55</sup>Donald McGavran to Mary McGavran, 4 August 1978 (WCIU 4.3).

<sup>56</sup>Donald McGavran, “Evangelization in India,” unpublished paper (WCIU 5.1).

<sup>57</sup>Donald McGavran, “Impressions of the Christian Cause in India: 1978 (Part I),” *India Church Growth Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (Apr-Jun 1979): 22.

<sup>58</sup>Donald McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (London: World Dominion Press, 1955), 36.

in cities. “In cosmopolitan areas,” he contended,

where a breakdown of the older people-consciousness had taken place, well-established churches seem to have been able to provide that home and consciousness of kindred which are so necessary before individuals from many peoples can, in a continuing stream, become Christians one by one.<sup>59</sup>

In other words, people movements had always been rural. Where consciousness of one’s “people” was diminished by diversity and density, conversions took place one by one, not as a people.

By the time McGavran published *How Churches Grow*, four years after *The Bridges of God* in 1959, he had returned to the United States to teach on a broader scale and with a more global view.<sup>60</sup> The book represented McGavran’s first attempt to study church growth missiology outside of his Indian context. His global emphasis necessarily required him to consider urban contexts, but he remained largely focused on rural areas. The only significant difference in McGavran’s view between the two works is additional commentary and recognition that cities change people. Describing Africa, he wrote,

A hundred years ago each tribe had its own separate territory and its own dialect or language. Today in vast rural stretches this is still true, but in urban and industrial areas men from many tribes assemble to form a partially non-tribal society. However, even those who now feel superior to their tribe usually choose their wives or daughters-in-law from their own “folk.”<sup>61</sup>

The early years of McGavran’s *Church Growth Bulletin* also show a lack of interest in cities, though not a complete absence of discussion. In the first year of publication, McGavran invited Canon Max Warren, a leader in the Anglican Church Missionary Society, to contribute an article on urban evangelization. McGavran

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 37.

<sup>60</sup>Donald McGavran, *How Churches Grow* (London: World Dominion Press, 1959).

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 41.

introduced the article, writing, “We are delighted to have this thoughtful contribution on the huge challenge of urban evangelization.”<sup>62</sup> He had seen the importance of church growth missiology in urban contexts but was not yet writing extensively on the subject.

In the mid 1960s, influenced by students like Roger Greenway, McGavran began to consider the application of his church growth missiology in urban contexts. McGavran’s most influential contribution to urban missiology appeared in the first edition of *Understanding Church Growth* in 1970.<sup>63</sup> *Understanding Church Growth* was compiled from McGavran’s teaching at the Winona Lake seminars and in his Fuller Seminary classroom. Beginning in the late 1960s, students at Winona Lake asked for more teaching on urban contexts. An evaluation of past seminars in 1969 revealed, “It came out during our discussion that for several years now we have had an increasing number of requests for more emphasis upon urban centers with their peculiar problems and opportunities.”<sup>64</sup> McGavran responded simply, “We have taken your counsel about urban church growth.”<sup>65</sup> With the regular addition of content on urban missions, future seminars provided opportunities for McGavran to discuss his thoughts on urban missiology.

### **McGavran’s Definition of *Urban***

One of the significant challenges in any discussion of urban ministry and

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<sup>62</sup>Max Warren, “Church Growth Day after Tomorrow,” *Church Growth Bulletin* 1, no. 5 (May 1965): 1.

<sup>63</sup>Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 278-95. Unless otherwise noted, all citations from *Understanding Church Growth* are from the 1970 edition.

<sup>64</sup>Edwin E. Jacques to Donald McGavran, 15 April 1969 (WCIU 7.3).

<sup>65</sup>Donald McGavran to Wade T. Coggins and Edwin Jacques, 25 April 1969 (WCIU 7.3).

missions is definition. Geographers, sociologists, urban planners, and statisticians have different understandings of what constitutes an urban place. One's understanding of terms like *urban* and *city* can significantly alter the way one views ministry in urban centers, especially in the realm of research.

One of the most frequently cited sources of statistics on urban populations, the United Nations Population Division, draws its data from national census information from every member nation. Unfortunately, each country defines "urban" and "city" differently, which affects the final data. Countries define the terms according to various criteria such as total population, population density, and percentage of agricultural employment. Others simply call certain cities "urban." For example, Denmark, Sweden, and Iceland define as urban any locality with two hundred or more inhabitants. Côte d'Ivoire, Spain, and the United Kingdom require ten thousand or more inhabitants. Cuba calls a place with two thousand inhabitants urban, or any "locality with fewer inhabitants but with paved streets, street lighting, piped water, sewage, a medical centre, and educational facilities." Iraq, Congo, Egypt, and United Arab Emirates all name specific locales. France and Sweden take into account the distance of houses from one another (less than two hundred meters).<sup>66</sup>

John Palen outlines multiple viewpoints that impact one's understanding of what is urban, including economic, cultural, demographic, and geographical definitions.<sup>67</sup> None of these definitions is entirely satisfactory. Such definitions have typically revolved around Louis Wirth's three-fold description of urban places based on size,

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<sup>66</sup>United Nations Population Division, "World Urbanization Prospect: The 2009 Revision Population Database: Sources" [on-line]; accessed 2 June 2011; available at <http://esa.un.org/wup2009/wup/source/country.aspx>; Internet.

<sup>67</sup> Palen, *Urban World*, 7.

density, and heterogeneity.<sup>68</sup> Gottdiener and Budd build on Wirth's definition, describing a city as "a bounded space that is densely settled and has a relatively large, culturally heterogeneous population."<sup>69</sup> Their definition is helpful in that it emphasizes both the local (boundaries) and cultural ("relatively large") nature of cities.

Wirth also described three types of relationships in rural and urban contexts, a subject most important to missionaries as they share Christ. Primary relationships, the type most often found in rural areas, are face-to-face and very personal. Secondary relationships are based on contacts that take place less frequently and are less personal. They are also focused on a specific role, like that between a bank teller and a regular customer. Finally, tertiary relationships are formal relationships like business contacts. Wirth argued that urban dwellers have many more secondary and tertiary relationships than primary ones.<sup>70</sup>

In recent scholarship, sociologists have described cities more by the types of networks (family, business, social, etc.) present.<sup>71</sup> Such studies emphasize both opportunities and challenges for urban missionaries. McGavran argued that the gospel spreads across relationships and through networks ("bridges"). For missionaries, an accurate understanding of relationships in a particular context, whether rural or urban, aids in the development of strategies and in evangelism.

Defining terms like *urban* and *city* is more than a debate over semantics. How

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<sup>68</sup>Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," in *Urban Life: Readings in the Anthropology of the City*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. George Gmelch, Robert V. Kemper, and Walter P. Zenner (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2010), 103-05.

<sup>69</sup>M. Gottdiener and Leslie Budd, *Key Concepts in Urban Studies* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2005), 4.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup>See, for example, Gottdiener and Hutchison, *New Urban Sociology*.

one understands the terminology affects how one perceives the task of urban missions. Various definitions of urban contexts not only help missionaries evaluate their fields, but they also aid in strategy development. It seems obvious that cities differ greatly from rural areas, but the characteristics described above emphasize the need for fresh thinking in urban church planting. Other themes such as pace of life, diversity, secularism, and security are equally important.

In *Understanding Church Growth*, Donald McGavran defined *rural* and *urban* in economic terms, saying, “I classify as rural all those who earn their living from the soil, dwell in villages, and eat largely what they raise.”<sup>72</sup> Urban, on the other hand, were those communities of people “who live in market centers and live by trade or manufacture.”<sup>73</sup> Still, he described urban areas as having populations of at least ten thousand.

In many ways, McGavran’s definition is not helpful, as he essentially defines urban as “not rural.” At the same time, his understanding of “urban” reflects his earliest thought on evangelization and people movements. The “bridges of God” that foster the conversion of entire peoples are based on what Wirth would refer to as “primary relationships.” As noted above, McGavran believed that such relationships and “people consciousness” break down in cities.<sup>74</sup> Where diversity is common, the homogeneous units that form the foundation of group movements to Christ change.

It was important to McGavran to distinguish between evangelization in the two contexts (rural and urban). McGavran recognized that most church growth had taken place through people movements in rural villages and towns where populations were

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<sup>72</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 278.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid.

<sup>74</sup>McGavran, *Bridges of God*, 57.



likely more homogeneous, where family and social networks (“bridges”) were stronger, and where lifestyles facilitated evangelism.<sup>75</sup> Urban contexts present different opportunities and challenges for missionaries than do rural areas.

### **Discipling Urban Populations**

In a chapter of *Understanding Church Growth* titled, “Discipling Urban Populations,” McGavran published his first significant rationale for urban missions as well as eight “keys” for reaching global urban centers. He began with a brief outline of the urban origins of Christianity, comparing those roots with Islam’s rural history. “Cities and larger towns had great meaning for the Early Church and have even more significance for Christian missions in the next half century,” he noted.<sup>76</sup> This emphasis is especially interesting considering his arguments in *The Bridges of God* that urban growth in the early Church was less preferable to later people movement expansion.<sup>77</sup> In the modern world, McGavran continued, “the importance of cities for church growth increases when we see that larger and larger proportions of earth’s population are living in them.”<sup>78</sup>

Continuing his apologetic for urban missions, McGavran warned that

the Church faces huge city populations growing still more enormous. Her task is to disciple, baptize, and teach these urban multitudes. It was urban multitudes that the Lord would have gathered as a hen gathers her brood under her wings; and His Church, indwelt by Him, longs to do the same. Yet the Church is not growing in

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<sup>75</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 280.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 278.

<sup>77</sup>McGavran, *Bridges of God*, 37-39. While McGavran recognized that growth in the Roman period had come both through people movements and individual conversions (the latter in urban contexts), he argued that the breakdown of family and cultural relationships in cities hindered people movements.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid.

most Afericasian cities.<sup>79</sup>

McGavran regretted the shortcomings of past missions efforts in urban contexts.

“Tremendous amounts of missionary treasure and life,” he continued, “have been poured out in ‘city work in Afericasia.’”<sup>80</sup> Many missionaries had lived in cities, but only to reach out into rural areas and draw new believers into the churches.

One problem in urban work was the use of the term, “reached,” which McGavran understood as having missionaries located in the city. McGavran argued that it was not enough for believers to be present in cities. “The Church has already done that,” he argued. “Her task is to bring urban multitudes to faith and obedience. The goal to be constantly held in mind is so to preach and live the Gospel that baptized believers in increasing numbers flow into existing congregations and form them into new congregations.”<sup>81</sup> McGavran’s recommendations for ministry in cities reflected his own application of larger church growth missiology to complex urban cultures and point toward this goal of evangelization.

### **McGavran’s “Keys”**

In *Understanding Church Growth*, McGavran presented nine recommendations for discipling urban populations: an emphasis on accurate research and eight “keys” for urban evangelization. These recommendations formed the core of his later teaching on the subject and have remained his most important contribution to urban missions.

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<sup>79</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 279-80. McGavran often used words like “Afericasian” to describe unevangelized regions of the world. This particular term refers to Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., 281.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 281-82. See also, Donald McGavran, “‘Reaching’ Students, City Populations, and Rural Masses,” *Church Growth Bulletin* 3, no. 2 (November 1966): 4.

**Urban church growth research.** At its heart, church growth is about research. McGavran often decried the “universal fog” surrounding the growth or decline of churches.<sup>82</sup> Referring to urban contexts, he wrote, “Research in urban church growth is a department of missions which demands immediate development by all who take the Great Commission seriously.”<sup>83</sup> “Large-scale research,” he continued,

is needed in every major country to reveal what activities, modes of life, and kinds of proclamation communicate the Christian faith in cities and which do not. Many illustrations of the latter and some of the former can be readily obtained; they would cast invaluable light on this urban field in which Christian mission will spend more than a billion dollars in the next thirty years.<sup>84</sup>

McGavran suggested the formation of specialized missionary societies made up of missionaries, anthropologists, and sociologists who would gather this type of research for the benefit of the church.

McGavran recognized the lack of research in urban contexts but suggested his “eight keys” in light of general church growth missiology. Implementation of his recommendations would require contextualization in specific countries and cultures, but, he contended, “these ‘keys’ are in the neighborhood of the truth.”<sup>85</sup> His hope was that urban missions practitioners would expand on the keys in the future.

**House churches and the property barrier.** First, he argued, urban

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<sup>82</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 67-82. McGavran defined this “fog” as “An opaqueness or obscurity on the part of mission-minded people that prevents them from perceiving church growth, from measuring what has occurred and planning for more.” McGavran, “Dictionary of Church Growth Terms” (WCIU 7.2).

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., 285.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., 283-84.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., 285.

missionaries must “emphasize house churches.”<sup>86</sup> McGavran recognized that new churches in urban contexts would face significant burdens, including the cost of property for construction of permanent buildings. In addition, churches in many parts of the world faced antagonism or outright persecution. He suggested that churches meeting in homes would provide an acceptable alternative to permanent construction, especially in cities. “The house church,” he wrote, “meets all these requirements ideally.”<sup>87</sup>

In some contexts, house churches might eventually grow to the point that they would construct permanent facilities, but in many locales, that would never be the case. Later in his life, McGavran expanded on his argument for house churches, saying that they were likely the best way to reach the diverse populations of modern cities.<sup>88</sup>

Another of McGavran’s keys, “surmount the property barrier,” overlaps considerably with his emphasis on house churches. He argued that in contexts where house churches were culturally inappropriate or where other barriers prevented meeting in homes, buildings still presented a significant challenge. The best answer was not foreign subsidy or labor, but rather the rapid growth of the church to the point that the members themselves could finance land and construction. “The building bottleneck,” wrote McGavran, “cannot be eliminated by concentrating on it alone. What must be found is a more effective way to communicate the gospel, where the smell of victory is in the air, . . . A church which grows greatly often thereby solves its building problem.”<sup>89</sup>

**Lay leadership.** McGavran also recognized the difficulties inherent in house

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<sup>86</sup>Ibid.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., 286.

<sup>88</sup>Donald McGavran, “House Churches: A Key Factor for Growth,” *Global Church Growth* 29 (January/February/March, 1992), 5.

<sup>89</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 292.

churches. Wear and tear on the host home, weariness of meeting long-term in a small group, and lack of leadership were common problems.<sup>90</sup> Closely related to this last issue was McGavran's second key: "Develop unpaid lay leaders."<sup>91</sup> He saw that laymen had been intimately involved in historic urban movements and argued that raising up leaders from urban neighborhoods would be vital for church planting in cities. "No paid worker from the outside and certainly no missionary abroad," he wrote, "can know as much about a neighborhood as someone who had dozens of relatives and intimates all around him."<sup>92</sup>

McGavran advocated finding new believers gifted in leadership and turning the church over to those men as soon as possible. Far from leaving these young leaders to fend for themselves, he saw the importance of continued close contact from missionaries and trained leaders. McGavran was not opposed to formal theological education – much of his last book, *Effective Evangelism*, was devoted to his views on that topic – but he saw clearly that urban movements would not take place if they required paid and formally trained leadership.<sup>93</sup>

**Church planting in receptive ethnic populations.** The following three keys to discipling urban populations related directly to two of the most controversial aspects of church growth missiology. McGavran argued that reaching cities and planting urban churches would require missionaries and leaders to "recognize resistant homogeneous

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<sup>90</sup>Ibid., 286.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., 287.

<sup>93</sup>See Donald McGavran, *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1988).

units,” “focus on the responsive,” and “multiply tribe, caste, and language churches.”<sup>94</sup>

From the earliest development of his church growth missiology, McGavran argued that “Men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers.”<sup>95</sup> The Homogeneous Unit Principle is one of the most foundational and controversial tenets of church growth thought.<sup>96</sup> Closely related to the Homogeneous Unit Principle was McGavran’s understanding of receptivity, first elaborated in *The Bridges of God*.<sup>97</sup> Receptivity, he argued, should be a guiding factor in determining mission strategy. “Correct policy,” he wrote, “is to occupy fields of low receptivity lightly.”<sup>98</sup> He added boldly, “that receptivity determines mission method is obvious.”<sup>99</sup> Church growth advocates research the fields and use the information gleaned to determine where resources are best used to accomplish the Great Commission.

Applying the principles of homogeneous units and receptivity is more complicated in urban environments. “The city,” wrote McGavran, “is not a homogenous whole, but rather a mosaic made up of hundreds of segments of society, a few responsive, many indifferent, and a few highly resistant. The obedient and intelligent steward of God’s grace recognizes this and plans his work in light of it.”<sup>100</sup> McGavran argued that accurate research would point to specific parts of the urban mosaic where evangelization

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<sup>94</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 287-89.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid., 198.

<sup>96</sup>For a fuller discussion of the Homogeneous Unit Principle, see ch. 2 of this dissertation.

<sup>97</sup>McGavran, *Bridges of God*, 67.

<sup>98</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 230.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid., 231. For a fuller discussion of receptivity, see ch. 2 of this dissertation.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid., 287.

and church planting could take place. These population segments often prove to be new immigrants longing for some connection to one another, to struggling groups facing difficulties integrating into new urban cultures, or to newcomers desiring to join the dominant culture.

McGavran was a strong advocate of ethnic and language churches. He resisted the tendency in cities to gather believers from scattered homogenous units into single churches. He referred to such churches as “urban conglomerates,” and contended that such congregations have a very low evangelistic potential due to the lack of relationships outside the church.<sup>101</sup> The ideal of bringing individuals from diverse backgrounds together was misguided, according to McGavran. “The first business of the church,” he argued,

is not to fuse the various populations of the metropolis into one people. The establishment, in each linguistic and ethnic group, of congregations whose members worship God with delight in their own mother tongue should be the aim. If any disagree with this principle, I suggest that he go and “worship” with a congregation of whose services he understands only one word in three! When city churches set themselves the task of discipling out to its fringes each ethnic unit in which there are already some Christians, and multiplying ethnic churches as the best means of accomplishing the task, discipling the cities will become much more possible than it is today.<sup>102</sup>

McGavran understood that as ethnic groups integrate into the dominant culture and as believers grow in faith, churches would appear more multiethnic. Until then, however, focusing church planting efforts on homogeneous groups would be the most fruitful way to reach cities.

**Evangelism and social ministry.** McGavran’s final two keys dealt directly

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<sup>101</sup>Donald A. McGavran, *Ethnic Realities and the Church: Lessons from India* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979), 162-65.

<sup>102</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 290.

with evangelism. As noted earlier, evangelism, for McGavran, was “proclaiming Christ and persuading men to become His disciples and responsible members of His Church.”<sup>103</sup> Most importantly, evangelism was the primary task of the Church and missions.

McGavran also dealt more and more with what he perceived as an emphasis on social ministry and justice over evangelism. He protested any attempt to place Christian “presence” on an equal footing with the “proclamation” of the gospel. McGavran always argued that Christian presence without the proclamation of the gospel was incomplete. Proclamation of the gospel is a necessary component of evangelism. McGavran rejected calling activities such as worship, feeding the hungry, and caring for those in need evangelism.<sup>104</sup>

Above and beyond the simple proclamation of the gospel, McGavran saw the need in urban contexts to “communicate intense belief in Christ,” his seventh key to discipling urban populations.<sup>105</sup> He recognized in church history the impact of believers who followed Christ at all costs. In cities, where cultural complexity and hurried lifestyles seemed to blind individuals to the activity around them, the church must be a shining light in the dark world. McGavran cited Revelation 2:10-11 and 7:9 to support his contention that the bold witness of believers in the face of suffering and persecution would speak loudly to urban dwellers. He declared, “The spread of Christianity

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<sup>103</sup>Donald McGavran, “Conclusion,” in *Church Growth and Christian Mission*, ed. Donald Anderson McGavran (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 231; Donald McGavran, “Essential Evangelism,” in *Eye of the Storm: The Great Debate in Mission*, ed. Donald McGavran (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972), 57; Donald A. McGavran, “Loose the Churches. Let them Go!” *Missiology* 1, no. 2 (April 1973): 81.

<sup>104</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 103; Donald McGavran, “A Missionary Confession of Faith,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 7, no. 2 (November 1972): 138. For a fuller discussion of McGavran’s understanding of the relationship between evangelism and social ministry, see ch. 2 and ch. 6 of this dissertation.

<sup>105</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 292.



throughout urban populations is due to no mere human appeal to dissatisfied groups of men.” “It is rather,” he continued,

that believers submit themselves to God, believe His revelation, accept His Son as Savior, receive the Holy Spirit, and press forward as new creatures, earnest of the New Heaven and the New Earth in which shall be no more anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall worship Him, and the Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign forever and ever.<sup>106</sup>

Such faith and passion lived out in cities created opportunities. “Presence” supports “proclamation” in urban contexts rather than the reverse or, worse, replacing proclamation.

Finally, McGavran did see the necessity of social impact on the process of discipling cities. Effective evangelists in urban contexts, he argued, “provide the theological base for an egalitarian society.”<sup>107</sup> While McGavran rejected the notion that social ministry or efforts at social justice equated evangelism, he recognized that cities are often places of great injustice. Rather than social activism, however, McGavran argued that believers must teach, as part of their active discipling, a biblical base for just society. He believed that evangelization would lead to greater equality and healthier cities. Such teaching would even bolster church planting. “Provision of a sound theological base for an egalitarian society,” he concluded, “should aid the multiplication of Christ’s churches in towns and cities. Christianity would be recognized as the religion which provides bedrock for urban civilization.”<sup>108</sup> In urban populations touched by atheism, communism, secularism, and other godless philosophies, the only valid answer for mankind is Christ.

Very little record remains of McGavran’s background work for writing his

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<sup>106</sup>Ibid., 293.

<sup>107</sup>Ibid.

<sup>108</sup>Ibid., 295.

chapter on urban missions in *Understanding Church Growth*, but one set of correspondence sheds light on the process. In 1967, he wrote to John Klebe, a doctoral student in urban sociology at the University of Oregon, suggesting that he would like Klebe to join the Fuller faculty to stress “the role of sociology in the discipling of receptive homogeneous units in the vast urbanization of Afericasia.”<sup>109</sup> The following winter, McGavran sent a manuscript of the “Discipling Urban Populations” chapter to Klebe, asking for his comments.<sup>110</sup> Klebe responded with an extensive letter outlining his thoughts on the chapter.

Aside from general comments on editorial issues (like verb usage in the “eight keys”), Klebe expressed concern over McGavran’s use of the word, “egalitarian,” in the eighth recommendation, “Provide the theological base for an egalitarian society.”<sup>111</sup> He suggested using words like “just” or “free” in place of “egalitarian” in order to clarify the argument.<sup>112</sup> Without indicating his reasons for the decision, McGavran responded, “I accepted about 98% of your judgments – though I am letting ‘egalitarian’ stand.”<sup>113</sup>

### **Beyond the “Eight Keys”**

McGavran’s “eight keys” to discipling urban populations had significant

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<sup>109</sup>Donald McGavran to John A. Klebe, 3 November 1967 (WCIU 9).

<sup>110</sup>Donald McGavran to John A. Klebe, 26 January 1968 (WCIU 9).

<sup>111</sup>John A. Klebe to Donald A. McGavran, 17 February 1968 (WCIU 9); McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 293.

<sup>112</sup>Klebe to McGavran, 17 February 1968. Klebe reasons for his dislike of the word were unclear, but indicated it was mainly because of his background as a missionary in France. The French Revolution rallying cry included the word *égalité*, and because of “the sort of high-brow magazine level of Saturday Review, Harper’s, etc.” He did not expand on his criticism.

<sup>113</sup>Donald McGavran to John A. Klebe, 21 February 1968 (WCIU 9).

influence on urban missions. Soon after the publication of *Understanding Church Growth*, McGavran and Wayne Weld published a workbook on church growth principles for Latin American church leaders. They condensed the “keys” from eight to six, combining the principles related to homogeneous units and removing the final emphasis on social justice.<sup>114</sup>

With the publication of *Ethnic Realities* in 1979, McGavran made his most detailed contribution to the Church Growth Movement’s understanding of mono- and multi-ethnic churches.<sup>115</sup> He described five basic types of churches reflecting various levels of homogeneity and heterogeneity.<sup>116</sup> McGavran added a group of “secondary types” that recognized the influence of urban society on church planting: “urban conglomerates” and “urban monoethnics.” The basic difference between the two was in their ethnic makeup. “Conglomerate congregations,” he wrote, “are composed of Christians from many different castes and tribes. Each convert has come to Christ alone, *out* of the caste in which he was born.”<sup>117</sup> Monoethnic churches, on the other hand, were “people movement churches” that arose out of homogeneous units.<sup>118</sup>

In Indian urban contexts, conglomerate churches were generally made up of believers who had moved to a city. McGavran argued that such churches rarely grew

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<sup>114</sup>Donald McGavran and Wayne Weld, *Principles of Church Growth* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1971), 12-13.

<sup>115</sup>McGavran, *Ethnic Realities*.

<sup>116</sup>McGavran’s five basic types of Indian churches were Syrian churches, fully conglomerate churches, Monoethnic churches from caste, monoethnic churches from tribe, and modified multiethnic churches. He also described four secondary types: urban conglomerates, urban monoethnics, great conglomerates, and indigenous churches.

<sup>117</sup>*Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>118</sup>*Ibid.*, 93.

through evangelistic means.<sup>119</sup> Once again, he returned to his philosophy from *The Bridges of God* that multiethnic conglomerate churches were made up of individuals whose people consciousness had been diminished by urban culture.

“Urban Monoethnics,” however, had great evangelistic potential. McGavran described such churches as those that began in a village people movement but where converts moved to a city and “re-formed” into a monoethnic congregation.<sup>120</sup> “Frequently,” he wrote, “they are the only city churches which are growing by communicating their faith to those who have yet to believe.”<sup>121</sup> Even then, urban monoethnic churches grow within their particular tribe or caste. The best method of evangelism for conglomerate churches, McGavran argued, was to plant monoethnic churches.

*Ethnic Realities* was McGavran’s most mature thought on urban church planting. He returned after many years not only to his original Indian field but also to his people movement precepts. The significant difference is that he applied his mature missiology to the contemporary world.

As McGavran approached the end of his life, he continued to write on the issue of peoples and cities. In 1983, Roger Greenway launched *Urban Mission*, one of the only academic journals dedicated to urban missiology. McGavran contributed the first article, expounding upon his ideas for ethnic and language churches among the mosaic of people groups in urban contexts.<sup>122</sup> He later published a revised version of the article in

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<sup>119</sup>Ibid., 165-66.

<sup>120</sup>Ibid., 171.

<sup>121</sup>Ibid., 175.

<sup>122</sup>Donald McGavran, “New Urban Faces of the Church,” *Urban Mission* 1 (September 1983): 3-11.

*Momentous Decisions in Missions Today*.<sup>123</sup> He began the article saying, “Today and tomorrow we must make the momentous decisions required to create multitudes of supporters who see urban mission as the most important missionary work today.”<sup>124</sup>

Echoing his “eight keys” from *Understanding Church Growth*, McGavran identified four “urban faces” necessary in twentieth-century missions. First, churches must have lay leadership that “will have to be perceptibly men of the masses, each of whom feels quite at home in his segment of the urban population.”<sup>125</sup> Second, churches will be “house churches” without the burden of buildings and property.<sup>126</sup> A third “face” will be churches that are all “in one highly responsive segment of the urban population.”<sup>127</sup> Closely related will be the final “face:” churches made up of groups from the “migrant multitude.”<sup>128</sup>

### **The City in McGavran’s Teaching**

Over the course of thirty-five years, McGavran published a tremendous library on church growth missiology. During the latter half of that period, he dealt increasingly with the application of his thought in urban contexts. Closely related to his writing, however, was a busy schedule of teaching and speaking in which his growing focus on cities paralleled his writing.

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<sup>123</sup>Donald A. McGavran, *Momentous Decisions in Missions Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 179-90.

<sup>124</sup>*Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>125</sup>*Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>126</sup>*Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>127</sup>*Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>128</sup>*Ibid.*, 187.

The first large platform for McGavran's teaching was, of course, the classroom. As his influence grew, however, McGavran spent a significant amount of time traveling around the United States and the world teaching his church growth missiology. In 1963, in partnership with the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association, McGavran led the first Church Growth Seminar at Winona Lake, Indiana.<sup>129</sup> As the workshop grew, McGavran and Edwin Jacques, Foreign Secretary for the Conservative Baptist Foreign Mission Society and a leader in the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association, exchanged annual evaluations and suggestions for the following year. The correspondence reveals McGavran's growth of interest in urban missiology.

Evaluations of the 1966 Winona Lake Conference included comments like, "More lectures on how the people movement can be applied in cities would be helpful," "More adaptation to urbanized societies," and "Need more on church growth in metropolitan areas; not every missionary is laboring in the boondocks."<sup>130</sup> Apparently, McGavran and the team did not respond, as Jacques wrote in 1969 that "for several years now we have had an increasing number of requests for more emphasis upon urban centers with their peculiar problems and opportunities."<sup>131</sup> As noted earlier, McGavran responded simply, "We have taken your counsel about urban church growth."<sup>132</sup>

For the 1969 Winona Lake Seminar, McGavran's team added a significant

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<sup>129</sup>Herbert Melvin Works, Jr., "The Church Growth Movement to 1965: An Historical Perspective" (D.Miss. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1974), 233-35.

<sup>130</sup>Edwin E. Jacques to Hollis Abbott, Charles Kirkpatrick, Wade Coggins, Donald McGavran, and Alan Tippett, 19 December 1966 (WCIU 7.1).

<sup>131</sup>Edwin E. Jacques to Donald McGavran, 15 April 1969 (WCIU 7.3).

<sup>132</sup>Donald McGavran to Edwin E. Jacques, 25 April 1969 (WCIU 7.3).

workshop titled, “The Urbanization Avalanche and Church Planting.”<sup>133</sup> McGavran addressed urbanization in Japan, while Ralph Winter spoke on Los Angeles and Alan Tippett on small cities. All three men participated in a panel discussion.<sup>134</sup> The only content issue on that year’s evaluations noted that “it was agreed that although a move was made in this direction this year, another year should see more solid material on work in urban centers.”<sup>135</sup>

The first record in McGavran’s correspondence of a lecture on urban church growth at one of the EFMA church growth conferences was for workshops at Nyack and Wheaton in 1970, the same year as the publication of *Understanding Church Growth*. In correspondence related to the planning of these meetings, McGavran suggested “Urban Church Growth” as one of his own topics.<sup>136</sup>

After the publication of *Understanding Church Growth*, McGavran spoke more frequently about urban church growth. Clearly, the interest revealed in early evaluations of the Winona Lake workshop had an impact. He delivered lectures on the topic in workshops in the United States, London, Toronto, and numerous other locations.<sup>137</sup> In 1971, McGavran embarked on a tour of church growth seminars in Taiwan, Thailand, Java, Singapore, India, Pakistan, Ethiopia, and the Philippines. At

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<sup>133</sup>“Schedule of Classes for the Church Growth Seminar at Winona Lake, September 1969” (WCIU 7.3).

<sup>134</sup>Ibid.

<sup>135</sup>Wade Coggins to Donald McGavran, 10 September 1969 (WCIU 7.3).

<sup>136</sup>Donald McGavran to Wade Coggins, 2 December 1970. WCIU 7.3).

<sup>137</sup> Donald McGavran to Wilbert Norton, 11 May 1971 (WCIU 7.3); Donald McGavran, “Minnesota School of Missions,” handwritten notes (WCIU 7.3); E.W. Oliver to Donald McGavran, 16 August 1971 (WCIU 10.1); Donald McGavran to Gerald Holmquist, 21 February 1973 (WCIU 10.1).

each conference, he presented a lecture on urban church growth missiology.<sup>138</sup>

Most of McGavran's teaching on the topic of urban missions and church growth reflected the content of his chapter on "Discipling Urban Populations" in *Understanding Church Growth*. In the mid-1970s, McGavran prepared a presentation for the Illinois Baptist Convention titled, "Liberating the Cities into the Freedom of Christ: Urban Church Growth," which he later presented at least one other time on a visit to Japan and Korea.<sup>139</sup> In the lecture, he first described the urban history of the global church, emphasizing the need for multiplying churches. "A top flight missionary problem," he began, "for Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Assemblies of God, as they multiply churches in the great cities of Korea is urban church growth."<sup>140</sup> McGavran described a Los Angeles area map on the back of his office door, noting that "less than half of the population has names on any church roll."<sup>141</sup>

During his lecture, McGavran described in some detail his "keys" to discipling urban populations. One significant addition, however, was a section on "Urban Church

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<sup>138</sup>Donald McGavran to "Friends in Taiwan, Philippines, Thailand, Java, Singapore, Madras, West Pakistan, Ethiopia, and London," 21 April 1971 (WCIU 10.1). The letter included a list of topics for McGavran, including "Urban Church Growth."

<sup>139</sup>Donald McGavran, "Liberating the Cities into the Freedom of Christ: Urban Church Growth," typed and handwritten notes, n.d. (BGC 178.90.1). The document is typed with several handwritten notes and changes. While there is no date listed on the notes, McGavran refers to specifics related to a meeting of pastors in Illinois. The handwritten editorial comments refer to Japanese and Korean statistics and indicate the use of the notes in those two countries. BGC refers to the Donald A. McGavran and Mary McGavran Collection, Billy Graham Center in Wheaton, Illinois. 178.83.2 refers to collection number 178, box 83, folder 2.

<sup>140</sup>Ibid. Emphasis McGavran's.

<sup>141</sup>Ibid. The description of the map is in a handwritten addition to the typed notes.



Growth as Redemption and Liberation.”<sup>142</sup> McGavran argued that “our modern cities are terrible places” that will destroy individuals and families without Christ.

“Consequently,” he continued, “when I talk about urban church growth, I am talking about the most potent force for humanizing the cities and solving their many problems.”<sup>143</sup>

In 1978, McGavran lectured on urban church growth for Paul Hiebert’s course on urban anthropology at Fuller Seminary.<sup>144</sup> He began with an emphasis on church planting, saying, “The evangelization of the city may also be called the churching of the city.”<sup>145</sup> As on other occasions, he covered his “eight keys” from *Understanding Church Growth*, but he added a distinctly anthropological slant by describing the various segments of urban populations such as the urban poor and dock workers. McGavran added socioeconomic and social factors to ethnicity as important facets of urban research.

### **McGavran’s Students and the City**

As any good teacher, McGavran extended his teaching on church growth missiology through the work of his students. His correspondence indicates a significant investment especially in students who were also field missionaries. Many of his students in the Institute of Church Growth came from cities and wrote on urban missiology.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>142</sup>Ibid.

<sup>143</sup>Ibid.

<sup>144</sup>Donald McGavran, “Lecture on Urban Church Growth to Hiebert’s Class on Urban Anthropology,” 23 May 1978 (BGC 178.85.3).

<sup>145</sup>Ibid.

<sup>146</sup>See, for example, Donald A. McGavran and James H. Montgomery, *The Discipling of a Nation* (Santa Clara, CA: Global Church Growth Bulletin, 1980); William R. Read, Victor M. Monterroso, and Harmon A. Johnson, *Latin American Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969); Roy E. Shearer, *Wildfire: Church Growth in*

With regard to church growth in urban contexts, four individuals stand out. James Wong, George Samuel, and Ezra Sargunam all wrote dissertations under McGavran's supervision. Roger Greenway was not one of McGavran's own students, but McGavran's influence on Greenway is unmistakable and important.

### **Students in the Institute for Church Growth**

James Wong was a Singaporean pastor and church planter who later led the Church Growth Study Center in that city. His 1972 thesis, "Singapore: The Urban Church in the Midst of Rapid Social Change," dealt with research into church planting in Singapore with special emphasis on multi-housing.<sup>147</sup> The work was later published under a slightly modified title.<sup>148</sup>

Wong completed extensive work on congregations and church planting, especially among Anglican and Southern Baptist missionaries. His conclusions reflected McGavran's own philosophies, especially with regard to house churches and lay leadership.<sup>149</sup> Wong also presented a paper on multi-housing church planting at the International Congress on World Evangelization in 1974. McGavran contributed to the paper with editing and comments.<sup>150</sup>

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*Korea* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966); William R. Read, *New Patterns of Church Growth in Brazil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965).

