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THE LIFE OF DONALD MCGGAVRAN: LEAVING A LEGACY

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Editor's Note: Gary L. McIntosh has spent over a decade researching and writing a complete biography on the life and ministry of Donald A. McGavran. We are pleased to present the eleventh and final excerpt from *Donald A. McGavran: A Biography of the Twentieth Century's Premier Missiologist* (Church Leader Insights: 2015).

Abstract:

As the Church Growth Movement continued to develop, it gained strength and respect. The establishing of the McGavran Chair of Church Growth was a *red-letter* day, which established the CGM as an academic discipline. Donald and Mary McGavran slowly backed away from direct ministry, but continued to follow the movement's impact. This excerpt reports the final years of McGavran's life and ministry.

Leaving a Legacy

At 85 years of age, Donald was aware that his ministry was ending, and with gratefulness he thanked Peter Wagner for penning a tribute to him.

As I read your gracious tribute to me, Pete, I was deeply touched. I want to tell you how much through the past many years your generous tributes have meant. No one else has so often and so kindly attributed the church growth movement's founding to me. Indeed, it may be said that you gave birth to the Father of the church growth movement!!

My contributions to the movement are rapidly drawing to a close—if indeed they have not already ended. From now on you are and will, please God, remain the leading figure in the church growth movement. No one else has your ability and your position.

The battle goes on. The ground gained in the past is only the beginning. The enemies so far conquered are being replaced with new enemies. God grant you great power to discern these and effectively to dispose of them.¹

He prayed that God would make Wagner's next fifteen years tremendously effective.

"New Urban Faces of the Church," an article that appeared in the September 1983 issue of *Urban Mission*, constituted Donald's call for new forms of churches to reach the mosaic of new peoples flowing into the urban areas of the world.

Since urban mankind is a vast mosaic made up of innumerable pieces, my thesis is that the Church in the cities of the world must have multitudinous new faces. A significant part of the plateaued or declining membership of many congregations and denominations is that they have taken the page of the church in their segment of the population and imposed it on other segments where it does not fit and another model is required.²

He wrote about the need for house churches and, along with Kip McKean, provided a case study highlighting the Boston Church of Christ congregation (a congregation that later received much criticism).

Along with Glasser he coauthored *Contemporary Theologies of Mission*. This 250-page book focused on the most controversial missiological questions of the 1980s. The authors described four theories of mission and

1 Donald McGavran to Peter Wagner, June 17, 1983.

2 Donald A. McGavran, "New Urban Faces of the Church," *Urban Mission* [1983], 3.

attempted to deal with them in comprehensive and scholarly fashion. While almost all reviewers recommended the book for careful study, some found the apparent appeal to collaborate with Roman Catholics unacceptable due to differences in doctrines of authority and soteriology. Unfortunately, it is not exactly clear in the book what Donald had in mind, although he most likely was thinking in methodological terms of collaboration rather than in theological ones.

As he grew older, Donald slowly lost his eyesight. This meant that he had to relinquish some of the jobs he had carried for many years, one of which was selecting the books for the Church Growth Book Club, listed six times a year in *Global Church Growth*. He confessed, “Since I can no longer read at all, I can no longer do this job. Someone else must be found at once. I should have written this letter to you two years ago!” He also voiced concern that a balance between global and American church growth be maintained. It “must not be limited to American C. G., though that has captured the center of the C. G. movement.”³ In addition, he also started turning down speaking engagements. In a response to William Arnold, then dean of Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, Donald explained, “The program that you lay out is, I am sorry to say, beyond my present abilities. I am now 87 years of age and could not undertake the challenging, inviting, and alas strenuous program required. I still do a good deal of writing, but any such responsible teaching is, I now fear, beyond me.”⁴

Not only was Donald slowly backing away from direct ministry, but Mary was also struggling with a major illness. By 1985 she was unable to attend church, which meant that she and Donald listened to many church services on television. As might be expected, he evaluated the religious television shows against church growth insights. He observed to Win Arn, “All these stress good Christian living and obedience to God’s commands in the Bible. But they very seldom indeed—and perhaps never—mention listeners starting new congregations or winning their neighbors and friends into new evangelistic home Bible studies.”⁵

3 Donald McGavran to Peter Wagner, James Montgomery, and Ted Olsen, December 8, 1983.

4 Donald McGavran to William V. Arnold, March 4, 1985.

5 Donald McGavran to Win Arn, October 24, 1985.

Donald's major accomplishment in 1984 was the publication of *Momentous Decisions in Missions Today*. Speaking from the vantage point of more than a half century of personal involvement in missions, Donald addressed the major questions of the 1980s under four headings: 1) theological, 2) strategic, 3) organizational, and 4) methodological. He reaffirmed the primacy of Gospel proclamation, conversion, and church planting. More importantly, he focused on the importance of the cities and urban evangelism. Roger Greenway stated of this book, "I recommend the book highly to missionaries and their executives, to college and seminary students, and to Third World leaders who are concerned about the future of missions in, to, and from their countries."⁶

Fuller Theological Seminary finally established the Donald A. McGavran Chair of Church Growth on November 6, 1984. Designed as it was to encourage and recognize Fuller faculty who had become a force in research and education within the field of Church Growth, Wagner was the obvious choice to be installed in the chair. Wagner was well known in the Church Growth Movement, having authored 26 books and numerous articles. By 1984 more than 1,150 clergy had taken church growth courses from him through the Fuller doctor of ministry program, as had many of the 2,700 alumni of the School of World Mission. An editorial in *Global Church Growth* declared, "An endowed Chair of Church Growth bearing the name of the founder and occupied by the man who represents the future of the movement is now a reality. The Church Growth Movement has consequently gained both credibility and permanence."⁷

With Wagner firmly in the McGavran Church Growth Chair, he desired to find a second professor of church growth to add to the faculty. One of Wagner's doctor of ministry students, Edmund "Eddie" Gibbs (b. 1938), had written a book titled *I Believe in Church Growth* (1981), and he came immediately to mind. Gibbs had served as a missionary with the South American Missionary Society, worked with the British and Foreign Bible Society, and later ministered with the Billy Graham Mission England team as national training director. From 1979 to 1982 he had studied Church Growth in the Fuller doctor of ministry program,

6 Roger S. Greenway, "Momentous Decisions in Missions Today," *Urban Mission* [1985], 56.

7 Kent Hunter, "A Red-Letter Day for Church Growth," *Global Church Growth* [1985], 2.

where he had become a friend of Wagner. This friendship had led to Gibbs coming to SWM to teach Church Growth from 1984 to 1988, after which FTS appointed him to the Robert Boyd Munger Chair of Evangelism from 1988 to 1991. Gibbs returned to the pastorate for a time and then rejoined SWM in 1996 to fill the McGavran Chair of Church Growth until his retirement in 2003.⁸

Donald's heart was always with the Restoration Movement, and he desired to help the different branches—Disciples of Christ, Churches of Christ, and Independent Christian Churches—of this movement grow. While in India, he had watched the Disciples of Christ branch move progressively toward theological liberalism, which had greatly disturbed him. His writing and teaching on church growth had little impact on that particular branch, but he had a huge impact on the more conservative Churches of Christ and Independent Christian Churches.

