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## Donald McGavran's Understanding of Conversion

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**abstract**

This paper seeks to explore Donald McGavran's understanding of conversion. First, we will look at the people and events that shaped his theology and methodology. Second, we will explore McGavran's understanding of conversion. He clearly emphasized in his writings that Church Growth was conversion growth. He also was very clear that salvation is only through Jesus Christ. However, Donald McGavran's understanding of conversion was clouded with the conflicting theological and sociological views that consequently influenced his methodology. Donald McGavran's view of conversion lacked a clear theological explanation as to how man becomes a Christian. Most of McGavran's explanation of conversion relied on methodology more than on theology.

Donald McGavran is known as the father of the "Church Growth Movement." However, the seeds of that movement began to germinate in the 1930s while he served as a missionary to India. He noticed that after decades of hard work the net result of the mission's work was a handful of small sterile congregations. Influenced by the work of J. Waskom Pickett, he began to investigate how churches grew, and this became a passion for him. The results of this study were published

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 4, Iss. 2 [2013], Art. 3 in 1936 under the title *Christian Missions in Mid-India*.<sup>1</sup> A third edition of the book was published under the new title *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, and a fifth edition was published in 1973.

His years of investigation produced principles and methodologies, many of which were controversial, especially when the movement was introduced to the United States in 1972.<sup>2</sup> A significant contribution to this paper is his definition of missions. McGavran says, "It is God's will that lost men and women be found, reconciled to himself, and brought into responsible membership in Christian churches."<sup>3</sup> This definition demonstrates his enthusiasm for evangelism and defines the Church Growth Movement.

The purpose of this paper is to seek to identify Donald McGavran's understanding of conversion. The paper will also show that McGavran's concept of "church growth" was synonymous with effective evangelism. This first section will provide foundational information to help the reader understand the cultural context and the development of the Church Growth Movement. This section will also identify people and events influential in McGavran's life. The second section will highlight salient teachings that reveal his understanding of conversion. It is the aim of this paper to deal only with those church growth principles that cast understanding about conversion. The third section of the paper will make positive observations, point out some negative critiques, and draw conclusions.

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### **donald mcgavran's life and influences**

Several people and events shaped McGavran's understanding of how people come to Christ and the importance of the Great Commission. Recognizing these events will help the reader understand the cultural and ministry context that shaped and influenced his life.

Donald McGavran was a third generation missionary to India whose evangelistic zeal was shaped by two family lines, one from Great Britain and the other from the United States.<sup>4</sup> His maternal grandparents, James and Agnes Anderson, sailed from England in 1854 as appointed missionaries to India by the

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<sup>1</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1993), 33.

<sup>2</sup> David L. Cook, "The Americanization of the Church Growth Movement," *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 11 (September 2000): 15.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Van Engen, *Centrist View: Church Growth is Based on an Evangelistically Focused and a Missiologically Applied Theology*, ed. Gary L. McIntosh (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 127.

<sup>4</sup> Gary L. McIntosh, "The Roots of Donald A. McGavran's Evangelistic Insights," *McIntosh Church Growth Network*, May 25, 2010, <http://churchgrowthnetwork.com/free-resources/2010/05/25/passion-of-donald-a-mcgavran/> (accessed October 9, 2010).

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Baptist Missionary Society founded by William Carey. Their missionary work would continue for another one hundred years through their children and grandchildren. Helen, their daughter, became the wife of John G. McGavran and the mother of Donald McGavran. They served in India until their furlough in 1910. John and Helen McGavran and their son Donald returned to India as missionaries in 1923. McGavran credited his early missionary training and experience to the friendship and guidance of his father.<sup>5</sup> It is not surprising, with this bloodline, that the McGavrans would be highly committed to the Great Commission as the motive for their evangelism.

However, as a senior at Butler College, McGavran's mind was in pursuing a medical, not a missionary, career. His thinking then was, "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>6</sup> The ministry of John R. Mott and the Student Volunteer Movement influenced McGavran during his college years. It was during a conference in Des Moines, Iowa, that he became convinced that one could not limit the degree of commitment to Christ. His prayer, "Lord, I'll do whatever you want" translated into a surrender to missionary service.<sup>7</sup> McGavran explained, "There it became clear to me that God was calling me to be a missionary, that he was commanding me to carry out the Great Commission. Doing just that has ever since been the ruling purpose of my life. True I have from time to time swerved from that purpose but not for long. That decision lies at the root of the church-growth movement."<sup>8</sup>