<sup>147</sup>James Yui Kok Wong, "Singapore: The Urban Church in the Midst of Rapid Social Change" (M.A. thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1972).

<sup>148</sup>James Y. K. Wong, *Singapore: The Church in the Midst of Social Change* (Singapore: Church Growth Study Center, 1973).

<sup>149</sup>Wong, "Singapore," 180-228.

<sup>150</sup>James Y. K. Wong, "Evangelism in High Rise Housing Apartments," two manuscripts with editing from Donald McGavran (WCIU 9).

George Samuel, a pastor and church planter in Bombay, completed his thesis titled, “Growth Potential of Urban Churches: A Study in Bombay,” in 1973.<sup>151</sup> McGavran and Samuel developed the typology of Indian churches used later in *Ethnic Realities*.<sup>152</sup> The relationship between Samuel’s work and *Ethnic Realities* shows the impact not only of McGavran on his students, but also of the students on McGavran.

Ezra Sargunam also contributed to *Ethnic Realities* with his 1973 thesis, “Multiplying Churches in Modern India: An Experiment in Madras.”<sup>153</sup> Sargunam described the history of urbanization in Madras and its impact on a particular people group, the “Tamilians.” McGavran’s early typology of Indian churches, along with Samuel’s expansion of that list, had a significant influence on Sargunam’s work. McGavran often recommended Sargunam’s published thesis to missionaries seeking guidance on urban church planting in Asian contexts.<sup>154</sup>

### **Roger Greenway**

Roger Greenway’s global influence as one of the key urban missiologists of the twentieth century merits an extended discussion, even though he was never enrolled as one of McGavran’s students. Greenway began his missionary career in 1959 as a

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<sup>151</sup>George Samuel, “Growth Potential of Urban Churches: A Study in Bombay” (M.A. thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1973).

<sup>152</sup>McGavran, *Ethnic Realities*, 39-40. McGavran developed an early typology in 1964, but Samuel and others expanded the descriptions to the nine later used in Samuel’s thesis and in *Ethnic Realities*.

<sup>153</sup>Ezra Sargunam, “Multiplying Churches in Modern India: An Experiment in Madras” (M.A. thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1973).

<sup>154</sup>M. Ezra Sargunam, *Multiplying Churches in Modern India: An Experiment in Madras* (Madras: Federation of Evangelical Churches in India, 1974). Donald McGavran to Ralph Neighbour, 15 September 1976 (WCIU 9); Donald McGavran to Richard Khan, 24 June 1980 (WCIU 8.2).

Presbyterian pastor in Colombo, Sri Lanka.<sup>155</sup> It was a time of great upheaval in the newly independent nation, and the young pastor learned much about working in difficult environments. Greenway was heavily involved in street and open-air evangelism in an effort to grow his church. Thousands of migrants were moving into the city from the surrounding countryside, and Greenway's evangelistic work saw considerable fruit.

In 1963, Christian Reformed World Missions transferred Greenway and his family to Mexico City to teach church history and missions at a Presbyterian seminary. He noticed that the seminary program was strongly oriented to rural areas, both in the makeup of the student body and in the composition of ministry assignments. Greenway followed suit and spent weekends preaching in remote mountain villages. In those rural locales, he saw firsthand the power of personal evangelism along networks of family and social lines.

Greenway's perspective changed radically with a visit from Donald McGavran in the mid-1960s.<sup>156</sup> McGavran asked Greenway to take him to the outskirts of Mexico City where thousands of families lived in squatter settlements. Greenway recounted,

In a dirty street swarming with flies and kids, McGavran turned to me and said, "Roger, it's great what you are doing in the mountains. But in the future, the frontier of missions will lie in the city. I challenge you to direct your efforts here."<sup>157</sup>

Greenway noted that he had experienced the practical aspects of urban mission in Colombo without recognizing the broader implications of that work. McGavran pointed him toward urban missiology. "More than any other man," Greenway wrote many years

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<sup>155</sup>Unless otherwise noted, biographical information on Roger Greenway is taken from Roger S. Greenway, "My Pilgrimage in Urban Mission," *Urban Mission* (March 1999): 6-17.

<sup>156</sup>Roger S. Greenway, email to the author, 8 December 2009.

<sup>157</sup>Greenway, "My Pilgrimage," 12.

later, “McGavran was my mentor.”<sup>158</sup>

Greenway launched into a new appointment as director of evangelism for Mexico City. McGavran pointed him toward Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, where Greenway earned a doctorate in missions. His dissertation was later published as *An Urban Strategy for Latin America*.<sup>159</sup> In that work, Greenway outlined several principles for urban missions, especially in the Latin American context. His principles were fleshed out in the Urban Institute in Mexico City.

First, effective urban missions requires *training*. Greenway believed firmly that evangelists must have a solid understanding of the Scriptures, of Christian doctrine, and of evangelistic methods. Cities offer unique opportunities to provide such training, including local churches and denominational groups.<sup>160</sup> Closely tied to training is *motivation*. Not only are there many distractions in urban contexts, the work itself presents challenges that require strong motivation for missions and ministry. Greenway advocated a constant emphasis on urban church growth and evangelism.<sup>161</sup> Also important are *goals*. Greenway taught students and practitioners the importance of research and mapping as ways to set goals for urban evangelism.<sup>162</sup>

A set of related principles revolves around evangelism. Greenway advocated *house-to-house visitation*. “Once an area of the city had been selected,” he wrote, “the

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<sup>158</sup>Greenway, email to author.

<sup>159</sup>Roger S. Greenway, *An Urban Strategy for Latin America* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973).

<sup>160</sup>*Ibid.*, 214. Greenway also outlined his strategic principles in “My Pilgrimage,” 12-14.

<sup>161</sup>Greenway, *Urban Strategy*, 214-15.

<sup>162</sup>*Ibid.*

strategy of the institute was to visit every house, selling Bibles, distributing tracts, and making personal contacts.”<sup>163</sup> Greenway’s visitation program placed a heavy emphasis on *verbal witness*. As urban missionaries build relationships, they must share a clear and simple explanation of the gospel. An additional principle that urban missions must be *family-centered* means that evangelists must share the gospel with the entire family, including children and extended relations in the home. The natural result would be a network of house churches in a neighborhood, hence Greenway’s final principle of planting house churches. Greenway honed his principles of urban missions in Mexico City, then as Latin America Secretary for his mission. He traveled extensively in that role and saw both the barriers to urban missions and the fruit of effective urban evangelism.

Greenway was invited to address the International Congress on World Evangelization meeting at Lausanne in 1974 on urban evangelism, especially among the urban poor.<sup>164</sup> In his message, Greenway revealed not only his practical understanding of urban missions but also his sound biblical theology of poverty, missions, and church planting. He focused especially on church planting, outlining several types of urban churches and church planting methods. Greenway recognized cultural issues related to church buildings but suggested that house churches might be the best methodology – if they were associated together with other churches in networks. “The house-church,” he argued, “will probably be the organizational form in which Christianity grows the fastest during the remainder of the century, and therefore church leaders should do everything possible to fit it properly into their ecclesiastical structures.”<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>163</sup>Ibid., 215.

<sup>164</sup>International Congress on World Evangelization, *Let the Earth Hear His Voice* (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), 909.

<sup>165</sup>Ibid., 918.

In 1976, Greenway published a small book titled, *Guidelines for Urban Church Planting*.<sup>166</sup> He recruited a group of urban missionaries to consider application of Donald McGavran's eight "keys" for urban missions in their own contexts. Greenway himself provided the opening essay, which served as an "exposition" of McGavran's principles. Touching on the biblical and theological foundations for urban missions, Greenway also gave the 1976 Baker Lectures at Reformed Bible College, which were later published as *Apostles to the City: Biblical Strategies for Urban Missions*.<sup>167</sup>

Greenway served as an inner-city pastor in Grand Rapids, Michigan, from 1978 to 1982. He witnessed first-hand the difficulties of ministry in a transitional neighborhood. Writing of that experience, Greenway noted, "There is no doubt in my mind that this is one of the most difficult frontiers of the whole mission world."<sup>168</sup> Racial and economic tension took its toll on the congregation. Interestingly, Greenway also remembered that he "learned that McGavran's axiom about homogeneity in congregational development holds true whether we approve of it in principle or not."<sup>169</sup>

Beginning in 1982, Greenway taught in the urban mission program at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia and worked with the Center for Urban Theological Studies in that city. While at Westminster, he launched *Urban Mission*, likely the first evangelical journal devoted to studying the task, practice, and theology of urban missions. Writing in the journal's first edition, Greenway declared,

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<sup>166</sup>Roger S. Greenway, ed., *Guidelines for Urban Church Planting* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976).

<sup>167</sup>Roger S. Greenway, *Apostles to the City: Biblical Strategies for Urban Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978).

<sup>168</sup>Greenway, "My Pilgrimage," 15.

<sup>169</sup>*Ibid.*

The rural, pith helmet mentality can no longer dominate missions. The realities of an urban world must be addressed. Where once most missionaries were needed in the bush, they now are needed in growing numbers in the cities. Pastors once prepared to minister in villages and small towns, but now they must be ready for urban pastorates and urban mission.<sup>170</sup>

As noted above, Donald McGavran contributed the first article to the new journal, writing on the application of his Homogeneous Unit Principle to the “new urban faces of the church.”<sup>171</sup>

In addition to his work on *Urban Mission* and teaching responsibilities at Westminster, Greenway continued to publish on issues of urban missions. With Timothy Monsma, who also contributed to *Guidelines for Urban Church Planting*, Greenway wrote *Cities: Missions’ New Frontier*.<sup>172</sup> He contributed several chapters to the book, including work related to both theological and practical foundations for city work. He continued to emphasize ministry among the poor and added a strong section on migrations and minority peoples in urban contexts. Throughout his career, Greenway has carried the banner of urban church growth missiology while adding a distinct theological and biblical base.

### **Conclusion**

Donald McGavran has never been well known as a proponent or analyst of urban missiology. This chapter has shown, however, that over the course of his career, McGavran grew in his appreciation for the needs of urban contexts and in his passion for evangelizing cities. McGavran’s published material on the urban missiology was limited

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<sup>170</sup>Roger Greenway, “Mission to an Urban World” *Urban Mission* 1 (September 1983): 1.

<sup>171</sup>McGavran, “New Urban Faces,” 3-11.

<sup>172</sup>Roger S. Greenway and Timothy M. Monsma, *Cities: Missions’ New Frontier* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000). The first edition of this work was published in 1989.



but has been highly influential. In combination with his correspondence and teaching, McGavran's urban missiology, which centered on the "eight keys" in the first two editions of *Understanding Church Growth*, comprises a significant contribution to the field. In fact, notes in McGavran's files indicate a desire to write further on the topic. In a list of ideas for the Church Growth Book Club, McGavran noted, "Resolve to contribute: urban evangelism – winning cities."<sup>173</sup>

McGavran had a habit of writing out prayers to open his classes at Fuller.<sup>174</sup> In 1978, he taught a course at Fuller on "the Indian Church" and opened one class meeting with this prayer:

Oh Lord our God, You have made the solitary to dwell in cities. You have established the City of God to which we journey. You caused your temple to be built in the great city of Jerusalem, and in your revelation the Bible tells us that all nations will stream into Zion to worship You.

This morning we lift up before You, O Lord, the cities of the world. They grow larger and larger. They oppress men and women. They steal away their minds and hearts from You, the True and Living God. Yet, Lord, they are full of men and women, your children, for whom Your Son our Saviour died. Grant then, O Lord, that the cities of India may soon feel the refining purifying fires of your Holy Spirit, and congregations of the redeemed may arise in multitudes.

Of your great power and goodness bless the evangelists and missionaries who work in cities, and grant them keen vision and great faith.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>173</sup>Donald McGavran, undated handwritten note headed, "C.G. Series at Moody Press" (WCIU 10.1).

<sup>174</sup>To read and hear a collection of McGavran's class prayers, see <http://www.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/docs/mcgpra.htm>.

<sup>175</sup>Donald McGavran, "The Indian Church," lecture outline, 15 February 1978 (WCIU 3.1).

CHAPTER 4  
CHURCH GROWTH IN THE CITY: MCGAVRAN  
AND CHURCH GROWTH RESEARCH

The heart of Donald McGavran’s church growth missiology may have been world evangelization, but its foundation was research. In his last book, much of which served as a reflection upon the development of church growth thought, McGavran identified three “rivers of thought” that impacted his own life.<sup>1</sup> Along with evangelical theology and the social sciences, he identified research as a most important influence on his ministry and mission. “The church growth movement, in consequence,” he recounted,

has greatly emphasized accurate research into the effectiveness of church and mission labors. It insists not only that the amount and rate of growth must be accurately charged, but also that the real reasons for growth or lack of growth must be accurately known.<sup>2</sup>

In a “dictionary” of church growth terms from McGavran’s files, he defined *church growth* as

A large umbrella term containing many different ideas. It is used to designate a school of thought in missions circles today that stresses research, accurate analysis, and use of all means to encourage the growth of the church anywhere in the world, but especially in what were formerly designated “mission lands.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Donald A. McGavran, *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1988), 53-63.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 61.

<sup>3</sup>Donald McGavran, “Dictionary of Church Growth Terms” (WCIU 7.2). William Carey International University and the U.S. Center for World Mission house a

From the very beginning, McGavran believed that evangelism could never be called “effective” without verifiable knowledge of the context and circumstances of church growth.

Over the course of his career, McGavran completed and influenced dozens of research studies in various mission fields around the world. As he developed an appreciation of the unique nature of urban contexts, he included substantial information and application of church growth principles. The purpose of this chapter is to outline the origins and growth of McGavran’s research principles, especially as they affect urban missions.

Vernon Middleton, McGavran’s student and biographer, traces McGavran’s interest in research back to his role as a missionary educator. Donald and Mary McGavran were appointed in 1923 as representatives of the United Christian Missionary Society with the express task of education.<sup>4</sup> Middleton identifies four principles of Christian education that transferred into McGavran’s church growth missiology: appraisal, training, research, and quantification.<sup>5</sup> McGavran the educator kept careful records of students and programs with a view to frequent evaluation. In addition, he advocated constant research in order to keep up with the most current ideas and methodologies. Middleton argues that these principles remained important to McGavran after his shift to leadership and church planting as McGavran sought to understand what

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significant collection of McGavran’s personal correspondence. Unfortunately, the collection remains in McGavran’s original filing cabinets and has not been catalogued. References in this collection will refer to the filing cabinet and drawer. “WCIU, 8.2” refers to the McGavran Collection at WCIU, cabinet 8, drawer 2.

<sup>4</sup>F.W. Burnham to Mr. and Mrs. D.A. McGavran, 31 May 1923 (WCIU 3.1).

<sup>5</sup>Vernon James Middleton, “The Development of a Missiologist: The Life and Thought of Donald Anderson McGavran, 1897-1965” (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1989), 25-30.

was happening in his particular field.<sup>6</sup>

When McGavran was appointed secretary-treasurer of his mission in 1932, he found himself supervising missions efforts on multiple stations in several areas. His leadership placed him in a relationship with the Mid-India Christian Council and exposed him to the work of J. Waskom Pickett, author of *Christian Mass Movements in India*.<sup>7</sup> The International Missionary Council commissioned Pickett and a team of researchers in 1928 to study mass movements among Indian churches. The team surveyed Christians and non-Christians in five regions by distributing surveys and performing interviews in every household.<sup>8</sup> Pickett's work encouraged McGavran not only in his understanding of people movements but also in its emphasis on research.

Around the time of publication of Pickett's book, McGavran was performing his own research on the missions under his supervision. He surveyed the churches associated with the Disciples of Christ, as well as congregations of other societies in his region. Of the work in 145 towns and cities, McGavran found only eleven churches that were growing. "In 134 cases," he later wrote, "the Christian population was increasing at less than 1 percent a year."<sup>9</sup> The same year, 1934, the Mid-India Christian Council invited Pickett to perform an in depth study of seven missions of various denominations. McGavran joined Pickett in the research, later completing the work according to Pickett's

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 27-28.

<sup>7</sup>Donald McGavran, "My Pilgrimage in Mission," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 20 (April 1986): 56; McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 60-61; Middleton, "Development of a Missiologist," 54-55; J. Waskom Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India: A Study with Recommendations* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1933).

<sup>8</sup>Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India*, 12-20.

<sup>9</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 60.

design.<sup>10</sup>

McGavran identified the discoveries associated with his research in the 1930s as a turning point in his life and the birth of church growth thought.<sup>11</sup> He listed research as one of three essentials in church growth missiology, second only to the fact that God wills church growth.<sup>12</sup> He continued,

Responsible research into the effectiveness of mission must be done. The 100,000 and more missionaries in the world today must not press forward with blindfolded eyes. Mission executives must know the facts concerning whether the churches their missionaries plant are static, declining, or growing; and if growing, are they growing slowly or rapidly? Could they grow much more rapidly if the national leaders and missionaries used methods that God is blessing to generate great growth in their own and other segments of society?<sup>13</sup>

These key questions became the driving force behind McGavran's work for the remainder of his life.

### **McGavran's Church Growth Research**

Influenced by Pickett's research methodologies, McGavran spent much the period between 1934 and 1954 developing his ideas that would comprise *The Bridges of God* in 1955.<sup>14</sup> As part of the Mid-India survey, McGavran was commissioned to study the Mandala and Bastar regions.<sup>15</sup> After his assignment to the Satnami people in 1937,

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 61; Middleton, "Development of a Missiologist," 71-72.

<sup>11</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 60-62.

<sup>12</sup>McGavran, "My Pilgrimage," 57. "Discovering the facts of church growth," he wrote, "is the second essential of all mission/church-growth thinking."

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Donald McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (London: World Dominion Press, 1955).

<sup>15</sup>Donald McGavran, "The History and Development of the Church Growth Position," presentation to the Union Biblical Seminary faculty seminar, 17 January 1972 (BGC 178.83.2). BGC refers to the Donald A. McGavran and Mary McGavran

McGavran continued to prepare case studies on church growth in other regions of India. Two early publications described in the following paragraph reveal the development of McGavran's research philosophy and church growth ideas.

### **Research in India**

In 1936, McGavran joined Waskom Pickett and Indian pastor G. H. Singh to publish *Christian Missions in Mid-India*, later released as *Church Growth and Group Conversion*.<sup>16</sup> McGavran contributed the bulk of the book, provided opening and closing essays describing early church growth missiology. In addition, he wrote case studies resulting from his research in Bastar and Mandala.

Both chapters reveal the form McGavran used for his studies. First, McGavran outlined the history of missions among a particular people. Second, he provided statistical data related to the growth (or non-growth) of the church among the people. In the cases presented in *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, McGavran presented significantly more data for the Bastar movement than for the Mandala church. Finally, McGavran's case studies concluded with one or more recommendations for work among the specific group and for general application.

The Mandala study was an analysis of what McGavran called an "arrested" people movement.<sup>17</sup> In other words, growth had begun at some point in the past but had ceased, generally due to poor missiology. Describing the overall purpose of the study and the particular case of Mandala, McGavran wrote,

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Collection, Billy Graham Center in Wheaton, Illinois. The citation 178.83.2 refers to collection number 178, box 83, folder 2.

<sup>16</sup>J. Waskom Pickett et al., *Church Growth and Group Conversion* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1973), viii.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 47. In *Bridges of God*, McGavran referred to "infant mortality" among people movements (85-87).

It will be recalled that the purpose of the Mid-India Survey was to discover what growth had taken place along group lines and what possibilities existed of further such growth. The questions asked were: In the midst of awakening peoples on every hand what hope has a given mission of leading one or more to Christ? As peoples grope for light, what can the mission concerned do to bring them into the Church? The work has been to describe those factors which have militated against the normal development of the Church (i.e., against people wise ingathering) and to judge, partly from past conversions and partly from present tendencies, which are now the “approachable peoples” from amongst which growth may be expected.<sup>18</sup>

The purpose of church growth research was to determine how peoples might be reached. In the case of the Mandala region, McGavran acknowledged that “Christianization usually starts with an individual,” but that it could not stop there.<sup>19</sup> His recommendation was that missionaries consider how to allow converts to remain among their people in order to foster a people movement.

McGavran’s concluding chapter reveals the foundational nature of research to the church growth task. The “first great question” is “how does the church grow when it grows greatly?”<sup>20</sup> McGavran’s response was that it grows within a social grouping and within prepared peoples. Research thus helps missionaries understand, first, “social strata,” and second, who is receptive to the gospel.<sup>21</sup> In conclusion, McGavran called for further research on group movements, receptive peoples, and effective church planting methodologies.<sup>22</sup>

In September 1936, McGavran wrote an article for *The United Church Review*

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 36.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 48.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 98.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 98-99.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 104-05.

titled, “Revival in Sterile Areas.”<sup>23</sup> Along with McGavran’s essays in *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, it was likely the earliest published outline of McGavran’s church growth missiology. He argued that true revival was evident only when “followers of false and debased religions” turned to Christ and were converted. “Any other kind of revival,” McGavran continued,

gives a false impression of spiritual health. It lulls the faithful to sleep with the comforting assurance that what counts is quality not quantity; that in a land, which is full of approachable castes, a Christian quality which fails to win others to Jesus Christ is a spurious quality, a possession of dubious value. . . . We need the kind of revival which brings into the Church sufficient numbers to make self-support, self-government, and self-propagation possible.<sup>24</sup>

McGavran’s emphasis on quantification was both the result of his belief in church growth as an indicator of the health of a mission and the fruit of his research. Later in the article, he outlined various regions he defined as either “fertile” or “sterile” depending on the level of church growth. He also described his understanding of homogeneous units, receptivity, and mobility of resources.<sup>25</sup>

The ideas first expounded in *Church Growth and Group Conversion* and McGavran’s article on “sterile fields” came together in his book, *The Bridges of God*. As with these first two publications, *Bridges of God* places a significant emphasis on church growth research. McGavran asked a foundational question, “How do peoples become Christian?”<sup>26</sup> The answer began with McGavran’s own research and experience. He

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<sup>23</sup>Donald McGavran, “Revival in Sterile Areas,” *The United Church Review* (September 1936): 253-57. *United Church Review* was the “official organ of the United Church of Northern India.”

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 253.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 254-55.

<sup>26</sup>Donald McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (London: World Dominion Press, 1955), 1.



recognized, however, that his research alone was not sufficient, and he devoted an entire chapter of the book to the need for further knowledge.

Declaring, “We need to know a great deal more than we do,” McGavran outlined multiple areas for future research.<sup>27</sup> First, missionaries must understand where people movements are taking place. McGavran argued that detailed information is needed from every denomination and missions agency. With that data in hand, researchers could study the beginnings, nature, and problems of people movements and church growth. “Can growth be forecast?” McGavran asked,

Is it possible to study a church, its ministry, its unsaved relatives, its degree of church attendance, its enthusiasm for the Lord, its integrations with its surroundings, the number of bridges to other peoples which it possesses, and then to forecast the amount of growth which will likely take place in the coming decade? It should be possible and it would be worth millions to the missionary enterprise.<sup>28</sup>

McGavran encouraged the study of movements large and small. He sought information on how the gospel was best communicated and how new believers could be encouraged into leadership. Is rapid growth best, he asked, and what is the “norm” for good growth?<sup>29</sup> “Here are vast areas of knowledge almost uncharted,” he continued, “Of real knowledge there is a pitifully small amount.”<sup>30</sup>

Specifically, McGavran suggested two areas of immediate need. First, he advocated “controlled experiments.” Such research might include delaying baptism with

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 150.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 151.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid. McGavran wrote, “We estimated in Chapter VIII that 50 per cent per decade was a good norm for growth. But this was an estimate. The missionary enterprise needs knowledge.”

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 152.

one group and immediate baptism in another.<sup>31</sup> He recommended trying literacy training for one people and increasing methods such as pastoral care, worship leadership, and public preaching for others. Missionaries should test “techniques,” he argued, in order to better understand how to foster movements.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, McGavran recommended the formation of an “institution of research.”<sup>33</sup> “What is called for,” he wrote, “is an extended series of factual studies of the effectiveness of missions, the growth of the churches, and the ways in which peoples have become Christian.”<sup>34</sup> Such careful studies would aid missionaries in their relations to missions agencies and to national churches. This final recommendation, which also encouraged in depth training for specialized researchers, would eventually lead to the formation of the Institute of Church Growth in 1961 at Northwest Christian College in Eugene, Oregon.

### **Early Research beyond India**

Apparently, the United Christian Missionary Society heard at least some of McGavran’s suggestions. During his regular furlough beginning in 1954, the agency commissioned McGavran to visit several of its works around the world. “My board,” he recalled, “impressed by the need to know its various mission fields more accurately, sent

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<sup>31</sup>In *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, McGavran recommended delaying baptism for new converts who had potential for reaching larger groups. “Sincere inquirers,” he wrote, “should be helped to win their families and caste-fellows, and then the group be baptized together. . . . We are not trying to induce individuals to renounce their people, but to get groups who remain in a vital relationship with their people to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour” (Pickett et al., *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, 110).

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 151-52.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 152.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

me to Puerto Rico, Thailand, Belgian Congo, the Philippines, Jamaica, and Orissa, India.”<sup>35</sup> In a report to the Society’s board of directors, McGavran outline the purposes of his research:

While my instructions included observing and reporting on the four major emphases of the strategy, it was understood that my principal task was to ascertain how the churches were growing, where they were growing, and why they were growing. If growth had stopped, to try to find out why it had stopped. And always to bear in mind how mission resources could be best used to promote growth of the Church. This emphasis was not only in line with our recently adopted strategy, but also with the long accepted goal of missions – that of establishing self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting churches. The multiplication of the Church is the central, continuing business of missions laid down by our Lord. It was my job to find out how we were getting along with it.<sup>36</sup>

For McGavran, the heart of church growth research was to present a picture of reality on the mission field. Without clear information, missionaries could deceive themselves into believing that the mission is reaching a people. McGavran’s desire was to prevent such problems while providing help and training for growth.

McGavran used some of his research to support his arguments *Bridges of God*.<sup>37</sup> “The information I received,” he recalled in *Effective Evangelism*, “greatly helped me develop a worldwide church growth point of view that spoke to the real situations in most mission fields.”<sup>38</sup>

One part of McGavran’s research was published in 1958 as *Multiplying*

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<sup>35</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 66-67.

<sup>36</sup>Donald A. McGavran, “The Plain But Thorny Path to Church Growth in the Foreign Field,” report presented to the Board of Managers of the United Christian Missionary Society, Des Moines, Iowa, n.d. (BGC 178.50.2), 1.

<sup>37</sup>Middleton, “Development of a Missiologist,” 203. Middleton outlines in detail the various research projects in chap. 5 of his dissertation.

<sup>38</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 67.

*Churches in the Philippines*.<sup>39</sup> The volume was one of two dedicated to the topic. The other, written by Earl Cressy, focused specifically on city churches.<sup>40</sup> Through individual church visits and conferences, McGavran and his team developed a detailed picture of the church in that country. The results of the study give insight into the purposes of church growth research. McGavran listed,

- A. An accurate understanding of the structure and growth pattern of about a hundred typical churches in all parts of the Islands, arising from efforts of Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Methodists, Disciples, and Evangelical United Brethren.
- B. A focusing of attention on church growth in these, heightening hope that growth is available, and pointing out ways in which it can be obtained.
- C. The writing of a report on almost every conference visited. These reports deal with specific situations and should be printed for the use of churchmen in these areas.
- D. This report which summarizes the church growth situation faced by the United Church of Christ in the Philippines.<sup>41</sup>

The Philippines survey serves as a model of McGavran's goals for all church growth research. First, he intended to provide an accurate picture of reality. Second, McGavran wanted to present ways that churches can grow. At the end of the study, he listed extensive recommendations ranging from staffing for evangelism and research to regular publications to new evangelistic tracts.<sup>42</sup> Finally, he desired that all of his church growth research would be available and useful for churches working in specific contexts.

Close on the heels of his research projects, McGavran wrote *How Churches*

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<sup>39</sup>Donald McGavran, *Multiplying Churches in the Philippines* (Manila: United Church of Christ in the Philippines, 1958).

<sup>40</sup>Earl H. Cressy, *Strengthening the Urban Church* (Manila: United Church of Christ in the Philippines, 1957).

<sup>41</sup>McGavran, *Multiplying Churches in the Philippines*, 7-8.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 137-45.

*Grow* with the intention of broadening the application of his church growth missiology.<sup>43</sup> His travels and research among peoples outside of India gave him a broader perspective, and he wanted to downplay the role of people movements.<sup>44</sup> Church growth research, however, retained its central place. The first chapter, “The Blaze of Opportunity,” reflected McGavran’s research, especially in Africa.<sup>45</sup> “The opportunity is not ‘to carry on church and mission work,’” he wrote,

but “to church the responsive unchurched in as great numbers and as rapidly as possible.” Why should any live – or die – without the Saviour? Our eyes will see today’s opportunities in their true dimension if we will but think of population after population, where the churches, even under established methods, are growing a little, in terms of discipling the entire population. Readers can do this for many fields with which they are acquainted.<sup>46</sup>

McGavran’s “central consideration” in *How Churches Grow* was to determine why some churches grow and others do not.<sup>47</sup> Through accurate research, he argued, missionaries and national churches could see the needs and opportunities of their respective fields.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Donald McGavran, *How Churches Grow: The New Frontiers of Mission* (London: World Dominion Press, 1959).

<sup>44</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 67. McGavran retained his solid belief in people movements in certain contexts, but he was worried that his church growth missiology would be seen only for the people movement emphasis in *The Bridges of God*. He wrote *How Churches Grow* without any mention of people or mass movements.

<sup>45</sup>McGavran, *How Churches Grow*, 6-9.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 17. “Thus we come to our central consideration,” he wrote. “In a world of hundreds of millions without Christ, how can the Churches and their assisting missions achieve adequate church growth? What makes churches grow? What makes them stop growing? What are the assisting missions doing which promotes growth? Are they doing anything that prevents it? How can the younger Churches use the massive resources of the older Churches for significant church multiplication? These questions are crucial for the world task of both the older and the younger Churches. They merit our closest attention.”

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*

McGavran devoted several chapters of *How Churches Grow* specifically to research. “The central business of the younger Churches and their assisting missions is church growth,” he began one chapter, “Yet curiously they often know little about its structure or take the trouble to measure it accurately.”<sup>49</sup> McGavran first recommended that missionaries and national churches gather accurate information on membership and baptisms. He also gave a brief primer on statistics and analysis, outlining how to present data with charts and graphs.<sup>50</sup> McGavran recommended breaking numbers down by people groups, or homogeneous units. “Wise administration,” he contended, “insists on being furnished with accurate knowledge of the degree, quality, nature and probably future extent of church growth in each homogeneous unit or group of congregations.”<sup>51</sup>

Not only must churches and missionaries gather accurate statistics, but they must also measure growth or decline against missionary methodologies. Statistics alone are only partially useful. Instead, argued McGavran,

Individuals, congregations, Churches and Missions, boards and older Churches, all in their own spheres need to cultivate the habit of measuring “church-growth achieved” and regarding it as one of the most significant factors in the world mission. Only then can they rightly estimate the value of theories of mission, forms of organization, and methods of operation. Measurement is not easy. It cannot occur automatically. Yet it must be done if the younger Churches are to enter their heritage and the world mission is to fulfill its high calling. The effort required will be abundantly rewarded.<sup>52</sup>

Going further, McGavran argued that missionaries and national churches must research not only their own statistics but also the makeup of the population and the belief systems of non-Christian religions. Church growth research seeks to understand how

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 30-31.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 39.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 154.

churches may grow by looking outside the congregation to the larger region.<sup>53</sup>

In the conclusion to *How Churches Grow*, McGavran made two specific recommendations related to church growth research. First, he wrote, “Extensive study of church-growth is an urgent necessity.”<sup>54</sup> He even suggested that as much as 1 percent of all missions expenditures go toward publishing church growth studies. Second, McGavran recommended that every church and mission strive for “reliable accounting” of church membership.<sup>55</sup> Only with valid records could churches and missionaries understand the true facts of growth or decline.<sup>56</sup> *How Churches Grow* made a significant contribution not only by arguing for and presenting research, but also by teaching McGavran’s readers how to perform church growth research themselves.

### **Research at the Institute of Church Growth**

With the formation of the Institute of Church Growth at Northwest Christian College in Eugene, Oregon, in 1961, Donald McGavran’s church growth missiology gathered a wider audience. The heart of the Institute’s curriculum was research. McGavran invited veteran missionaries to study church growth and engage in in-depth research of their particular fields.

McGavran’s first student was Keith Hamilton, who studied church growth

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 40-51.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 185.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid. McGavran recommended that churches keep accurate statistics on transfer growth, “baptisms from the world and from the churches,” and “losses by death, discipline, removals, and reversions.”

among tribal groups in the Andes.<sup>57</sup> The following year, the Institute grew and engaged in further research that, in McGavran's words, "abundantly justified the church growth point of view."<sup>58</sup> During the five years before the Institute of Church Growth moved to Fuller Seminary, students performed forty-three research projects, many of which were later published. McGavran also continued his own research, sometimes in partnership with his students.

Students attending the Institute were expected to prepare significant research on their field before attending classes. To support students' research, McGavran prepared a document for students titled, "How to Do a Survey of Church Growth," that was later published as a small pamphlet. "Men and women often ask us how to discover and describe church growth," McGavran wrote, "This pamphlet is written in answer."<sup>59</sup> In this document, McGavran outlined four steps to a church growth study. The steps were intended to be general enough to apply in any context.<sup>60</sup>

The first step in church growth research is to define the study. McGavran recommended a careful purpose statement that set boundaries around the field. Key questions included the geographical area and denominations to be studied. Also, McGavran suggested determining the "kind of population involved." In other words, he asked, "are you going to study church growth among Indians or Mestizos, rural tribes or

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<sup>57</sup>See Keith E. Hamilton, *Church Growth in the High Andes* (Lucknow, India: Lucknow Publishing House, 1962).

<sup>58</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 71. See also, Middleton, "Development of a Missiologist," 277-79.

<sup>59</sup>Donald McGavran, "How to Do a Survey of Church Growth," unpublished pamphlet. n.d. WCIU 1.1. While this paper is undated, contextual clues indicate its being written during the ICG years of 1961-1965. A handwritten note reads, "Now printed, 7 Feb 1967."

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, 1.



city masses, the intelligentsia or the illiterate, one caste or tribe or many?”<sup>61</sup>

The second step for students was “finding the membership facts,” or statistical research. McGavran listed several key numbers. Field totals included total numbers for a particular denomination or group of denominations in an area. Of equal or greater value were “membership totals for each homogeneous unit.” For example, it was important not only to know how many Baptists could be found in the study area, but also how many of those Baptists were of identifiable ethnolinguistic groups or segments.

McGavran suggested breaking the numbers down further into individual congregations. “Nothing grows but local churches,” he wrote.<sup>62</sup> With this set of statistics, a researcher could prepare graphs of growth and decline. “You have now (if your work is well done),” McGavran concluded, “true pictures of what church growth has taken place.”<sup>63</sup>

With accurate statistics and graphs, students moved to the third step of their research: “ascertaining causes of growth and non-growth.” At this point, analysis of numbers would lead to conclusions as to reasons for church growth. “Look for CAUSES,” McGavran argued, “– striking conversions, beliefs and traditions of the tribe, oppression, wars, the work of certain men – or their death or retirement. Consider what policies the Church or mission has followed in times of increase or decrease.”<sup>64</sup> He admonished students to perform careful and honest study, contending that they should reject thinking that is merely a defense of the status quo. McGavran also suggested several sources of information that would help students at this stage of their research. In

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<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 2.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 3.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 5. Emphasis McGavran’s.

addition to his own books, McGavran recommended interviews and historical documentary research.