During the late 1970s the Brammel Road Church of Christ in Houston, Texas, experienced rapid growth from 100 to more than 1,000 in worship attendance. Pastor Joe Schubert started receiving so many requests for help from other Church of Christ pastors that he could not respond to them all. Thus, in 1981 he invited Tim Matheny, Minister of Evangelism at Madison Church of Christ, then the largest Church of Christ in the United States with over 4,000 in worship attendance, to become executive director of the Center for Church Growth in Houston, Texas. Matheny invited Win Arn to lead a church growth training seminar in 1982 for the Churches of Christ, which sparked the Center to publish a newsletter, later a magazine, *Church Growth Today*; conduct regional church growth seminars; and offer consultations for local churches. Donald encouraged the Churches of Christ to get back to making disciples through effective evangelism.⁹ When Matheny moved on to work in the field of financial management,¹⁰ John Ellas assumed the directorship of the Center for Church Growth.

8 Gibbs brought a British European perspective to the field of Church Growth and focused on the problem of nominalism in churches. His interest eventually turned to studies of church growth in postmodern contexts. To date he has written nearly twenty books on topics related to church growth.

9 Tim E. Matheny, "The Founder of the Church Growth Movement Speaks Out to Churches of Christ," *Center for Church Growth Newsletter* [1985], 1-2.

10 After leaving the Center for Church Growth, Tim Matheny also joined with R. Daniel Reeves at Church Consultants Group and Kent Hunter at the Church Growth Center as a church consultant.

A former pastor from Athens, Georgia, Ellas published several books on church growth and continued to lead church consultations for Church of Christ congregations until his retirement in the mid-1990s.

Church growth teaching continued to spread in the United States, and another institute founded on Donald's Church Growth ideas was launched in 1984. Larry Gilbert, a Christian businessman in Maryland, had founded Steps in Living Ministries in 1978 as a means to provide resources to help pastors and churches. Sensing God's tug toward active ministry, he sold his successful sign business and moved to Lynchburg, Virginia, and enrolled in Liberty University, where he met and befriended Elmer Towns. Together Gilbert and Towns launched the Church Growth Institute (CGI) in 1984. The focus of CGI was on the conservative, non-charismatic side of the church world, with a strategy of providing practical resources for churches and pastors.

Gilbert oversaw the business side of the ministry, while Towns conducted national seminars. Together they developed several popular resources, such as *Friend Day*, which to date has sold over 50,000 copies. Gilbert also conducted church growth research and wrote materials like the *Team Ministry Spiritual Gifts Inventory*, used by more than five million people. "Instead of large three and four day conferences that cost the pastor several hundred dollars, CGI introduced the \$99 one day leadership seminar and took them to small towns. Over 65,000 church leaders have attended CGI seminars."¹¹ While Towns was the primary seminar leader, Gary L. McIntosh (b. 1947), a professor at Talbot School of Theology, Biola University; and Glen S. Martin (b. 1953), a successful pastor in Manhattan Beach, California, also led training seminars on evangelism and assimilation. At its peak CGI was conducting more than one hundred seminars per year.

Donald and Mary usually attended black churches in the United States. Their three decades in India resulted in their feeling more comfortable in African-American churches than in ones comprised primarily of white people. However, as they grew older they felt it best to affiliate with a church nearer their home. In February 1986 they joined Lake Avenue Congregational Church, pastored by Paul Cedar and also attended by the

11 Larry Gilbert to Gary L. McIntosh, September 24, 2013.

Wagners and several other faculty members from Fuller. The McGavrans knew pastor Cedar from Fuller, where he had taught evangelism for several years in the Fuller doctor of ministry program.

Two articles for the public gave Donald the opportunity to reflect on his life and ministry. *Theology News and Notes* published “That the Gospel Be Made Known” in the June 1985 issue. The article provided a glimpse into Donald’s thoughts as he neared the end of his career and life. In this article he reflected on his missionary journey and explained his pilgrimage down several rivers: the theological river, the missionary labor river, and the growth of the church river. He concluded, “My pilgrimage has taken place in the midst of these tremendous divine movements. God has used the Church Growth Movement far more than any of us laboring at it had dared to ask or think.”¹² He also described his pilgrimage in mission for the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*. His contribution, simply titled “My Pilgrimage in Mission,” provided a repository in brief of his overall life and ministry.¹³

Critics had attacked church growth thinking from the beginning of the movement. In the early years Donald had stood alone in defense of his missiological idea. Then Tippett had come to take up the battle, along with, eventually, Kraft, Wagner, and Winter. By the 1980s the furor cooled somewhat. Church growth leaders modified their positions to some extent, while critics did their homework and discovered that church growth relied on sound biblical truth.

Then Kraft published *Christianity in Culture*, and things heated up once again. Edward Gross wrote *Is Charles Kraft an Evangelical*, questioning Kraft’s orthodoxy and that of the Church Growth School. Nevertheless, as always, the SWM faculty stood together, and Harvie Conn in his book *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds* complimented Kraft on his scholarship, integrity, and orthodoxy. Church growth missiology was never totally without its critics, but by the mid-1980s it appeared that the criticism was softening, or at least maturing.¹⁴

12 Donald A. McGavran, “That the Gospel Be Made Known,” *Theology News and Notes* [1985], 13.

13 McGavran, “My Pilgrimage in Mission,” 53-57.

14 Peter Wagner to SWM Faculty, July 31, 1985.

In early 1986 a letter arrived from Kenneth Ward asking for advice regarding church renewal. Donald passed the letter along to Wagner, informing Ward that Wagner was better prepared to give direction to his inquiry. His continued concern for biblical fidelity was seen in the final paragraph of this short letter, which read, “We must move away from the liberal position which holds that the Bible is not the infallible, inspired Word of God and consequently emphasize only those parts of it which they happen to like at the moment.”¹⁵

Fr. Devasia Vaghayil wrote Donald from Meghalaya, India, asking for his views on the subjects of missiology, ecumenism, the Homogeneous Unity Principle, as well as for his impressions of the missionary methods of Catholics. Donald responded in great length. His answer to the first question shows that Donald viewed the Church Growth Movement as synonymous with missiology rather than simply as a branch of missiology. He explained,

You asked, Is the church growth movement a branch of missiology? The answer is both yes and no. Missiology is the science of missions. However, what are missions? The great theologian, Richard Niebuhr, says that missions are everything done outside the four walls of the church. If you define missions in this way, then the church growth movement is certainly a branch. If, however, you define missions as I do—namely, the carrying out of the Great Commission—then the church growth movement is synonymous with effective evangelism and there with missions.¹⁶

In the letter Donald continued to explain the complex nature of missiology, as well as to answer the remaining three questions.