Donald McGavran's pilgrimage was also strongly influenced by what he calls "three rivers of thoughts that dominated the twentieth century."<sup>9</sup> The first of these influences was the theological river, which negatively transformed his view of Scripture. The combination of liberal leadership in his denomination, the Disciples of Christ, and his studies at Yale Divinity School convinced him of the "truth of the liberal positions."<sup>10</sup> After graduating from Yale in 1922, McGavran went to India as a missionary. Yet, the venom of liberalism would remain in him for the next fifteen years. McGavran tells that "the Bible that I read for the next fifteen years had the various strands (J, E, D, P, etc.) underlined in different colors."<sup>11</sup> McGavran's work during these years was in the Hindi language and among a

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Donald A. McGavran, "My Pilgrimage in Mission," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 10, no. 2 (April 1986): 53.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Donald A. McGavran, *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1988), 54.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 55.

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 4, Iss. 2 [2013], Art. 3 people that were idol worshippers. His teaching called for them to abandon those idols and return to the God of the Bible. While acknowledging his liberalism, he believed that it did not “greatly affect my thoughts.”<sup>12</sup> Yet, this statement seems to contradict his understanding of Scripture. While he went about preaching, reading, and quoting the Bible as any evangelical would, “in the back of my mind theological liberalism persisted as my understanding of the truth.”<sup>13</sup>

The turning point came for McGavran one Sunday morning when, after reading a passage, he asked the class, “After reading a passage such as this, what is the first thing you ask?” One student replied, “What is there in this passage that we cannot believe?” The student’s answer implied that anything one cannot explain as possible, such as miracles, must be understood as an “exaggerated or poetic representation of what happened.”<sup>14</sup>

The experience allowed McGavran to conclude that “any real missionary movement must depend upon an authoritative Word of God made known in the Bible and manifested by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”<sup>15</sup> This is important because any inference to his understanding of conversion is based solely on a solid biblical foundation.

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The second river of thought influencing his life was anthropology. In the first half of the twentieth century, most missionaries were required to know and understand the religion of the people they were seeking to evangelize—hence, comparative religions. However, in the second half of the century, because of the increased interest in anthropology in state universities, the need to know other religions was largely supplanted by anthropology.

During the formative years of the Church Growth Movement (1933–1953), McGavran stated that he was “greatly influenced by this second river.”<sup>16</sup> The impact of this river on McGavran’s understanding of conversion is seen in much of his writings and missiological principles. In fact, understanding cultures led McGavran to challenge people to “discern each separate community and its degree of readiness.”<sup>17</sup> Discerning each cultural segment of a community was important to how McGavran understood conversion. It remains important in understanding how a diverse population comes to Christ in the urban areas of the United States. The principles influenced by this second river of thought will be examined in the next section.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>17</sup> Donald A. McGavran, *How Churches Grow: The New Frontiers of Missions* (London: World Dominion Press, 1959), 44.

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The third river of thought is what Charles Chaney refers to as the drive for “ruthless research and analysis.”<sup>18</sup> Several events impacted McGavran and shaped his thinking about research and analysis in 1934. First, he was concerned that among the missionaries working in India most churches were not growing. In fact, McGavran tells that “in 134 cases the Christian population was increasing at less than 1 percent a year.”<sup>19</sup> Second, he was growing very intolerant of all the good deeds being done by missions in the name of evangelism. He argued that “evangelism is seeking and saving sinners.”<sup>20</sup> Third, J. Waskom Pickett, a Methodist Bishop, had the greatest influence on Donald McGavran's life, ministry, and drive for research. Pickett used a sophisticated method of research to gather data on people movements. He wrote the results of his findings in his book, *Christian Mass Movements in India*. His basic insights and field research methods were the structures upon which the Church Growth Movement was built. Years later, McGavran was to give credit to Pickett's seminal contributions. “I neither invented church growth nor am solely responsible for it. Indeed, I owe my interest to a great Methodist Bishop, Jarell Waskom Pickett. In 1934, he kindled my concern that the church grow. I lit my candle at his fire.”<sup>21</sup> McGavran continued to assist Pickett in the study of why similar mass movements to Christ were not happening in mid-India. The result of their study was published under the title *Christian Missions in Mid-India* (1936), which later was revised as *Church Growth and Group Conversions* (1956).