The final step of the research project was writing and publishing the study. McGavran listed four sections that should be included in any church growth study. First, students should describe the context, or background. Here, one would briefly outline the history, social structure, and culture of the research field. Second, the student would insert the research data, especially the graphs based on the research in the second step. The third section would include the student's conclusions about the causes of growth or non-growth with appropriate support from his statistical data and interviews. Finally, students should include "actions essential to rapid growth in the future."<sup>65</sup> McGavran called this final material "the ultimate justification for the study."<sup>66</sup> He concluded, "The 'actions' you will describe are not those required to carry on good missions, but those demanded to carry out the Great Commission."<sup>67</sup>

While at Eugene, McGavran also launched the annual Church Growth Lectures. The second set of lectures, led by Cal Guy, Melvin Hodges, Eugene Nida, and McGavran were published in 1965 as *Church Growth and Christian Mission*.<sup>68</sup> By this time, McGavran had firmed up most of his basic church growth ideas, including his thoughts on research. In his lecture titled, "Knowing Each Variety of Church Growth," McGavran spoke more boldly than ever about the importance of research, referring for the first time to a "fog" that prevents missionaries and churches from understanding their

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

<sup>68</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 73; McGavran, "History and Development"; Donald McGavran et al., *Church Growth and Christian Mission* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).

growth, or lack thereof.<sup>69</sup>

McGavran argued not only for more research but also for research that is more accurate. In the past, he had asked for numbers representing membership and baptisms. He clarified that information by describing three “varieties” of church growth: biological growth made up of the children of members who become believers; transfer growth, or the movement of church members from one congregation to another; and conversion growth.<sup>70</sup> The first two varieties represent an increase in numbers, but only conversion growth, which is new baptized believers entering the church, indicates inroads into the lost world.

McGavran also suggested elements of knowledge that should be the fruit of church growth research, what he referred to as “foundational knowledge about the physical churches.”<sup>71</sup> First, churches must understand the “spread of the Church and the shape of its congregations.”<sup>72</sup> In other words, missionaries and church growth practitioners must be aware of not only how many people are in the church, but also where they live and who is in their networks. Second, churches must understand what segment of the population is being reached.<sup>73</sup> Finally, McGavran emphasized the importance of accurate statistics and responsible accounting.

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<sup>69</sup>McGavran et al., *Church Growth and Christian Mission*, 149.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 152-53. In the Billy Graham School of Missions and Evangelism at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, faculty members have defined biological growth differently. Rainer wrote that “biological growth takes place when babies are born to church members.” Thom S. Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles* (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 22.

<sup>71</sup>McGavran et al., *Church Growth and Christian Mission*, 162.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 163.

In his concluding summary lecture, McGavran outlined several key points in mature church growth thought. One of those was “constant measurement of church growth and intelligent use of the facts discovered.”<sup>74</sup> “All twelve preceding chapters,” he wrote, “assume that church growth should be measured, trends discerned, weaknesses spotted, difficulties anticipated, and future developments foreseen.”<sup>75</sup> Church growth research permeates every aspect of missiology. In perhaps his clearest statement on the subject, McGavran concluded, “Research is an important way in which the Church can take its saving task more seriously. It can with the light of truth dispel the fog that now surrounds growth.”<sup>76</sup>

### **Research and *Understanding Church Growth***

Donald McGavran’s most complete explanation of church growth missiology is found in *Understanding Church Growth*, published in 1970.<sup>77</sup> In one sense, the entire book is about research, in that “understanding” church growth means getting to the real reasons why churches do or do not grow. McGavran included chapters on the “universal fog” discussed in *How Churches Grow* and on statistical analysis similar to his “How to Do a Survey on Church Growth.” He expanded on each, however, and included dozens of examples from his own research and that of his students.

Following an introductory section on “basic considerations,” McGavran included two chapters under the heading, “Discerning the Outlines.” This image of one

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<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 242.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 243.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 244.

<sup>77</sup>Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970).

straining to see shadows in the fog indicates the basis of McGavran's understanding of church growth research as a way to find the general causes of church growth and decline.

"An informational fog over an entire subject," he wrote,

like smog, can only be dispelled by dealing with it at its sources. It becomes important therefore to recognize the factors that produce it. Each by itself hinders the discipling of the nations. Together they could be fatal to mission. This overwhelming obscurity in a crucial area demands the immediate attention of the missionary enterprise.<sup>78</sup>

McGavran listed several causes for the "fog" surrounding church growth, including poor statistics, ignorant administrators, missionary ethnocentricity ("cultural overhang"), and semantic confusion.<sup>79</sup> The answer, according to McGavran, was accurate research going beyond anecdotal accounts to real data that reveal the health or sickness of churches.

McGavran also advocated strongly for solid application of research, one of the most valuable strengths of *Understanding Church Growth*, even though he dealt with that topic in earlier works. "Statistical knowledge is not enough," he contended, "to know the structure is interesting, but is important only as it leads on to understanding *why* the Church and its homogeneous units have grown, plateaued, and occasionally diminished."<sup>80</sup> McGavran reiterated his earlier recommendation of graphs and field research, especially when one can compare various churches and denominations in a particular area.

### **McGavran's Research and Urban Contexts**

*Understanding Church Growth* took all of McGavran's prior work and

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 71.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 73-75.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., 103. Emphasis McGavran's.

expanded it to outline his mature thought on church growth missiology. McGavran believed that the general principles of research would apply in any context with some adjustment. That flexibility of application, he believed, was certainly necessary for those working in urban contexts. As with his ideas on urban church growth, McGavran's interest in research related to city contexts grew over time, culminating in his work on *Understanding Church Growth*. With the exception of a few historical and biblical references, mention of urban contexts is almost completely absent from his earliest work.<sup>81</sup>

### **Urban Research in Puerto Rico**

The first significant application of McGavran's church growth research in urban contexts came in his study of Puerto Rico in the early 1950s. His report noted a tremendous opportunity for church growth due to urbanization. Evangelicals moving into the cities from rural areas brought the church, and Roman Catholic arrivals were in great need of the gospel.<sup>82</sup> "Each Church," recalled McGavran, "faces the urban opportunity. For some it is merely a sociological phenomenon, which is disrupting their rural churches. For others it is a new harvest field to which the finger of God points."<sup>83</sup> McGavran's earliest research revealed many of the problems and opportunities of urban church growth.

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<sup>81</sup>See chap. 3 of this dissertation for discussion of McGavran's discussion of the growth of the early church in urban contexts. In his historical survey of people movements in *The Bridges of God*, McGavran noted that the earliest expansion of the Church in the Roman and Pauline periods took place in cities. See McGavran, *Bridges of God*, 17-38.

<sup>82</sup>Donald McGavran, notebook of case studies for the course, "Case Studies in Church Growth," n.d. (WCIU 10.3).

<sup>83</sup>Ibid.

## Urban Research in the Philippines

A second study took place in the Philippines in 1958. As noted above, McGavran's research, which culminated in *Multiplying Churches in the Philippines*, was one of a two-part study. Earl Cressy specifically studied urban churches while McGavran took on a broader view. "Because Dr. Cressy's study concerned itself exclusively with city churches," McGavran wrote, however, "it would be erroneous to assume that my study was one of rural churches. It is on the contrary of both rural and urban churches as concerns their growth."<sup>84</sup>

McGavran's research in the Philippines focused on the United Church of Christ but included other denominations for comparison, following closely his model for church growth research. He first identified eight "kinds" of churches found in the Philippines, three of which were urban or suburban. "Type I" was described as "metropolitan or urban churches arising at former missions stations in cities," all of which remained tied to institutions.<sup>85</sup> McGavran counted twenty-five such congregations. He noted an additional twenty-five "Type II" churches, which were identical to the first group except that McGavran did not note the tie to missionary institutions.

The third type of church was suburban churches, which McGavran described as "barrio churches but now have been sucked into urban orbit."<sup>86</sup> Members of Type III churches lived in areas that were more rural, but they worked in the large cities. By far, churches of these types were the minority in his study. The largest number of churches

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<sup>84</sup>McGavran, *Multiplying Churches*, 3.

<sup>85</sup>McGavran studied 100 churches but extrapolated these numbers to the total of 770 UCC churches in the Philippines.

<sup>86</sup>McGavran, *Multiplying Churches*, 13.

were *población* (town) churches found in county seat towns but having membership spread over a large rural area.

McGavran noted that urban churches had different opportunities and problems when compared to the rural or small town churches. “The Philippines,” he wrote,

have seen a tremendous rush to the cities and will see more. In the cities, despite the far flung network of Roman churches there is not and cannot be the close guard which exists in the small towns where everyone knows everyone else, and tells the priest of any irregularities. The townsmen too do not fear excommunication by priests. Thus the cities pose a triple opportunity: first, care for the inrushing members of the Evangelical churches; second, evangelization of the cosmopolitan masses; and third evangelization of the intellectuals.<sup>87</sup>

Urban churches grew mainly through transfer growth from those migrating to cities, especially students.<sup>88</sup> City churches experienced conversion growth on a higher level than rural churches, mainly through large evangelistic meetings.<sup>89</sup>

The overwhelming need in the Philippines, however, was for churches in the small towns and countryside. That is where McGavran spent the majority of his time in this study. He recognized the influence of the cities even in the rural churches, saying that most pastors and leaders were rural people educated in cities. One of his recommendations for church growth was training rural pastors in their own settings.<sup>90</sup>

### **Urban Research in Jamaica**

McGavran’s research in Jamaica, published in 1962, provides an early example

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<sup>87</sup>Ibid., 19-20.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., 55.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., 56.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., 138-39. McGavran did not exclude the possibility of seminaries and colleges, but his strongest recommendations were for field training of lay preachers. He suggested month-long training schools held in the vernacular languages.



of his work without the rural/urban division found in the Philippines project.<sup>91</sup> He studied thirty-five Disciples of Christ churches, five of which were located in towns or cities. The remainder were rural churches on ten circuits. Approximately one-third of the total church membership was found in the five city churches.<sup>92</sup>

McGavran saw the greatest evangelism challenge in the rural areas but tremendous opportunity in the cities. “Here they are,” he wrote,

tens of thousands of the most winnable people in the world, conveniently congregated in a great modern city, on flat ground traversed by excellent roads. They are not Moslems, not Hindus, and not Communists. They are citizens of a State where the Church still has prestige. It would be quite possible for the Christian Church to plant and bring to maturity ten congregations of 200 to 500 members each in the next decade.<sup>93</sup>

McGavran warned of the difficulty of the urban task in Jamaica, however. “Building these urban masses,” he wrote, “into self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating churches will take special planning, consecration, footwork, sweat, and tears.”<sup>94</sup> His research did not detail how urban church planting in Jamaica would look, but McGavran pointed to the great need.

### **Urban Research in Mexico**

Another example of research during the Institute of Church Growth years was McGavran’s work in Mexico. He and his research team began by defining ten cultural categories, or “ten Mexicos,” ranging from the largest city to the smallest village

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<sup>91</sup>Donald McGavran, *Church Growth in Jamaica* (Lucknow, India: Lucknow Publishing House, 1962).

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., 94-95.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., 109.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., 110.

populations.<sup>95</sup> “The first Mexico,” they began, “is Mexico City itself. Here five million people from all over Mexico gather together in one of the great metropolises of the world.”<sup>96</sup> The team recognized Mexico City as the most receptive population in the country, with half the entire Mexican evangelical population living in that district. Urban life, with all its challenges, made separation from the predominant and powerful Catholic Church easier.<sup>97</sup>

Second and third segments of the Mexican population were found in the so-called “liberal” and “conservative” cities. The team found that certain urban areas were more receptive because of a relative freedom from Catholic pressures. Other cities were less so.<sup>98</sup> The remaining population segments were rural and tribal peoples, with the exception of the “tenth Mexico,” made up of the urban poor. “City masses are a common feature of human society in all lands and all ages,” McGavran wrote, “. . . and Evangelical Churches should pay more attention to them.”<sup>99</sup>

The team argued that the need in Mexico was for effective discipling of every segment, including the urban masses and the rural population. “It is not sufficient,” they concluded, “to prepare missionaries for Mexico or Latin America.” Instead, a worker must “be prepared to recognize which Mexico he is in and what kind of presentation in it is actually blessed by the Holy Spirit to the increase of the church.”<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>95</sup>Donald McGavran, John Huegel, and Jack Taylor, *Church Growth in Mexico* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 36.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid., 37.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid., 40-41.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid., 41.

In *Understanding Church Growth*, McGavran pointed to the critical need for urban church growth research. “Large-scale research is need in every major country,” he wrote,

to reveal what activities, modes of life, and kinds of proclamation communicate the Christian faith in cities and which do not. Many illustrations of the latter and some of the former can be readily obtained; they would cast invaluable light on this urban field in which Christian mission will spend more than a billion dollars in the next thirty years.<sup>101</sup>

McGavran mentioned the value of general studies of church growth but recommended more specific studies related to urban problems and opportunities. As examples of valuable research, McGavran mentioned data from his studies of Mexico, Japan, and Brazil.<sup>102</sup> He also suggested the formation of a society for church growth research focused especially on urban areas, arguing that a short-term project would be insufficient.<sup>103</sup>

### **Urban Research in Zaire**

One of McGavran’s largest research projects took place in 1977 in connection with a conference held in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). Denominational leaders asked McGavran to speak to missionaries and nationals regarding healthy church growth. He suggested a two-month preparatory research trip. The result was *Zaire: Midday in Missions*.<sup>104</sup>

Leading up to his study, McGavran developed and distributed a five-page

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<sup>101</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 283-84.

<sup>102</sup>*Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>103</sup>*Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>104</sup>Donald McGavran and Norman Riddle, *Zaire: Midday in Missions* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1979).

survey to missionaries and church leaders.<sup>105</sup> McGavran asked for basic information related to population and tribal statistics of villages and churches.<sup>106</sup> For cities, he requested participants to describe areas where one tribe dominated the population and where neighborhoods were mixed. He followed up with several qualitative questions regarding mission needs.<sup>107</sup> The results of the survey were limited because of its in-depth nature and the work required to gather the data.<sup>108</sup>

McGavran built on the survey results with onsite visits and interviews. In a letter to the mission executives who had invited him to the conference, McGavran outlined four recommendations for evangelism in Zaire.<sup>109</sup> One of particular interest was a result of his visit to Kinshasa, a city of 2.5 million people. In that city, McGavran's research indicated only 100,000 church members. "This is pitiful," McGavran mourned,

in view of the 700,000 in the city who call themselves Protestants. To church these will require at least 2400 congregations today, and 5000 by the year 1997. If the 2,500,000 Zaireans in Kinshasa who call themselves Christians are not to become secular materialists, at least 8000 churches are needed now.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>105</sup>Ibid., 171. A copy of the survey in McGavran's files had a typewritten note attached reading, "This Country-wide Survey is a model – the first that I know of – for estimating the degree to which a given land has been evangelized. It is being put into effect in Zaire." "Gathering Hard Data: Kinshasa Church Growth Conference 1977" (WCIU 10.1).

<sup>106</sup>McGavran and Riddle, *Zaire*, 173-74. McGavran asked for maps, population statistics by tribe, information on the relationships between tribal groups, and church membership by tribe.

<sup>107</sup>"Gathering Hard Data."

<sup>108</sup>McGavran and Riddle, *Zaire*, 179.

<sup>109</sup>Donald McGavran to Executives of the Eight Boards Evangelizing Zaire, 11 August 1977 (WCIU 10.1). McGavran recommended reaching out to children through the schools, evangelizing nominal Christians, planting churches in cities, and sending missionaries (including nationals) into rural areas.

<sup>110</sup>Ibid.

Before writing his general recommendations, McGavran wrote to the leader of American Baptist Missions in Africa. He described Kinshasa as “dark area” in great need of churches.<sup>111</sup> “In my general letter to the Boards,” McGavran wrote,

I am suggesting that all of them ought to throw some church planting missionaries into Kinshasa. The task there is enormous. All big cities ought to be open cities where all are welcome. It makes no difference to me whether the church multipliers are missionaries or Zaireans, provided they are effective. But all communities should throw sizable evangelizing forces into the Big City. It should be at least be four million by the year 2000 – just 22 years from now.<sup>112</sup>

To J. Philip Hogan, a missions leader for the Assemblies of God, McGavran wrote specifically regarding Kinshasa. He admonished, “Protestant denominations are not reaching out to the unevangelized and, in the cities, are not caring for what they have.” McGavran sounded the call to urban missions in Zaire to anyone who would listen. In their expanded recommendations published after the conference, McGavran and Riddle declared,

The cities in Zaire lie wide open, receptive to the gospel. Church multiplication in the cities today will have to be intelligent, meet today’s conditions, solve urban problems, and operate in a rapidly changing Africa. It will be a very rewarding process. The miracle God has wrought in the last hundred years is great. The miracle he will work in the churching of the urban populations will be still greater.<sup>113</sup>

### **Conclusion**

As with the development of McGavran’s urban church growth missiology in general, so also his understanding of the importance of urban research grew over the course of his career. He studied churches and people extensively over three decades and described opportunities and hindrances to church growth in many contexts. His students

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<sup>111</sup>Donald McGavran to C. Jump, 8 July 1977 (WCIU 10.1).

<sup>112</sup>Ibid.

<sup>113</sup>McGavran and Riddle, *Zaire*, 149.

in the Institute for Church Growth and at Fuller Seminary carried the work even further.<sup>114</sup> In conclusion, McGavran's lifelong emphasis on church growth research reveals several key issues for urban missiologists.

First, research is vital to the work of missions, including urban missions.

Around 1966, McGavran wrote,

To date, most churchmen (nationals and missionaries) consider research in church growth a questionable luxury. The time is shortly coming when they will regard it as an indispensable part of church-mission structure – the ongoing organization (staff, buildings, equipment, and budget) necessary to carry on authentic mission.<sup>115</sup>

Since that time, missionaries and missions leaders have recognized the importance of research, thanks in part to McGavran's work. In every field, however, ongoing research remains necessary. McGavran's subheading in the "Discipling Urban Populations" chapter in *Understanding Church Growth*, "Urgent Need for Research," remains valid.<sup>116</sup>

A second conclusion based on McGavran's research emphasis is that urban

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<sup>114</sup>See, for example, the various types of urban churches in North American described in Donald McGavran and Win Arn, *How to Grow a Church* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1975), 111-66, and Donald McGavran, *Ethnic Realities and the Church* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979). For his students' research, see especially George Samuel, "Growth Potential of Urban Churches: A Study in Bombay," M.A. Thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1973; M. Ezra Sargunam, *Multiplying Churches in Modern India: An Experiment in Madras* (Madras: Federation of Evangelical Churches in India, 1974); James Y. K. Wong, *Singapore: The Church in the Midst of Social Change* (Singapore: Church Growth Study Center, 1973); Donald A. McGavran and James H. Montgomery, *The Discipling of a Nation* (Santa Clara, CA: Global Church Growth Bulletin, 1980); William R. Read, Victor M. Monterroso, and Harmon A. Johnson, *Latin American Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969); Roy E. Shearer, *Wildfire: Church Growth in Korea* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966); William R. Read, *New Patterns of Church Growth in Brazil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965).

<sup>115</sup>Donald McGavran, "Research as a Permanent Part of Church-Mission Structure," unpublished manuscript, 1966 (WCIU 7.3).

<sup>116</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 282.

church growth research must be planned for. McGavran repeatedly bemoaned the attitude that church growth happens regardless of missionary effort. Research is foundational to strategy development and ongoing church work and health.

Third, McGavran showed that urban church growth research can serve a motivational function. One only has to read McGavran's letters and reports on his research in Zaire to sense his growing desire to see cities reached with the gospel. When one sees the overwhelming needs of cities for the gospel and for spiritual transformation, he cannot help but be moved to action. Far from excluding the importance of rural evangelism, accurate research presents a clear picture of needs that places cities in proper perspective.

Finally, McGavran's urban church growth research demonstrates cities as unique fields with unique problems and opportunities. In each of McGavran's research projects, he distinguished urban and rural fields because they presented different possibilities. Whether he worked in the Philippines, where he found the rural areas in greater need than the cities, or in Zaire where the opposite was true, McGavran found that research pointed to real need.

CHAPTER 5  
DONALD MCGAVRAN'S CHURCH GROWTH  
PRINCIPLES IN URBAN CONTEXTS

Aside from his students, one of the few people to recognize Donald McGavran's contribution to urban missions was Kenneth Mulholland, former Dean at Columbia International University and President of the Evangelical Missiological Society. After McGavran's death, Mulholland wrote an article for *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* in which he outlined McGavran's key contributions to missiology.<sup>1</sup> Mulholland's unique contribution to the conversation about McGavran's legacy was his assertion that "McGavran made evangelical missions conscious of the cities."<sup>2</sup> Mulholland called the "Discipling Urban Populations" chapter in *Understanding Church Growth* "prophetic," saying that McGavran "called upon missions to focus on the city at a time when they were still putting the bulk of their effort into the towns and rural areas."<sup>3</sup>

As noted in chapter 3 of this dissertation, McGavran developed "eight keys" for evangelizing cities. Those keys comprised the bulk of his chapter in *Understanding Church Growth* and represent his effort to apply church growth missiology to cities.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Kenneth Mulholland, "Donald McGavran's Legacy to Evangelical Missions," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (January 1991): 64.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 278-95.



McGavran intended the list to be what Mulholland called “a skeletal framework on which much urban strategy has been draped.”<sup>5</sup> Calling for more extensive research on urban contexts, McGavran wrote, “no one yet knows what modes of mission promise most for communicating the Christian faith to urban man.”<sup>6</sup>

McGavran’s principles were certainly no mere guesses, however. The eight keys were the product of his teaching and years of student research. “They are offered,” he concluded, “in the hope that church growth thinkers will carry the process further, and describe more exactly the keys which will unlock specific conurbations in which the Church is commanded to bring many sons to glory.”<sup>7</sup> The purpose of this chapter is to survey McGavran’s own application of his missiology to urban contexts and, when necessary, to expand that application based on his broader thinking. In some areas, such as his concept of people movements, McGavran did not elaborate fully on how his missiology would apply in cities. In those cases, readers and researchers must take McGavran’s general principles and apply them for individual contexts, a practice that McGavran advocated strongly.

### **Applying Church Growth Missiology**

One important facet of McGavran’s missiology that applies in the case of his urban recommendations was his conviction that his basic ideas were generally valid in most contexts with proper contextualization. Not every element of church growth thinking was universal, but all had applicability. In a letter to a missionary in Peru, McGavran wrote, “We are not dealing with universal principles which will work

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<sup>5</sup>Mulholland, “McGavran’s Legacy.”

<sup>6</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 285.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

everywhere.” At the same time, he continued, “the few general principles there are must be qualified and modified to fit each specific population.”<sup>8</sup> Even with that qualification, McGavran understood the basic tenets of church growth as applicable in most contexts. To a missionary working in Boston, he wrote, “It is true that for the most part we talk about the growth of the Church overseas; but most of the principles set forth have a bearing upon New England churches.”<sup>9</sup>

In 1971, McGavran exchanged letters with Charles Chaney, then pastor of First Baptist Church in Palatine, Illinois, but later a leader in the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.<sup>10</sup> Chaney wrote,

I just completed *Understanding Church Growth*. Thank you for a most helpful book. It underscores what I have been saying to you, over several years, that the Eurica scene is not nearly as different from Afericasia as you insist. I can transpose almost every principle of your book to the metropolitan areas of Chicago. My contact and study of other American cities convinces me that they are no different.<sup>11</sup>

Chaney referred specifically to McGavran’s ideas on people movements and “bridges” across which the gospel spreads. McGavran responded, “I am pleased that you find *Understanding Church Growth* germane to the Eurican scene. It does, of course, speak

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<sup>8</sup>Donald McGavran to Kenneth Case, 1 November 1965 (WCIU 7.1). William Carey International University and the U.S. Center for World Mission house a significant collection of McGavran’s personal correspondence. Unfortunately, the collection remains in McGavran’s original filing cabinets and has not been catalogued. References in this collection will refer to the filing cabinet and drawer. “WCIU, 8.2” refers to the McGavran Collection at WCIU, cabinet 8, drawer 2.

<sup>9</sup>Donald McGavran to June Jenkins, 27 August 1970 (WCIU 7.1).

<sup>10</sup>Chaney later co-authored a book on church growth: Charles L. Chaney and Ron S. Lewis, *Design for Church Growth* (Nashville: Broadman, 1977).

<sup>11</sup>Charles Chaney to Donald McGavran, 15 March 1971 (WCIU 7.1). McGavran often used terms like “Eurica” (Europe and North America) and “Afericasia” (Africa, Latin America, and Asia) to distinguish between the “Christian” West and other mission fields. Here, Chaney picks up on that usage.

to principles which apply in most countries. It is being translated into many languages.”<sup>12</sup>

For urban contexts, the applicability of church growth thinking is a valuable concept. While McGavran may not have applied every aspect of his missiology to cities himself, that limitation does not dismiss the validity of his principles for city ministry and missions.

### **Urban Church Growth**

This chapter will outline two general areas of McGavran’s missiology as applied in urban contexts. In *Understanding Church Growth*, described his “eight keys to church growth in cities” as “principles about which church growth men are agreed.”<sup>13</sup> They were based on broader church growth principles. The eight were as follows:

1. Emphasize house churches
2. Develop unpaid lay leaders
3. Recognize resistant homogeneous units
4. Focus on the responsive
5. Multiply tribe, caste, and language churches
6. Surmount the property barrier
7. Communicate intense belief in Christ
8. Provide the theological base for an egalitarian society.<sup>14</sup>

His points break down into three broad categories, each of which corresponds to a basic

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<sup>12</sup>Donald McGavran to Charles Chaney, 24 March 1971 (WCIU 7.1).

<sup>13</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 285.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 285-95.

tenet of church growth missiology.<sup>15</sup>

The first broad category is related to methodologies of evangelism in urban contexts. First, one must consider people movements and McGavran's concepts of discipling and perfecting. McGavran also argued that his receptivity principle retained importance in urban contexts. Finally, McGavran understood that homogenous units look different in cities than in rural areas.<sup>16</sup> He contended that accurate segmentation of city populations would aid the effective proclamation of the gospel, even if he did not ever elaborate fully how such segmentation might look.<sup>17</sup>

McGavran also emphasized church planting, the second category of his urban missiology. He particularly advocated the use of the house church model, even to the point of starting a house church himself.<sup>18</sup> McGavran's general principles on church planting methodologies shed light on his specific teaching for urban contexts. In the "eight keys," he focused on church planting based on ethnolinguistic groups and on financial issues such as property ownership and leadership.

Finally, one must consider a third category: McGavran's views on social ministry in urban contexts. While he argued that evangelism is primary in all missionary endeavors, McGavran contended that churches in urban contexts must be concerned with justice and social issues. McGavran made an important, if generally unknown, contribution to the field as he stood strongly against a movement to define mission less as

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<sup>15</sup>For an outline of the basic elements of church growth missiology, see chap. 2 of this dissertation.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 214-15, 287-89.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 284-285.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 285; Donald A. McGavran, "House Churches: A Key Factor for Growth," *Global Church Growth* 29, no. 1 (January/February/March 1992): 5-6. This article was published posthumously.

evangelism and more as holistic ministry.<sup>19</sup> His views on holistic ministry in urban contexts will be the subject of the next chapter.

### **Urban Evangelism**

Donald McGavran's earliest missiological writing dealt essentially with evangelization. His desire was that unreached and unresponsive peoples follow Christ, and his constant question was how that might come about. "My pilgrimage in the twentieth century," he recalled in *Effective Evangelism*,

resulted from eternal God's command. In Romans 16:25, 26, God commands that the gospel be made known to all peoples (segments of society), leading them to faith and obedience. Every segment of society – rural and urban, literate and illiterate, high income and low income, factory workers and university professors – must hear the gospel. It must be proclaimed with the purpose of discipling every piece of the human mosaic, with the intention to make it a Christian segment of humanity.<sup>20</sup>

It is important to note McGavran's burden first, for all nations, and second, that entire bodies of people become Christian. This people movement philosophy drove his missiology, especially as seen in his principles of people movements, receptivity, discipling, and homogeneous units.

### **Urban People Movements**

As noted earlier in this dissertation, McGavran's first major published work

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<sup>19</sup>Donald A. McGavran, ed., *Eye of the Storm: The Great Debate in Mission* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972); Donald A. McGavran, "Missiology Faces the Lion," *Missiology* 17, no. 3 (July 1989): 335-41. *Holistic ministry* has been defined as "the intentional integration of building the church and transforming society." Such ministry combines social ministries on an equal (or sometimes superior) footing with evangelism. See Douglas McConnell, "Holistic Mission," in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 448-49.

<sup>20</sup>Donald McGavran, *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1988), 53.

dealt with the concept of people movements.<sup>21</sup> In *The Bridges of God*, McGavran built upon his earlier research with J. Waskom Pickett and the Mid-India Survey, applying the concept of Christward group movements on a broader scale. *The Bridges of God* asks, he began, “how clans, tribes, castes, in short how *Peoples* become Christian.”<sup>22</sup> McGavran believed that a new day in missions had arrived, one that represented the end of traditional approaches.

While *The Bridges of God* was McGavran’s major exposition of the people movement concept, he developed his ideas over a period of many years. In the 1930s, McGavran argued that people movements were not “mass movements,” in that a people movement “is not one of mere mass, but always of a people; usually enlarges by the conversion of small, well-instructed groups; and achieves large numbers only over a period of years.”<sup>23</sup> In *The Bridges of God*, McGavran clarified even further, arguing that “groups” in people movement conversions were generally small in number.<sup>24</sup>

**McGavran’s understanding of Christian conversion.** Within a discussion

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<sup>21</sup>In *Understanding Church Growth*, McGavran defined “people movements”: A people movement results from the joint decision of a number of individuals – whether five or five hundred – all from the same people, which enables them to become Christians without social dislocation, while remaining in full contact with their non-Christian relatives, thus enabling other groups of that people, across the years, after suitable instruction, to come to similar decisions and form Christian churches made up exclusively of members of that people (297-98). This definition will be discussed more fully below.

<sup>22</sup>Donald McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (London: World Dominion Press, 1955). Emphasis McGavran’s.

<sup>23</sup>J.W. Pickett et al., *Church Growth and Group Conversion* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1973), 4. This work was originally published in 1936. One essay (by A. L. Warnhuis) was added to the later edition.

<sup>24</sup>McGavran, *Bridges of God*, 13.

of McGavran's views on group movements, it is also important to note McGavran's views on conversion in general.<sup>25</sup> Based on his understanding of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20, McGavran divided the conversion process into two parts: discipling and perfecting. He described the initial conversion of a people as "discipling," arguing that peoples must first experience the "removal of distracting divisive sinful gods and spirits and ideas from the corporate life of the people and putting Christ at the centre on the Throne."<sup>26</sup> He continued, "The discipling of a people takes place only on new ground."<sup>27</sup> This decision, made as a group, represented an initial turning to Christ and only occurred once.

The second phase of conversion, for McGavran, was "perfecting":

This is the bringing about of an ethical change in the disciplined group, an increasing achievement of a thoroughly Christian way of life for the community as a whole, and the conversion of individuals making up each generation as they come to the age of decision.<sup>28</sup>

People movements took place in the initial discipling of a group. From that point, the process of perfecting meant the continued growth of the church among a particular people. Perfecting was the long-term process following an initial turning to Christ.

**McGavran and people movements.** McGavran's understanding of group conversion and people movements led to his own early shift in strategic thinking. Having spent his career to that point in educational and institutional work on the mission field, McGavran came to question the value of traditional approaches. In a 1955 article in

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<sup>25</sup>For a fuller discussion of this topic, see chap. 2 of this dissertation.

<sup>26</sup>McGavran, *Bridges of God*, 14.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*

*International Review of Mission*, McGavran identified two “distinct types of missions and churches.”<sup>29</sup> “First,” he wrote,

there is the mission-station approach, with its “one station few churches,” non-reproductive churches and large mission institutions in the midst of highly resistant cultures. Second, there is the “people movement” approach, with its “one station many churches,” reproductive churches lightly assisted with mission institutions in the midst of one or more peoples which are turning to the Christian Faith.<sup>30</sup>

This strong statement reflects McGavran’s intense belief in the necessity of a new approach to evangelization that emphasized movements of groups rather than individuals. He contrasted the Western mode of individual conversion with that of mission fields where “here a group of fifty and there a group of eighty and yonder one of six, after much instruction and weighing of the issues, decide as groups to accept the Christian Faith.”<sup>31</sup>

McGavran spent a great deal of time in *The Bridges of God* describing the historical development of the church through people movements. He clearly believed that the New Testament and early church model of growth was the conversion of peoples rather than individuals. At the same time, McGavran noted that the earliest growth of the church took place in urban centers. In the cities, however, individual conversions became the norm as “people-consciousness” faded when individuals were separated from family and tribal ties.<sup>32</sup> He contended that “the rapid expansion of the Christian faith during the first four centuries witnessed both growth through individual conversions and a series of People Movements.”<sup>33</sup> People movements took place mainly in the countryside and

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<sup>29</sup>Donald McGavran, “New Methods for a New Age in Missions,” *International Review of Mission* 44 (1955): 396.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 398.

<sup>32</sup>McGavran, *Bridges of God*, 38.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 38.



villages, while city churches swung toward individual conversions, a change McGavran considered negative and a hindrance to future growth.<sup>34</sup>

People movements were a controversial subject, and McGavran reduced his emphasis on the topic in his second work, *How Churches Grow*, which was intended for a wider audience than *The Bridges of God*.<sup>35</sup> McGavran later recalled,

In 1958, finding that most mission leaders were inclined to think that I spoke chiefly about people movements to Christ and had started calling me “People Movement McGavran,” I wrote a second book, *How Churches Grow*. In it I never mentioned people movements. This was in order to emphasize that the essential task of all world evangelization was to carry out the commands concerning finding and folding the lost.<sup>36</sup>

McGavran’s concern was that the vital question of how peoples become Christian would be lost in the controversy over people movements.

McGavran did not, however, abandon the idea of people movements altogether. He believed such movements to be an important contrast to the traditional mission station approach on many fields. In *Understanding Church Growth*, McGavran devoted two chapters to people movements in a section entitled, “Special Kinds of Church Growth.”<sup>37</sup> McGavran clarified and reiterated his point that people movements were not necessarily “*large numbers becoming Christians*.”<sup>38</sup> Instead, he wrote, “Most

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 37.

<sup>35</sup>Donald McGavran, *How Churches Grow: The New Frontiers of Mission* (London: World Dominion Press, 1959).

<sup>36</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 67.

<sup>37</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 296-334. The two chapters, “People Movements,” and “Kinds of People Movements and Their Care,” were included in the same section of the book as McGavran’s chapter on “Discipling Urban Populations.”