Even though Donald was finding it difficult to read, he continued to study and advance his knowledge. A letter to Sam Wilson of Mission Advanced Research and Communication (MARC) illustrated his personal study. True to form, Donald encouraged Wilson in the publication of the “unreached people’s” volumes, saying, “The idea which came to me in a flash of blinding white was in essence a simple one—namely, our Lord

15 Donald McGavran to Kenneth Ward, March 24, 1986.

16 Donald McGavran to Fr. Devasia Vaghayil, June 10, 1986.

straightly commands His followers to disciple all the unreached people groups of the world.” He proceeded to discuss the four major Greek words in the Great Commission quoting Kittel, the German authority on biblical words. This was new to Donald, as he had rarely—if ever before—quoted sources like Kittel in his previous uses of the Great Commission.¹⁷ In his reply, Wilson stated, “I deeply appreciate your letter of the 17 of November, developing a truer significance for the words *ta ethne*. I could not agree with you more. . . . You are absolutely correct that we have been deceived by our contemporary understanding. I would be enthusiastic in looking for a way to utilize anything from the prestigious pen of Donald McGavran in the *Unreached Peoples* series.”¹⁸

Donald kept informed and involved in the SWM faculty luncheons as much as possible during his final years. Wagner suggested that the faculty use their luncheons to discuss central issues in missiology. In reply, Donald shared his feelings on what he believed was a danger to be avoided: “I have a feeling that the School of World Mission needs to make sure that in every class the goal is clearly ‘to be all things to all men in order to win some’ (1 Cor. 9:22). Unless we do this, the pressures for academic excellence will inevitably lead us to graduate men who know missiology very well but who bring very few of their brothers and sisters to faith in Christ.”¹⁹

One writer, Joe Webb, asked Donald to review an article he had written for *Global Church Growth*. Donald suggested that Webb focus on the fact that “Church growth insists that evangelistic effectiveness be measured by the number of men and women, boys and girls, who become lifetime, responsible, practicing Christians in ongoing congregations.” A final paragraph provided a glimpse into his way of writing letters and articles, as well as his work schedule: “I am sitting at your desk in the McGavran room dictating this to Betty Ann. I am going to spend the rest of the morning here working at making the library in the other room more useful. I want books in it to be readily findable.”²⁰

Since Webb was writing a dissertation on a history of the School of

17 Donald McGavran to Sam Wilson, November 17, 1986.

18 Sam Wilson to Donald McGavran, December 4, 1986.

19 Donald McGavran to Peter Wagner, February 13, 1987.

20 Donald McGavran to Joe Webb, October 30, 1987.

World Mission between 1965 and 1985, Donald provided an overview from his memory of those years. While the letter was not a complete record, he listed in 1987 nine items he felt he ought to emphasize in a history of the SWM.

First, there was an accurate description of what a school of missions really wants to do.

Second, another important task to which I gave much time during my years as dean was securing a faculty of seven full-time professors of mission.

Third, the absolute necessity for students at a school of world mission to describe exactly—repeat, exactly—the degree to which the populations in which they have been missionaries or national leaders are actually becoming Christians.

The fourth aspect of what the School of World Mission was doing was stress on effective evangelism done by SWM faculty during their summer and sabbatical quarters.

Fifth, Iberville and Winona Lake.

The sixth influence of the School of World Mission arose by the beginning of a publishing company called William Carey Library.

Seventh, very influential in forming missionary history was the Church Growth Bulletin.

The eighth aspect of the church growth movement has been a waking in nation after nation to the urgency of effective evangelism.

The ninth aspect of the work of SWM during the first ten or twenty years is the effect that it had not merely on career missionaries but on leaders of national churches.²¹

In the United States the Church Growth Movement was experiencing its best years. In the fall of 1980 Arn's Institute initiated a new advertising campaign published in the form of a newspaper. The *Church Growth Resource News* was a 16-page newspaper featuring articles and resources for church growth. The highly effective one-day specialty workshops were beginning to catch on. The 1980-1981 workshop schedule featured Win and Charles Arn teaching on three topics: "Identifying, Reaching and

21 Donald McGavran to Joe Webb, December 10, 1987.

Winning New People;” “The Effective Incorporation of New Members;” and “Growth: A New Vision for the Sunday School.” Five series of workshops were scheduled for October and November 1980, with another eleven from February to May 1981. *The Great Commission Sunday School* was the newest film used in the Sunday School seminar. Other featured church growth films included *Discover Your Gifts*, *The Gift of Love, But... I'm Just a Layman!*, and *And They Said It Couldn't Be Done*. The original church growth films—*How to Grow a Church* and *Reach Out and Grow*—were also available. However, only one Advanced Growth Seminar was scheduled for 1981. Later that year a second film on the Sunday School was produced: *The Possibility Sunday School*.

Jack Gunther had worked with the IACG since 1979. He assisted the institute in computerizing its database for subscriptions, mailing lists, and advertising. Over the two years they worked together, Arn and Gunther often discussed the potential of assisting churches to use computer technology for church growth. In the fall of 1981 Gunther left his position with IBM and founded Church Growth Data Services. An advertisement announcing the new company appeared in the *Church Growth Resource News* in fall 1981. In the same paper a small ad drew attention to a new Two-Year Plan for Regional Church Growth. This new plan, along with *The Master's Plan* evangelism training packet, was the ingredient that propelled the institute to its pinnacle of effectiveness within the next three years.

Response to the specialty workshops continued to be positive, and 18 were held in the fall of 1981 in Chicago, Minneapolis, Portland, Oklahoma City, St. Louis, and the bay area of California. An additional 48 workshops were conducted in 16 cities in 1982. Glasser was featured in the advertising, although he most often spoke via film at the workshops.

The winter 1982 issue of the *Church Growth Resource News* featured the newly designed Two-Year Plan for Growth, a comprehensive strategy among the institute, local church leaders, and regional denominational offices. Through this plan local churches banded together as a group for church growth training. This effectively lowered the costs so that smaller churches could afford training in church growth principles and receive church growth resources. More than five hundred churches became involved in this two-year plan between 1982 and 1986. Two new books

were released in 1982: *The Pastor's Church Growth Handbook, Volume II* (Arn) and *The Master's Plan for Making Disciples* (Arn and Arn). Similar to the first volume, the *Pastor's Handbook* was a compilation of articles from *Church Growth, America*. The major impact, however, came from *The Master's Plan*.

Published in October 1982, *The Master's Plan* was essentially an adaptation of Donald's Bridges of God concept for a North American audience—Friendship Evangelism. The product line included a book, a new film (*For The Love of Pete*), a one-day training seminar, and a *Master's Plan Church Action Kit*. This new approach to advertising allowed for a church to become involved on four different levels. For example, if pastors had a limited amount of money, they could simply purchase the book for \$6.95. If church leaders desired to move further along with *The Master's Plan*, they could order and view *For The Love of Pete* for only \$37.50. For those who desired to train their people in household evangelism, they could order and use *The Master's Plan Church Action Kit*, which included a coordinator manual, leadership equipping guide, information on conducting a churchwide workshop, a copy of the book, a videotape of *For The Love of Pete* film, and a blueprint action booklet—all for \$169.95. Finally, for churches that were very serious about training their people to reach friends and family members for Christ, there was *The Master's Plan Training Seminar*. For a cost of \$695 a church could send five leaders for a complete, one-day training on how to effectively use *The Master's Plan* in their context. Five training seminars were scheduled for the fall of 1982 and 10 for winter and spring 1983.

People and churches were ready for a new approach to evangelism, and *The Master's Plan for Making Disciples* book and church action kit were well received during the next four years (more than eight thousand action kits were in use by 1985). To meet the need of another national seminar leader, Arn hired Robert Orr, a pastor in Canada, as vice president of seminars (1984-1993) to help conduct national seminars during the fall of 1982 and the first six months of 1983. Orr had worked as an associate with the institute from 1974 to 1982, leading seminars effectively in Canada and the United States. A keen leader and practitioner in the field of Church Growth, he had planted three churches and directed the institute's

Canadian office from 1981 until 1984.²²

Insight 1000, a computer system to help churches grow, was publicized in the winter of 1982. The package was a combination of computer technology (hardware) and programming (software) designed to provide church leaders with information that would help their churches grow. The Insight 1000 software was the first product of its kind to move beyond maintenance functions to supporting the ministry goals of the church. To support Gunther as director of Church Growth Data Services, two additional employees were hired to promote, sell, install, and train church leaders in the use of the Insight 1000 program.