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 297. Emphasis McGavran’s.

people movements consist of a series of small groups coming to decision.”<sup>39</sup>

**Defining people movements.** McGavran’s definition of people movements provides valuable insight into his understanding of the phenomenon.<sup>40</sup> First, he viewed conversion in people movements in terms of “multi-individual, mutually interdependent” decisions.<sup>41</sup> In certain cultures, “people-consciousness” surpassed individuality – a fact difficult for Westerners to understand. In those cases, individuals participated in a larger decision to cast away old idols and gods in favor of Christ. Such is the nature of people movement conversion, which McGavran contrasted with “one-on-one” modes of decision-making and evangelism.<sup>42</sup>

Second, McGavran’s definition reveals his key concern with the mission station approach: that new believers were removed from contact with non-Christian relatives and relationships. They became rebels against their families and communities. The result was that a people viewed church members as outsiders, reducing the possibility of more people accepting Christ.<sup>43</sup>

McGavran referred to the process of separation as “redemption and lift.”<sup>44</sup> As the result of many good things such as education and health care, Christians grew more and more distant from their non-Christian relationships. “So, pushed out by their own people and pulled out and transformed by the church,” McGavran explained, “educated

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>For the definition, see footnote 20 above.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 302.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.,

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 300-01.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 260-77.

and redeemed Christians form a separated community. They begin to move in new circles.”<sup>45</sup> “Because of this separation,” he continued,

they often cease to be effective communicators among their former intimates and have no kindred contact with non-Christians at their new level. The [new] congregation lives in a refined type of ghetto, as it were. Physical separation may or may not be a factor, but social separation is marked.<sup>46</sup>

To be sure, it was important that believers renounce their old pagan practices and beliefs. People movements, however, allowed a community to set aside those beliefs together as a people rather than “against the tide.”<sup>47</sup>

The basis for people movements was the “bridge” referred to in the title of McGavran’s first work. “Bridges” provided a path across which the gospel could be communicated without hindrance. In McGavran’s early work in India, the “bridge” was generally related to caste or tribe. In his later writing, he added the concept of “web movements” in cultures without tribe or caste.<sup>48</sup> Web movements generally ran across family relationships in tight-knit communities but had the same characteristics as caste movements, albeit with slower progress.

**People movements in urban contexts.** If the key to people movements is in caste, tribal, and tight-knit family relationships, what might such a movement look like in a city or cities? McGavran did not discount the possibility of urban people movements. In *Understanding Church Growth*, he wrote, “Men and women of society, advanced or primitive, urban or rural, literate or illiterate, can come to Christian decision by the

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 263; McGavran, *Bridges of God*, 44.

<sup>46</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 263.

<sup>47</sup>McGavran, “New Methods,” 398-99; McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 300.

<sup>48</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 320-325.

people-movement route, though the pattern of movement in each society will differ from that in any other.”<sup>49</sup> The answer may lie in the “web movement” described in *Understanding Church Growth*.

McGavran distinguished “web movements” from typical people movements based on their speed and their family-centered focus. “As tribal society breaks down all around the world,” he wrote, “its place is taken not by highly individualized men but by communities with a strong family life.”<sup>50</sup> In Western societies, the web broke down due to mobility and the lack of relationship with extended families. While McGavran did not specifically mention cities, this breakdown in broad family relationships would also apply to urban contexts. For example, McGavran described a family that slowly came to Christ over a period of four years. The church grew outside of the family through a “web” of social relationships.<sup>51</sup>

Long before *Understanding Church Growth*, McGavran advocated witness within families. In a letter to Disciples of Christ missionaries and mission administration, McGavran argued, “There is no method in my estimation equal to that of witness to relatives.”<sup>52</sup> One key to success in evangelism to family members, according to McGavran, was the closeness of the relationship. “All methods,” he continued to Yocum,

will gain many times in effectiveness if preceded by a hearty kiss from the witness

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 316.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 32-21.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 322-23.

<sup>52</sup>Donald McGavran to C. M. Yocum, 14 August 1947 (BGC 178.49.39). BGC refers to the Donald A. McGavran and Mary McGavran Collection, Billy Graham Center in Wheaton, Illinois. The citation 178.83.2 refers to collection number 178, box 83, folder 2.

to the women of the family. You see what I mean. If relationship is such that a hearty kiss is normal and proper, then the witness falls on fertile soil.<sup>53</sup>

Sociologists recognize that relationships and networks in cities are considerably different from those in rural areas. At the same time, it does not seem necessarily true that people and web movements would be exclusively rural. As noted earlier, Louis Wirth, one of the pioneers of urban sociology, argued that primary (family) relationships were fewer in urban contexts.<sup>54</sup> “The family as a unit of social life,” he wrote, “is emancipated from the larger kinship group characteristic of the country, and the individual members pursue their own diverging interests in their vocational, educational, religious, recreational, and political life.”<sup>55</sup>

In the face of fraying family ties, urban dwellers seek different types of relationships. Wirth continued,

Being reduced to a state of virtual impotence as an individual, urbanites are bound to exert themselves by joining with others of similar interest into organized groups to obtain their ends. This results in the enormous multiplication of voluntary organizations directed toward as great a variety of objectives as there are human needs and interests. While on the one hand the traditional ties of human association are weakened, urban existence involves a much greater degree of interdependence between people and a more complicated, fragile, and volatile form of mutual interrelations over many phases of which individuals as such can exert scarcely any control.<sup>56</sup>

Later sociologists have noticed the issue of relationships in cities. Claude Fischer, whose studies of urban culture focused on primary relationships and subcultures,

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>See above, pp. 76-77.

<sup>55</sup>Louis Wirth, “Urbanism as a Way of Life,” in *Urban Life: Readings in the Anthropology of the City*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. George Gmelch, Robert V. Kemper, and Walter P. Zenner (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2010), 114. Originally published in *American Journal of Sociology* 44 (1938): 1-24.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 115.

argued that intimate relationships in cities are different than those in rural areas but are no less important. “What happens to primary groups under the influence of urbanism?”

Fischer asked.

They persist and they change. They persist in that urbanites are as involved in intimate relationships as are ruralites (or more so). And they persist in that each of them – the ethnic group, friends, the family – exists as a distinguishable and vital group in the city. As theorists of primary-group breakdown point out, the city provides a multitude of competitors, of alternate bases of association. These other social worlds often challenge and alter ethnic groups and the family. But two important points about that challenge should be remembered: First, to leave one social world for another does not mean the loss of primary ties, but only their transference. People who neglect their extended kin in favor of friends met in a professional context are not without intimate ties, it is just that they have formed different intimate ties. Second, and more important, the availability of other acquaintances, friends, and intimates in the urban setting does not rule out close ties with kin (or, indeed, neighbors).<sup>57</sup>

McGavran focused on close family relationships as the primary means of gospel transmission and evangelization. Fischer’s argument supports the notion that, in urban contexts, other relationships might provide a “web” for evangelism.

More recently, Mark Gottdiener and Ray Hutchison have built on Fischer’s theories with what they call the “socio-spatial approach” to urban sociology.<sup>58</sup> They argue that urban contexts not only add to the variety of individuals in one’s social network, but also that in the twenty-first century, those networks spread over a larger area. The phenomenon is referred to as “community without locality.”<sup>59</sup> Electronic media and internet-based social networking have made relationships possible across large

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<sup>57</sup>Claude S. Fischer, *The Urban Experience*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), 170. See also, Claude S. Fischer, *To Dwell among Friends: Personal Networks in Town and City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

<sup>58</sup>Mark Gottdiener and Ray Hutchison, *The New Urban Sociology* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2006).

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, 186.

metropolitan areas.

Donald McGavran's views of the importance of people movements have significant application for urban contexts, especially as he argued the necessity of that the gospel spread across relationships into families and clans. His conclusion that such movements were almost exclusively rural may have been true in most cases, but the principles of "bridges" and "webs" have significant application in the contemporary urban context.<sup>60</sup>

### **The Homogeneous Unit Principle and the City**

McGavran's best known and most controversial contribution to twentieth century missiology, the Homogeneous Unit Principle (HUP), is intimately related to his concept of people movement. Tribes, castes, and peoples came to Christ most easily, according to McGavran, when the gospel spread across bridges of relationships and kinship. In *Understanding Church Growth*, he gave his classic and concise statement on the issue: "Men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers."<sup>61</sup> Beginning in the early days of his India experience through his entire career, McGavran promoted evangelism and church planting along lines of ethnicity and people groups.

**Background of the HUP.** McGavran's dealt extensively with movements among particular castes and peoples in India in his earliest publications. He was inspired by J. Waskom Pickett's studies of evangelism among individual peoples.<sup>62</sup> In *Church*

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<sup>60</sup>For further discussion of the application of McGavran's people movement principles to urban contexts, see the conclusion of this dissertation.

<sup>61</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 198.

<sup>62</sup>J. Waskom Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India* (New York: Abingdon, 1933); J. Waskom Pickett, *Christ's Way to India's Heart* (Lucknow, India:

*Growth and Group Conversion*, McGavran, Pickett, A. L. Warnshuis, and G.H. Singh all described movements among people groups such as the Gara, Balahis, and Satnamis.<sup>63</sup> The latter group was McGavran's own mission field from the 1930s until 1959.

Indian Hindu society has long been one of the most divided in the world. In a 1985 article, McGavran outlined the history and impact of the caste system on Indian society and, in particular, on Christian missions. He traced the source of the system to the Aryan invasions of the Indian subcontinent, when the lighter-skinned Aryans subdued the darker-skinned indigenous peoples.<sup>64</sup> More importantly, the Aryans developed a theological system to support their domination. They argued that God had created four castes: priests, warriors, merchants and landowners – all four Aryan, and a lowest group of serfs.<sup>65</sup>

By the time of McGavran's work in India, the four had expanded to hundreds of separate castes. The lowest group, the "Scheduled Castes," formerly known as "Untouchables," remained oppressed under the belief that God had created them inferior. McGavran argued that every society had examples of the strong oppressing the weak, but a racism based on theological presuppositions was the most heinous of all.<sup>66</sup> Members of each caste were restricted to work and marriage among only that caste. Such cultural issues were the spark that led to the Homogeneous Unit Principle.

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Lucknow Publishing House, 1938). In both works, Pickett described movements within castes of Indian society. In the latter, he argued that missionaries should work among the lower castes rather than among the elites of society.

<sup>63</sup>Pickett et al., *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, 21-60.

<sup>64</sup>Donald McGavran, "The Hottest Race Issue in the World," *Transformation* 2, no. 2 (April/June 1985): 16.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.



Two key concepts are important to understanding the HUP: McGavran's interpretation of *ta ethne* or "nations" in Matthew 28:19 and his expansion of that principle to what he referred to as "segments" of populations. Like many missionaries, McGavran was motivated by the Great Commission task to "make disciples of all nations." Patrick Melancon argued that "the imperative nature of the Great Commission served as a backdrop for all of McGavran's principles."<sup>67</sup> Integral to the Great Commission, for McGavran, was the focus on *ta ethne*, or "nations."

**McGavran's understanding of *panta ta ethne*.** McGavran generally referred to *ta ethne* as "tribes, castes, classes, segments of society."<sup>68</sup> He often mentioned the fact that Hindi translations of the term generally used "caste."<sup>69</sup> In a 1975 address to the Fuller School of World Missions, McGavran outlined the various versions of the Great Commission found in the New Testament. After describing *ta ethne* in the same terms as above, he asked, "We are commanded to disciple *ta ethne* – well what does *ta ethne* mean to us?"<sup>70</sup> He continued to describe the multitudes of people around the world – nominal Christians, secularists, Muslims, Hindus – who had yet to hear the gospel. In this particular case, "nations" meant all those outside of faith in Christ. In his own glossary of church growth terms, McGavran defined *ta ethne* as "a Greek noun which has been transliterated in church growth writings to mean "the peoples." It is generally used in the

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<sup>67</sup>Patrick Julian Melancon, "An Examination of Selected Theological Topics in the Thought of Donald A. McGavran" (Ph.D. diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997), 100.

<sup>68</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 47.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>70</sup>Donald McGavran, "The Passion of Our Lord for the Salvation of the World," unpublished address, Fuller Seminary, 1975 (WCIU 5.1).

sense of the mosaic of tribes, clans, and peoples, each held together as a homogeneous unit by cultural ties.”<sup>71</sup>

One particularly illuminating discussion on this issue took place in correspondence between McGavran and David Hesselgrave. Hesselgrave expressed disagreement with McGavran’s stand on people movements and, in particular, his understanding of *ta ethne*. He was “convinced that the language of the Great Commission may allow for, but does not prescribe, the ‘people approach’ to mission any more than it requires the ‘individual approach.’”<sup>72</sup> Hesselgrave included a letter from New Testament scholar Donald Carson in which Carson evaluated McGavran’s interpretation of *ta ethne*. “As I see it,” Carson wrote,

it is improper to run from a more or less agreed definition of *ethnos* to the complete theory of McGavran. I think they do not adequately recognize how often *ta ethne* simply means “Gentiles” without the heavy emphasis on “ethnic units” which they desire.<sup>73</sup>

With particular reference to cities, Carson added that McGavran’s argument that *panta ta ethne* (all the peoples/nations) dictated a peoples-focused approach to missions must also be applied to Acts 8:40, where Luke wrote that Philip “preached the gospel to all the towns” (ESV). In that case, wrote Carson, McGavran must “come up with some conclusions which must inevitably contradict his people principle in all cities where more than one *ethnos* live within the parameters of one *polis*.”<sup>74</sup>

McGavran responded to Hesselgrave with an affirmation of his own belief that “*ta ethne* in Romans 16:26, Matthew 28:19, etc. (translated ‘nations’ or ‘peoples’ in all

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<sup>71</sup>Donald McGavran, “Dictionary of Church Growth Terms,” (WCIU 7.2).

<sup>72</sup>David Hesselgrave to Donald McGavran, 1 May 1980 (WCIU 8.2).

<sup>73</sup>Donald Carson to David Hesselgrave, 29 April 1980 (WCIU 8.2).

<sup>74</sup>Ibid.

versions of the Bible) means ethnic units.”<sup>75</sup> Where McGavran took exception to Hesselgrave’s letter was with the contention that McGavran read the term as prescriptive only of people movements. McGavran responded that on multiple occasions, he had argued that God blesses both the people movement and “one-by-one” methods.<sup>76</sup>

**Defining Homogeneous Units.** In one of his earliest discussions of the topic, McGavran defined a people in terms of marriage. Speaking of people movements, he wrote,

Basic to the entire point of view is the concept of a people. A people is a society whose members marry exclusively within it. Whether such a caste or tribe is really racially distinct from others is immaterial. As long as its sons take wives only from the people itself, so long will it think of itself as a really separate race and will have an intense “people consciousness.” Its intimate life will be restricted to itself. Clan loyalty or people loyalty will be the highest virtue. If becoming a Christian offends this clan loyalty, if it means “leaving my people and joining some other people” then the growth of the Church will be very slow. Whether persons of other tribes or castes become Christians or Communists makes little difference to persons of intense people consciousness. What counts is “what our people are doing.”<sup>77</sup>

This rather narrow definition of a people is particularly interesting in its subordination of ethnicity to “people consciousness.” McGavran emphasized self-identity and unity of a people as foundational to the spread of the gospel among the group.

In *The Bridges of God*, McGavran retained intermarriage as a fundamental aspect of a people but expanded his explanation. Western individualism, he argued, made the concept of a people difficult for missionaries. Religious liberty, freedom of

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<sup>75</sup>Donald McGavran to David Hesselgrave, 13 May 1980 (WCIU 8.2). In his own letter, Carson had acknowledged “ethnic units” as one definition of *ta ethne*, as did Hesselgrave.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid. McGavran presented several published examples, such as *The Bridges of God*, chaps. 16 and 17 of *Understanding Church Growth*, and *Ethnic Realities*, 227-29.

<sup>77</sup>Pickett et al., *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, 5.

conscience, and migrations tended to cause Westerners to look at Christian conversion as an individual decision. If groups or families turned to Christ, it was due to a series of individual decisions. In other societies, however,

a people is not an aggregation of individuals. In a true people intermarriage and the intimate details of social intercourse take place within the society. In a true people individuals are bound together not merely by common social practices and religious beliefs but by common blood. A true people is a social organism which, by virtue of the fact that its members intermarry very largely within its own confines, becomes a separate race in their minds.<sup>78</sup>

Movements among peoples, for McGavran, depended upon an accurate understanding not only of the makeup of a particular group but also of the group's capacity for corporate decision-making. His later works, while never rejecting his belief in people movements concept, downplayed the concept's centrality.

McGavran first used the term, "homogeneous unit," in *How Churches Grow*, published in 1959. In a chapter on research and analysis, he argued that missionaries should not rely on "field totals" for an accurate picture of how churches are growing. Instead, leaders must consider churches among a particular people, or "homogeneous unit."<sup>79</sup> Such units were generally composed along the same lines as those described in McGavran's earlier work (ethnicity and intermarriage), though he did add various factors such as class and profession.<sup>80</sup>

As with most of his principles, McGavran's most extensive work on the Homogeneous Unit Principle came in *Understanding Church Growth*. He clearly moved beyond ethnicity as the basis for the principle, saying in one of his chapters on research,

The second fact needed is each *homogeneous unit total* across the years. The

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<sup>78</sup>McGavran, *Bridges of God*, 9.

<sup>79</sup>McGavran, *How Churches Grow*, 37.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*, 54.

*homogeneous unit* is simply a section of society in which all the members have some characteristic in common. Thus a homogeneous unit (or HU, as it is called in church growth jargon) might be a political unit or subunit, the characteristic in common being that all the members live within certain geographic confines.<sup>81</sup>

He described the definition of a homogeneous unit as “an elastic concept,” its meaning depending on the context in which it is used.<sup>82</sup>

One must be careful, however, not to extend McGavran’s principle too far. Following this description, McGavran gave only examples of cultural and language groups, tribes, and castes. One of McGavran’s students, George Samuel, suggested that “people groups,” a later appellation for homogeneous units, could be comprised of occupational groups. Giving travel agents and insurance agents as specific examples, Samuel continued, “Factors such as language, religion, ethnicity, residence, occupation or customs make them identifiable as a special group of people.”<sup>83</sup> “People who perceive themselves to have a common affinity for one another can be seen practically everywhere,” he wrote, “whether urban, rural or tribal areas.”<sup>84</sup> In his comments on the article, McGavran corrected Samuel’s understanding, noting, “This, George, is very Western. It is NOT this kind of ‘group’ which is the obstacle in gospel propagation. The obstacle is the endogamous unit, the *jatiyan*.”<sup>85</sup>

In a later chapter of *Understanding Church Growth* devoted exclusively to “social structure,” McGavran outlined three characteristics of homogeneous units: people

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<sup>81</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 85. Emphasis McGavran’s.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>83</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup>George Samuel to Donald McGavran, 3 May 1980 (WCIU 5.1).

<sup>85</sup>Donald McGavran, handwritten notes on George Samuel to Donald McGavran, 3 May 1980 (WCIU 5.1). *Jatiyan* is a Hindi word for “caste” or “people group” (Vern Middleton, email to the author, 9 August 2011).

consciousness, geographical location, and language.<sup>86</sup> He retained intermarriage as a key aspect of people consciousness, especially in non-Western societies. In all cases, however, McGavran noted that the proper way to understand a people, or homogeneous unit, was to consider the cost of taking a new believer away from his or her “kith and kin.”<sup>87</sup>

**The HUP in urban contexts.** Throughout his career, McGavran advocated strongly for an approach to missions that emphasized homogeneous units in evangelism and church planting. He may have considered the principle “elastic,” but he did not waver from his commitment. McGavran did understand, however, that two special cases presented challenges to his thinking: racism and cities.<sup>88</sup>

Overwhelmingly, the most vocal opponents of McGavran’s Homogeneous Unit Principle were those who pointed to the problem of racism. One example of this opposition came from Francis DuBose, a Southern Baptist and longtime professor of missions at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in Mill Valley, California. DuBose was born in rural Alabama but grew up in Houston, Texas.<sup>89</sup> His first pastorates were in small Texas churches, but he often reflected on the poverty he saw in Depression-

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<sup>86</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 190-93.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., 191. The “cost” is the loss of potential for a movement within a group with high people-consciousness. McGavran concluded, “It is patently true that among societies with high people consciousness those methods of propagating the Gospel which enable men to accept Christ without renouncing their peoples are blessed of God to the growth of His Church” (191).

<sup>88</sup>The issue of race and social justice will be dealt with more completely in chapter 6 of this dissertation.

<sup>89</sup>Unless otherwise noted, biographical material on DuBose is taken from, Francis M. DuBose, “My Pilgrimage in Urban Mission” *Urban Mission* (June 1999): 6-16.

era Houston and on the problems of immigrants in the Dallas-Fort Worth area where he attended Southwestern Seminary. After completing his Th.D. in missions, DuBose served as Director of City Missions for the Detroit Baptist Association.

In his 1978 book, *How Churches Grow in an Urban World*, DuBose dealt with issues directly related to the peoples of the city.<sup>90</sup> He clearly rejected McGavran's Homogeneous Unit Principle as unhealthy and unbiblical, saying, "The New Testament and the homogeneous unit strategy seem in clear opposition both in attitude and practice."<sup>91</sup> He feared that the HUP fed racism.<sup>92</sup> DuBose advocated a *Heterogeneous Principle*, recognizing that the heterogeneity present in every city must influence urban missions strategies.<sup>93</sup> Urban populations are diverse, and churches should reflect that diversity. At the same time, DuBose offered the *Homogeneity Principle*.<sup>94</sup> While he argued that the HUP should not be prescriptive in any way, DuBose did recognize that homogeneous units exist in cities, especially within ethnolinguistic and immigrant groups. He advocated the use of the HUP through small language-based evangelistic

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<sup>90</sup>Francis M. DuBose, *How Churches Grow in an Urban World: History, Theology, and Strategy of Growth in All Kinds of City Churches* (Nashville: Broadman, 1978).

<sup>91</sup>*Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>92</sup>*Ibid.*, 124-25. See also the correspondence between DuBose and McGavran discussed below.

<sup>93</sup>DuBose defined the *Heterogeneous Principle*, saying, "In an urban society where heterogeneity is the social pattern of public life, the church must be on the same wave length with these massive and complex dimensions if there is to be effective and lasting growth" (170).

<sup>94</sup>DuBose followed McGavran's definition of the HUP but noted, "Because homogeneity is the pattern of primary groups within the city, the homogeneous unit principle has value, but it should always be balanced with the heterogeneous principle. It should never be used primarily as a manipulative pragmatic principle" (170).

Bible studies which he called “penetration” groups.<sup>95</sup>

Following the publication of *How Churches Grow in an Urban World*, McGavran corresponded with DuBose regarding DuBose’s criticism of the HUP.

McGavran wrote,

I am happy . . . to share with you our concern that the multitudinous peoples (ethnic groups, linguistic units, economic entities, in short, segments of society) which exist and are going to continue to exist are evangelized effectively. By those last two words, I mean “evangelized in such a way that it becomes possible for them to become Christians.” It is not possible for a person who speaks only Mandarin to become a Christian if the only church he can join is an English speaking one. Our Lord did not require his disciples to join a congregation made up of Italian speaking soldiers meeting in the barracks of the Roman army of occupation.<sup>96</sup>

DuBose responded that he was “open” on the subject, but stood firm in his conviction that the HUP promoted racism.<sup>97</sup>

McGavran saw that the primary root of arguments like those of DuBose was a concern for Christian “brotherhood” that breaks down barriers and unites races. He was sensitive to race problems in the United States, even to the point of joining a multi-racial church and giving to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference.<sup>98</sup>

Historian Martin Marty blasted the Homogeneous Unit Principle in a 1978 article titled, “Is Homogeneous-Unit Principle of Church Christian?” Beginning on a sarcastic note, Marty opined, “Jesus Christ is evidently not able to break down most barriers between people so far as their races, ethnic groups, social classes, economic

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<sup>95</sup>Ibid., 161-62.

<sup>96</sup>Donald McGavran to Francis DuBose, 12 March 1979 (WCIU 9). See also, C. Peter Wagner to Francis DuBose, 7 March 1979 (WCIU 9).

<sup>97</sup>Francis DuBose to Donald McGavran, 2 May 1979 (WCIU 9).

<sup>98</sup>Donald McGavran to Martin Marty, 24 April 1978 (WCIU 4.3); Martin Luther King, Jr., to Donald McGavran, 15 October 1963 (WCIU 4.3).



brackets, and the like are concerned.”<sup>99</sup> McGavran responded with a personal letter to Marty in which he defended the principle against Marty’s charges of racism.

First, he reminded Marty that the HUP was first and foremost a missionary principle aimed at removing unnecessary barriers to the gospel among “the three billion people who have yet to believe.”<sup>100</sup> Second, McGavran argued that those who promote the HUP also advocate “full brotherhood” in the church. “While I was formulating the Homogeneous Unit Principle,” McGavran wrote,

Mrs. McGavran and I were the only white members of the All Black Second Christian Church of Indianapolis. We have spent more than thirty years living among dark skinned people in India, eating with them, working with them, regarding them in every way as brothers and sisters. One of them, a saintly man, I regarded as my guru. When meeting him I would bend down and touch his feet – the Indian way of showing marked respect. I would have marched at Selma had it been possible. I contribute to various current causes for establishing more brotherhood here in the USA.<sup>101</sup>

McGavran clearly felt the need to emphasize his own conscience with regard to race in the face of Marty’s accusations. He also recognized the danger of segregation:

There is danger, of course, that congregations (whether established according to the HU principle or not) become exclusive, arrogant, and racist. That danger must be resolutely combated. It is combated better among Christians who accept the Bible as their rule of faith and practice and accept Christ as their Lord and Saviour, than among people who don’t. But it must be combated. We say this again and again – and live it, too.<sup>102</sup>

McGavran saw no contradiction between his Homogeneous Unit Principle and his

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<sup>99</sup>Martin Marty, “Is Homogeneous-Unit Principle of Church Christian?” *Context* (15 March 1978), 2. Marty referred often in the article to C. Peter Wagner, “How Ethical is the Homogeneous Unit Principle?” *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 2, no. 1 (January 1978): 12-19.

<sup>100</sup>Donald McGavran to Martin Marty, 24 April 1978 (WCIU 4.3).

<sup>101</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup>*Ibid.* Emphasis McGavran’s. For further discussion of McGavran’s views on the eradication of racism, see chap. 6 of this dissertation.

commitment to Christian brotherhood. He accused Marty of “blowing up” the issue in the name of gaining readership for his newsletter.<sup>103</sup>

In his letter to Marty, McGavran mentioned a 1974 article from *Missiology* on the topic of racism and the Homogeneous Unit Principle. Victor Hayward, then a leader in the World Council of Churches, chastised McGavran for an article in *Church Growth Bulletin* detailing real examples of the HUP in local missions.<sup>104</sup> In a summary statement, McGavran asked what he believed to be the debate’s key questions: “Is the desire of men to become Christians with their own kind, without crossing barriers, normal and right? Should it be respected and encouraged? Or is it demonic, a denial of the gospel?”<sup>105</sup> McGavran responded to his own questions, writing,

Churches today must impose only those conditions for baptism and entry into the Body recorded in the New Testament. These are only three: faith, repentance, and confession. Because of the battle for brotherhood now raging, the temptation is enormous to add a fourth condition: to become a Christian you must cross a race or class barrier! The temptation must be resisted. Once we start loading on the law, where shall we stop? Let us bring men to Christ, confident that once they have accepted Him and fed on His Word, He will give them eyes to see what they should do and power to do it.<sup>106</sup>

Such was the heart of McGavran’s response to criticism of the Homogeneous Unit Principle. He believed that barriers must be broken down, but that such change was

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<sup>103</sup>Ibid.

<sup>104</sup>Victor Hayward and Donald McGavran, “Without Crossing Barriers? One in Christ vs. Discipling Diverse Cultures,” *Missiology* 2, no. 2 (April 1974): 203-24; Donald McGavran, “Without Crossing Barriers,” *Church Growth Bulletin* 7, no. 5 (May 1971): 1-3. The article in *Missiology* reproduced a series of correspondence between Hayward and McGavran between 16 August 1971 and 22 December 1971 that stemmed from the *Church Growth Bulletin* article. In the first letter, Hayward referred to church growth based on homogeneous units as “demonic” (205).

<sup>105</sup>Hayward and McGavran, “Without Crossing Barriers?,” 222.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid., 223.

the fruit of the gospel rather than the gospel itself. Racism itself was sinful, but such sin could be defeated only by spiritual growth (perfecting).

Within the debates over the Homogeneous Unit Principle, cities introduced a special challenge. McGavran's own missionary experience was essentially rural, but he recognized that urban contexts presented a different challenge not found in village and tribal areas where "people consciousness" remained strong.<sup>107</sup> He first broached the subject in print in *How Churches Grow*. Using Japan as an example, McGavran dispelled the idea that its population was truly homogeneous. Clans and villages each had a unique culture and community that lent themselves to homogeneous unit churches. "Even in the urban areas," McGavran wrote, "there are sub-divisions significant for church growth."<sup>108</sup>

Japan proved to be an excellent example of urban church growth problems for McGavran. In 1968, he visited Japan and gave a lecture on church growth. He began,

Japan is an urban society and is becoming ever more so. Any visitor to Japan will be shown a map of Japan in which the four hundred mile long region between Tokyo and Osaka is colored black. This central area will hold 85 million people, 85 percent of the people of Japan, a vast megalopolis. There will be other cities and towns to be sure, but the great modern CITY in Japan will be one of some eighty five million people or more. How does the Church grow in the CITY? How can congregations multiply in these great conurbations? The Church in Japan is an urban phenomenon – but is scarcely showing how cities can be permeated with the gospel.<sup>109</sup>

McGavran outlined the slow growth of the Japanese church, describing the

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<sup>107</sup>India is still overwhelmingly rural, with 80 percent of the population living in the villages or countryside. Some of the world's largest cities, however, are found in that nation. See M. S. A. Rao, Chandrashekar Bhat, and Laxmi Narayan Kedekar, eds., *A Reader in Urban Sociology* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1991), 2. This work focuses on the Indian context.

<sup>108</sup>McGavran, *How Churches Grow*, 43.

<sup>109</sup>Donald McGavran, "Church Growth in Japan: Some Observations in the Summer of 1968," unpublished Manuscript (WCIU 3.4). See also, Donald McGavran, "An Address on Japan Church Growth Given to the Missionary Fellowship in the Fall of 1968," unpublished notes (WCIU 3.4).

evangelistic success among young people and single women who had moved to larger cities for work. These “segments,” as McGavran defined the groups, were the most responsive due to their separation from family and other social ties. The answer for church growth, he contended, was reaching these segments (and many others) through gospel proclamation, “provided it is proclaimed to them in their language, by people of their own station in life, and in ways in which becoming Christian is possible to them.”<sup>110</sup>

In *Understanding Church Growth*, McGavran acknowledged an “urban exception” to his Homogeneous Unit Principle. “In a few metropolitan centers of Africa,” he wrote,

The fire under the pot has grown hot enough so that homogeneous units *are* disintegrating, many cross-class marriages *are* taking place, and migrants from various parts of the country *are* becoming one new people. A true melting pot has developed. In such cities, some supratribal Churches are growing rapidly by conversion. Congregations which worship in a standard language and disregard class differences multiply furiously. In such cities the unifying brotherhood should be stressed, breaking with the old homogeneous unit should become a prerequisite for baptism, and worship in the standard language should become the rule.<sup>111</sup>

This statement appears to contradict his comments in the correspondence with Victor Hayward discussed earlier. In fact, it reveals McGavran’s recognition that in urban contexts, various types of churches are necessary – ideas he discussed in more detail in *Ethnic Realities and the Church*.

In that work, McGavran identified nine “types” of churches in India, two of which were specifically urban. “Urban Conglomerates” were churches made up of various people groups and segments.<sup>112</sup> Most members of such churches came originally from multi-ethnic mission station churches. When they moved to cities, they joined

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<sup>110</sup>McGavran, “Church Growth in Japan,” 13.

<sup>111</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 215.

<sup>112</sup>Donald McGavran, *Ethnic Realities and the Church: Lessons from India* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979), 157-59.

similar churches. McGavran argued that, in general, such churches had low evangelistic potential except among certain segments of dislocated, disfranchised individuals and families.<sup>113</sup>

A second field for Urban Conglomerates was among segments for whom ethnicity and people-consciousness had broken down. “Discerning real social units,” he later wrote,

must sometimes reckon with the fact that moving into cities, and moving around in cities, loosens up traditional social units. And for a time, the old bonds being loosened, a new social unit which is ephemeral is created. This new social unit is made up of recent arrivals. These are separated from the old social unit and so are open to the possibility of entering a new social unit.<sup>114</sup>

Within a narrow window of time, individuals and families moving to cities were open to forming new groups based not necessarily on identity, but on other factors. In these cases, the HUP continued to apply but within the new group rather than the old tribal or ethnic unit.

The best evangelistic methodology for urban conglomerates was, however, to start monoethnic churches among homogeneous units, whether those units be identified according to ethnicity, economic status, or trade. “Urban Monoethnics,” as McGavran called homogeneous churches in urban contexts, had the greatest evangelistic potential.<sup>115</sup> Whether made up of recent arrivals from homogeneous units in tribal or caste areas or from new converts (a case more rare), such churches grew best by reaching out to people of like background.

Two of McGavran’s “eight keys” for discipling urban populations outlined in

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<sup>113</sup>Ibid., 167-69.

<sup>114</sup>Donald McGavran, “Lecture on Urban Church Growth, May 23 1978, to Hiebert’s Class on Urban Anthropology,” unpublished lecture notes (BGC 178.85.3).

<sup>115</sup>McGavran, *Ethnic Realities*, 176.

*Understanding Church Growth* dealt specifically with the Homogeneous Unit Principle. First, McGavran argued that urban missionaries must “recognize resistant homogeneous units.”<sup>116</sup> One must see in a city not one urban population, but a variety of different groupings. “The city,” he wrote,

is not a homogeneous whole, but rather a mosaic made up of hundreds of segments of society, a few responsive, many indifferent, and a few highly resistant. The obedient and intelligent steward of God’s grace recognizes this and plans his work in the light of it.<sup>117</sup>

Recent immigrants from rural areas or cities might prove to be a receptive unit, as could those struggling to lift themselves from poverty. Whatever the primary source of self-identification, each homogeneous unit needed to hear the gospel and, when converted, work to spread the good news among its own kind.

McGavran also suggested the need to “multiply tribe, caste, and language Churches.”<sup>118</sup> The most fundamental division of urban homogeneous units was language. “Part of the feeling of lostness in responsive homogeneous units in cities,” he wrote, “comes from the fact that the immigrants are not at home in the standard language of the city. Even when they learn to speak it after a fashion, it never sounds as sweet in their ears as their mother tongue.”<sup>119</sup> New congregations who worshipped in one language were necessary for gospel propagation. McGavran mourned the tendency, especially in urban contexts, to ignore language differences. Even worse, he noted, were attempts to worship in multiple languages. Such practices, he declared, led to “bedlam.”<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>116</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 287.

<sup>117</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup>*Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>119</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup>*Ibid.*, 290.

As noted earlier, McGavran acknowledged that certain segments desired to join the dominant culture. “Under such circumstances,” he conceded, “multitudes will flock into congregations which worship in the standard language, encourage intermarriages, and demonstrate the melting pot at its hottest.”<sup>121</sup> Among such groups, multiethnic congregations were possible and necessary. “But in most cases,” he warned, “the melting-pot aspect has been grossly overestimated.”<sup>122</sup>

By the time of the publication of his last book, *Effective Evangelism*, McGavran had become fully convinced of both the importance of urban centers and the challenges of evangelism in those contexts. Writing of the importance of the Homogeneous Unit Principle, McGavran declared,

This is particularly important in urban evangelization in the United States. Despite the fact that in America we are all one people, the urban populations are composed of many different segments. The ethnic minorities living in inner cities are quite different from the wealthy populations in beautiful suburbs.<sup>123</sup>

McGavran devoted an entire chapter of the book to “Segments of Society and Church Growth,” most of which focused on urban contexts.<sup>124</sup>

McGavran identified the various units of urban society by ethnicity, income, education, vocation, and age. “Urban humanity,” he wrote,

is a mosaic made up of thousands of pieces. Men and women of each piece like to join congregations made up of people like themselves, speaking the same language, receiving the same incomes, having the same amount of education, and thinking very much alike.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>121</sup>Ibid.

<sup>122</sup>Ibid.

<sup>123</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 59.

<sup>124</sup>Ibid., 110.

<sup>125</sup>Ibid., 111.

The biblical command, he added, was that “Congregations ought to be multiplied in each piece of the mosaic.”<sup>126</sup> To emphasize his point, McGavran added,

The modern city is not made up of one kind of persons but of many, many different kinds – business executives, government officers, daily laborers, university professors, ditch diggers, illiterates, semi-literates, and many, many others. In some segments of America the average income is \$50,000 a year; in others it is \$5,000.

Stated in ethnic terms, urban populations in America today are composed of many different ethnic strains – Anglos, blacks, Hispanics, Vietnamese, Chinese, Filipinos, Samoans, French Canadians, and many others. Each of these major divisions again is subdivided into subsections. Recent arrivals from Mexico are different from third and fourth generation Hispanics. Puerto Rican Hispanics consider themselves superior to Mexican Hispanics. And Argentinian Hispanics hold themselves to be superior to Puerto Ricans. The mosaic of humanity is wonderfully displayed in American cities today.<sup>127</sup>

For McGavran, the beautiful diversity of cities might complicate evangelization according to his Homogeneous Unit Principle, but it did not negate the principle’s reality and applicability in those contexts. Rather than glossing over the diversity and variety of peoples and segments in cities, urban missionaries must find ways to share Christ among all urban peoples. The end goal was not to create a church that erased ethnic, language, or economic barriers but rather to work within the cultures of men to proclaim the gospel. “The Church,” he closed a 1983 article in *Urban Mission*,

will not transform all segments of humanity into one homogeneous unit, all of whose members speak Esperanto, English, or Hindi. The Bible tells us that on that Great Day men will be there from every tribe and nation and people and *tongue*. The Church spreads throughout the unbelievably complex fabric of urban mankind, it will assume many faces. Each is an urban face of His body, the Church.<sup>128</sup>

### **Urban Church Planting**

Integral to Donald McGavran’s commitment to global evangelization was his

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<sup>126</sup>Ibid., 112.

<sup>127</sup>Ibid., 112-13.

<sup>128</sup>Donald McGavran, “New Urban Faces of the Church,” *Urban Mission* 1, no. 1 (September 1983): 11. Emphasis McGavran’s.



view that accomplishing that task required planting churches. Stemming from his high view of the church and his conviction that the conversion process must result in church membership, McGavran placed great importance on the reproduction of local churches within populations. He contended throughout his ministry that evangelism was “proclaiming Christ and persuading men to become His disciples and responsible members of His Church.”<sup>129</sup> He once described “church growth,” writing,

we mean a process of spiritual reproduction whereby new congregations are formed. The Church in New Testament times grew in this fashion. New congregations by the score sprang up where there had been none before. In our use of the term, a Church “grows” when it multiplies its membership and its congregations and then with ever-increasing power takes into itself converts in a widening stream.<sup>130</sup>

His own definition of church planting tied the task directly to evangelism.<sup>131</sup>

McGavran believed that the primary task of missions was the planting of new congregations. In *Understanding Church Growth*, he declared, “for the welfare of the world, for the good of mankind – according to the Bible, one task is paramount. Today’s supreme task is effective multiplication of churches in the receptive societies of earth.”<sup>132</sup> It would be difficult to overstate McGavran’s commitment to church reproduction. His lifelong quest that began with the question of how peoples become Christian ended with

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<sup>129</sup> Donald Anderson McGavran, ed., *Church Growth and Christian Mission* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 231; Donald McGavran, ed., *Eye of the Storm: The Great Debate in Mission* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972), 57; Donald A. McGavran, “Loose the Churches. Let them Go!” *Missiology* 1, no. 2 (April 1973): 81. In *Understanding Church Growth*, McGavran wrote that “God desires that men be saved in this sense: that through faith they live in Christ and through obedience they are baptized in His name and live as responsible members of His Body” (51). See also, Melancon, “Examination of Select Theological Topics,” 142-53.

<sup>130</sup> Pickett et al., *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, 98.

<sup>131</sup> McGavran, “Dictionary of Church Growth Terms,” 2.

<sup>132</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 49.

the expansion of the church into every people of the globe.

Unfortunately, McGavran saw in his own time two competing views, or “concepts,” of missions. The first maintained “that mission is proclaiming the gospel to all men whether they obey it or not.”<sup>133</sup> Within this view, McGavran contended, church planting is of little or, at best, secondary importance. The key was “that the gospel be preached everywhere, among all populations, languages, and varieties of men.”<sup>134</sup> Such a viewpoint was admirable but incomplete.

The second concept, which McGavran defended, focused on evangelism with the end goal of reproducing churches. “Concept Two,” wrote McGavran,

holds that mission is essentially bringing men into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ and His Church. . . . It believes that the Gospel must be preached throughout the entire world, but is convinced that the most effective way to achieve that is to multiply churches which are themselves reproductive.<sup>135</sup>

McGavran firmly believed throughout his career that missions and mission work, including institutional work like education, orphanages, and hospitals, was only effective if the end result was indigenous churches.

With regard to urban missions, McGavran devoted four of his “eight keys” to suggestions about church planting. He argued that urban church planting presented special problems that required unique answers. McGavran noted that much missions work had been based in cities but that urban church growth had been slow. “Failure of the church to grow in most cities,” he noted, “is not due to lack of effort.”<sup>136</sup> Most

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<sup>133</sup>Donald McGavran, “Evangelization or Church Planting,” unpublished manuscript, n.d. (WCIU 7.3). McGavran’s arguments in this paper are very similar to the distinction he made between “search” and “harvest” theologies. See *Understanding Church Growth*, 34-48.

<sup>134</sup>Ibid.

<sup>135</sup>Ibid., 2.

<sup>136</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 281.

mission stations had been located in cities, but missionaries worked from those stations into the countryside. Church planting took place in villages, but urban congregations remained static, at best.<sup>137</sup> Missionaries suffered from the illusion that city churches were strong and that “city work” had progressed well. “But city work is not the task,” McGavran continued,

The assignment is not “to reach the cities.” The Church has already done that. Her task is to bring urban multitudes to faith and obedience. The goal to be constantly held in mind is so to preach and live the Gospel that baptized believers in increasing numbers flow into existing congregations, and form themselves into new congregations, which ramify and branch out through the wards, *barrios*, *colonias*, *mohullas*, and other sections of urbania, soon to be occupied by 1,500,000,000 human beings.<sup>138</sup>

### **Planting House Churches**

The most notable point of McGavran’s urban missiology is his recommendation that missionaries plant house churches. He pointed to the biblical background of house churches, noting that the early church in Jerusalem most certainly did not meet in large buildings.<sup>139</sup> For missionaries and churches faced with dense populations and high property costs, house churches represented a viable alternative to permanent buildings. McGavran also maintained that a “congregation should meet in the most natural surroundings, to which non-Christians can come with the greatest ease and where the converts themselves carry on the services.”<sup>140</sup> House churches thus served

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<sup>137</sup>Ibid., 280.

<sup>138</sup>Ibid., 281-82. McGavran apparently understood “reaching” the cities as having missionaries and churches physically present. Missionaries and churches were already present in many cities, so evangelism was not a “pioneer” activity. The missionary task, rather, was to evangelize the peoples of the city.

<sup>139</sup>Donald McGavran, “House Churches: A Key Factor for Growth,” *Global Church Growth* 19, no. 1 (January-March 1992): 5.

<sup>140</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 285.

both a pragmatic economic purpose and an evangelistic one.

Advocates of “house churches” have used the phrase in different ways. For some, the term refers to autonomous local churches that meet in a home or, perhaps, in another small intimate place.<sup>141</sup> The house church in this model will always remain small, simply structured, and without a dedicated building. A second model views the house church as a transitional church that will likely move at some point into a more permanent, dedicated structure. Such was the style of the “house-church” movement in England in the 1970s.<sup>142</sup> A third usage is more properly called a cell church model. Advocates stress the importance of small intimate gatherings, but the small groups meet together on a regular basis in larger corporate worship.<sup>143</sup> Advocates of the first model generally reject both of the other views as valid house churches.<sup>144</sup>

In his writing on house churches, McGavran rarely addressed the autonomous local church model except in rare circumstances where context dictated such an existence. For example, in his article on house churches in a 1992 edition of *Global Church Growth*, McGavran used Paul Yonggi Cho’s Yoido Full Gospel Church as an

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<sup>141</sup>See, for example, Wolfgang Simson, *Houses that Change the World: The Return of the House Churches* (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: OM Publishing, 1998); Robert and Julia Banks, *The Church Comes Home* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998); Tony and Felicity Dale, *Simply Church* (Austin, TX: Karis Publishing, 2002); J.D. Payne, *Missional House Churches: Reaching Our Communities with the Gospel* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2007).

<sup>142</sup>Simson, *Houses that Change the World*, 72-73.

<sup>143</sup>C. Kirk Hadaway, Francis M. DuBose, and Stuart A. Wright, *Home Cell Groups and House Churches* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), 113-41. Hadaway, DuBose, and Wright discuss several models in detail. See also, William A. Beckham, *The Second Reformation: Reshaping the Church for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Houston: Touch Publications, 1995); Ralph W. Neighbour, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here?* (Houston: Touch Publications, 2000).

<sup>144</sup>Banks and Banks, *Church Comes Home*, viii.

example.<sup>145</sup> But Yoido Church is generally recognized as a cell church because the hundreds of local groups are part of the larger congregation that gathers for worship. On another occasion, McGavran lauded the Boston mission of Kip McKean for its work with house churches. McKean, too, worked more with a cell church model.<sup>146</sup>

The benefit of house churches in urban contexts, McGavran argued, was not an ecclesiological issue but rather a pragmatic one. He contended that “the house church movement must never fight a battle against buildings.”<sup>147</sup> The most important aspect of the model was not the structure but the intent. House churches fulfilled two essential purposes: evangelizing homogeneous units and providing low cost locations for new churches. Churches need not remain forever in a home or apartment, but small groups of believers and unbelievers meeting to study the scriptures would always provide opportunities for evangelism.

As noted above, McGavran observed that cities hosted diverse mixtures of peoples and that “congregations ought to be multiplied in each piece of the mosaic.”<sup>148</sup> One way to accomplish that task was through the launching of hundreds of small churches made up of members of each people. “Each segment must be won to Christ on its own level,” he wrote, “If it is invited to join a church composed of people living on a different level, it will reject Christ very largely because the Savior is obscured by His congregation.”<sup>149</sup> House churches, on the other hand, could remain homogeneous and

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<sup>145</sup>McGavran, “House Churches,” 5-6.

<sup>146</sup>Donald McGavran and Kip McKean, “Effective Evangelization in Modern Cities,” *Urban Mission* (March 1985): 40-41. See also, McGavran, “House Churches,” 5.

<sup>147</sup>McGavran, “House Churches,” 5.

<sup>148</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 112.

<sup>149</sup>*Ibid.*, 113; McGavran, “House Churches,” 5.

provide comfortable surroundings, especially for recent immigrants. To missionaries seeking to reach Italian immigrants in Toronto, McGavran suggested learning one or two of the variety of Italian dialects, then returning to Toronto to start dozens of house churches – an “Italian ‘city within a city.’”<sup>150</sup>

Such groups, according to McGavran, must serve an intentionally evangelistic purpose. He warned against the danger that groups would become inwardly focused and lose contact with non-believers. In the 1950s, McGavran reported to his supervisors on the growth of urban congregations in Puerto Rico. Several large city churches launched dozens of small groups including “house churches.” “Each provides a steady stream of converts which when they have been instructed are baptized in the San Juan Church,” he wrote.<sup>151</sup> Kip McKean’s ministry in Boston hosted 150 evangelistic Bible studies each week. McGavran lauded the strategy but warned,

Most Bible studies carried on by most churches have very little evangelistic impact. This is because those who attend and study the Bible are already Christians – the most faithful members of existing churches. An evangelistic Bible study can take place only where practicing “Christians” invite their unbelieving friends and together study pertinent passages of God’s Word.<sup>152</sup>

McGavran repeatedly celebrated urban churches that planted house churches and small groups throughout their cities.<sup>153</sup> He often used David Yonggi Cho’s Yoido

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<sup>150</sup>Donald McGavran to Charles Tipp, 24 March 1980 (WCIU 8.2).

<sup>151</sup>Donald A. McGavran, “The Plain But Thorny Path to Church Growth in the Foreign Field,” report presented to the Board of Managers of the United Christian Missionary Society, Des Moines, Iowa, n.d. (BGC 178.50.2), 1. While the report is undated, it would have been presented some time in 1956 or 1957.

<sup>152</sup>McGavran and McKean, “Effective Evangelization in Modern Cities,” 42.

<sup>153</sup>Donald McGavran, “Evangelization in India,” unpublished manuscript (WCIU 5.1); Donald McGavran to Edgardo Silvano, 13 December 1965 (WCIU 9); McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 286.

Church as an example of a growing urban church.<sup>154</sup> Following McGavran's research visit to Zaire in 1977, he declared, "Church multiplication in the cities today will have to be intelligent, meet today's conditions, solve urban problems, and operate in a rapidly changing Africa."<sup>155</sup> He described successful models in the cities of Kinshasa and Boma, Zaire, both based on small or house churches.<sup>156</sup>

The churches of Boma, a port city in Zaire, demonstrated the second benefit of house churches: their low cost. In *Understanding Church Growth*, McGavran devoted another of his "keys" to the need to "surmount the property barrier."<sup>157</sup> He argued that churches restricted to meeting in homes often had trouble in areas of great poverty and in slums. In those locales, large families often lived in one or two small rooms. Hosting a church was difficult. In Boma, two large churches dominated key hillsides. In order to reach into the crowded areas of the city, the churches planted eighteen small "chapels" constructed of inexpensive materials. "The essence of the Boma model can now be stated," wrote McGavran,

The eighteen chapels are, in effect, eighteen local churches – each with about two hundred fifty adult members, plus children. Members of each congregation know each other well. Their children go to school together. They meet in the chapel several times a week. The catechist-teacher (pastor) knows each one by name. In

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<sup>154</sup>McGavran and McKean, "Effective Evangelization in Modern Cities," 43; Donald McGavran, notes following a visit to David Yonggi Cho, Summer 1976, (WCIU 10.3); Donald McGavran, "An Article Idea," unpublished notes, 10 October 1976 (WCIU 10.3); McGavran, "House Churches," 5-6.

<sup>155</sup>Donald McGavran and Norman Riddle, *Zaire: Midday in Missions* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1979), 149.

<sup>156</sup>*Ibid.*, 149-50; Donald McGavran, "God's Royal Power in Zaire," edited manuscript (WCIU 5.1); Donald McGavran, "The Boma Model," *The Alliance Witness* 112, no. 22 (1977): 20.

<sup>157</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 291; McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 59.

these chapels Christians develop genuine community, pay their pastor, build and repair the chapels, and study the Bible together.<sup>158</sup>

While not house churches in the strictest sense, the Boma chapels met McGavran's criteria for inexpensive evangelistic outposts in the city. Groups gathered in the local buildings during the week but gathered in a larger meeting on Sundays, much as did the Yoido Church in Seoul.

### **Leading Urban Churches**

Another vital area of urban mission strategy for McGavran involved leadership development. On one hand, the need for national leaders was logical; as churches grew and multiplied, local leadership would be necessary. McGavran's position on lay leadership was not only practical, however. He argued that well-trained lay leadership in small urban churches would cause them to be more effective in efforts to reach the city.

In *Understanding Church Growth*, McGavran argued forcefully for lay leadership, pointing out that "laymen have played a great part in urban expansions of the Church."<sup>159</sup> "In any land," he continued,

when laborers, mechanics, clerks, or truck drivers teach the Bible, lead in prayer, tell what God has done for them, or exhort the brethren, the Christian religion looks and sounds natural to ordinary men. . . . No paid worker from the outside and certainly no missionary from abroad can know as much about a neighborhood as someone who had dozens of relatives and intimates all about him.<sup>160</sup>

McGavran returned to his frequent examples of growing urban churches as references. Both David Yonggi Cho in Seoul and Kip McKean in Boston provided solid examples of church planters who relied heavily on non-clergy leadership.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>158</sup>McGavran, "The Boma Model," 20.

<sup>159</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 286.

<sup>160</sup>*Ibid.*, 286-87.

<sup>161</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 129-35.



Lay leadership did not mean untrained leadership, however. Pointing to Nevius' model of long periods of training for evangelists, McGavran argued that "lay leaders need much training whether in town or village."<sup>162</sup> Much later, he admonished seminaries and Bible schools to train pastors to prepare laypeople for ministry and church planting.<sup>163</sup>

In the early 1970s, McGavran engaged in correspondence with Roger Greenway, then a Presbyterian missionary in Latin America. Greenway suggested the possibility of launching a cluster of urban church growth "institutes" around the world.<sup>164</sup> McGavran responded with great enthusiasm, suggesting first that such an institute should "stimulate urban church planting of all sorts."<sup>165</sup> He pointed to Clark Scanlon's *Church Growth through Theological Education* as an excellent example of creative methodology.<sup>166</sup> Scanlon, a Southern Baptist missionary in Guatemala, argued that

the New Testament pattern involves each Christian unreservedly throwing all his resources, physical, mental and personal into the reconciling of the world to God in Christ. The sharp division of responsibility between laity and clergy was a later and

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<sup>162</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 287; John L. Nevius, *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches* (Shanghai: Presbyterian Press, 1886; reprint, Hancock, NH: Monadnock Press, 2003). Nevius advocated (and practiced) long periods of training for lay evangelists. Leaders would come to a central city (in Nevius' case, Chefoo in China) for terms from six weeks to two months, generally during slow times for agricultural work. Training covered not only Bible and theology but also subjects such as geography, astronomy, and history. See Nevius, *Planting and Development*, 50-52.

<sup>163</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 134-35.

<sup>164</sup>Roger Greenway to Donald McGavran, 29 May 1974 (WCIU 9).

<sup>165</sup>Donald McGavran to Roger Greenway, 4 June 1974 (WCIU 9).

<sup>166</sup>*Ibid.*; Clark Scanlon, *Church Growth through Theological Education (in Guatemala)* (n.p.: Libreria Bautista, 1962). McGavran published Scanlon's work through the Institute for Church Growth.

detrimental addition to the Christian faith.<sup>167</sup>

In a separate letter, McGavran suggested that only ministers who had been “successful in winning men and starting house churches,” whether clergy or laity, be allowed to serve.<sup>168</sup>

### Conclusion

Donald McGavran’s “eight keys” to urban missions and evangelism are a clear application of his larger church growth missiology. McGavran sought to answer a foundational question: how do peoples become Christian? In *Understanding Church Growth* and throughout much of his writing and correspondence, McGavran sought to discover ways to reach the growing urbanized populations, especially through evangelism and church planting.

His ideas on people movements, the Homogeneous Unit Principle, church planting, and leadership were formulated over almost sixty years of ministry and study. All were, he believed, critical to discipling urban peoples and segments, what he referred to as a “beautiful mosaic.” Summarizing his passion at the end of his life, he wrote,

These commands must be obeyed, especially in the rapidly growing and many-faceted cities of the world and the responsive populations. The essential work was the spread of the Christian faith. The absolute center of evangelization was *matheteusate panta ta ethne*, incorporating all the segments of society into Christ’s body.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>167</sup>Scanlon, *Church Growth through Theological Education*, 61.

<sup>168</sup>Donald McGavran to Roger Greenway, 28 April 1971 (WCIU 9).

<sup>169</sup>McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 67.

## CHAPTER 6

### MCGAVRAN AND URBAN SOCIAL MINISTRY

In one sense, the historic roots of Donald McGavran's church growth missiology were grounded in the debates over the relationship between evangelism and social action.<sup>1</sup> In an unpublished 1971 manuscript describing the Church Growth Movement, McGavran wrote that the term "'Church Growth' was first used because the word evangelism had been emasculated by both the right and the left."<sup>2</sup> He acknowledged that the "right" had struggled to understand the complete meaning of evangelism by an emphasis on "seed sowing" and neglect of baptism and church membership. "The left," he wrote, "had gutted it by confining its use to the good deeds done in schools and hospitals and leprosy homes, 'indirect evangelism,' service substituted for discipling, Inter-church aid substituted for missionary work."<sup>3</sup>

Throughout his missionary and teaching career, McGavran worked to keep the priority of evangelism in front of world Christianity. He firmly believed that social

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<sup>1</sup>Authors represented in this chapter, including McGavran, used terms like "social action" and "social ministry" at various times in their writing. Generally, the terms are interchangeable and will be considered synonymous in this chapter.

<sup>2</sup>Donald McGavran, "Church Growth and Evangelism," unpublished manuscript notes, 1971 (WCIU 1.1). William Carey International University and the U.S. Center for World Mission house a significant collection of McGavran's personal correspondence. Unfortunately, the collection remains in McGavran's original filing cabinets and has not been catalogued. References in this collection will refer to the filing cabinet and drawer. "WCIU, 8.2" refers to the McGavran Collection at WCIU, cabinet 8, drawer 2.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

ministries were an important part of church ministry, but the Great Commission demanded a focus on proclamation of the gospel, even in the face of social problems and injustices.

Such problems seem to multiply in the density and complexity of urban contexts, and one must consider the challenges that come when a Christian believer, especially one from a Western nation, confronts extreme poverty, open injustice, and urban sin for the first time. In his important (though controversial) study on a biblical theology of the urban church, Robert Linthicum explained his own experience. Having arrived in inner city Chicago in the mid-1950s, Linthicum recalled years later,

Incident after incident reminded me that I suffered from a theology gap. A theology that would be adequate for a rural world or Western culture was not adequate for the city. Manifestations of raw corporate evil, almost beyond the power even of its perpetrators to control, made nonsense of a doctrine of sin perceived as individual acts of wrongdoing. My confrontation with economic and political exploiters of the poor who were also faithful communicants in their churches made a mockery of the church as the body of Christ. My experiences increased my frustration with a theology learned in college and seminary's halls of ivy.<sup>4</sup>

Whether or not one agrees with Linthicum's reaction, he expresses well the encounter that often takes place when a missionary arrives in a culture different from his or her own. For many, moving into a city is equivalent to crossing cultures. Urban poverty seems overwhelming. According to the World Bank, one quarter of the global population lives on less than \$1.25 per day. Half of sub-Saharan Africans live in poverty.<sup>5</sup> Exploitation, human trafficking, and a host of other social problems challenge a believer's ethical and theological sensibilities. The missionary sent to evangelize a

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<sup>4</sup>Robert C. Linthicum, *City of God, City of Satan: A Biblical Theology of the Urban Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 20.

<sup>5</sup>World Bank, "Poverty Trends," [on-line]; accessed 14 July 2009; available from <http://go.worldbank.org/K7LWQUT9L0>; Internet.

people and start churches in a city asks, “How can I witness and preach in the midst of suffering and deprivation?”

McGavran believed the relationship between evangelism and social ministry to be essentially a theological issue with practical and strategic implications. He also saw that social issues such as poverty, justice, and race relations were especially acute in cities. The purpose of this chapter is to engage this relationship, especially in the context McGavran’s missiology. McGavran’s advocacy of the priority of evangelism in missions and of the role of the local church in social ministry applied especially in urban centers.

### **Historical Development of the Debate**

Donald McGavran’s role in debates over the relationship between evangelism and social ministry, while significant in the twentieth century, is part of a much longer story. Historians, Bible scholars, and theologians trace the Church’s involvement in social ministry to the earliest days of the New Testament. As the gospel spread, so did the Church’s involvement in the lives of the communities in which it was planted. Jesus’ ministry was characterized by the proclamation of the kingdom, healing, and ministry to the poor (Luke 4:18, 7:22, et al.). In the fourth century, Roman Emperor Julian complained that Christians took care of not only their own but also the pagan poor.<sup>6</sup> The earliest modern missionaries, like William Carey, established schools, orphanages, and other ministries to the suffering. During the Great Awakening and after, evangelical leaders pursued social concerns alongside gospel proclamation. Men like Spurgeon, Wesley, Whitefield, and their contemporaries were actively involved in social ministry.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Penguin, 1986), 37-38; Timothy J. Keller, *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1997), 87-88.

<sup>7</sup>John R. W. Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today: A Major Appraisal of Contemporary Social and Moral Questions* (Basingstoke, UK: Marshalls, 1984), 2-4. Stott contends that the evangelical revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries led

It was not until the late nineteenth century and the fundamentalist/modernist controversies that division arose over the relationship between evangelism and social ministry.

In a paper presented to the Consultation on the Relationship between Evangelism and Social Responsibility meeting at Grand Rapids in 1982 (a continuation of the Lausanne Congress), Asian theologian Bong Rin Ro traced the history of the Church's social involvement through history from the early church until the twentieth century. He found that, while levels of social involvement ebbed and flowed through the centuries, times of great renewal and revival generally led to increased social involvement. The early church, the Protestant Reformation, and the Great Awakenings were all characterized by social action and ministry. The Reformers' renewed emphasis on Scripture pointed believers toward the needs of those around them. Wesley and Whitefield ministered to the masses and inspired men like William Wilberforce to seek justice for the oppressed. Ro's paper concluded that "the contemporary theology which relates the kingdom of God to social concern and the current debate as to the priority of evangelism or social responsibility are recent developments."<sup>8</sup>

### **From Edinburgh to Uppsala**

Arthur Johnston, John Stott, and David Bosch trace the beginnings of this controversy to the growth of the "Social Gospel" and its influence on the ecumenical missionary councils starting at Edinburgh in 1910. Exemplified by Walter Rauschenbusch at the turn of the twentieth century, the Social Gospel Movement was the

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by men like Wesley, Wilberforce, and the Clapham Sect, are examples of the evangelical passion for social concern throughout history.

<sup>8</sup>Bong Rin Ro, "The Perspective of Church History From New Testament Times to 1960," in *In Word and Deed: Evangelism and Social Responsibility*, ed. Bruce J. Nicholls (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 13.

fruit of liberal theology and pre-World War I social optimism and Darwinism. The movement's aims were strong: reform society, apply Christian ethics to the rapidly urbanizing American landscape, and fight poverty. Unfortunately, Social Gospel thought moved rapidly to an emphasis on the inauguration of a worldly kingdom of God in humanity.<sup>9</sup>

Johnston argued that the World Missionary Conference held at Edinburgh in 1910 revealed a significant shift from a nineteenth century emphasis on personal evangelism and revivalism to one of "'temporal' salvation of man in society."<sup>10</sup> The growth of liberal theology, historical criticism of the Bible, and the Social Gospel movement led to a "new theology" that undermined traditional views of gospel proclamation. The result was a gathering with an overemphasis on pluralism and biblical uncertainty. Bosch argued that millennial tendencies, which led to an optimistic view of history moving toward a perfect Christianized society, influenced the conference toward an increased prominence of social ministry over proclamation.<sup>11</sup> Johnston contended that Edinburgh instigated the division between "ecumenical" and "evangelical" missiologies.<sup>12</sup>

Historians often point to Timothy L. Smith's description of this period as "the

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<sup>9</sup>N. A. Magnuson, "Social Gospel," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 1118-19; David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 400-403.

<sup>10</sup>Arthur P. Johnston, *The Battle for World Evangelism* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1978), 34.

<sup>11</sup>David J. Bosch, *Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), 160.

<sup>12</sup>Johnston, *Battle for World Evangelism*, 52.

Great Reversal.”<sup>13</sup> Where Christians had historically been involved in both evangelism and social ministry, the growth of the Social Gospel and its implications revealed at Edinburgh led to a separation between liberals and fundamentalists on the issue.<sup>14</sup> The division continues in contemporary ministries. Ray Bakke contended that “the schism in the church that has pitted social and personal ministries against each other in the city, a tragic legacy of the fundamentalist-modernist early in the twentieth century, still marginalizes the church’s ministry in a rapidly urbanizing world.”<sup>15</sup>

Carl F. H. Henry, in his important work, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, agreed that the conservative reaction to theological liberalism was much to blame for decades of a dearth of Christian influence on society and social problems.<sup>16</sup> It is difficult to underestimate the influence of this book, published in 1947, on the contemporary social ministry debates. Henry noted that, in addition to its opposition to liberalism, the fundamentalist eschatological emphasis on the imminent return of Christ caused evangelicals to ignore social problems in favor of a total commitment to personal evangelism. “Humanitarianism,” he wrote, “has evaporated from Christianity.”<sup>17</sup> The only solution was a renewed vigor of social action alongside evangelistic fervor. Henry offered a corrective to such evaporation through engaging

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<sup>13</sup>David O. Moberg, *The Great Reversal: Evangelism and Social Concern*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lipincott, 1972), 30. Moberg traces the phrase to Smith’s lectures, but it is not found in his best known work, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).

<sup>14</sup>Moberg, *The Great Reversal*, 11.

<sup>15</sup>Ray Bakke, *A Theology as Big as the City* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 14.

<sup>16</sup>Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947), 10-11.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.



culture and social problems with the redemptive gospel. Such a “contemporary program” meant “total opposition to all moral evils, whether societal or personal” and “offers not only a higher ethical standard than any other system of thought, but provides also in Christ a dynamic to lift humanity to its highest level of moral achievement.”<sup>18</sup>

Unfortunately, the schism between conservatives and liberals on the social ministry issue continued throughout most of the twentieth century. The World Council of Churches (WCC) attempted to broaden missionary conferences to be more accepting of evangelical views.<sup>19</sup> At Amsterdam 1948, however, such overtures were accompanied by a continued departure from historical views on sin, redemption, and the atonement.<sup>20</sup> Between 1948 and the World Congress on Evangelism held in Berlin in 1966, the divergence of ecumenical and evangelical views on missions continued to grow as evangelicals asserted the priority of Great Commission evangelism.

McGavran began to address the issue of the relationship between evangelism and social justice ministries in the 1960s. That is not to say, of course, that McGavran ignored the issue before that time. Most of his early ministry was intertwined with work in education, leprosy clinics, and orphanages. In *The Bridges of God*, McGavran nevertheless pointed to growing churches as the single most effective means to social change. “There is no force for social change,” he wrote,

which could conceivably be greater than that of a great body of Christian clergy and laity, themselves redeemed in the inner man and in close contact with social advancement elsewhere, who would at the same time be thoroughly indigenous national leaders and workers.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 75.

<sup>19</sup>Johnston, *Battle for World Evangelism*, 79-90.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 80.

<sup>21</sup>Donald McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (London: World Dominion Press, 1955), 140-41.

McGavran's high view of the church led to his understanding that the drive for social justice and ministry began with local congregations living according to Scripture. Good ministries were just that – ministries of the church.

In 1965, McGavran organized a group of scholars to compile *Church Growth and Christian Mission*. In his conclusion to the book, McGavran addressed his growing concern for the meaning of *evangelism*. "Further confusion arises in the attachment of new meanings to old words," he began.<sup>22</sup> Referring to what he understood to be the traditional definition of the term, "proclaiming Christ and persuading men to become His disciples and responsible members of His Church," McGavran continued,

But today we read about "industrial evangelism" and "inner city evangelism," whose primary aim seems to be neither to win men to Christian discipleship nor to multiply self-propagating churches, but rather to have existing Christians "enter into dialogue on important ethical and moral issues with the leaders of industrial society." The Church becomes a means for achieving (it is hoped) a greater degree of justice, brotherhood, and decency.<sup>23</sup>

In an early edition of the *Church Growth Bulletin*, McGavran discussed criticism he had received regarding that statement. He pointed out that the problem with "industrial" or "inner city evangelism" was that they did not seek conversion to Christ.<sup>24</sup> One missionary from Mexico wrote to correct McGavran's understanding of industrial evangelism, but McGavran replied that while it is always important for Christians to have

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<sup>22</sup>Donald McGavran, "Conclusion," in *Church Growth and Christian Mission*, ed. Donald McGavran (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 231.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid. McGavran does not cite a source for the quote included here. It appears that he is repeating a general statement proposed by those who have attempted to "redefine" evangelism. "Industrial evangelism" was a movement aimed at evangelizing factory workers, especially those who had moved from rural to urban areas. See Henry D. Jones, "Urban and Industrial Missions," *Occasional Bulletin from the Missionary Research Library* 10, no. 5 (15 June 1959): 1-7.

<sup>24</sup>Donald McGavran, "Does 'Concern for Social Justice' Convert?" *Church Growth Bulletin* 1, no. 3 (January 1965): 11-12.

influence through their daily work, believers must focus on the propagation of the gospel and the multiplication of churches.<sup>25</sup>

McGavran expanded his argument for clarity of definition in an article for *World Vision* in June 1965. He declared, “It is time to recognize that calling all kinds of good actions evangelism simply confuses the issue.”<sup>26</sup> Distinguishing between unreached societies and those with existing churches and numerous believers, McGavran argued that in the latter, the church could be a potent force for justice. In areas yet unreached with the gospel, however, missions must remain focused on gospel proclamation. “The unevangelized billions of the earth,” he concluded, “still call for mission considered as church planting.”<sup>27</sup>

Convened by Billy Graham and *Christianity Today* magazine editor Carl F. H. Henry, the World Congress on Evangelism held in Berlin in 1966 sought to emphasize the importance of gospel proclamation.<sup>28</sup> In his opening remarks, Graham noted, “Our purpose is important because we hold the conviction that evangelism -- the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ -- is the only revolutionary force that can change our world.”<sup>29</sup> Johnston called the Berlin conference “one of the most remarkable evangelical events in

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<sup>25</sup>John Hazelton to Donald McGavran, 9 March 1965 (WCIU 7.1); Donald McGavran to John Hazelton, 12 March 1965 (WCIU 7.1).

<sup>26</sup>Donald McGavran, “Social Justice and Evangelism,” *World Vision* 9, no. 6 (June 1965), 9. McGavran had dozens of copies of this article in his personal files.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup>Johnston, *Battle for World Evangelism*, 155-224.

<sup>29</sup>Billy Graham, “Opening Greetings,” in *One Race, One Gospel, One Task: Official Reference Volumes*, vol. 1, ed. Carl F. H. Henry and W. Stanley Mooneyham (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1967), 8. The proceedings of the Berlin Conference comprise two volumes in this work.

modern Christian history.”<sup>30</sup> McGavran reported on the conference, writing,

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this colorful world gathering is its insistence, in session after session, by speaker after speaker, from communion after communion, that *evangelism in its clear Biblical sense be taken with life and death seriousness*. Dr. Graham said, “Some new definitions of evangelism leave out entirely the winning of men to Jesus Christ . . . . We cannot accept these definitions. Evangelism has social implications, but its primary thrust is winning men to a personal relationship with Christ.”<sup>31</sup>

The Berlin conference was a precursor to the 1974 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in which McGavran would play a more significant role, especially in the area of evangelism and social action.

### **Uppsala 1968**

The World Council of Churches gathering at Uppsala in 1968 and the International Congress on World Evangelization at Lausanne in 1974 stand as pivotal events in the development of a missionary theology of evangelism and social ministry. At Uppsala, ecumenical theologies of missions and evangelism moved farther away from historical and biblical views. At Lausanne, evangelicals adopted a more balanced (but still controversial) approach.

The key term at Uppsala was “humanization.”<sup>32</sup> Johnston identifies several ways that this idea was expressed in the conference. In general, the conference focused on evangelism as the “horizontal” relationship between men rather than the “vertical”

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<sup>30</sup>Johnston, *Battle for World Evangelization*, 157.

<sup>31</sup>Donald McGavran, “World Mission Leaps Forward at Berlin: An Initial Report on The World Congress on Evangelism,” *Church Growth Bulletin* 3, no. 2 (September 1966): 1. Emphasis McGavran’s.