The *Church Growth, America* magazine continued in publication through spring 1983. At its peak, the magazine reached more than six thousand subscribers. However, based on the expense of publishing a magazine, *Church Growth, America* was retooled into *The Win Arn Growth Report* in fall 1983. The *Win Arn Growth Report* was mailed free of charge, but recipients were asked to donate 15 dollars once a year. Subscriptions to this four-page newsletter reached nearly 35,000 by 1986.

All of these new products, consultation programs, and seminars raised the IACG to a new level of ministry impact. Plans were made to relocate to new office space and to add new seminar staff to the teaching team during summer and fall 1983. *See You Sunday*, the new film in the Dynamic Laity Film Series, was featured in the winter of 1983.²³ To provide further support for the expanding Master's Plan training, the institute hired Avery Powers (1944-2003), founder of a successful camping and backpacking ministry that focused on evangelism, in the spring of 1983. Powers's background in evangelism and discipleship, particularly in outdoor camping, made him an ideal coordinator of training seminars for *The Master's Plan* friendship evangelism materials.

22 As of 2013, Robert Orr serves as academic vice president and professor of church growth at California State Christian University, La Habra, CA.

23 The Win Arn/Church Growth Dynamic Laity Film Series often went by the common name "The Chuck Bradley Series." All of the films featured a popular layman named Chuck Bradley. In the Winter of 1983 there were seven Chuck Bradley films: *But...I'm Just A Layman!*, *The Gift of Love*, *Discover Your Gifts*, *The Great Commission Sunday School*, *The Possibility Sunday School*, *For the Love of Pete*, and *See You Sunday*.

The increasing number of churches registering up for the Two-Year Plan created a need for even more staff to oversee the numerous churches involved in the program, as well as to conduct the individual church growth analysis of each congregation. In May 1983 Win Arn asked Gary L. McIntosh, a local pastor who had completed a doctor of ministry degree in church growth under Wagner in 1982, to complete church growth diagnostic studies of twenty churches involved in the Two-Year Growth Plan. Following what turned out to be a two-week practice run, Arn offered McIntosh a position with the institute to oversee the Two-Year Growth Plan, consult with churches, lead seminars, and conduct diagnostic studies of churches. McIntosh accepted Arn's offer, and by September 1983 the full-time consulting staff of the institute included six people: Win Arn, Charles Arn, Jack Gunther, Gary McIntosh, Robert Orr, and Avery Powers. Win Arn served as the institute's principal spokesperson, Charles Arn edited the *Win Arn Growth Report* and developed church growth products, and Jack Gunther directed Church Data Services and oversaw the institute's administration. Orr, McIntosh, and Powers directed seminars, consultations, and *The Master's Plan*, respectively.²⁴

The addition of new staff fueled the continued growth of Arn's institute. That fall a new movie, *The Ministers*, featuring Chuck Bradley, was added to the Dynamic Laity Film Series. A new series of specialty seminars was added as well, for a total of six one-day workshops in the two series. Topics in Series II included "How to Build a Vision, a Team and a Plan for Growth," "How to Mobilize Your Laity for Ministry," and "How to Effectively Use a Computer in Your Church." Sixteen presentations of Series I and 10 of Series II were scheduled between January and May 1984, for a total of 78 seminars in a five-month period. Then, during the summer of 1984, Powers left to return to the pastorate, leaving the institute with five consulting staff.

The IACG reached its peak in 1985. By that year Arn had produced 11 church growth films that 45 film libraries carried and an estimated

24 At its peak, Arn's Institute for American Church Growth employed 28 people. After Gunther and Powers left, the core team consisted of Win Arn, president and director; Charles Arn, vice president of research; Robert Orr, vice president of seminars; and Gary L. McIntosh, vice president of consulting services.

250,000 people viewed each year. The Basic Growth Seminar, with refinements and enhanced media, had been conducted in thousands of churches across America, as well as in 10 nations overseas and in more than 50 denominations and 45 states. The institute was still on the cutting edge of the American Church Growth movement, “continuing to provide direction, leadership, and a constant flow of practical resources for local churches and denominations.”²⁵

That same year Win Arn introduced the Church Growth Development Scale for local churches and the Denominational Growth Development Scale for denominations. Both tools provided a new paradigm on how church growth insights penetrated a church and a denomination. Arn attracted the attention of denominational leaders when he published a 10-year growth forecast for denominations; *Christianity Today* later picked up and published the forecast. Numerous calls came into the institute requesting further information, advice, and recommendations. The film *A Matter of Urgency* was advertised as the new addition to the Dynamic Laity Film Series.

The idea of providing computer technology for church ministry proved to be ahead of its time. Church office staff were resistant to the introduction of computers in the 1980s, and the Insight 1000 hardware and software did not sell well. A decision was made in 1985 to close Church Data Services, and the software was sold to another company, who rewrote it and marketed it as Logos Church Software. Since Gunther was the principal owner of Church Growth Data Services, this closure left him with no future in the company, and he left the institute in 1985 to pursue other business opportunities.

More than five hundred churches were participating in the Two-Year Growth Plan in 1985, but as the year progressed some were ending their two-year cycle and moving out of the program. The Two-Year Growth Plan had provided a regular income to the IACG, and people began to raise questions concerning how to replace the income from the departing churches. The number of diagnostic studies completed on churches showed evidence of the decline in the Two-Year Growth Plan. All churches in

²⁵ Church Growth, Inc., “American Church Growth: the Man Behind the Movement,” *Church Growth Resource News*, Pasadena, CA: Church Growth, 1985), 1.

the plan completed a diagnostic analysis, a good indicator of what was happening. During 1983 approximately 116 diagnostic studies were completed, with 180 finished in 1984. The number of studies dropped to 120 in 1985, and no studies were completed in 1986.

Essentially, the Two-Year Plan was no longer attracting new churches by 1986. The reason for the slowdown was related to several factors. By 1986 denominations had started developing their own church growth centers and programs, and some graduates of the Fuller doctor of ministry program were competing with Arn's institute by offering similar two-year training processes. The Church Growth Center (today Church Doctor Ministry) in Corunna, Indiana, founded by Kent Hunter in 1978, was one such competing organization. After receiving a Ph.D. in theology, Kent Hunter became pastor of an urban church in Detroit, Michigan. He entered the Fuller doctor of ministry program in the mid-1970s to study Church Growth and began applying what he learned from McGavran and Wagner to his local church.

The result was a significant turnaround in the church's ministry. The growth of this urban church brought national attention to Hunter, who started writing and speaking about church growth.²⁶ The demands on his time, while leading a growing church, led to the incorporation of a nonprofit ministry dedicated to teaching church growth principles and providing consulting services to churches. In the mid-1980s Kent Hunter started offering his own version of a two-year growth plan, which gradually made inroads into the church market that Arn's Institute was serving. This is only one example; other centers and institutes were also developed during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

In the fall of 1984 the institute created a new Church Growth Associate (CGA) program for training church consultants. Designed to train denominational executives, theological educators, pastors, and laypersons, the CGA program was a means to help church leaders communicate and apply church growth principles to their congregations. Training included two weeks of classroom study held one year apart with a 12-month field

26 As of 2013, Kent Hunter has authored thirty books. Now called the Church Doctor, Hunter and Church Doctor Ministries have launched a young adult training experience known as SEND North America, as well as a twenty-four-month spiritual pilgrimage called Healthy Churches Thrive!

internship between the weeks of classroom instruction. Tuition cost \$500 for each week, plus \$50 a month during the year, for a total cost of \$1,600. Associates were trained in basic consulting techniques and in leading six of the Institute's seminars. More than 90 church growth associates were trained by 1986. However, the program never met expectations, as only five percent of those trained ended up practicing consulting for any length of time. The institute also came to realize they were training future competitors.