<sup>32</sup>“Humanization” was essentially any kind of social change that improved the lives of human beings. Beyerhaus mentioned education, liberation, and social transformation. See Peter Beyerhaus, “Mission and Humanization,” *International Review of Mission* 60, no. 237 (January 1971): 11-24.

relationship between man and God.<sup>33</sup> Conversion, notes Johnston, “involved, for Uppsala, a turning to one’s fellow man in a new way.”<sup>34</sup> The majority of delegates viewed dialogue as taking precedent over proclamation and defined missions as the struggle for social justice.<sup>35</sup> The first priorities of missions became advocacy for the powerless and revolutionary movements.

The reaction to Uppsala was swift. McGavran edited a collection of essays reflecting both sides of the theological argument titled, *Eye of the Storm: The Great Debate in Mission*.<sup>36</sup> J. C. Hoekendijk, one of the influential WCC voices at Uppsala, opened the book with his essay on “The Call to Evangelism.” He rejected the notion that evangelism was about expanding or growing the church or about church planting. Nor was evangelism mainly proclamation. Rather, the goal of evangelism was the establishment of God’s *shalom* on earth.<sup>37</sup>

Christians accomplished that goal through three things: *kerygma*, *koinonia*, and *diakonia*. Hoekendijk interpreted “*kerygma*” as the preaching of good news, though not necessarily in the sense of contemporary personal evangelism. He believed that the church must proclaim the truth that Jesus has come to renew the creation. Lostness, repentance, and salvation, for Hoekendijk, were not necessarily a part of this

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<sup>33</sup>Johnston, *Battle for World Evangelism*, 232.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>36</sup>Donald McGavran, ed., *Eye of the Storm: The Great Debate in Mission* (Waco, TX: Word, 1972).

<sup>37</sup>J. C. Hoekendijk, “The Call to Evangelism,” in *Eye of the Storm*, 47.

proclamation.<sup>38</sup>

The second aspect of evangelism, for Hoekendijk, was “*koinonia*.” Through community, the Church manifested God’s peace. *Shalom* is lived, not just proclaimed. Finally, evangelism revealed God’s peace through service. Hoekendijk argued that all three of these elements made up a biblical theology of evangelism and missions.<sup>39</sup>

McGavran reserved most of his reaction to Hoekendijk’s essay for the latter’s opposition to church planting evangelism. He did not necessarily reject Hoekendijk’s three-fold view of evangelism, but rather argued that it was too complicated. “K.K.D.,” McGavran contended, referring to *kerygma*, *koinonia*, and *diakonia*, “is one good description of the normal Christian life.”<sup>40</sup> Such a life, however, is not evangelism. McGavran continued, “We must communicate the gospel while doing the good deeds which the Christian sees needed both within and without the church.”<sup>41</sup> He did not reject social ministry as a part of the life of the church, but argued that such action was a result of conversion rather than a form of gospel proclamation. For McGavran, social ministry “commends” the gospel, but is not proclamation of the gospel.

Central to the Uppsala debate was a document referred to as “Section Two,” which became “Renewal in Mission,” the gathering’s official statement on evangelism. The document affirmed the concept of humanization, arguing that the foundation for mission is the humanity of Christ (the “new man”). The Christian’s role in evangelism was to bring others to a place of choosing to come “face to face with his fellow men in a

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<sup>38</sup>Hoekendijk, “Call to Evangelism,” 49-50. Bosch also argues for the threefold scope of mission, saying that all three elements must be present and “indissolubly bound together.” Bosch, *Witness to the World*, 227-28.

<sup>39</sup>Hoekendijk, “Call to Evangelism,” 49-50.

<sup>40</sup>Donald McGavran, “Essential Evangelism,” in *Eye of the Storm*, 63.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 65.

new way.” The goal of evangelism was a new life, the fruit of which freed “men for community, enabling them to break through the racial, national, religious and other barriers that divide the unity of mankind.”<sup>42</sup>

McGavran responded to “Section Two” by asking, “Will Uppsala betray the two billion?” “By ‘betray,’” he clarified, “I mean any course of action which substitutes ashes for bread, fixes the attention of Christians on temporal palliatives instead of eternal remedies, and deceives God’s children with the flesh when they long for the spirit.” McGavran feared that Uppsala was abandoning the traditional definition of missions for church renewal. The document exchanged the biblical understanding of active and intentional church-based evangelism for merely “the church being the church” in the world.<sup>43</sup>

The final documents from Uppsala included a section on “priorities” for missions. Among several suggestions of priority areas, the framers included “rapid urbanization and industrialization.” “All over the world,” the statement read,

men are on the move from tribal village to township, from rural area to urban sprawl. The migrant worker, the sufferer from racial prejudice in housing, the child in a crowded school, the lonely student in his crowded dormitory, the watchers of the T. V. screens, the inmates, nurses and medical specialists of the hospital wards – all these make the emerging urban centres a locality for mission.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>“Renewal in Mission: The World Council’s Final Pronouncement on Mission,” in *Eye of the Storm*, 250. In *Eye of the Storm*, McGavran reproduced exactly the WCC statement originally published in *The Ecumenical Review* 21, no. 4 (October 1969): 362-73.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 233. McGavran devoted several editions of *Church Growth Bulletin* to discussion of the Uppsala meeting. He included articles by prominent evangelical theologians and missiologists such as Ralph Winter, Alan Tippett, and John Stott. See “Special Uppsala Issue,” *Church Growth Bulletin* 4, no. 5 (May 1968); “Uppsala Issue Number Two,” *Church Growth Bulletin* 5, no. 1 (September 1968); “Uppsala Issue Number Three,” *Church Growth Bulletin* 5, no. 2 (November 1968).

<sup>44</sup>World Council of Churches, “Renewal in Mission,” *Ecumenical Review* 21, no. 4 (October 1969): 369.

McGavran's great frustration with Uppsala was the absence of the concept of spiritual lostness in statements such as this one. He asked, "How could the honorable Christians who drafted 'the program' so thoroughly concerned with men's horizontal relationships, have failed to stress the tremendous need of sinful men through faith in Jesus Christ to be born again?"<sup>45</sup>

McGavran's work revealed the theological weaknesses of the Uppsala documents. At the same time, he showed his own belief that evangelism is proclamation and that social ministry is a separate work of churches. The dichotomy that had begun in Edinburgh grew stronger through Uppsala. It would remain for McGavran and other evangelicals to meet separately at Lausanne to clarify relationship between evangelism and social ministry.

Between the Uppsala gathering and the Lausanne Congress, McGavran continued to participate in the heated discussion over the relationship between social action and missions. In a 1969 article in *Church Growth Bulletin*, he questioned the conclusions of Mennonite missionary leader Peter Dyck, who had written an article on poverty relief and ministry.<sup>46</sup> Dyck responded that he believed that, while Christian missionaries should minister to the needs of the poor and suffering, they should never do so as a means to evangelism. His concern was that aid be used as "bait" for non-believers.<sup>47</sup> McGavran replied with a lengthy letter in which he objected strongly to Dyck's characterization:

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<sup>45</sup>Donald McGavran, "Uppsala's 'Program for Mission' and Church Growth," *Church Growth Bulletin* 5, no. 2 (November 1968): 12.

<sup>46</sup>Donald McGavran, "What Does Mr. Dyck Mean?" *Church Growth Bulletin* 6, no. 2 (November 1969): 21-22. The article questioned statements in Peter Dyck, "When is Service Christian?" *MCC News Service Bulletin*, 24 May 1968 (WCIU 7.1).

<sup>47</sup>Peter Dyck to Donald McGavran, 24 December 1969 (WCIU 7.1).



We are talking about a *good deed*. We are talking about giving powdered milk to a woman whose baby is dying for lack of protein. We are asking whether the Christian is justified to give it, saying nothing at the time, expecting that later when – and if – rapport has been established, he will speak to the woman about the Bread of Life, hoping she will accept Christ.<sup>48</sup>

Clearly, McGavran saw the importance of ministries to those in need as well as sharing the gospel.

Leading up to the Lausanne Congress, McGavran stepped up his writing and correspondence related to the issue of social ministry and justice. In the May 1971 *Church Growth Bulletin*, he criticized a WCC conference held in Africa for equating “humane action” with evangelism. McGavran encouraged his readers to contact their own denominational leadership on the issue and, in extreme circumstances, “to withhold dollars from those organizations which disguise their real intent by subtly redefining terms till ‘to preach the gospel’ is ‘to fight behind Che Guevara.’”<sup>49</sup> Paul Hopkins, a leader of Presbyterian missions in Africa, corrected McGavran, pointing out that the meeting was, in fact, developed and sponsored by African churches concerned with racism and revolution.<sup>50</sup>

McGavran responded quickly that Hopkins’ correction was merely technical. The two found common ground, however, on their condemnation of racism. Still, McGavran wrote,

My position you know. I am strongly for social action. For twenty years I was known as “The Chamar Padri.” I have been a member of an all-black church for many years (though not now). I would have marched at Selma had it been possible. My forbears were abolitionists – when social action cost – and prohibitionists – and I am proud of them. But I am totally against social action (humanization) being

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<sup>48</sup>Donald McGavran to Peter Dyck, 22 January 1970 (WCIU 7.1). Emphasis McGavran’s.

<sup>49</sup>Donald McGavran, “What Can Christians Do about It?” *Church Growth Bulletin* 7, no. 5 (May 1971): 4.

<sup>50</sup>Paul Hopkins to Donald McGavran, 2 July 1971 (WCIU 7.1).

substituted for evangelism – as it was at Uppsala and is being in the dominant policy currently promoted by WCC.<sup>51</sup>

McGavran sent Hopkins a copy of his *World Vision* article, “Social Justice and Evangelism,” and concluded,

Let us work at a more and more effective social action – but one which does not masquerade as evangelism and does not redefine evangelism and mission so that they mean humanization. The Church is able to carry on vigorous programs of social action and of evangelism. The social actionists do not have to highjack the plane of missions and take it to Havana.<sup>52</sup>

In the growing debate, McGavran found a fellow soldier in German theologian Peter Beyerhaus. Beyerhaus was a principle architect of the “Frankfurt Declaration,” which was a European response to the Uppsala debates.<sup>53</sup> In 1971, Beyerhaus published *Missions: Which Way?*<sup>54</sup> McGavran wrote a foreword for the work, saying that “everyone who prays for and gives to missions should read this book.”<sup>55</sup> The following year, Beyerhaus dedicated his *Shaken Foundations: Theological Foundations for Mission* to McGavran.<sup>56</sup> Beyerhaus provided a theological base for McGavran’s understanding of missions and evangelism. Just before the Lausanne Congress, McGavran distributed a copy of Beyerhaus’s article condemning a World Council of Churches gathering at

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<sup>51</sup>Donald McGavran to Paul Hopkins, 9 July 1971 (WCIU 7.1).

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Donald McGavran, “The Theological Bedrock of Modern Missions: The Frankfurt Declaration,” *Church Growth Bulletin* 6, no. 6 (July 1970): 4-5; McGavran, *Eye of the Storm*, 283-84. McGavran praised the Frankfurt Declaration and reprinted it in several places. The Frankfurt Declaration was originally published in English in *Christianity Today* 14, no. 19 (19 June 1970): 4-6.

<sup>54</sup>Peter Beyerhaus, *Missions: Which Way? Redemption or Humanization?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971).

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., i.

<sup>56</sup>Peter Beyerhaus, *Shaken Foundations: Theological Foundations for Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972).

Bangkok, a meeting which had continued the understanding of missions promoted at Uppsala.<sup>57</sup>

### **The Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization**

In July 1974, four thousand Christians from over 150 countries gathered at Lausanne, Switzerland, for the International Congress on World Evangelization. Following a series of follow-up consultations to Berlin, Billy Graham and a group of global evangelical leaders began planning for Lausanne in 1971. Their desire was to affirm the emphasis on evangelism begun at Berlin and to clarify further the biblical foundations of missions.

McGavran was more heavily involved in the Lausanne Congress than in previous meetings, both as a keynote speaker and in behind-the-scenes leadership. In a letter to McGavran, Graham asked for help: “Any suggestions or ideas that you may have concerning the forthcoming Lausanne Congress, that you could give me privately and confidentially, I would appreciate.”<sup>58</sup> McGavran responded with a lengthy letter outlining several ideas.

First, McGavran wrote, “It is imperative that this Congress focus on evangelism, rather than the ‘whole duty of the Church’ or ‘everything God wants Christians to do.’”<sup>59</sup> McGavran suggested that Graham send a letter to speakers immediately encouraging them to keep the focus on evangelism. McGavran also included a short paper titled, “Ten Dimensions in World Evangelism.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>Donald McGavran to “Friends,” n.d. (WCIU 4.3).

<sup>58</sup>Billy Graham to Donald McGavran, 19 October 1973 (WCIU 3.1).

<sup>59</sup>Donald McGavran to Billy Graham, 1 November 1973 (WCIU 3.1).

<sup>60</sup>Ibid. Interestingly, McGavran noted in June 1974 on his copy of the letter, “Was not done, I think, but was still worth writing. It all helps create a climate.”

Graham responded positively to McGavran's suggestions. Even more significantly, Graham asked McGavran to contribute to his opening address. "Since this address will be of such strategic importance," Graham wrote,

I am wondering if I could confidentially ask you to help me to prepare it. I would almost like to use some of the material that you have in your paper. There are certain parts of your paper that express far better than I what should be said on that opening evening.<sup>61</sup>

McGavran offered any help he could give, suggesting again his "dimensions" paper.<sup>62</sup>

Graham's final letter asked again, "I am wondering if I would be asking too much of you to prepare a rough address for me, that you think I should give on that opening day in Lausanne."<sup>63</sup>

Immediately before the Congress, McGavran penned a letter to Harold Lindsell, editor of *Christianity Today*. Lindsell was scheduled to speak to the Congress immediately following McGavran's plenary address. McGavran expressed his fear that an emphasis on social action would overshadow the importance of evangelism. "There is real danger," McGavran wrote, "that at Lausanne social action may muscle in and displace evangelism."<sup>64</sup> He warned Lindsell that Orlando Costas, Rene Padilla, and Samuel Escobar, all speakers at the Congress, would push hard for a social emphasis and encouraged him to speak firmly for the priority of evangelism.<sup>65</sup> McGavran also worried that the Congress would follow along in the movement toward equating evangelism and social action. "Me-tooism is in style," he continued.

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<sup>61</sup>Billy Graham to Donald McGavran, 20 November 1973 (WCIU 4.4).

<sup>62</sup>Donald McGavran to Billy Graham, 26 November 1973 (WCIU 4.4).

<sup>63</sup>Billy Graham to Donald McGavran, 19 December 1973 (WCIU 4.4).

<sup>64</sup>Donald McGavran to Harold Lindsell, 9 July 1974 (WCIU 3.1).

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

It is easy to call on Evangelicals to repent of lack of social action – though they have always been strong on social action. . . . What is needed, of course, is multiplied evangelism and among new and old Christians, education concerning effective ways to improve society. Biblical churches are the most effective and potent forces for reformation of society.<sup>66</sup>

When the Congress convened in July, McGavran delivered a plenary address covering the ten essentials he had sent earlier to Billy Graham. He emphasized both the divine and human dimensions of evangelism, pleading for a focus on gospel proclamation and on unreached peoples. He cast a vision for the future that included partnership with “Latfricasia” in the Great Commission task.<sup>67</sup> He argued most fervently, however, for the priority of evangelism:

Because of the tremendous drive to replace evangelism with social action pressing toward righteousness, mercy and peace, Lausanne must speak clearly on social action. There is, indeed, a crying need in the world for brotherhood, righteousness, and peace. Christians are doing much to bring these about and *will do more*. Make no mistake about that. But horizontal reconciliation of man with man is not vertical reconciliation of man with God. Social action is good; but it must neither be called evangelism nor substituted for it. The *temporal* welfare of mankind demands clarity at these points. We must not deny to men, struggling to build a righteous, peaceful society, the most potent element in that struggle, namely multitudes of Christian cells (churches) where men meet around the Bible to seek the will of God and to open themselves to his righteousness and his power. The *eternal* welfare of men also demands clarity. We must not deceive men by giving them “the bread which perishes” in place of the Bread of Heaven.<sup>68</sup>

McGavran affirmed both his conviction that evangelism must take priority over social action and his belief that the proper place for emphasis on social ministries is the local

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<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

<sup>67</sup>McGavran often used terms like “Latfricasia” to describe non-Western regions. “Latfricasia” stood for Latin America, Africa, and Asia. “Eurica” referred to Europe and North America.

<sup>68</sup>Donald McGavran, “The Dimensions of World Evangelization,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice: International Congress on World Evangelization, Lausanne, Switzerland*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), 96. Emphasis McGavran’s.

church.

In his follow-up paper on the Congress, McGavran responded to critics of his evangelistic priorities. He pointed out that many questioned whether missionaries and evangelists could, in fact, share Christ without “vigorously engaging in social action.”<sup>69</sup> McGavran answered by affirming his understanding of evangelism as proclaiming Christ and persuading men and women to follow Him. “The most potent forces for social change are Bible-reading, Bible-obeying churches,” he declared. “But first, my friends, you must have some Christians and some churches!!”<sup>70</sup>

In his address, McGavran touched briefly on urbanization and the need for evangelism and church planting in cities. Apparently, many of his listeners complained that his mention of cities was not adequate. “A number of you felt that urban church growth had been slighted,” he began. “I plead guilty on that point.”<sup>71</sup> McGavran advocated use of the growing fields of urban sociology and anthropology to find productive ways to engage cities. Referring to the social sciences, McGavran contended, “As redeemed men use these, they will begin to solve the horrendous problems and repel the demonic forces which blight and curse the rapidly growing cities.”<sup>72</sup>

Billy Graham’s opening message to the Congress, while not following directly McGavran’s “ten dimensions,” certainly reflected McGavran’s suggestion to focus on evangelism and cross-cultural missions. He convened the gathering by reminding listeners of the variety of voices who had negatively influenced world evangelism during

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<sup>69</sup>Donald McGavran, “The Dimensions of World Evangelization: Summary Report,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, 109.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 114.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

the twentieth century: politicians, economists, philosophers, and modern theologians who advocated a diminished view of Scripture and the gospel. With an emphasis on Scripture, Graham set the stage for the most important evangelical gathering of the twentieth century.<sup>73</sup>

In another address explaining the background of the Congress, Graham explained several factors that led to the meeting. One of those reasons was “the error of letting social concern become our all consuming mission.”<sup>74</sup> Graham argued that while all believers should be concerned with poverty and social injustice, “evangelism and the salvation of souls is the vital mission of the Church.”<sup>75</sup>

Out of the Lausanne conference came a covenant affirming an evangelical understanding of evangelism and mission.<sup>76</sup> The document defined evangelism in terms of proclamation and persuasion and placed social ministry as the fruit of salvation rather than as a part of evangelism. At the same time, another section strongly affirmed the importance of social action alongside evangelism:

We express penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive. Although reconciliation with man is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love for our neighbor and our obedience to Jesus Christ. The message of salvation implies also a message of judgment upon every form of alienation, oppression and discrimination, and we should not be afraid to denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup>Billy Graham, “Let the Earth Hear His Voice,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, 16.

<sup>74</sup>Billy Graham, “Why Lausanne?” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, 30.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>76</sup>“The Lausanne Covenant,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, 3-9.

<sup>77</sup>“The Lausanne Covenant,” 4-5.

This statement was important for several reasons. First, it acknowledged a theological and doctrinal basis for social ministry alongside evangelism while maintaining the priority of the latter. Second, it expressed the clear rejection of earlier attempts to identify evangelism and social ministry as identical tasks. Finally, the statement, when paired with the prior definition of evangelism, affirmed clearly the notion that social ministry is the result of salvation and, therefore, a part of the Christian life.

Plenary speakers and strategic papers debated these issues throughout the Congress. Samuel Escobar declared, “once and for all we should get rid of the false notion that concern for the social implications of the gospel and the social dimensions of witnessing comes from false doctrine or lack of evangelical conviction.” He continued that it is this very concern for the gospel that leads to social activism.<sup>78</sup> Carl Henry outlined the theological basis for social action in response to racism, poverty, and war, declaring that “in the Church, love of God and man is the only adequate norm of human conduct, for it mirrors God’s own love.”<sup>79</sup>

Both Escobar and Rene Padilla expressed concern, if not condemnation, for an emphasis on numerical growth that outweighed social concern.<sup>80</sup> McGavran took offense at their comments, believing that Padilla and Escobar were accusing proponents of church growth of ignoring social needs. In a letter immediately following the Congress, McGavran wrote,

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<sup>78</sup>Samuel Escobar, “Evangelism and Man’s Search for Freedom, Justice, and Fulfillment,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, 310-11.

<sup>79</sup>Carl F. H. Henry, “Christian Personal and Social Ethics in Relation to Racism, Poverty, War and Other Problems,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, 1180.

<sup>80</sup>Padilla, “Evangelism and Man’s Search,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, 323; Samuel Escobar, “Evangelism and the World,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, 138.



Both seem to believe that our church growth emphasis is somehow against philanthropy and social justice. I was sorry that they voiced this so clearly in their plenary addresses. I want to assure them that they are barking up the wrong tree. We are all men who have put in more years in philanthropy and social action than they have. I acted as Superintendent of a Leprosy Home for eleven years, and built a hospital and a substantial agricultural demonstration center, and was principal of schools, etc., etc. If there exist churchmen or missionaries who, facing human need, really sit back and do nothing to meet it, then this whole faculty would feel they were doing wrong.<sup>81</sup>

McGavran included in the letter a 1972 article from *Christianity Today* in which he condemned the Uppsala doctrine of humanization but upheld the importance of church-based social ministry.<sup>82</sup>

The Lausanne Congress was a watershed gathering in the history of world evangelization and missions, but the meeting was not the end of arguments over the relationship between evangelism and social ministry.<sup>83</sup> Arthur Johnston criticized the statement on social responsibility as one of the key weaknesses of the Lausanne Covenant because the statement retained an emphasis on justice and social action even as it still prioritized evangelism.<sup>84</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, David Moberg complained that the Covenant reinforced what he understood to be the false dichotomy between evangelism and social action.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>81</sup>Donald McGavran to Paul Little, 22 August 1974 (WCIU 3.1).

<sup>82</sup>Donald McGavran, "Yes, Uppsala Betrayed the Two Billion: Now What?" *Christianity Today* 16, no. 19 (23 June 1972): 16-18.

<sup>83</sup>McGavran was pleased with the results of the Lausanne gathering but remained concerned that evangelism retain priority in later meetings. Donald McGavran, "An Interview with Donald McGavran," *Global Church Growth* 26, no. 3 (July-September 1989), 7-8.

<sup>84</sup>Johnston, *Battle for World Evangelism*, 326-27.

<sup>85</sup>Moberg, *Great Reversal*, 167.

## After Lausanne

Part of the genius of the Lausanne movement was its continuation following the closing of the initial Congress. The discussion of evangelism and social responsibility continued at the International Consultation on the Relationship between Evangelism and Social Responsibility, held at Grand Rapids, Michigan, in June 1982. The purpose of the meeting, as outlined in the official report, was to “to define more clearly what is included in ‘social responsibility,’ whose responsibility it is, and how it relates to evangelism.”<sup>86</sup> In essence, the meeting affirmed that social action is a consequence of evangelism, a bridge to evangelism, and a partner with evangelism. The Grand Rapids consultation went far toward synthesizing much of the theology and practice reflected in other historical gatherings, from Edinburgh to Uppsala to Lausanne.<sup>87</sup>

McGavran continued to promote the priority of evangelism over social ministry. In late 1975, he corresponded with Indian pastor George Samuel, one of his former students, regarding a meeting to be held in India. He encouraged Samuel “to refuse to redefine ‘evangelism’ to include social action” adding, “Any such redefinition simply muddies the waters.”<sup>88</sup>

In 1979, McGavran joined Peter Beyerhaus in the latter’s call for a new

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<sup>86</sup>Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, “LOP 21: Evangelism and Social Responsibility: An Evangelical Commitment” [on-line]; accessed 7 July 2009; available at <http://www.lausanne.org/all-documents/lop-21.html>; Internet.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid.

<sup>88</sup>Donald McGavran to George Samuel, 19 November 1975 (WCIU 9). See also, Donald McGavran to George Samuel, 14 June 1976 (WCIU 9). In the latter, McGavran wrote, “I am coming more and more to say that ‘the Church has only one mission – to call men from darkness to light and from death to life. The Church has in addition many ministries – relief of suffering, disease, ignorance, injustice.’”

network of denominations committed to evangelism.<sup>89</sup> He sent a copy of an “urgent appeal” from Beyerhaus to evangelical leaders such as Robertson McQuilkin, Harold Lindsell, Arthur Johnston, and Carl F. H. Henry. In the cover letter, McGavran wrote,

I feel strongly that the undiluted Gospel must be voiced rather than the ecumenical confusion. The time *has* come to say clearly that Evangelism *and* Social Action, *and* Development, *and* Education, *and* Worship, *and* World Friendship, *and* Peace are NOT equal goals in Christian Mission. The supreme and compelling purpose of Christian Mission is to proclaim Jesus Christ as God and Saviour and to persuade men to become his disciples and responsible members of His Church. Everything else is auxiliary. Many good things have been done, are being done, and will be done; but they must not be substituted for the supreme purpose.<sup>90</sup>

Henry and Lindsell both responded positively while stopping short of commitment to a new organization. Henry noted that Beyerhaus’s letter “is cause for grave concern” and encouraged the editors of *Christianity Today* to pursue the issue.<sup>91</sup> Lindsell replied that Beyerhaus “has his finger on the right spot.”<sup>92</sup>

McGavran also continued to publish on the issue. In 1977, he edited an expanded version of *Eye of the Storm* in which he included documents related to the debate over the WCC view of missions.<sup>93</sup> *Momentous Decisions in Missions Today*, a collection of essays and articles on missiology, dealt with the evangelism-social action

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<sup>89</sup>Peter Beyerhaus to Donald McGavran, 2 March 1979 (WCIU 8.9); Donald McGavran to Peter Beyerhaus, 8 March 1979 (WCIU 8.9).

<sup>90</sup>Donald McGavran to Vernon Grounds, Robertson McQuilkin, Arthur Johnston, Harold Lindsell, and Carl F. H. Henry, 8 March 1979 (WCIU 8.1).

<sup>91</sup>Carl F. H. Henry to Donald McGavran, 13 March 1979 (WCIU 8.1). McGavran responded to Henry, reaffirming his belief in social action but standing firm on the priority of evangelism. Donald McGavran to Carl F. H. Henry, 19 March 1979 (WCIU 8.1).

<sup>92</sup>Harold Lindsell to Donald McGavran, 23 March 1979 (WCIU 8.1).

<sup>93</sup>Donald McGavran, ed., *The Conciliar-Evangelical Debate: The Crucial Documents, 1964-1976* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1977).

problem in several chapters, as did a volume McGavran co-wrote with Arthur Glasser.<sup>94</sup>

### **Theological Issues in the Debate over Social Ministry**

For Donald McGavran, the relationship between social ministry and evangelism was essentially a theological issue related to the definition of missions. The lengthy survey of the historical development of the debate over evangelism and social responsibility, and especially of McGavran's involvement, shows the complexity of the issues involved. The controversy is no longer between theological liberals and fundamentalists, if it ever was. Within evangelicalism, committed believers disagree on how Christians should share the gospel, work for social justice, and meet human needs.

### **Streams of Thought in the Debate**

McGavran's work was part of a larger movement to define evangelism and missions against the background of twentieth-century social realities. In order to understand his thought on the issues, however, one must see the larger context of the theological debate. Various scholars have attempted to identify streams of thought on the relationship between evangelism and social ministry.

Tokunboh Adeyemo, in his paper for the Grand Rapids consultation, distinguished nine "schools of thought." First, some Christians believe that social action is a "distraction from evangelism." Driven by the imminent return of Christ, these believers focus on evangelism without allowing for any outside work that would prevent them from reaching the greatest number possible.<sup>95</sup> An extreme view associated with the first are those who believe that "social action is a betrayal of evangelism." In other

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<sup>94</sup>Donald McGavran, *Momentous Decisions in Missions Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984); Donald McGavran and Arthur Glasser, *Contemporary Theologies of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983).

<sup>95</sup>Tokunboh Adeyemo, "A Critical Evaluation of Contemporary Perspectives," in *In Word and Deed*, 50-51.

words, social ministries cause an unhealthy emphasis on creation, which proponents of this view see as evil.<sup>96</sup> A third group argues that social action is evangelism. In the same meeting, David Bosch contended that this group might better be divided into two: one believing that “evangelism and social ministry are indistinguishable from one another” and the other that “evangelism is social action.” The distinction is important, in that the former concentrates on the act of social ministry as evangelism, and the latter contends that evangelism impacts society.<sup>97</sup>

Adeyemo identified a fourth group as those who argue that “social action is a means to evangelism.” For this group, social ministry opens the door to gospel proclamation, the only valid reason to engage society. A fifth school of thought is that “social action is a manifestation of evangelism.” Here, word and deed are united in the sense that the latter makes valid the former. Sixth, Adeyemo identifies those who argue that “social action is a result or consequence of evangelism.” John Stott represents the seventh group, those who believe that “social action is a partner of evangelism.” Many of the contributors to the Lausanne Congress fall into the eighth category, “that social action and evangelism are equally important but genuinely distinct aspects of the total mission of the Church.” These would include Ronald Sider, Vinay Samuel, David Bosch, and Samuel Escobar. Finally, one school of thought argues that “social action is part of the Good News.” These thinkers would contend that the Kingdom reigns over all things and that gospel proclamation means bringing the Kingdom to bear on all of society.<sup>98</sup>

**C. Peter Wagner.** C. Peter Wagner, McGavran’s student and a faculty

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<sup>96</sup>Ibid.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., 49.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid., 53-57.

member in Fuller Seminary's School of World Mission, identified two biblical mandates for Christian mission: the evangelistic mandate to share the gospel and the cultural mandate to engage culture.<sup>99</sup> He then distinguished five different positions on the relationship between evangelism and social action, based on a spectrum between two extremes.

Position "A" holds that Christian mission includes only the cultural mandate but not an evangelistic mandate.<sup>100</sup> At the other end of the scale, position "E" believes the opposite: that the Bible mandates evangelistic work but not cultural engagement. Between these two extremes, position "B" includes both the evangelistic and cultural mandate but views the cultural mandate as having priority. Position "D" is similar, but with the cultural and evangelistic mandates reversed in priority. Finally, position "C" holds that the cultural and evangelistic mandates have equal weight in Scripture. While Wagner's model is less complicated than that of Adeyemo, it is not entirely helpful in that it allows for an infinite number of possibilities along the scale. Its value is in Wagner's recognition that most believers see both mandates in the Bible but view their relationship differently.

**David Hesselgrave.** A third option is David Hesselgrave's analysis of holistic mission. He identifies four different ways of looking at the relationship between evangelism and social action. On one end of Hesselgrave's typology is "radical liberationism." "Liberationists," he explains, "tend to equate the biblical notion of salvation from sin with the struggle of poor and oppressed people for justice."<sup>101</sup> Few, if

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<sup>99</sup>C. Peter Wagner, *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel: A Biblical Mandate* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 12-19, 21-54.

<sup>100</sup>*Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>101</sup>David J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: Ten Key Questions in Christian Missions Today* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 120.

any, evangelicals in the Lausanne tradition would fall into this category. At the opposite end of the spectrum is “traditional prioritism.” In this category fall those who see the primary mission of the Church as evangelism. All other ministries, including social action, are secondary. In the center is “holism theology.” Hesselgrave breaks this category down into two divisions. “Revisionist holism” considers evangelism and social action to be equal partners, while “restrained holism” retains a “certain priority for evangelism.”<sup>102</sup>

### **The Problem of Definition**

Very few, if any, evangelicals would argue that the Church has no role in social ministries. Throughout history, believers have reached out to the sick, the poor, widows, and orphans.<sup>103</sup> The heart of the issue at hand is whether social ministry and action should be considered missions or, even more narrowly, evangelism. All of the “models” listed above are simply ways of regarding the fashion in which the cultural and evangelistic mandates go together. Thus, the real problem becomes one of definition; what is missions? C. Peter Wagner’s outline of the cultural and evangelistic mandates serves as a valuable guide for the discussion.

Wagner found the evangelistic mandate clearly in the Great Commission, where Jesus commanded the Church to “go . . . and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19 ESV).<sup>104</sup> For the biblical mandate to impact culture, Wagner went back to God’s creation of Adam: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have

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<sup>102</sup>Ibid., 120-21.

<sup>103</sup>Derrel R. Watkins, *Christian Social Ministry: An Introduction* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 1-20.

<sup>104</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations come from the English Standard Version.

dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth” (Gen 1:26). This dominion extended over all creation, including culture and society.

In the New Testament, the clearest direction for believers’ engagement in social ministry comes in the Great Commandment. When one of the Pharisees tried to trap Jesus by asking for the greatest of the commandments, Jesus responded that his followers must “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matt 22:37). In addition, Jesus said, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 22:39). It is this command to love one’s neighbor that is the root of social ministry.<sup>105</sup>

The most influential voice in this debate over the past fifty years has been John R. W. Stott, a British pastor and theologian who chaired the committee that framed the Lausanne Covenant. Stott acknowledged his own pilgrimage on this issue beginning at the Berlin Conference on Evangelism and Mission in 1966. There, he gave a series of Bible studies on the Great Commission. He contended strongly that the call of the Great Commission was a “preaching, converting, and healing mission.”<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup>C. Peter Wagner, *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel: A Biblical Mandate* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 12. In his memoir, Wagner indicated that he had changed his position on social action and evangelism. Describing *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel*, Wagner wrote: “I had become so frustrated with criticisms about my strong promotion of the clause in the Lausanne Covenant stating the primacy of evangelism over social action that I decided to write a scholarly apologetic defending my position. . . . Ironically, I have now actually changed my position and I see that evangelism and social responsibility are equal components of dominion theology.” C. Peter Wagner, *Wrestling with Alligators, Prophets, and Theologians* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2010), 291.

<sup>106</sup>John R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 37; William Arthur Groover, “The Theology and Methodology of John R. W. Stott as a Model for Pastoral Evangelism” (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1988), 176-77; Sung Eun Choi, “An Analysis of John R. W. Stott’s Theology of Evangelism and Practice of Evangelism” (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2006), 206-07.



At Lausanne, Stott outlined his philosophy of “mission,” an understanding that is found throughout the Lausanne Covenant. “Recently,” he began, “the word ‘mission’ has come to be used in a wider and more general sense, to include evangelism but not be identical with it.”<sup>107</sup> Because God is a sending God, Stott argued, and because He has sent His people throughout history, “mission” is the sending of the Church to evangelize the lost.

Over the years between Berlin and Lausanne, Stott began to look differently at the relationship between evangelism and social ministry in mission. “Today, however, I would express myself differently,” Stott wrote in 1975.<sup>108</sup> He viewed evangelism and social ministry as equal partners in the Christian life, and his arguments on the issue provide a framework for the conversation today. Stott began with the Great Commission, but moved beyond those commands to a broader biblical theology.

### **The Great Commission**

Most missions theology begins with Christ’s final command to the Church, the Great Commission. As Stott pointed out, most versions of the commission place a heavy emphasis on evangelism.<sup>109</sup> The longer ending of Mark’s gospel includes the command, “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15). Luke’s account says that Jesus gathered the disciples, saying, “that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24:47-48). In Acts, Luke also records that Jesus said, “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and

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<sup>107</sup>John R. W. Stott, “The Biblical Basis of Evangelism,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, 66.

<sup>108</sup>Stott, *Christian Mission*, 37.

<sup>109</sup>*Ibid.*, 36.

Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

The major thrust of these accounts is proclamation. The key elements of the Great Commission come from four words found in the Matthean account: “Go,” “make disciples,” “baptizing,” and “teaching.”<sup>110</sup> Evangelism comes into play on the last three, leading many to believe that evangelistic proclamation and discipleship are the sole commands here. Social ministry becomes a fruit of salvation rather than an element of mission. Stott disagreed with that interpretation, however, arguing that

It is not just that the Commission includes a duty to teach converts everything Jesus had previously commanded, and that social responsibility is among the things which Jesus commanded. I now see more clearly that not only the consequences of the Commission but the actual Commission itself must be understood to include social as well as evangelistic responsibility, unless we are to be guilty of distorting the words of Jesus.<sup>111</sup>

Stott regards John’s record of the commission as the “crucial” form.<sup>112</sup> There, Jesus told the disciples, “as the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (John 20:21). Stott saw in this commandment the charge to follow the model of Jesus. True, Jesus’ incarnation was completely unique; believers cannot imitate Christ in every way. At the same time, Stott argued, we can imitate him as “one who serves” (Luke 22:27).<sup>113</sup> Speaking of Jesus, Stott wrote, “certainly he preached, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God and teaching about the coming and the nature of the kingdom . . . . But he served in deed as well as in word.”<sup>114</sup> Jesus’ ministry of healing and feeding and

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<sup>110</sup>Robert Duncan Culver, *A Greater Commission: A Theology of World Missions* (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 150; Wagner, *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel*, 54.

<sup>111</sup>Stott, *Christian Mission*, 37.

<sup>112</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup>*Ibid.*, 39. See also, Stott, “Biblical Basis,” 66-67.

<sup>114</sup>Stott, *Christian Mission*, 39.

washing took place alongside his ministry of preaching.

The result of Stott's reliance on the Johannine commission was his own definition of mission. He affirms, against the broadening definitions of Uppsala, that "mission" is not a word for every action of the church. "Mission," he contends, reflecting the words of John 20:21, "describes rather everything the church is sent into the world to do." God is a sending God, and Christ sends his people into the world to be salt and light (Matt 5:13-16). "Mission," Stott concluded, "embraces the church's double vocation of service to be the 'salt of the earth' and the 'light of the world.'"<sup>115</sup>

Within this Christian mission, Stott outlined three ways that evangelism and social ministry typically relate. First, social ministry can be a "means to evangelism."<sup>116</sup> Stott disliked this model, detecting the "smell of hypocrisy." He worried that social ministries would become something like "bait" for non-believers.<sup>117</sup> Second, social ministry might be the "manifestation of evangelism." In other words, social ministry gives credibility to gospel proclamation. Stott acknowledged that such a relationship was seen in the Scriptures but still contended that a third possibility was superior. That third relationship is that social ministry and evangelism are partners. They are inseparable yet independent. Stott conceded a logical priority of evangelism, but still argued that both were equally important facets of missions. Yet, he concluded, "the reason for our acceptance of social responsibility is not primarily in order to give the gospel either a visibility or credibility it would lack, but rather uncomplicated compassion."<sup>118</sup> As partners, evangelism and social ministry are both ends, not means one to the other.

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<sup>115</sup>Ibid., 48.

<sup>116</sup>Ibid., 41.

<sup>117</sup>Ibid.

<sup>118</sup>Ibid., 47-48.

Stott's critics pointed out that one cannot build a theology of mission on one of five accounts of the Great Commission, especially when it is clear that Christ's incarnation was unique. David Hesselgrave is one such critic. Pointing to Andreas Kostenberger's work on the influence of John's gospel on missions, Hesselgrave contended that Stott's reliance on the Johannine commission was invalid.<sup>119</sup> In an extensive study, Kostenberger argued that the incarnational model advocated by Stott (and many others) was, in fact, contrary to John's Gospel. Rather, John 20:21 taught that the relationship between God and Son was to be modeled between Jesus and the apostles.<sup>120</sup> Where Stott argued that Jesus' mission (as reflected in Luke 4:16-19) encompassed service to the poor and needy, Kostenberger countered that, according to John's gospel, Jesus' mission involved salvation, forgiveness of sin, and signs that cannot be reproduced.<sup>121</sup>

Hesselgrave argued that "theologians should pay special attention" to the Matthean commission over other accounts. As Jesus' final and most complete statement, this account "highlights priorities that bode well for mission in the new millennium."<sup>122</sup> In other words, discipling and teaching would carry more weight and bear more fruit than would social ministry in the future. Culver, too, placed heavier emphasis on the Matthean commission.<sup>123</sup> Finally, George W. Peters, placing much greater weight on

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<sup>119</sup>David J. Hesselgrave, "Redefining Holism," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (July 1999): 280.

<sup>120</sup>Andreas J. Kostenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples according to the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 216-17; See also, Andreas J. Kostenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 203-26.

<sup>121</sup>Kostenberger, *Missions of Jesus*, 214-15.

<sup>122</sup>Hesselgrave, "Redefining Holism," 281.

<sup>123</sup>Culver, *A Greater Commission*, 150-151.

Matthew 28:18-20, spoke bluntly: “I do not find anywhere in the Bible that the first [cultural] mandate comes under the biblical category of missions. . . . It is not implied in the Great Commission of our Lord to His disciples.”<sup>124</sup>

Referring to the Lausanne meeting, Arthur Johnston expressed serious concern over efforts to redefine “mission.” He accused Stott and his committee of trying to build credibility with the ecumenical missiologists by softening the evangelical stance on evangelism. In the past, he wrote, “the mission of the church was evangelism by its members at home, and by its missions at home and abroad. Expressions of love and compassion in evangelism at home and abroad are evident in dispensaries, hospitals, schools, and orphanages, which contribute to that mission of evangelism.”<sup>125</sup> Johnston reflected a significant camp of critics who argue that evangelism is primary and that social ministry is a separate fruit of the Christian life.

Stott responded to critics by expanding his theology of mission beyond the commission in the Gospel of John. In 1984, he listed five key doctrines that he believes impact the view of missions as a partnership between evangelism and social responsibility. “Any one of them,” he wrote, “should be sufficient to convince us of our Christian social responsibility; the five together leave us without excuse.”<sup>126</sup> First, he explained, evangelicals need a fuller doctrine of God. As Creator, God is concerned “for the whole of mankind and for the whole of human life in all its colour and complexity.”<sup>127</sup> He is not only the God of the covenant with Israel, but also the God of

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<sup>124</sup>George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago: Moody, 1972), 170.

<sup>125</sup> Johnston, *Battle for World Evangelism*, 360-61.

<sup>126</sup>Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, 15.

<sup>127</sup>*Ibid.*, 15.

the nations. As a result, God cares about justice. Throughout the Old Testament, God and His prophets spoke against all types of injustice, especially toward the poor and the weak. “Here then is the living God of the Bible,” Stott proclaimed,

His concerns are all-embracing – not only the ‘sacred’ but the ‘secular,’ not only religion but nature, not only his covenant people but all people, not only justification but social justice in every community, not only his gospel, but his law. So we must not attempt to narrow down his interests. Moreover, ours should be as broad as his.<sup>128</sup>

Second to a fuller doctrine of God, evangelicals must have a fuller doctrine of man. Stott lamented the fact that secular humanists seem to have more compassion for others than Christians have. Human beings are not souls alone or bodies alone, but are both. As such, Christian ministry must engage not only the spiritual (evangelism) but also the physical (social ministry).<sup>129</sup> A fuller doctrine of Christ also supports Stott’s argument. Here, Stott expanded on his understanding of John’s version of the Great Commission. Jesus’ compassion is as much a model for believers as his relationship with the Father.<sup>130</sup>

The fourth supporting element of theology was a fuller doctrine of salvation. Stott bemoaned the tendency to personalize salvation to the point that it means nothing beyond the forgiveness of one’s own sins. He argued that the fruit of such a practice is a lack of concern for the kingdom and the Lordship of Christ. Stott also sensed a tendency to separate faith from love. While it was true that liberal and conciliar theologies leaned too far toward away from faith alone in Christ toward their own vision of love, it was equally dangerous to focus so acutely on faith and knowledge that we forget to love our

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<sup>128</sup>Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>129</sup>Ibid., 18-20.

<sup>130</sup>Ibid., 21-22.

fellow man.<sup>131</sup>

Finally, Stott argued for a fuller doctrine of the Church. He contended that an accurate biblical ecclesiology demands a balance between an understanding of the Church as a “‘holy’ people called out of the world to belong to God” and a “‘worldly’ people, in the sense of being sent back into the world to witness and to serve.”<sup>132</sup> In proclaiming “You are the salt of the earth” and “You are the light of the world,” Jesus implied that the Church must be both the opposite of the world and at the same time be soaking into the world and driving out the darkness (Matt 5:13-16).<sup>133</sup>

An improper view on any of these five areas makes for an imbalanced mission, according to Stott. Throughout the history of the Church, waves in both directions stand out. The Social Gospel and Liberation Theology movements leaned in one direction – toward a God formed in their own image, a Christ devoid of power and spiritual redemption, salvation that applies only to the redemption of social systems, and a church tied too closely to the world. At the same time, fundamentalism and similar movements showed the tendency to deemphasize the immanence of God, Christ’s ministry of healing and social change, the importance of love, and the worldly impact of the Church. Stott argued that proper balance in mission was the only way to live biblically in the world.

Others have taken up the argument that Stott began at Lausanne and with his writing. C. Peter Wagner revealed his differences with McGavran when he described his own change of heart on the issue of holistic mission. Before Lausanne, Wagner recounted, he firmly believed that “mission” and “evangelism” were synonymous. After hearing speakers like Stott, he wrote, “I now believe that the mission of the Church

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<sup>131</sup>Ibid., 24-25.

<sup>132</sup>Ibid., 23-24.

<sup>133</sup>Ibid., 25.

embraces both the cultural and the evangelistic mandates. I believe in what is now being called ‘holistic mission.’”<sup>134</sup> Wagner emphasized the “sending” nature of God and defined “holistic mission” as “everything that the Father sends his redeemed people out from their congregations to do: principally implement the cultural mandate and the evangelistic mandate.”<sup>135</sup> Still, Wagner maintained the priority of evangelism more strongly than Stott while arguing that mission encompasses both evangelism and social responsibility.

To this point, the debate has been between two camps, the first being those who argue for absolute evangelistic priority, represented by Arthur Johnston, David Hesselgrave, and Donald McGavran. These missionaries and scholars do not deny the importance of social ministry in the Church, but they do argue that its place is not of equal importance to evangelism. The second group, represented by John Stott, C. Peter Wagner, and the Lausanne Covenant, contended that social ministry is at the very least an essential part of the Church’s mission, even if evangelism maintains a logical priority. A third group of dissenters at Lausanne remained frustrated by what they considered a false dichotomy between social ministry and evangelism. Their voice remains strong today.<sup>136</sup>

In his plenary address at Lausanne, René Padilla anticipated Stott’s later arguments related to the Church’s place outside of the world and in the world. Padilla lamented an emphasis on repentance that does not drive the Church to address social structures and social problems. Evangelism, he argued, was only one facet of Jesus’ mission. “Together with the *kerygma* went the *diaconia* and the *didache*,” he wrote. “A comprehensive mission corresponds to a comprehensive view of salvation. Salvation is

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<sup>134</sup>Wagner, *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel*, 91.

<sup>135</sup>*Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>136</sup>See also, Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, eds., *Mission as Transformation: A Theology of the Whole Gospel* (Carlisle, Cambria, UK: Regnum, 1999).



wholeness.”<sup>137</sup> Separating evangelism and social ministry is a false dichotomy, he argued, in that those two elements were tied closely together in Jesus’ ministry. Evangelism is both heard and seen. Jesus’ ministry of healing and freedom went alongside, and in some cases preceded, the proclamation of the good news.

Much later, Padilla expanded on his arguments at Lausanne in *Mission between the Times*. There, he contended first that the presence of the kingdom proclaimed by Christ is the only proper way to understand mission and the relationship between evangelism and social action. “Evangelism and social responsibility,” he concluded, “are inseparable.”<sup>138</sup> Word and deed were united in the ministry of Christ and the apostles and must be in the contemporary church, as well. In fact, Padilla argued, the debate over priority was irrelevant. Christ is Lord over all of creation, and every human need is an opportunity for His Lordship to be seen. In actual practice, no priority was needed or practical.<sup>139</sup>

Wilbert Shenk encouraged evangelicals to move beyond the dichotomy between word and deed to a more holistic view. The separation of the two in modern times was the result, he argued, of the Enlightenment tendency to break something down into parts in order to understand more clearly their relation to one another. The New Testament model of the kingdom was the only solution in that it does not at any time distinguish between evangelism and social responsibility in the mission of the Church. “I submit,” he declared,

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<sup>137</sup>Padilla, “Evangelism and the World,” 129-30. See also, Samuel Escobar, “Evangelism and Man’s Search for Freedom, Justice, and Fulfillment,” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, 303-26.

<sup>138</sup>René Padilla, *Mission between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 197.

<sup>139</sup>*Ibid.*, 198.

That the flaw in the ‘word and deed’ paradigm is that it has encouraged us to focus attention on the parts rather than on the whole, which is God’s new order. Once we accept this partial way of looking at Christian witness, we never succeed in arriving at the whole. We live in constant frustration trying to achieve balance to defend priorities. But the whole – i.e., God’s new order – is always greater than the way we add up the parts. Such arithmetic does not correspond with God’s.<sup>140</sup>

Another voice in this conversation was that of Ronald Sider, who published a detailed response to Stott and the Lausanne model not long after the conference. In the face of multiple options related to the priority of evangelism or social concern, Sider argued that the two are “distinct yet equal” parts of the Church’s mission.<sup>141</sup> In reality, he said, they are inseparable and indistinguishable. Sider outlined four ramifications of his position. First, “proclamation of the biblical gospel necessarily includes a call to repentance and turning away from all forms of sin.”<sup>142</sup> Repentance necessarily leads to more just societies. Second, the Church, as a new community, is made up of redemptive relationships. Those relationships witness to the gospel of Christ. Third, social responsibility and action “sometimes facilitate the task of evangelism.” In other words, sometimes, social action comes first. Finally, Sider decried the use of “the Great Commission” to speak of evangelism and “the Great Commandment” to speak of social concern. Both are integral parts of the Christian life, he argued, and lead to costly discipleship that confronts injustice.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>140</sup>Wilbert R. Shenk, “The Whole is Greater than the Sum of the Parts: Moving Beyond Word and Deed,” *Missiology* 20, no. 1 (January 1993): 74.

<sup>141</sup>Ronald J. Sider, “Evangelism, Salvation, and Social Justice: Definitions and Interrelationships,” *International Review of Mission* 64, no. 255 (July 1975): 264.

<sup>142</sup>*Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>143</sup>*Ibid.*, 266. See also, Ronald J. Sider, “Evangelism or Social Justice: Eliminating the Options,” *Christianity Today* (8 October 1976): 26-28; Andrew Walls and Cathy Ross, *Mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008). The authors recognize service as one of five distinguishable yet inseparable marks of biblical mission.

McGavran and Sider corresponded briefly on this issue of social ministry. After thanking McGavran for bringing attention to the need for worldwide evangelization, Sider noted, “I see no reason whatsoever either biblically or theologically to argue that evangelism is more important than social justice.”<sup>144</sup> McGavran responded that the question is whether evangelism or social ministry meets a greater need: “What will grant men eternal and abundant life?”<sup>145</sup>

### **McGavran’s Theology of Missions**

In response to his reading of the authoritative Scriptures, Donald McGavran developed a definition of missions and evangelism that encompassed much of his church growth thinking. Evangelism, which for McGavran could not be separated from missions, was “proclaiming Christ and persuading men to become His disciples and responsible members of His Church.”<sup>146</sup> This two-fold definition, encompassing both conversion and church membership, was key to understanding McGavran’s theology of mission, very much in line with Hesselgrave and others who place priority on evangelism.<sup>147</sup>

Following the Matthean Commission, McGavran argued that the first step in missions requires that a people be “discipled,” which he defined as “the removal of

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<sup>144</sup>Ronald Sider to Donald McGavran, 29 May 1980 (WCIU 8.2).

<sup>145</sup>Notes on Sider to McGavran, 29 May 1980.

<sup>146</sup>Donald McGavran, “Conclusion,” in *Church Growth and Christian Mission*, ed. Donald McGavran (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 231; Donald McGavran, “Essential Evangelism,” in *Eye of the Storm*, 57; Donald A. McGavran, “Loose the Churches. Let them Go!” *Missiology* 1, no. 2 (April 1973): 81.

<sup>147</sup>David J. Hesselgrave, “The Changings of the Guards: Missiological Legacies of Donald A. McGavran, John R. W. Stott, Carl F. H. Henry, and Ralph D. Winter,” paper presented to the Midwest Regional Meeting of the Evangelical Missiological Society, Chicago, 19 April 2008.

distracting divisive sinful gods and spirits and ideas from the corporate life of the people and putting Christ at the centre on the Throne.”<sup>148</sup> The second stage of “Christianization” was “perfecting,” which was the “bringing about of an ethical change in the disciplined group, an increasing achievement of a thoroughly Christian way of life for the community as a whole.”<sup>149</sup> It is at this point that the Church takes on social ministry and engagement.

Another important image of missions for McGavran was that of “finding the lost.” In *Understanding Church Growth*, he spoke of evangelism and missions in terms of reconciliation. The goal of evangelism was to bring lost men, women, and children back into relationship with God. God, wrote McGavran, “beyond question wills that lost persons be found – that is, be reconciled to himself.”<sup>150</sup> The biblical image of lost sheep and a seeking shepherd fit well with this understanding of evangelism (Matt 18:12-14). McGavran continued, “The finding God wants them found – that is, brought into a redemptive relationship to Jesus Christ where, baptized in his name, they become part of his household.”<sup>151</sup> God seeks, McGavran argued, but he seeks and finds through believers. That is evangelism and leaves little room for social ministry.

As noted throughout this chapter, McGavran reacted strongly against efforts to call social ministry evangelism and to elevate Christian “presence” over “proclamation” of the gospel. As some ecumenical leaders contended that “presence” and social ministry are equals, believing that if Christians would serve, others would see that service and

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<sup>148</sup> McGavran, *Bridges of God*, 14.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>150</sup> Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 21.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

respond to the gospel, McGavran spoke out.<sup>152</sup> “Certainly,” he wrote in a 1941 article, “the good deeds of a Christian who never mentions His Lord, do in a vague way attract men to Jesus Christ, . . . but to call these activities evangelism is an unfortunate use of the word.”<sup>153</sup>

McGavran argued that Christian presence without the proclamation of the gospel was incomplete, although he recognized certain instances (such as areas of intense persecution) where “presence” evangelism might be necessary. “Please note,” he wrote, “that I endorse presence when the goal is that Jesus Christ according to the Scriptures be believed, loved, obeyed, and followed into the waters of baptism.”<sup>154</sup> For McGavran, ministries that addressed social needs were necessary as part of the life of the church, but they were not missions or evangelism.<sup>155</sup>

McGavran also tied the conflict between evangelism and social ministry to a low view of Scripture. In an address in Kansas City in 1976, he argued that “the theological source of the terrible tension is the low and high view of the Bible.”<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>152</sup>J. I. Packer also points out this issue in “What Is Evangelism?” in *Theological Perspectives on Church Growth*, ed. Harvie M. Conn (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1976), 93-94.

<sup>153</sup>Donald McGavran, “Evangelism, Sanctification, and the Social Gospel,” *United Church Review* 12, no. 7 (1941): 159.

<sup>154</sup>Donald McGavran, “Presence and Proclamation in Christian Mission,” in *Eye of the Storm*, 209. See also, Donald McGavran, “The Right and Wrong of the ‘Presence’ Idea of Mission,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 6 (January 1970): 98-108; Donald McGavran, “Proclaiming and Discipling: What Does the Bible Say?” unpublished manuscript, n.d. (WCIU 5.1).

<sup>155</sup>Donald McGavran, *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1988), 103; Donald McGavran, “A Missionary Confession of Faith,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 7, no. 2 (November 1972): 138.

<sup>156</sup>Donald McGavran, “Idea for the Kansas City Address,” unpublished notes, October 1976 (WCIU 10.3).

McGavran reminded his listeners of his own pilgrimage from a low to high view of Scripture.<sup>157</sup> For those with a low view of Scripture, the only logical course was to work to alleviate suffering in the world. For those who followed an authoritative reading of the Bible, especially the Great Commission, the only option could be a priority on evangelism “to meet the tremendous spiritual needs of men.”<sup>158</sup>

McGavran maintained that the only biblically valid way to engage social problems was through the local church. “The Church of Jesus Christ has two main functions,” he wrote.

It calls men from death to life: it serves men and transforms those sections of society in which it has power. It evangelizes and it serves. It multiplies churches and it changes the social structure of society. And it does these two things in that order. First, it establishes congregations of the redeemed. Then it feeds them on the word of God. They become a blessing to their families, their neighborhoods, their cities, their nations, their world.<sup>159</sup>

### **Social Ministry in Urban Contexts**

For the most part, McGavran’s basic views of the priority of evangelism over social ministry applied to urban contexts as well as rural. He believed that the clear proclamation of the gospel was the central task of believers and churches, even in contexts where social injustice and suffering was great. At the same time, he recognized the great need of cities, especially when it came to poverty and race. Where gospel proclamation might be the central need in rural or affluent areas, McGavran saw that evangelism and ministry would necessarily go together in urban churches.

McGavran viewed cities as dangerous and difficult places. Reflecting on a

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<sup>157</sup>Ibid.; See also, McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 54-56.

<sup>158</sup>McGavran, “Idea for Kansas City.”

<sup>159</sup>Donald McGavran, “Churches: The Most Potent Instrument for Social Advance,” unpublished manuscript, n.d. (WCIU 5.1).

visit to Calcutta in 1978, he called the city “unbelievably crowded and dirty” with a dearth of churches.<sup>160</sup> In a lecture on “Liberating the Cities into the Freedom of Christ,” McGavran wrote,

Our modern cities are terrible places. They dehumanize men. They throw together great masses of angry men. They exploit men and women. Cities have demonic dimensions. Some Christians say and write that the cities cannot be Christianized and will destroy men. That is not my opinion. But I readily grant that unless we plant churches made up of redeemed men and women who know themselves to be Christ’s family, the city may well destroy us.<sup>161</sup>

The only answer to the spiritual and physical suffering of men and women in cities, in McGavran’s view, was the church. “Consequently,” he added, “when I talk about urban church growth, I am talking about the most potent force for humanizing the cities and solving their many problems, and bringing in the reign of justice peace and brotherhood.”<sup>162</sup>

One area where McGavran saw the greatest need in cities was race relations and racial equality. On the mission field, McGavran took a stand against the segregation of castes in India.<sup>163</sup> During the Civil Rights era in the United States, McGavran advocated interracial marriage as a way to create one “nation indivisible.” In a curious mixture of his Homogeneous Unit Principle and his commitment to integration, McGavran advocated intentional intermarriage between races. He argued that because true “peoples” marry “their own kind,” interracial marriages would help Americans

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<sup>160</sup>Donald McGavran, “India Visit High Lights,” unpublished manuscript, 1978 (WCIU 4.3).

<sup>161</sup>Donald McGavran, “Liberating the Cities into the Freedom of Christ,” unpublished lecture notes, 1976 (BGC 178.90.1).

<sup>162</sup>Ibid.

<sup>163</sup>Vern Middleton, “Caste Issues in the Minds of McGavran and Gandhi,” *Missiology* 13, no. 2 (April 1985): 159-73.

become “one great ethnic unit.”<sup>164</sup> In other words, if the goal of racial justice was that all Americans be one people, then intermarriage between races could foster that “people consciousness.”

In the early 1960s, McGavran revealed his belief that racial equality could only come about through churches. In an article for the *Christian Herald*, McGavran suggested a “plan of action” through which “each local church appoint families for short-term cross-racial membership.”<sup>165</sup> He contended that such a move was only a first step, but that it would bring great healing to the racial divide. McGavran viewed his own membership in the all-black Second Christian Church of Indianapolis as just such a “mission.”<sup>166</sup>

McGavran’s views on social ministry came together in the final of his “eight keys” to discipling urban populations in *Understanding Church Growth*. McGavran argued that, in order to reach cities, missionaries and church planters must “provide the theological base for an egalitarian society.”<sup>167</sup> Because social change was the fruit of a church’s life and ministry in its community, giving new believers a solid understanding of Scripture and the biblical commands to ministry and justice would lead to a better world. “Christianity provides the perfect base for the emerging masses of the world,”

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<sup>164</sup>Donald McGavran, “One Nation Indivisible,” unpublished manuscript, n.d. (WCIU 1.1). A cover note is dated 1977, but it is unclear whether that date is for the manuscript or the note, where McGavran wrote, “Really good. Finish up and send.”

<sup>165</sup>Donald McGavran, “A Plan of Action for Churches,” *Christian Herald* (October 1961): 13 (WCIU 7.4).

<sup>166</sup>Donald McGavran, “A Profitable Next Step in Integration: Peoples and the McGavrans,” unpublished manuscript, n.d. (WCIU 1.1). Attached to this manuscript was a note indicating McGavran’s desire in 1977 to rework the article for publication. He also explained how the “strategy” played out with seminary students in Des Moines, Iowa. There were “no takers.”

<sup>167</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 293.



McGavran wrote. “Indeed, the only place where the common man has even dared hope for justice has been Christendom.”<sup>168</sup>

With great hope, McGavran believed that the combination of “redoubled proclamation” and effective discipleship would lead to the urban social justice longed for by his opponents in the debates of the 1960s and at Lausanne. “Such a combination,” he continued,

would undergird the social order-to-be with an unshakable belief that justice and mercy are incarnate in God Himself, and that God’s good hand is upon all those who believe in His Son, guiding and directing them to just, peaceful, and merciful solutions to the complex problems of human life in this most changeable of all ages.<sup>169</sup>

McGavran recognized the difficulty of ministry in complex urban centers. When faced with extreme poverty, injustice, racism, and crime, missionaries naturally gravitated toward alleviating suffering. True to his theology and practice, McGavran argued that the only way to change the world was through the proclamation of the gospel, the perfecting of believers, and the multiplication of churches.

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<sup>168</sup>Ibid.

<sup>169</sup>Ibid., 294.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

Donald McGavran's career spanned most of the twentieth century, and his influence has continued well into the twenty-first. During his field experience, he dealt for the most part with rural and village peoples. As his awareness of global missions expanded, however, McGavran increasingly saw cities as crucial fields for gospel proclamation and church planting. The purpose of this dissertation was to examine and evaluate Donald McGavran's philosophy and strategy of urban missions. While few have recognized McGavran's contributions in this field, this project has shown his thinking in the area to be substantial, even if not as well known as his general church growth missiology.

This dissertation also sought to answer three questions regarding McGavran's urban missiology. First, what was McGavran's understanding of missions in urban contexts? The second chapter provided a biographical sketch of McGavran's life and career, including the general principles of his missiology, and the third chapter addressed more specifically his approach to cities. These surveys revealed that from the early 1960s, McGavran began to deal with missions beyond his original missions context in India. The more he was exposed to urban missions, the more he advocated church growth in urban places.

The second research question asked, what is the specific application of McGavran's church growth missiology in urban contexts? Chapter 4 outlined the foundation of church growth thought: research. McGavran believed that missionaries and pastors must understand their contexts and the state of their churches in order to better

reach families and peoples with the gospel. With reference to cities, he particularly advocated the use of the social sciences to clarify the networks of peoples who lived there. Chapter 5 expanded and applied McGavran's best known contribution to urban missions, his "Discipling Urban Populations" chapter in *Understanding Church Growth*. I showed that McGavran himself applied his own teaching to the unique situations present in cities, focusing especially on evangelism and church planting. Finally, considering the concentration of social problems and need found in urban contexts, chapter 6 outlined McGavran's understanding of the relationship between social ministry and evangelism with a view toward evangelism in cities.

The final research question will be the focus of this concluding chapter: How might McGavran's urban church growth thinking be applied in the twenty-first century? One contention of this dissertation is that McGavran's missiology has significant application today and in the future, especially in cities.

### **Urban Church Growth in the Twenty-First Century**

Rapid global urbanization has drawn the attention of churches and missions agencies, and the growth of cities demands careful attention to appropriate missions strategies.<sup>1</sup> Just as McGavran saw the need to forsake traditional mission station models, missionaries today must consider how current methodologies apply in cities of great

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<sup>1</sup>In my own denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention, recent initiatives have emphasized urban missions. For example, the Great Commission Resurgence Task Force recommendations encouraged the North American Mission Board to be more active in engaging cities. NAMB responded with a new strategy reflecting urban needs. See "Embracing a Vision for a Great Commission Resurgence: Final Report of the Great Commission Task Force of the Southern Baptist Convention," in *Annual of the 2010 Southern Baptist Convention*, Orlando Florida, 15-16 June 2010, 83-84. See also, Carol Pipes, "Send North America: Why Every Church Must Plant" [on-line], *On Mission*; accessed 12 September 2011; available at <http://www.onmission.com/onmissioncb.aspx?id=8590001173>; Internet; Jeff Walters, "Embracing the City: A Brief Survey of the North American Mission Board's Engagement of America's Urban Centers," unpublished paper, 2008; available at <http://northamericanmissions.org/?q=node/491>.

ethnic, cultural, and economic diversity.

Some scholars and missionaries have applied McGavran's work to urban contexts. Many of his students, some mentioned earlier in this dissertation, wrote projects dealing with urban church growth principles. C. Peter Wagner, perhaps McGavran's best-known student and a professor with McGavran at Fuller, included a chapter on urban evangelism in his 1971 book, *Frontiers of Missionary Strategy*. One of his six steps for the multiplication of urban churches was to "apply church growth principles."<sup>2</sup> Among the principles he recommended were the use of cultural anthropology studies, family units, and the Homogeneous Unit Principle.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the most prolific of McGavran's students in terms of urban church growth has been Roger Greenway. His *Guidelines for Urban Church Planting* was a collaborative effort with several of McGavran's students and friends to apply McGavran's "eight keys" to urban discipling in specific contexts.<sup>4</sup> Other examples of Greenway's work include chapters on various aspects of church growth missiology applied in cities, including research, homogeneous units, church planting, and social ministry.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>C. Peter Wagner, *Frontiers in Missionary Strategy* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), 193. For more on Wagner's relationship with McGavran, see Charles H. Kraft, *SWM/SIS at Forty: A Participant/Observer's View of Our History* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2005), 109-16; C. Peter Wagner, *Wrestling with Alligators, Prophets and Theologians: Lessons from a Lifetime in the Church – A Memoir* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2010), 79-112.

<sup>3</sup>Wagner, *Frontiers in Missionary Strategy*, 193-94.

<sup>4</sup>Roger S. Greenway, ed., *Guidelines for Urban Church Planting* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976). For discussion of Greenway's *Guidelines*, see pp. 102-03 above.

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, Roger S. Greenway, ed., *Discipling the City: Theological Reflections on Urban Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979); idem, ed., *Discipling the City: A Comprehensive Approach to Urban Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992); Roger S. Greenway and Timothy Monsma, *Cities: Missions' New Frontier*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

Even McGavran's critics used his frameworks and terminology to discuss urban missions. The best example is Francis DuBose, who was a strong critic of specific elements of McGavran's missiology, especially the Homogeneous Unit Principle. In *How Churches Grow in an Urban World*, DuBose listed twenty principles of healthy urban church growth, many of which echoed McGavran's own tenets.<sup>6</sup> DuBose was more cautious about urban church growth missiology than was Roger Greenway, but he advocated strongly for evangelism and church planting. He differed with McGavran and Greenway on some issues, but his principles of urban missions reflect much of the thinking of his contemporaries.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, church growth scholarship after the 1970s has neither continued McGavran's missions focus nor has it added anything to a discussion of urban missions.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, Donald McGavran's church growth missiology continues to have implications for twenty-first century urban missions.

## Urban Research

As shown in chapter 4, McGavran understood accurate and honest research to

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<sup>6</sup>Francis DuBose, *How Churches Grow in an Urban World* (Nashville: Broadman, 1978).

<sup>7</sup>For more on DuBose's urban missiology, see pp. 156-58 above.

<sup>8</sup>For example, neither Elmer Towns' *Complete Book of Church Growth* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1981) nor Thom Rainer's *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1993) speak of urban contexts. Wagner briefly mentioned urban missions in *Strategies for Church Growth* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1989), 190-92. See also, John Albert Crabtree, Jr., "The Divergence of Donald McGavran's Church Growth Movement in North America, 1955-2000" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003). Some have tried to call the Church Growth Movement back to its missionary roots. See, for example, Ed Stetzer, "The Evolution of Church Growth, Church Health, and the Missional Church: An Overview of the Church Growth Movement from, and back to, Its Missional Roots," *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 17 (Winter 2006): 87-112.

be foundational to effective evangelism. One of the key influences of church growth missiology is research and the use of social sciences. Thom Rainer defined *church growth* as “that discipline which seeks to understand, through biblical, sociological, historical, and behavioral study, why churches grow or decline.”<sup>9</sup> DuBose relied heavily on research and the social sciences (his “Scientific Principle”). While such tools should always remain secondary to theology and Scripture, research can support strategy development and church planting by giving missionaries a clear view of their context.<sup>10</sup> Understanding the city is the first step to reaching the city.

Harvie Conn, longtime professor of missions at Westminster Seminary, also promoted the use of research in urban missiology and its impact on strategy development. Writing in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* in 1986, Conn noted that “our students need to know ‘how to read cities.’”<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, he wrote elsewhere, “until very recently church growth research has been rural in its focus of attention.”<sup>12</sup> To that end, he developed a reader of practical tools for his students, his *Urban Church Research: Methods and Models*.<sup>13</sup> The book contained dozens of articles, bibliographies, and research instruments designed to help urban ministry practitioners understand their cities. Much later, Conn included a section on urban research in *Planting and Growing Urban Churches*, comprised of three articles and a valuable resource list. Conn emphasized the

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<sup>9</sup> Rainer, *Book of Church Growth*, 38.

<sup>10</sup> DuBose, *How Churches Grow*, 171.

<sup>11</sup> Harvie Conn, “Missions and Our Present Moment in History,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (April 1986): 183.

<sup>12</sup> Harvie Conn, “The City: The New Frontier,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (October 1984): 396.

<sup>13</sup> Harvie Conn, comp., *Urban Church Research: Methods and Models, Collected Readings* (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1985).

need for research that is useful not only by academics, but also by practitioners.<sup>14</sup>

In *Urban Ministry*, Conn and Manuel Ortiz spent considerable time describing and explaining the use of urban research, contending that like a cross-cultural missionary, the urban minister must enter a new culture as a learner, bond with that culture, and learn to contextualize his or her ministry within that new culture.<sup>15</sup> They affirmed that “using information from the social sciences helps us achieve kingdom goals – but more than that, the social sciences enhance the way our goals are initially set.”<sup>16</sup> Conn and Ortiz believed that research is not the end of urban missions, but it is rather the beginning as it supports contextualized church planting and leadership.

Organizations such as the Joshua Project,<sup>17</sup> the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention,<sup>18</sup> the Association of Religion Data Archives,<sup>19</sup> and the World Christian Database<sup>20</sup> have effectively portrayed the global growth of Christianity. Data from these sources describe people groups and Christianization around the world but do not focus specifically on cities. While much research is available on urban

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<sup>14</sup>Harvie Conn, ed., *Planting and Growing Urban Churches: From Dream to Reality* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).

<sup>15</sup>Harvie M. Conn and Manuel Ortiz, *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, and the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 255-310.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>17</sup>For more information on the Joshua Project, see <http://www.joshuaproject.org>.

<sup>18</sup>For more information on the Research Department of the International Mission Board, see <http://public.imb.org/globalresearch>.

<sup>19</sup>For more information on the Association of Religion Data Archives, see <http://www.thearda.com>.

<sup>20</sup>For more information on the World Christian Database, see <http://www.worldchristiandatabase.org>.

demographics and societies, ministry practitioners have written little on urban church growth in recent years.