The institute conducted an extensive survey of churches to determine the impact that love and care were having on church growth. The "Love/Care Quotient," as the survey was called, was comprised of 17 questions. A total of 168 churches from 39 denominations participated in the survey with 8,658 individuals responding. The survey results were published in 1986 as *Who Cares About Love?* Co-authored by Arn, Nyquist, and Arn, a companion two-film feature movie was produced by the same name for the Dynamic Laity Film Series. A seminar, also by this name, was introduced later that year. Donald valued the book because it did not end with thoughts about building a loving church while neglecting evangelism. Happily, the book talked about how loving churches reach lost people. Donald suggested that if believers really loved their fellow man, they would seek to lead him or her to Christ and establish congregations where each can grow in faith.²⁷

That same year the institute published two new resources. *Celebration of Friendship* was a planning guide on how to host a one-day event to which church members could safely invite their friends. The second kit, *Celebrating God's Family*, focused on helping newcomers move toward membership and service in their church. Arn co-authored *Church Growth: State of the Art* (1986) with Wagner and Towns. The book offered 22 articles on the state of church growth in the United States. One of the appendices listed "Who's Who In Church Growth," and four of the institute's staff were listed: Win Arn, Charles Arn, Robert Orr, and Gary L. McIntosh.

The Two-Year Growth Plan continued to decline and was discontinued in January 1986. This resulted in a financial strain on the institute, and the

²⁷ Donald McGavran to Win Arn, May [no day] 1986.

primary seminar and consulting staff, including Win Arn, were moved to a commission income rather than a salary. After the institute's teaching staff started working on commission, the travel schedules became intense. All four were on the road leading conferences, seminars, or consultations from 15 to 20 days a month. Sensing a need to have his schedule more under his own control so as to spend more time with his family, McIntosh resigned from the institute in July of 1986 to take a position as professor of practical theology at Talbot School of Theology, Biola University. Talbot had recently added courses on evangelism, church growth, and church planting to its curriculum, for which it was seeking a professor. During the application process, the doctor of ministry directorship position became vacant, and McIntosh providentially fit both roles. Arn graciously accepted McIntosh's resignation and asked him to continue working as an associate with the institute. After a one-month vacation, McIntosh became a professor of practical theology and director of the doctor of ministry program, adding church growth as one of four majors.

As 1987 began, the IACG publicized a new church resource titled *A Shepherd's Guide to Caring and Keeping*. The brand new resource kit included a six-hour video course on the principles of new member assimilation. The *Church Growth Ratio Book* was published that year. A small, 80-page booklet, it summarized nearly 15 years of church growth insights into usable ratios and percentages.

Donald continued to encourage Arn by making financial donations and writing letters from time to time. In one example, he wrote the following to Arn in 1987: "I am enclosing a check that Mary and I send to you with our love. God has done an amazing piece of work through you, and I trust that He will give you many more years in which to carry it out."²⁸

Throughout 1987 and 1988, the IACG continued to develop new products, but the number of seminars gradually declined. A move was made from the office in Pasadena to a less expensive property in Monrovia, California. A new film, *Maximum Christianity*, was produced that year, and many of the former ones were offered in video format. The 1988-1989 Church Leadership Resource Catalog featured 127 resources, of which 9 were brand new.

28 Donald McGavran to Win Arn, June 22, 1987.

A turning point in the life of Arn's Institute came in 1988, when he suffered a stroke that took him away from the ministry for nearly a full year. Arn had hired a new vice president a few weeks before his stroke. The new administrator, along with Charles Arn and Robert Orr, kept the ministry going in Win's absence. Donald felt badly that he could not get out to see Arn, but Mary had been sick for a few years. Unable to drive, he could only call and write notes of encouragement. In a short note he expressed, "I am confident, Win, that your recovery from the stroke will be complete and that your best years lie ahead. The work that you have done in the 1970s and 1980s has greatly improved the church growth possibilities in thousands of congregations. . . . God grant you a speedy recovery and many years of usefulness."²⁹ This was not to be, however. The loss of the institute's principal speaker slowed the momentum and hurt its visibility significantly; it would never regain its earlier momentum.

The Charles E. Fuller Institute for Evangelism and Church Growth (CEFI) was also doing well in the late 1980s. It sponsored the first church planting seminars in 1983 and 1984, featuring Rick Warren, Peter Wagner, and Carl George as the principal speakers. Wagner presented in lecture form the information later found in *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest*. This seminar became one of the most influential ones delivered by the CEFI. Much of the material appeared in *How to Plant a Church: A Self-Study Pack*, also authored by Wagner and published by the Fuller Institute. Over the years Wagner and George presented additional seminars, such as *How to Break the 200 Barrier*, *How to Break the 400 Barrier*, and *How to Start a Prayer Ministry in Your Church*. CEFI offered extensive training in small group systems using George's Meta Church paradigm. Additionally, during the mid-1980s CEFI offered the first consultant training for denominational leaders and other individuals. Known as Diagnosis with Impact, participants took a week of training and then were required to actually complete a diagnosis of a local church with one of the CEFI consultants. Approximately one hundred consultants participated in CEFI's training, several going on to fruitful consulting ministries.

When Donald founded the Institute of Church Growth in Eugene, Oregon, in 1961, there was no magazine devoted to disseminating church

²⁹ Donald McGavran to Win Arn, July 22, 1988.

growth ideas. Then in 1964, Overseas Crusades started publishing the *Church Growth Bulletin*, which was later renamed *Global Church Growth*. After 22 years of producing the magazine, the leaders of Overseas Crusades decided that they could not continue publishing it. Donald was too old to assume duties as publisher, and he looked for an excellent church growth leader with an organization to take over publication duties. He found the right person in Kent Hunter, director of the Church Growth Center in Corunna, Indiana. For reasons Hunter never fully understood, McGavran had taken a liking to him and asked him in 1987 to take over as publisher and editor of the magazine. Hunter tried to dissuade McGavran, making a case for his own lack of experience, but, as Hunter recalled, “He just gave me the McGavran stare—that look he had every time he said ‘panta ta ethne.’ I was humbled by his devotion and challenge . . . and took over the magazine.”³⁰

The first issue of *Global Church Growth* magazine under Hunter’s editorial direction was in March 1987. Donald wrote an article, “Hold High the Torch,” and asked missionary societies and denominational leaders to subscribe. “I write the above words in my 90th year. Overseas Crusades and I have held the torch as high a possible during the past 22 years. Now we, from failing hands, throw it to other leaders who[m] God has chosen, confident that this is God’s will and that GLOBAL CHURCH GROWTH will enter a new period of unparalleled growth and tremendous influence.”³¹

“Effective evangelism” was a term Donald used synonymously with church growth; he indicated this precisely in a letter to Win Arn. The IACG had moved to a new location in Monrovia, California, and Charles Arn had taken Donald to see the new office and to speak to the staff. In a follow-up letter, Donald wrote, “I trust that your business will increase so greatly that you will be able to rent the whole building and quite possibly to buy it and make it the permanent headquarters devoted to encouraging effective evangelism, i.e., church growth.”³²

It is not surprising that he used those words for his last book, *Effective*

30 Email from Kent R. Hunter to author, October 9, 2013.

31 Donald McGavran, “Hold High the Torch,” *Global Church Growth* [1987], 1.

32 Donald McGavran to Win Arn, August 3, 1988.

Evangelism: A Theological Mandate. Originally titled *Theological Education and Church Growth*, the book was a compilation of lectures he had presented at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia during 1986. Donald examined the strengths and weaknesses of theological institutions, primarily seminaries and schools of theology, and suggested that such institutions must accept the responsibility for training future leaders in the context of the real world. He felt that such training must include the goal of effective communication of God's Word in order to multiply churches. He suggested to Wagner that every seminary, Bible college, and Bible school of every denomination should train its students in how to win people to Christ and establish churches. Future pastors should be trained in how to turn their churches around to ensure that genuine Christianity becomes the religion of the land.