In a recent paper presented to the Evangelical Missiological Society, J. D. Payne outlined the need for urban research, especially in North America and Canada.<sup>21</sup> Reminiscent of McGavran's call for urban research in *Understanding Church Growth*, Payne's article calls for missionaries to embrace research, improve research, and develop a network of volunteer and professional researchers. Even with available research, he noted, accurate pictures of urban peoples, especially migrant groups, are difficult to find.<sup>22</sup>

Another aspect of McGavran's research emphasis was the use of social sciences. While fields such as sociology and cultural anthropology cannot replace the guidance of Scripture in the missionary task, they do help missionaries understand the peoples with whom they work and the contexts in which they labor. In a speech given at a church growth seminar in Vancouver, McGavran maintained that "the sciences of man (education, sociology, and psychology) have much to tell us as to how cities grow, institutions develop men become Christian, and make other changes. Hence [these sciences] should be greatly studied."<sup>23</sup>

An abundance of work in the fields of urban sociology and anthropology is available to urban missionaries and strategists. As McGavran argued, such materials can

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<sup>21</sup>J. D. Payne, "Examining Evangelical Concentrations and International Migrations in the U. S. and Canada: A Call for More and Better Research," paper presented to the Southeast Regional Evangelical Missiological Society, 26 March 2011.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>23</sup>Donald McGavran, "Ten Prominent Elements in the Church Growth Point of View," unpublished manuscript, 1974 (WCIU 10.1). While this particular document is undated, it was located with several other documents from a Canada church growth seminar held 20-22 February 1974 in Vancouver.



help church planters and evangelists understand how relationships work in urban contexts and how missionaries can interact with urban populations.<sup>24</sup>

### **Urban People Movements**

McGavran's church growth thinking began with his study of people movements in India. While he did little to apply the concept to urban contexts, McGavran's people movement philosophies apply, the first being his concept of "web movements."<sup>25</sup> Regardless of the location, people live in relationship, and "bridges" exist across which the gospel can pass. In cities, those relationships likely go beyond ethnicity and family to other social networks.<sup>26</sup>

Not only do social networks exist in cities, but also, for at least a limited time, new migrants retain close relationships in their home locales, many of which are unreached with the gospel. Roger Greenway noted this possibility in his *Urban Strategy*

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<sup>24</sup>Among the wealth of materials are works such as the following: Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York: North Point Press, 2000); Ricky Burdett and Deyan Sudjic, *The Endless City: The Urban Age Project by the London School of Economics and Deutsche Bank's Alfred Herrhausen Society* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2007); Edward Glaeser, *Triumph of the City* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011); Mark Gottdeiner and Leslie Budd, *Key Concepts in Urban Studies* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2005); Mark Gottdeiner and Ray Hutchison, *The New Urban Sociology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2006); George Gmelch, Robert V. Kemper, and Walter Zenner, eds., *Urban Life: Readings in the Anthropology of the City*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2010); John J. Maciones and Vincent N. Parrillo, *Cities and Urban Life* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998); J. John Palen, *The Urban World*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2008).

<sup>25</sup>See pp. 146-48 above.

<sup>26</sup>George G. Hunter III, "The Bridges of Contagious Evangelism: Social Networks," in *Church Growth: State of the Art*, ed. C. Peter Wagner and Win Arn (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1986), 69-81; Timothy M. Monsma, "The Intersecting Veins of the City," in *Cities: Missions' New Frontier*, 117-29; Timothy M. Monsma, "Family, Clan, and Tribe in the City," in *Discipling the City: Theological Reflections*, 151-74.

for *Latin America*, where he wrote, “In the present period of rapid urbanization, the kinship relations between urban and rural people may prove to be one of the most decisive factors in winning large numbers of both groups to the Christian faith.”<sup>27</sup> More recent studies have affirmed his contention.<sup>28</sup>

A second application of McGavran’s people group thinking is recognizing that evangelistic movements in cities are not necessarily fast moving. As noted in chapter 5, McGavran said that people movements might take years to complete. City evangelism across relationships involves short-term goals but long-term patience. In other words, missionaries working in urban contexts must always be prepared to share the gospel but must work patiently to disciple (and perfect) groups of believers who are outward-focused and evangelistic in orientation.

### **Urban Church Planting**

Another important theme for McGavran and in twenty-first century urban missions is church planting.<sup>29</sup> In *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest*, C. Peter Wagner argued that the “single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches,” a statement with which McGavran would likely have agreed.<sup>30</sup> Reflecting on the state of urban missions in 1999, Harvie Conn wrote,

evangelism and church planting don’t seem to get as much attention as economic justice, environmental issues, or the feminization of poverty. Urban mission connections form on international and citywide scales ... but how many concentrate

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<sup>27</sup>Roger S. Greenway, *An Urban Strategy for Latin America* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 58.

<sup>28</sup>Doug Saunders, *Arrival City: How the Largest Migration in History is Reshaping Our World* (New York: Pantheon, 2010).

<sup>29</sup>See chapter 5 above, especially pp. 169-77.

<sup>30</sup>C. Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1990), 11.

their planning on new strategies for new church planting and growth?<sup>31</sup>

The task of biblical missions rests with churches and requires that believers be involved in making disciples. The Christian mission is incomplete, however, if it stops there. The heart of missions is biblical churches making disciples by reproducing biblical churches. Once evangelism has taken place, new believers must be gathered together to form new churches. These new congregations must reflect a New Testament understanding of the church in all its facets.<sup>32</sup>

In today's world, two "great migrations" are having a significant impact on Christian missions. The first is urbanization – the move of populations from rural to urban. Much of that migration took place in the last century; at the turn of the twentieth century, less than 15 percent of the global population lived in urban contexts.<sup>33</sup> As discussed earlier, the urban population today has grown to more than half of the global total. The second wave of migration is individuals, families, and peoples moving away from their places of origin to a new locale. Enoch Wan, a leader in the study of missions and global migrations, cites statistics that 3 percent of the global population – some 214 million people – are now living away from their countries of birth.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Harvie M. Conn, "Urban Mission: Where are We Now?" *Urban Mission* (June 1999): 4.

<sup>32</sup>See also, Elmer L. Towns, "Church Planting in the Urban Setting: The Key to Reaching America," *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 9 (Spring 1998): 41-51.

<sup>33</sup>Todd M. Johnson, David B. Barrett, and Peter F. Crossing, "Status of Global Mission, 2011, in Context of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 35, no. 1 (January 2011): 29.

<sup>34</sup>Enoch Wan, "Diaspora Missiology," *Occasional Bulletin of the Evangelical Missiological Society* 20, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 3; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Trends in International Migrant Stock: The 2008 Revision* (New York: United Nations, 2009), 1. For the expanding discussion of migrations, see Christine D. Pohl, "Biblical Issues in Mission and Migration," *Missiology: An International Review* 31, no. 1 (January 2003): 3-15; Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, "The New People Next Door: Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 55 [on-

According to the United Nations, two-thirds of international migrants have settled in “developed” countries.<sup>35</sup> Wan identifies several “push and pull” factors affecting migration. Poverty, natural disaster, and political or religious persecution are forces that often drive individuals and families from their places of origin. More positively, quality of life, opportunity, and religious freedom tend to draw migrants and refugees to developed countries.<sup>36</sup> These factors bring about great opportunity for Christian missions as millions of people move from unchurched lands to nations where the church is much stronger. A special study group formed by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization celebrated the fact that

many previously presumed to be “unreached” people from the 10/40 windows are now accessible due to the global trend of migrant populations moving “from south to north, and from east to west.” Congregations in the receiving countries (i.e. industrial nations in the West) can practice “missions at our door step” i.e. reaching the newcomers in their neighborhoods without crossing borders geographically, linguistically and culturally. When God is moving the diasporas geographically making them accessible, the Church should not miss any opportunity to reach them with the gospel, i.e. “missions to the diasporas.”<sup>37</sup>

The overlap between global migration and urbanization is a central concern for

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line], paper presented at Pattaya, Thailand: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 2004; accessed 15 September 2010; available at [http://www.lausanne.org/documents/2004forum/LOP55\\_IG26.pdf](http://www.lausanne.org/documents/2004forum/LOP55_IG26.pdf); Internet; Enoch Wan, “Rethinking Missiology in the Context of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Global Demographic Trends and Diaspora Missiology,” *Great Commission Research Journal* 2, no. 1 (Summer 2010): 7-20; J. D. Payne, “Global Migration, the United States, and Canada: A Great Commission Opportunity,” *Great Commission Research Journal* 2, no. 1 (Summer 2010): 21-30.

<sup>35</sup>United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *International Migration Report 2006: A Global Assessment* (New York: United Nations, 2009), 1.

<sup>36</sup>Wan, “Diaspora Missiology,” 2; See also, Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, *Scattered to Gather: Embracing the Global Trend of Diaspora* (Manila: LifeChange Publishing, 2010).

<sup>37</sup>Lausanne Committee, *Scattered to Gather*, 27.

urban missions, as a significant portion of urban population growth is ethnic. Sociologist Roger Waldinger points out that, in the United States, “Today’s newcomers are far more likely than their native-born counterparts to live in the nation’s largest urban regions, making immigration, now as in the past, a quintessentially urban phenomenon.”<sup>38</sup> Almost half of all immigrants to the United States between 2000 and 2009 went to the nation’s eight largest cities.<sup>39</sup> The trend toward urban immigration is true of many western cities.

As the nations described in Matthew 28:18-20 move to global urban centers, the opportunities for evangelism are boundless. For migrants moving internally from villages to cities and for those emigrating to other nations, the overwhelming change of social life will provide opportunities for believers and churches to reach out with ministry and the gospel. “The twenty-first century,” contend anthropologists Caroline Brettell and Robert Kemper, “will be accompanied by vast differences in wealth and power within and among the world’s societies, and cities will be the critical arena in which these differences will be experienced.”<sup>40</sup> Healthy, church-centered evangelism and missions will have a significant message for those who have left their homes for urban centers. In addition, new city dwellers will maintain contact with those back in their home villages, providing an additional opportunity for gospel missions.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Roger Waldinger, “Strangers at the Gates,” *Strangers at the Gates: New Immigrants in Urban America*, ed. Roger Waldinger (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 1.

<sup>39</sup>The Brookings Institution, *State of Metropolitan America* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2010), 44.

<sup>40</sup>Caroline B. Brettell and Robert V. Kemper, “Cityward Migration in Comparative Perspective,” in *Urban Life*, 356.

<sup>41</sup>For an excellent analysis of these new populations and their networks, see Saunders, *Arrival City*. See also, J. D. Payne’s forthcoming *Strangers Next Door: Immigration, Migration and Missions Opportunity* (Colorado Springs: Biblica, 1012).

**Ethnicity and church planting.** Global migration and urban church planting intersect on the issue of ethnicity and racial reconciliation. Since the mid-twentieth century, missionaries and church planters have focused their efforts on planting churches among particular people groups or ethnic units. Ralph Winter, in his outline of three eras in missions history, described the key contribution of the twentieth century as an emphasis on unreached peoples.<sup>42</sup> That emphasis can be traced to McGavran's Homogeneous Unit Principle (HUP). In application, this principle means that effective evangelism and church planting require removing as much as possible these barriers by launching churches within particular homogeneous populations. Winter carried McGavran's HUP one step further through his advocacy of a "people group approach" to missions. He argued that in order to complete the Great Commission task of making "disciples of all nations," missionaries and churches would have to leave behind geographic and political definitions and focus strategically on ethno-linguistic groups.<sup>43</sup>

While most contemporary missions agencies have taken up Winter's philosophy, the approach has not been without controversy, especially among those working in urban contexts. Francis DuBose recognized that the heterogeneity present in every city must influence urban missions strategies. He clearly rejected McGavran's Homogeneous Unit Principle as unhealthy and unbiblical, saying, "The New Testament and the homogeneous unit strategy seem in clear opposition both in attitude and practice."<sup>44</sup> Urban populations are diverse, he argued, and churches should reflect that

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<sup>42</sup>Ralph D. Winter, "Four Men, Three Eras," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, ed. Ralph Winter et al. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009), 253-61.

<sup>43</sup>For a fuller discussion, see Ralph Winter, "Unreached Peoples: The Development of the Concept," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 1, no. 2 (1984): 129-61.

<sup>44</sup>DuBose, *How Churches Grow*, 171.

diversity.

More recently, Mark DeYmaz, pastor of an intentionally multi-ethnic congregation in Little Rock, Arkansas, has been a vocal opponent of church planting focused on single ethnic groups. “Surely, it must break the heart of God to see so many churches throughout this country segregated ethnically and economically from one another,” he declares.<sup>45</sup> DeYmaz bases his arguments on biblical passages such as Jesus’ prayer for the unity of the Church (John 17:1-26), the nationalities represented in the church at Antioch (Acts 11:19-21), and Paul’s teaching on the unity of Jews and Gentiles in the Church (Eph 3:6). He concludes that “we should recognize that Paul, like Christ, intended the local church to be multi-ethnic and, as such, to uniquely display God’s wisdom and glory.”<sup>46</sup>

Chapter 5 of this dissertation included an extended discussion of the Homogeneous Unit Principle, including McGavran’s views on its application in urban contexts. Cities are culturally, racially, and economically diverse. At the same time, minority groups exist in cities in numbers large enough to retain some cultural and language characteristics, justifying an ethnic church planting approach. McGavran’s HUP arose in rural village contexts where diversity was rare, and it has proven strategically valid on many fields. The question for urban missiologists is what constitutes a people group or homogeneous unit.

Missionaries arriving and working in cities recognize quickly that traditional ethno-linguistic definitions break down in urban contexts. McGavran argued that “the idea of the homogeneous unit is very elastic,” saying that in various places it might be

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<sup>45</sup>Mark DeYmaz, *Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church: Mandate, Commitments, and Practices of a Diverse Congregation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 4.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 37.

based on ethnicity. In other locales, the “common characteristic” might be geography, language, or class.<sup>47</sup> Homogeneous units looked differently in rural or urban environments and in Western or non-Western societies.

Troy Bush, who teaches urban ministry at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, argues that cities require a different vision of people groups. He contends that one must consider not only ethnicity and language but also social groups and urban networks. Traditional categories remain important, especially among first-generation immigrants who have not learned their host language or culture. At the same time, other factors connect urban dwellers and provide inroads to a population. Bush warns, however, that overanalysis is problematic. “The beautiful complexity of the city,” he says, “can lead to confusion about people groups. As we identify groups in the city, especially social groups, it is tempting to see groups everywhere.”<sup>48</sup> Identifying people groups and people group segments in urban contexts is, at best, a complex endeavor, but it is vital to church planting in cities.<sup>49</sup>

Urban missionaries have proposed numerous models and methodologies for planting churches that reflect the diversity of their communities. Manuel Ortiz describes two types of models: multi-congregational and multi-ethnic. Multi-congregational churches have at least two (and usually many more) ethnic churches meeting in one

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<sup>47</sup>Donald A. McGavran, “The Genesis and Strategy of the Homogeneous Unit Principle,” paper presented to the Lausanne Theology and Education Group, May 30, 1977. (WCIU 4.2).

<sup>48</sup>Troy L. Bush, “Urbanizing *Panta ta Ethne*,” paper presented to the Evangelical Missiological Society Southeast Regional Meeting, 25 March 2011, 17-18. See also, Troy L. Bush, “The Great Commission and the Urban Context” in *The Great Commission Resurgence: Fulfilling God’s Mandate in Our Time*, ed. Chuck Lawless and Adam W. Greenway (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 299-324.

<sup>49</sup>For a similar suggestion, see Timothy Monsma, “‘Homogeneous Networks:’ A Label That Promotes Good Evangelistic Strategies in Cities,” *Urban Mission* 5 (January 1988): 11-17.



location.<sup>50</sup> The congregations generally gather at different times or in different areas of a church property. The benefits of this model are its stewardship of valuable urban real estate and the preservation of language and cultural distinctives. Multi-ethnic churches not only mix believers from various ethnic backgrounds in a common worship service, but they also reflect diversity in worship styles, leadership, and structure.<sup>51</sup>

One particularly interesting model of multi-ethnic church planting is aptly referred to as a “hybrid.” John Leonard, who worked among North Africans in Paris for many years, describes this model as a meeting of the multi-congregational and multi-ethnic philosophies.<sup>52</sup> Believers and non-believers gather in small groups focused on particular people groups or segments.<sup>53</sup> At a separate time, the small groups meet together for corporate worship and fellowship. The corporate gathering involves leadership and musical styles from diverse cultures. Leonard argues that this hybrid model is the most flexible and reproducible and that it best recognizes cultural distinctives in a biblically faithful way.<sup>54</sup>

Mark DeYmaz has begun to advocate an approach similar to Leonard’s. In a recent work dedicated to McGavran’s Homogeneous Unit Principle, DeYmaz argues that

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<sup>50</sup>Manuel Ortiz, *One New People: Models for Developing a Multiethnic Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 63-85. See also, Rodney M. Woo, *The Color of Church: A Biblical and Practical Paradigm for Multiracial Churches* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009).

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 86-106.

<sup>52</sup>John S. Leonard, “Hybrid Church Planting Among North African Muslim Immigrants Living in France,” in *Globalization and Its Effects on Urban Ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Susan S. Baker (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009), 213-24.

<sup>53</sup>People group “segments” are not necessarily ethnolinguistic groups but may reflect cultural, economic, or generational populations.

<sup>54</sup>Antioch Church in Louisville, Kentucky, is a current example of the hybrid model. See <http://antiochpeople.org>.

the HUP is a valid missiological principle for evangelism and discipleship, but not for church planting and church life.<sup>55</sup> He proposes a model of “graduated inclusion” through which individuals hear about Christ and are disciplined through materials and groups targeted to specific ethnolinguistic groups or people segments. The church intentionally seeks to move believers into the larger body, however, which is multi-ethnic. One key to the process is developing leaders from diverse ethnicities. DeYmaz writes,

Again, let me be clear. There are only two reasons why we have determined to provide such cross-cultural ministry. . . . First it is for the purpose of building relationships and evangelism – to share the gospel in a way that is most accessible to the 1.0s [first generation immigrants] we are trying to reach; and second, to establish an initial level of comfort for internationals who are coming to Christ through our witness and into the church who are not yet fluent in the language or culture of the United States. For all involved, then, we do our best to clarify that we have no intention of creating an ethnic-specific church. Instead, we have adopted the HUP as an evangelistic tool for ethnic-specific outreach and as part of a more comprehensive strategy for building one healthy multi-ethnic church.<sup>56</sup>

DeYmaz believes that he has applied McGavran’s principles in an appropriate and biblical way, and it appears that his approach is bearing fruit. At the same time, it is likely that DeYmaz is reaching a group of people that is, in fact, homogeneous in its commitment to the American ideal of multiculturalism. It remains to be seen whether DeYmaz and other advocates of multi-ethnic church planting will reach deeply into people groups.

Faithful church planters continue to seek ways to reach out to immigrants and refugees in their communities, but the challenges of language and culture make simple answers impossible. Most would agree with DeYmaz that the goal of reconciliation between races and ethnicities is worthy. At the same time, the realities of cultural pride

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<sup>55</sup>Mark DeYmaz, *Homogeneous Unit Principle: Accept It or Reject It?* (Little Rock, AR: Mosaix Global Network, 2011), 19. DeYmaz published this book in an electronic format, and it is available at <http://www.mosaix.info/resources/hup>.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 26.

and conflict present real barriers that take time and solid discipleship to overcome. As with most issues in urban missions, the best answer lies in a “both/and” approach that recognizes the need for both ethnic congregations and multiethnic churches.

So, the questions remain: What is a people group in the city? How long are immigrant groups a “homogeneous unit” before they become, in mixture with the majority culture, something entirely new? What about the second and third generations? Twentieth century missiologists pointed us toward the importance of people groups. We must continue to apply biblical and practical thinking to the concept in urban centers.<sup>57</sup>

**Simplicity and church planting.** One final issue related to urban church planting is that of “simple” models. McGavran noted that high property costs and the need for hundreds of neighborhood churches make the construction of church buildings almost prohibitive.<sup>58</sup> DuBose proposed that effective urban missions be both flexible and simple.<sup>59</sup> Simplicity often shows in church planting through house churches, a methodology DuBose addressed in *Home Cell Groups and House Churches*, written with

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<sup>57</sup>See also, Conn and Ortiz, *Urban Ministry*, 311-39; Miriam Adeney, “Is God Colorblind or Colorful? The Gospel, Globalization, and Ethnicity,” *Mission Frontiers* 32, no. 3 (May-June 2010): 11-15; Skip Bell, “What Is Wrong With the Homogeneous Unit Principle? The HUP in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church,” *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 14 (Fall 2003): 3-17; Walther A. Olsen, “The Homogeneous Unit Principle Revisited: Part One,” *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 8 (Spring 1997): 3-16; Tom Steers, “Needed: More Monocultural Ministries” [on-line], *Christianity Today* (July 2010); accessed 16 August 2010; available at [http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/article\\_print.html?id=88308](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/article_print.html?id=88308); Internet; Tom A. Steffen, “Big Picture Curricula for Multiethnic Ministry,” *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 14, no. 1 (Fall 2003): 39-59; David Van Biema, “The Color of Faith,” *Time* (11 January 2010), 38-41.

<sup>58</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 322.

<sup>59</sup>DuBose, *How Churches Grow*, 170.

C. Kirk Hadaway and Stuart Wright.<sup>60</sup>

Advocates of house churches argue that small gatherings are more faithful to New Testament models by providing flexibility and accountability. J.D. Payne notes that the term *house churches* can convey a limited image; house churches do not meet only in houses. They are, in his words, “the local expression of the body of Christ whether they meet in a house, a park, or a conference hall.”<sup>61</sup> While house churches are not a perfect model, many urban practitioners have argued that house churches represent the healthiest way to plant churches in crowded urban contexts.<sup>62</sup>

While he maintains the value of a large corporate gathering, Tim Keller also advocates for small groups spread throughout a city. Not long after launching Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, Keller and his staff shifted to a “cell church model.”<sup>63</sup> The church had grown considerably during its first few years, but Keller recognized that its impact was limited based on its Manhattan location and the size of New York City. They made the decision that “nothing would compete with small groups as the main way we minister to individuals in the church.”<sup>64</sup> Redeemer reflects what William Beckham refers to as a “two-winged church,” having both a large collective

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<sup>60</sup>C. Kirk Hadaway, Francis M. DuBose, and Stuart A. Wright, *Home Cell Groups and House Churches* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987).

<sup>61</sup>J. D. Payne, *Missional House Churches: Reaching Our Communities with the Gospel* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2007), 10.

<sup>62</sup>For example, Manuel Sosa, “Church Planting in South America’s Urban Centers,” in *Globalization*, 225-42; David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God Is Redeeming a Lost World* (Midlothian, VA: WIGTake Resources, 2004).

<sup>63</sup>Timothy J. Keller and J. Allen Thompson, *Church Planter Manual* (New York: Redeemer Church Planting Center, 2002), 16.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*

worship service and multiple small groups for discipleship and fellowship.<sup>65</sup> Cell churches maintain a large gathering but overcome the property barrier by holding most activities in smaller groups.

No single church planting model will provide the answer for every city. House churches, simple churches, and cell churches are one response to the critical issue of flexibility and property costs. Also, in cities where transportation is an issue, house churches and cell churches can alleviate the problem of long commutes, especially in cities where evangelical churches are rare.

### **Social Ministry in Urban Contexts**

Regardless of theological or strategic intentions, urban missionaries cannot avoid the social problems prevalent in cities. In the face of poverty and other issues, urban missiologists and church planters have concluded that one cannot separate social ministries from the church any more than one can divide people from their suffering. The answer is the gospel proclaimed through the church. At the same time, one must take seriously McGavran's contention that evangelism must take priority lest missionaries and churches lose focus on their Great Commission task.

Some urban ministry practitioners have shifted away from the controversial language of social ministry and evangelism to speak of "changing the city" and "community transformation." When Tim Keller planted Redeemer Presbyterian Church, he did so with a "clear, compelling purpose: to apply the gospel to New York City so as to change it spiritually, culturally, and through it, to change our society and the world."<sup>66</sup> He started with the gospel, but believed that the gospel would bring about significant

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<sup>65</sup>William A. Beckham, *The Second Reformation: Reshaping the Church for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Houston: Touch Publications, 1995), 25-26.

<sup>66</sup>Keller, *Church Planting Manual*, 24.

change in urban life. Civility between neighbors, changes in family structures, improvement of race and class relationships, and Christian influence on the arts are all the fruit of Christ-centered church planting ministry.<sup>67</sup>

Eric Swanson and Sam Williams also tie community transformation directly to the evangelistic proclamation of the gospel and to the presence of the local church. “Wherever the gospel has gone,” they note, “this spiritual transformation is reflected in a wake of societal impact.”<sup>68</sup> Keller, Swanson, and Williams recognize that church planting and church health impact the social fabric of a city in ways that politics and government cannot. But such change cannot come about unless a church takes seriously her calling to feed the hungry, care for the poor, bring about reconciliation, and minister to the suffering.

Harvie Conn argued that evangelism and social ministry are “two sides of the same coin” and cannot be separated, even if they are not identical activities of the Christian church.<sup>69</sup> He expressed his frustration with what he described as “apartheid” between evangelism and social ministry, saying,

Who is more naïve? The liberal leaders of what we now call “the social gospel” with their passionate concern for a broken world and their never-ending optimism of how we may rectify it? Or the evangelical who has given up on the world’s headaches in favor of a stripped-down form of evangelism reduced to four spiritual laws? Or the evangelical social activist who does not see intercessory prayer as the first and constant component of our “social evangelism?”<sup>70</sup>

Conn viewed proclamation, presence, and prayer as part of unified whole in

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<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

<sup>68</sup>Eric Swanson and Sam Williams, *To Transform a City: Whole Church, Whole Gospel, Whole City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 44.

<sup>69</sup>Harvie Conn, *Evangelism: Doing Justice and Preaching Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 9.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 80.

the lives of believers and churches. “To seek [community] development without centering on Christ as our confession,” he later wrote with Manuel Ortiz, “is to be reductionist. On the other hand, to do evangelism while ignoring the concerns of the poor and the powerless is also reductionist.”<sup>71</sup> The mission of God through the city is hampered by sin, both personal and systemic, and must be addressed through both evangelism and social ministries of justice and peace.

One of the most intriguing and convincing recent arguments is that of Christopher J. H. Wright in his monumental biblical theology of mission, *The Mission of God*. Using the Old Testament Jubilee in Leviticus 25 as his foundation, Wright argued for the absolute necessity of social engagement in the Christian mission. The ethical impetus of the Old and New Testaments demands that believers engage culture on behalf of the poor, the needy, the widow, and the orphan.<sup>72</sup> Wright, however, contended that the notion of “priority” is not helpful in the discussion. “Priority,” he argued, “suggests something that has to be your starting point.”<sup>73</sup> Instead, he continued, we should consider the *ultimacy* of evangelism. Mission can start at any point depending on the most pressing need. “We can enter the circle of missional response at any point on the circle of human need,” he contended,

but ultimately we must not rest content until we have included within our own missional response the wholeness of God’s missional response to the human predicament – and that of course includes the good news of Christ, the cross and resurrection. . . . Mission may not always begin with evangelism. But mission that does not ultimately include declaring the word and the name of Christ, the call to repentance, and faith and obedience has not completed its task.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Conn and Ortiz, *Urban Ministry*, 348.

<sup>72</sup> See, for example, Ex 22:22; Deut 14:29, 24:19-21; 1 Tim 5:3-16; James 1:27.

<sup>73</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Grand Rapids: IVP, 2006), 317.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

Wright's argument is satisfying on several levels. First of all, it takes into account the whole corpus of Scripture, including the many passages encouraging God's people to fight for justice, to protect the helpless, to feed the hungry, and free the enslaved.<sup>75</sup> He also recognizes the absolute commands of the Great Commission to make disciples. Second, Wright answers many of the concerns outlined above. He recognizes that evangelism and social engagement are not identical, but they are, in fact, two necessary parts of the Christian mission. Evangelism alone is not a biblical response to the world, nor is social ministry the sole answer. Both must work together.

Mark Gornik expands on Wright's use of the Jubilee as a model for mission. He points out, first of all, Jesus' self-description in Luke 4:18-19:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Jesus refers to Isaiah 61:1-2, a passage looking forward to the Messiah. Commentators agree that this is a "programmatic statement of Jesus' ministry."<sup>76</sup> Many holistic mission practitioners view this passage, along with John 20:21, as marching orders for ministry that seeks to serve.<sup>77</sup>

Gornick takes further support from Jesus' healing of a woman in Luke 13:10-17. Jesus freed the woman from the demon causing her illness and from her bondage to the law. Jesus' ministry showed the reality and fulfillment of the Old Testament Jubilee.

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<sup>75</sup>See, for example, Lev 19:10, 23:22; Deut 24:14; Luke 4:18; Rom 15:26.

<sup>76</sup>Walter L. Liefeld, *Luke*, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed., Frank E. Gaebelain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 867.

<sup>77</sup>Mark R. Gornick, "Doing the Word: Biblical Holism and Urban Ministry," in *The Urban Face of Mission: Ministering the Gospel in a Diverse and Changing World*, ed. Manuel Ortiz and Susan S. Baker (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2002), 190-91.



Word and deed joined together to bring freedom.<sup>78</sup>

Roger Greenway described a four-fold perspective on mission, especially urban mission, that encompasses conversion, church planting, community ministry, and creation care. He considers all of these essential to the fulfillment of the missionary mandate. In terms of social responsibility, Greenway makes an excellent point in light of the full biblical witness:

If we wipe out poverty but neglect to tell the poor the Good News about Jesus Christ, we will have failed in our mission. If we preach the gospel but ignore the plight of the poor, we are false prophets.<sup>79</sup>

In more recent years, the “emerging church” has reflected something of a syncretism of Uppsala-style conciliar missiology with a postmodern worldview. Emerging churches are notoriously difficult to define, but Eddie Gibbs identified one of the movement’s central characteristics as “serving with generosity.” For these young leaders, mission and evangelism should be an integral part of a believer’s daily life. “The good news,” writes Gibbs, “presents the opportunity to participate with God in the redemption of the world, and emerging churches communicate the good news through service.”<sup>80</sup> Emerging churches teach that before one can tell the good news, one must become good news. This reversal of priority from evangelism to service is a notable feature of emerging thought, although Gibbs argues that emerging church leaders “refuse to engage in debate over which mandate has priority.”<sup>81</sup> While its involvement in cross-cultural missions may be weak, the emerging church movement has had a significant

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 192-93.

<sup>79</sup>Greenway and Monsma, *Cities: Missions’ New Frontier*, 72-74.

<sup>80</sup>Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 144.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 149.

impact on the Church in North America.<sup>82</sup> Obviously, the debate over holistic mission continues.

While missionaries and church planters working in urban contexts must face the reality of social problems, McGavran was correct to argue that evangelism must remain central to the missionary task. Practitioners like Conn and Greenway presented a more balanced (and perhaps realistic) view of the need and opportunity for social ministry as a path to evangelism, but McGavran's key point remains: ministry is for city churches planted in context. Missionaries must avoid spending inordinate amounts of time in social ministries, especially when those ministries have political implications. Instead, believers and churches must plant new churches that will follow Christ's command to minister to those in need.<sup>83</sup>

### **Areas for Further Research**

The limitations of this dissertation have not allowed for a complete discussion of every major issue in urban missions. The task has been to discern Donald McGavran's missiology as it applies in cities. Many questions remain for further research. First, as noted above, is the question of people groups and segments in cities. More in depth

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<sup>82</sup>Few, if any, of the formative works in emerging church thought deal with cross-cultural missions. Instead, authors like Dan Kimball, Brian McClaren, Eddie Gibbs, and Ryan Bolger deal almost exclusively with the American context. See Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005); Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003). For critique of the Emerging Church and its understanding of evangelism, see D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005); Chuck Lawless, "The Emerging Church and Evangelism," in *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent: A Discussion of the Emergent Church Movement*, ed. William D. Henard and Adam W. Greenway (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 308-333.

<sup>83</sup>See also, Norman G. Wilson, "Evangelism and Social Action – Revisiting an Old Debate: Good News for Immigrants and Evangelicals Too," *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 20 (Winter 2009): 69-83.

biblical, anthropological, and sociological research is necessary for missionaries to understand what composes a homogeneous unit in cities. Second, researchers must further study the impact of various church planting models in cities. A broad survey of models unique to cities would be of great benefit to churches and missions agencies.

Finally, McGavran's involvement in the examination of the definition of missions and evangelism during debates leading up to and following the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization merits much further study. Along this line, there is dearth of work in evangelical publishing related to the relationship between evangelism and urban social ministries. The vast majority of current work deals almost exclusively with social action.<sup>84</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Global cities are places of tremendous need and burgeoning opportunity. Donald McGavran's passion and focus for getting the gospel to unreached peoples, families, and individuals are both a challenge and an inspiration to twenty-first century missionaries and churches. As millions of people move to cities where the church does not exist, Great Commission Christians must go. In the world's great cities where churches are found, those communities must obey Christ's commands to proclaim the gospel and love their neighbors. Tested biblical missiology will aid in that task.

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<sup>84</sup>See, for example, Eric O. Jacobsen, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003); Phil Mortensen, *For God So Loved the Inner City: Urban Missions and the Forgotten Church* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2008); Ronald Edward Peters, *Urban Ministry: An Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007); Ronald J. Sider et al., *Linking Arms, Linking Lives: How Urban-Suburban Partnerships Can Transform Communities* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008); Randy White, *Encounter God in the City: Onramps to Personal and Community Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006) for examples. See also Raymond J. Bakke, *A Theology as Big as the City* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997); Raymond J. Bakke, *The Urban Christian: Effective Ministry in Today's Urban World* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1987).

McGavran's closing words in his "Discipling Urban Populations" chapter of *Understanding Church Growth* remain valid four decades after they were penned and are a fitting call:

Discipling urban populations is perhaps the most urgent task confronting the Church. Bright hope gleams that now is precisely the time to learn how it may be done and to surge forward actually doing it.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup>McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 295.

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## ABSTRACT

### “EFFECTIVE EVANGELISM” IN THE CITY: DONALD MCGAVRAN’S MISSIOLOGY AND URBAN CONTEXTS

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This dissertation examines the missiology of Donald A. McGavran as it applies in urban contexts. Chapter 1 introduces the research question by examining the current state of global urbanization and urban missions. Alongside the study of urban missions is an outline of the rise of Donald McGavran’s church growth thought through the twentieth century, including the rise and decline of the Church Growth Movement’s missiological emphasis.

Chapter 2 includes a more in-depth biographical study of Donald Anderson McGavran and an outline of his church growth missiology. The biographical section surveys McGavran’s missionary career and the development of church growth thought. The chapter concludes with an outline of key principles of church growth missiology.

Chapter 3 presents an overview of McGavran’s understanding of urban missions, including a survey of his writing and teaching directed specifically at urban missions. Because much of McGavran’s influence on cities came through his students at the Institute of Church Growth and the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary, the chapter includes a brief outline of his students’ work.

The final three chapters go more deeply into three key elements of McGavran's urban missiology that have application to contemporary urban ministry. Chapter 4 addresses McGavran's contention that research is a key to church growth, with an emphasis on his advocacy of urban research.

Chapter 5 explains McGavran's understanding of evangelism in urban contexts. Within this understanding, three important facets of evangelistic strategy are addressed: people movements, the Homogeneous Unit Principle, and church planting.

Chapter 6 delves into McGavran's work related to "holistic" missions and his understanding of the relationship between social ministry and missions. McGavran's leadership in the conciliar/evangelical debates is addressed, as is his own work related to social justice issues.

Chapter 7 answers the final research question, how might McGavran's teachings be applied in urban contexts today, if at all? The dissertation concludes with a summary and reinforcing insights from McGavran's teaching on urban missions.

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