Donald was appalled that most seminaries and schools of theology did not even teach a course in evangelism. Those that did usually had only one, with perhaps two to four units of credit, out of a total of over ninety units in a three-year master of divinity program. As long as pastors, the future leaders of churches in North America, were not trained in evangelism, Donald pointed out that it was unlikely for churches to thrive.³³ To remedy this situation, he called for all schools of theological education to offer at least five four-unit courses on effective evangelism. He suggested the courses cover the theology of evangelism, understanding unreached people, methods of evangelism, church diagnosis, and international evangelism.³⁴ If this were done, Donald believed, the four hundred thousand or so churches in North America could run rather than limp. Evangelism, in his mind, must involve every Christian church—lay persons, congregations, pastors, and denominations. "Indeed," he challenged, "a real shepherd of the flock must know how to find and fold the lost."³⁵

When Glasser retired from deanship of SWM in 1980, he continued to teach classes on theology of mission. However, by the mid-1980s he was moving toward the part-time retired position of senior professor, and a

33 Donald McGavran to Peter Wagner, May 5, 1988.

34 Donald McGavran, "God Commands Effective Evangelism," *Global Church Growth* [1988], 5.

35 McGavran, "God Commands Effective Evangelism," 6.

search progressed to find his replacement. Following a national search, the spotlight fell on Charles “Chuck” Van Engen (b. 1948). Van Engen had attended FTS and received his MDiv in 1973. Most of the SWM faculty had known him from those years and had followed his ministry career as a missionary in Mexico and then as a professor at Western Seminary in Holland, Michigan. During and after his student years at FTS, Van Engen had continued to read works by McGavran, Tippett, Winter, Kraft, Glasser, and others associated with SWM. Then, when he studied for his PhD at the Free University of Amsterdam, he wrote his thesis on *The Growth of the True Church*, which was an analysis of Donald’s theology. It was out of this clear background in church growth missiology that he was offered the opportunity to succeed Glasser as professor of theology of church growth in 1988.³⁶

Wagner was working to finish up the 1990 edition of *Understanding Church Growth* during a sabbatical leave in 1988. He had helped Donald with a revised version earlier, but this third iteration (second revision) was to be much more Wagner’s than Donald’s. He assured the Fuller faculty senate that the new revision would help keep SWM-ICG at the center of the worldwide Church Growth Movement.³⁷ During his leave he had also finished *How to Have a Healing Ministry without Making Your Church Sick* and *The Third Wave of the Holy Spirit*. In addition, he wrote several chapters for other books, six articles, and a seminar on prayer, which was to become one of the more popular seminars for CEFI.

Wagner was concerned about the academic integrity of the Church Growth field, and along with colleague George G. Hunter III sought to remedy the situation. Professors of academic institutions were expected to complete research that advanced their field of study. When research was completed, it then needed to be written and presented to a group of peers for their approval, critique, and/or suggestions. As the academic field of Church Growth developed, it quickly became obvious that there was no forum at which professors of Church Growth could present research papers. This situation led Peter Wagner and George Hunter to found the

36 Other faculty joined SWM in the 1980s before McGavran’s death in 1990. J. Dudley Woodberry (b. 1934) joined in 1985, and Hoover Wong (b. 1928) joined in 1988.

37 Peter Wagner to faculty senate, June 17, 1988.

North American Society for Church Growth in 1984. Membership was open not just to professors but to anyone who wanted to network together around the study of McGavran's church growth theory.

The society drew together denominational leaders, professors, consultants, para-church leaders, and interested pastors. Wagner was elected the first president in November 1985, and it was decided to hold an annual meeting each year in Southern California during November so that Donald could attend as long as he was able to do so. George Hunter III, dean of Asbury Seminary's E. Stanley Jones School of Missions, was elected president for 1986 and organized the annual meeting for 1987. Featured speakers for that year included McGavran, Gibbs, and Jim Montgomery of Discipling A Whole Nation (DAWN). Since he no longer was able to read any prepared notes, McGavran spoke from memory, laying emphasis upon the Great Commission. The highlight of the meeting was a celebration of McGavran's ninetieth birthday, attended by an estimated 65 supporters. Kent Hunter, director of the Church Growth Center, was elected president for 1988 and Elmer Towns for 1989. The society approved the beginning of an academic journal, the *Journal of the North American Society of Church Growth*. John Vaughan, professor of Church Growth at Southwest Baptist University, Bolivar, Missouri, was appointed founding editor, with the first issue released in 1991.

The Church Growth Movement had gained much ground in the United States during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Wagner was shifting his emphasis from standard, foundational church growth theory toward an emphasis on spiritual power. He had started documenting the rapid growth of Pentecostal churches in Latin America during the 1960s and 70s and had written a book about his findings—*Look Out! The Pentecostals are Coming* (1973). The book was later revised as *Spiritual Power and Church Growth* (1986).

Wagner was working on a new book, *The Third Wave of the Holy Spirit* (1988), during 1987 and sent a copy of one chapter to Donald for his comments. Donald was concerned, however, that as Wagner occupied the McGavran Chair of Church Growth, he continue to emphasize the need for conversion evangelism and church multiplication. He recognized that some churches that practiced signs and wonders did grow (of course,

this was not the case with all). What bothered him most was the lack of conversion growth in the North American church. In October 1987 he wrote Wagner, pointing out, “So much of the church growth going on in the United States is transfer growth or biological growth. The conversion of hard-core secularists and materialists—in short, of American pagans—is what we need to document.”³⁸

Church growth was obviously important to Donald, but not just any type of church growth pleased him. He emphasized this in a letter to John Vaughan in February 1988. John Vaughan is well known for his research on the growth of mega churches in the United States. After reading a report of churches that had grown by over 1,500 people between 1985 and 1986, Donald wrote to Vaughan,

I read with particular interest your statistics about the ten churches whose attendance has grown by 1500 or more between 1985 and 1986.

I wonder whether in future issues you could address yourself to another very important aspect of effective evangelism—church growth. I would like to know how many of the gains in worshipers in the ten fastest growing churches were (a) children of existing Christians in that church, (b) Christians from other parts of the United States who had moved to the vicinity of the rapidly growing church, liked it very much, and joined it, and finally (c) converts. Those converts might have been secularists, humanists, agnostics, Shintoists, Hindus, Buddhists, or long lapsed Christians.

Until we know this, Professor Vaughan, we don’t know how significant that growth is.

If the growth is simply that of Children of the church or devout Christians of other communities who have moved to the vicinity of these churches, it is not very significant. Church growth too frequently occurs in new suburbs and is simply a rearrangement of existing Christians.

What we must get is the kind of evangelism that seeks out the lost—the really lost—and brings them back to the Father’s house.

With high regard, I remain Your comrade in the bonds of the

38 Donald McGavran to Peter Wagner, October 12, 1987.

Great Commission.³⁹

Again, Donald wrote to John Vaughan, this time after receiving a report on the fastest growing churches in the United States in 1988. His concern for conversion growth was evident. “However, what I would very much like to see *Church Growth Today* explore is: How much of it is biological? How much of it is conversion? How much of it is transfer? . . . We will not stop the static condition of many congregations and denominations until we vastly increase the number of conversions.”⁴⁰

Matthew Welde, executive director of Presbyterians United for Biblical Concerns, wrote Donald in early 1989, passing along a copy of his address to Presbyterians in San Francisco, as well as a recommendation for *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate*. Donald replied with a letter that shows an awareness of living in his final days. He wrote,

I was saddened to hear that of the eleven Presbyterian seminaries, in only one was a course on evangelism required.

Keep on pushing this idea, my friend. I am confident that it has God back of it. It will please our Heavenly Father greatly if seminaries throughout the United States recognize that if they are to turn our present static condition around, they simply must turn out thousands of ministers who are effective evangelists.

I write you as a 91-year-old. I am sure the Lord is going to call me home very soon. I pass the torch on to you.⁴¹

As Donald moved further into retirement, he continued to press for the clarification of the definition of mission. In fact, after listening to a tape by Winter from the U.S. Center for World Mission, Donald boldly wrote,

I am hoping and praying that the World Mission Center at 1605 East Elizabeth Street will become one of the places where we succeed in turning a large number of people from vague, ill-defined, all-inclusive “missions” to a carrying out of the Great Commission, to finding the lost, to bringing lost sheep back to the

39 Donald McGavran to John Vaughan, February 12, 1988.

40 Donald McGavran to John Vaughan, March 29, 1989.

41 Donald McGavran to Matthew Welde, February 7, 1989.

fold, to bringing lost sons and daughters back to the Father's house. That's the heart of it. Unless we tie pretty closely to multiplying churches, all our talk about teaching unreached peoples is simply going to add to the vagueness.⁴²

His challenge to Winter was to keep the U.S. Center focused on evangelism and church planting rather than becoming an organization that promoted a vague, indefinite, unbiblical idea of mission.

Remarkably, even as Donald became weaker he continued to speak at some gatherings, to carry on correspondence, and to write articles. When it came to travel and speaking, unbeknownst to him his secretary quietly sent out a memo asking for special assistance in travel and help. His eyesight had deteriorated to the point that he could not always distinguish faces, find light switches, or see obstacles in his pathway. Thus, it was important that when he attended speaking engagements the sponsors always take special care to protect both him and his dignity. Happily, sponsors respected Donald greatly and always complied with this request.

An article by Donald, titled "Missiology Faces the Lion," appeared in the July issue of *Missiology*. To no one's surprise, it focused on the danger of stressing humanitarian care over evangelism of the lost. Four responses to the article were included, along with a rejoinder from McGavran.⁴³ In the same issue Donald wrote a short article on the life and ministry of his former colleague Alan Tippett. Tippett had passed away on September 16, 1988, and Donald paid tribute to him as "a great missionary, a great teacher, a great missiologist, a great bibliophile, and a great saint of God."⁴⁴

The December issue of *Theology News and Notes* ran a short reflection from Donald in which he shared some of the major influences on his life. He mentioned his call to ministry at Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, in 1919; his experience in India as an educator from 1923 to 1936; his 18 years of work as an evangelist from 1936 to 1954; and his trip through Africa, Latin America, and the Philippine Islands on the way home in 1954. However, he noted that the most influential decision of his life was resolving to

42 Donald McGavran to Ralph Winter, June 6, 1988.

43 Donald A. McGavran, "Missiology Faces the Lion," *Missiology* [1989], 335-355.

44 Donald A. McGavran, "Missiologist Alan R. Tippett, 1911-1988," *Missiology* [1989], 261-267.

begin a graduate school devoted to training career missionaries in Church Growth studies.⁴⁵

Mary's cancer (the original diagnosis was post-encephalitis, followed by multiple mini strokes that led to gradual decline) had gradually progressed to the point at which Donald wondered whether she would live to see her 92nd birthday on March 12, 1990. She enjoyed listening to records and books on tape of *Guidepost* stories while she rested in bed, and Donald often played them for her. He also recited Scripture from memory, particularly from the Psalms. Their daughter Winifred lived close by, visiting regularly and assisting, and daughters Helen and Patricia and son Malcolm flew in to help as needed. A live-in caregiver allowed Donald and Mary to live alone for much of their later years.

Mary did make it to her birthday, but by March 24 she was unconscious. The doctor told Donald she would most likely not live another week. Their daughter Jean, a medical doctor, arrived to care for Mary, sitting with Donald beside her hospital bed set up in their living room. The bed was placed in front of their large picture window so she could see her garden and mountains, which she loved. It was there that on April 5, 1990, Mary McGavran passed away. She and Donald had been married for 68 years. Donald reflected that Mary certainly had been a faithful partner in all that happened in their lives. Whether it had been on the mission field, as house mother at Yale Divinity School, or as the wife of the founding dean of the SWM, she had enabled much of his life's work. Only after talking things over with Mary had Donald made most of his decisions. Mary had dedicated her life to missions even before she met Donald, and she had played a very large part in all that he accomplished.

Donald's own health was failing, but prior to Mary's death he functioned quite well. However, after her passing his own health deteriorated quickly. Donald was by nature a stoic and, while he was in pain prior to Mary's death, he refused to go to the doctor due to his concern for her. His daughter Jean took him to the doctor before leaving, and it was determined that he was suffering from metastatic colon cancer, which had spread to his bones. Donald himself would live for only another few weeks to a few

45 Donald A. McGavran, "Donald A. McGavran: Professor Emeritus of Church Growth," *Theology News and Notes* [1989], 12.

months at most. To get around the house (seldom did he venture outside) he used a walker and was in considerable pain in spite of the medication he took. Even though he grew weaker day by day, he spent the last weeks of his life dictating letters about urgent issues around the world.⁴⁶

Donald saw it as entirely proper that his own death would follow so closely after Mary's. In a final word to many of their friends, he encouraged them to "play an active part in world evangelization. . . . I trust that God will greatly bless you and extend your life so that your closing years will be full of good works and much effective evangelism."⁴⁷ Less than three months later Donald passed away on July 10 at the age of 92. Kent Hunter, editor of *Global Church Growth*, wrote in "So Ends a Chapter of History,"

With the death of Dr. Donald McGavran, an entire chapter of Christian history comes to a close. His life, work, writings, teachings, and his influence on countless thousands of Christians throughout the world represents a unique era.

Throughout history, God raises up Christian leaders who have a specific task and direction. When they are gone, their movements often continue. Their influence is not buried with their mortal remains. Their vision continues to spark generations who follow. Their presence, unique as it is, is gone from this earth forever. There will not be another McGavran. Not now—not ever. An epoch represented in the life and work of our dear friend and "comrade in the bonds of the Great Commission" (as he so often signed his letters) comes to a close.

We go forward according to the guidelines of our leader, Jesus Christ, who said, "Go therefore and make disciples of *panta ta ethne*." We go forward in the bonds of the Great Commission.⁴⁸

Donald and Mary were interred in the McGavran family plot in northeast Ohio near Lisbon, where generations of McGavrans rest, and have memorials engraved to them. Donald arranged for a large headstone to be placed in this lovely old cemetery.

46 Donald McGavran to all members of the McGavran family, April 26, 1990.

47 Donald McGavran to friends, April 26, 1990.

48 Kent Hunter, "So Ends a Chapter of History," *Global Church Growth* [1990, 27(2)]:1.

Tributes and reflections about Donald McGavran were published in numerous places following his death. Ralph Winter stated, “It is extremely doubtful that any other person in history has trampled more places, inquired about the hard facts of the real growth of the

Christian movement in more out-of-the-way locations, —and thought it through more profoundly—than Donald A. McGavran.”⁴⁹ Elmer Towns expressed his conviction that “Donald McGavran, as the modern father of the church growth movement, is the most important individual in this century in changing the focus of foreign mission outreach around the world.”⁵⁰ Fuller Theological Seminary summed up the feelings of many,

McGavran, the father of the church growth movement, though light of build, was as Harold Lindsell noted, “a giant of a missiologist, a man of spectacular performance.” . . . Neither sectarian, nor provincial, McGavran willingly shared his principles of church growth with anyone anywhere who sincerely desired to lead others into a saving relationship with the Lord. His enthusiasm was contagious. His love for his Lord and Savior, his quick step, impish eyes, warm smile and unswerving conviction that evangelism must be the chief priority of the church, gave him an aura of perpetual youth. We will miss him. But we rejoice in the knowledge that his work will go on and his influence will continue to be felt around the world as long as time shall last.⁵¹

Indeed, McGavran’s insights continue to impact missionary strategy and practice today. The following are just a few aspects of his continuing legacy.

First, while the study of mission (missiology) had been around for some time, McGavran virtually invented the field of missiology. The founding of the Institute for Church Growth in Eugene, Oregon, and the School of World Mission in Pasadena, California, provided for the development of a full curriculum (i.e., courses, reading lists, assignments, methods of research, and publications) that has continued to form the basic core

49 Ralph D. Winter, “Reflections on McGavran’s Legacy,” *Ministry Advantage* [1997, 9(4)]: 3.

50 Elmer Towns, “Reflections on McGavran’s Legacy,” *Ministry Advantage* [1997, 9(4)]: 3.

51 “Donald A. McGavran 1897-1990,” *Alumni News* [1990], 15.

curriculum of missiological studies ever since. He defined the terms and set the agenda for missiology. Without McGavran, it is doubtful if the field of missiology as an academic discipline would even exist.

Second, McGavran observed that Western missionaries, who came primarily from individualist cultural backgrounds, regarded one-by-one decisions for Christ as the only acceptable method. Yet, in most of the world group (collectivist) decisions were preferred. This led him to see the need for including anthropology and sociology as components of missionary training to study social structure. His first faculty hire in Eugene, Oregon, and at the School of World Mission in Pasadena, California, was Alan Tippet, who had a Ph.D. in Anthropology. Even though the conservative evangelical branch of the Church viewed anthropology and sociology with critical eyes, McGavran saw their importance and included them as key aspects of his church growth thought.

Third, McGavran stressed a return to Great Commission mission and compelled Christians to recognize that the day of mission was not dead. He brought back the revolutionary idea that churches ought to be growing (i.e., making disciples) rather than remaining static. He promoted the classical understanding of mission as being the proclamation of the gospel of salvation and the planting of churches, and spoke of this so often that critics often complained that McGavran had only one string on his violin, but this was part of his genius. A leader must have a clear and simple message that can be understood and embraced by the constituency he or she is trying to lead. Great leaders have to keep saying the same thing over and over again, which is precisely what McGavran did throughout his life.

Fourth, McGavran recognized the demise of colonial missions and pointed the way to the post-colonial era, which called for new contours of missionary practice. He challenged the mission station approach that was pleased with slow growth, and promoted a people movement approach, which looked for a greater harvest. By doing so, he provided a positive voice for missions when voices were saying God was dead, the day of missions was over, and that missionaries should go home. His positive perspective continues to be heard in many corners of the missionary world today.

Fifth, in a time when most church leaders thought people came to Christ primarily through mass events, church revivals, camp meetings, home

visitation, and cold calling, McGavran discovered that the main bridges to Christ were family and friends. The idea of household evangelism was not new (it is found throughout the Bible), but McGavran demonstrated the fruitfulness of this approach through research. By doing so he set fire to a new movement of evangelism. Whether it is labeled friendship evangelism, lifestyle evangelism, web evangelism, network evangelism, or *oikos* (household) evangelism, each owes much to his initial research.

Sixth, McGavran highlighted the fact that receptivity to the gospel rises and falls among different peoples in different circumstances and in different times. He argued that peoples' openness to the gospel should control the direction of resources (i.e., receptive people receive greater resources, while less receptive ones receive fewer resources). Although everyone does not agree with this principle, it is a common part of evangelistic practice today and guides deployment of personnel and expenditure of budgets (e.g., church planting is most often focused on receptive populations).

Seventh, McGavran's continuing influence is observed in numerous other themes that continue to impact the decision-making of church and mission leaders. For example, (1) the importance of assimilating newcomers into the social networks of a local church, (2) the necessity of making disciples rather than just getting decisions, (3) the need to multiply disciples and churches in all *ta ethne* (the nations), (4) the significance of understanding context, and (5) the requirement of planting indigenous churches.

McGavran's approach was balanced. He always supported the Church's fight for justice in all walks of life, but he was adamant that evangelism and church planting were central to the Church's task. His clear, consistent voice influenced many to make disciples of all the nations, an influence that made life and hope real for many lost souls around the world.

The legacy of Donald and Mary McGavran also continues on through their children and grandchildren. One grandson, Donald, carries on the family tradition of missionary work. Like his grandfather, he is a specialist in education, holding a doctor of education degree (EdD) from Columbia International University in Columbia, South Carolina. Providentially, in 2000 he and his family entered the mission field by first serving at Woodstock School in India, the same school his great-grandmother

(Helen), his grand-aunt Joyce, his father (Malcolm) and aunts (Jean, Helen, Patricia, and Winifred) attended. Now, with the involvement of this current Donald McGavran at Woodstock, and his own children's attendance there, the McGavran family boasts one of the longest family connections at the school—five generations! Don McGavran served at Woodstock School until 2005, then ministered in Kenya (2005–2010), and is currently superintendent of Mountainview International Christian School in Indonesia.

Except for Mary Theodora, who passed away as a child in India, the children of Donald and Mary all went on to distinguished careers of service in education and medicine.⁵²

Mary Theodora McGavran (1923–1930)

Deceased in India

Jean McGavran Davis (1925–1993)

Medical Doctor

M.D., Washington University

Three children: Christopher, Timothy, and Thomas

Helen McGavran Corneli (1926–2014)

Educator

Ph.D. University of Wisconsin

Four children: Howard, Steve, “Mimi” Miriam, and Danelle

Malcolm Howard McGavran (1929–1993)

Medical Doctor

M.D., Washington University

Professor of Pathology

University of Texas, Houston

Five children: Megan, Andrew, Gregory, Donald, and Jennifer

Winifred McGavran Griffen (b. 1937)

Counselor

52 At the time of Donald and Mary's deaths, they had 11 great-grandchildren.

Ph.D., Counseling
Pasadena, CA
Two children: Mary and Karn

Patricia McGavran Sheafor (b. 1939)
Speech Language Pathologist
M.A., Michigan State University
Two children: Douglas and Sarah

Whether it is through his family or his ideas, Donald A. McGavran's legacy lives on. His insights, perspectives, and approaches continue to inform mission theory and practice across numerous cultures and in most countries of the world. It is likely that his principles of church growth will continue to influence mission theory and practice for the foreseeable future.

About the Author

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