As a result of his work with Pickett, a curiosity arose within him that was to occupy his life and ministry until his death. He asked, “Why are some churches growing, and others are not?” He identified four questions that were to direct the Church Growth Movement:

1. What are the causes of church growth?
2. What are the barriers to church growth?
3. What factors can make the Christian faith a movement among some populations?
4. What principles of church growth are reproducible?<sup>22</sup>

These experiences from 1933–1953 shaped his life and ministry, and helped McGavran solidify his belief that there are anthropological and sociological

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<sup>18</sup> Dr. Charles Chaney served as President of Southwest Baptist University and later as Vice President for Church Extension of the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention from 1988–1997. Steve Wilkes, “Interview with Dr. Charles Chaney,” *Journal of Evangelism and Missions* 2 (Spring 2003): 64.

<sup>19</sup> McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 60.

<sup>20</sup> Donald A. McGavran, “Essential Evangelism: An Open Letter to Dr. Hoekendijk,” in *The Conciliar-Evangelical Debate: The Crucial Documents, 1964–1976* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1977), 66.

<sup>21</sup> Cook, *The Americanization of the Church Growth Movement*, 16.

<sup>22</sup> George G. Hunter III, “The Legacy of Donald A. McGavran,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 16, no. 4 (1962): 158.

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factors that produce an environment that facilitates leading people to faith in  
Christ and responsible membership in the church.

### **donald mcgavran's understanding of conversion**

McGavran coined the term “church growth” to distinguish from those that were doing good deeds and ministry in the name of evangelism. He used church growth synonymously with “effective evangelism.”<sup>23</sup> Thom Rainer rightly observes that McGavran’s church growth was conversion growth.<sup>24</sup> This is also supported by McGavran’s book, *How Churches Grow*, in which he states that the essential task of all world evangelization was to find and congregationalize the lost. He further states that the work of the church was “to church the responsive unchurched in great numbers and as rapidly as possible.”<sup>25</sup>

McGavran maintains that the soteriological expression of the Great Commission must be understood in an ecclesiological context as well. Evangelism and church growth cannot be separated.<sup>26</sup> A word of caution to the critics of the Church Growth Movement is not to allow McGavran’s heart for the church to detract from his passion for evangelism. Rainer alludes to this when he says, “Church growth, historically understood and properly defined, is simply evangelism that results in the growth of the church.”<sup>27</sup> McGavran’s understanding of conversion is rooted in theology, influenced by sociology and anthropology, and understood in an ecclesiological context.

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### **theological foundation**

Donald McGavran’s understanding of conversion was based on a theological foundation. He leaves no room for doubt that conversion is at the center of his message. How did he use the terms, though? In his first book, *The Bridges of God* (1955), conversion means to leave polytheism and be united with the people of God in Jesus Christ.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, conversion, according to Sidney H. Rooy, in “North America is to leave the world to join units of the redemptive activity of God.”<sup>29</sup> One point that is both consistent and frequent in all of McGavran’s

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<sup>23</sup> McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 89.

<sup>24</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *The Great Commission and the Church Growth Movement*, ed. Chuck Lawless and Thom S. Rainer (Crestwood: Pinnacle Publishers, 2005), 14.

<sup>25</sup> McGavran, *How Churches Grow*, 5.

<sup>26</sup> Rainer, *The Great Commission*, 7.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>28</sup> Donald A. McGavran, *The Bridges of God* (Great Britain: World Dominion Press, 1955), 14.

<sup>29</sup> Sidney H. Rooy, “The Concept of Man in the Missiology of Donald McGavran: A Model of Anglosaxon Missiology in Latin America,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 37, no. 2 (Winter 1975): 192.

Suarez: Donald McGavran's Understanding of Conversion writings is his definition of the purpose of evangelism—to make disciples of the nations and bring them into responsible membership in Christian churches.

McGavran's interpretation of Matthew 28:19–20 is significant to understanding what is meant by effective evangelism or conversion. He interpreted “discipling the nations” as bringing unbelievers to commitment to Christ and active participation in the church. He distinguished this step from “teaching them all things,” which he called perfecting. In the perfecting stage, the members of the Christian community experienced an ethical change and growth in their new way of life.<sup>30</sup> He insisted that “discipling” takes priority over “perfecting,” and he reminded people that “we need to find the lost and help them grow in grace.”<sup>31</sup>

Darrell L. Guder, however, argues that McGavran's theories resulted in a reductionism of the Gospel on two accounts. First, he claims that McGavran's definition of mission makes his methodology for evangelism flawed because it placed the priority on evangelism and did not include the broader social and political dimensions. Second, he argues that McGavran made a distinction between “discipling” and “perfecting,” again demonstrating a reductionist understanding of the Gospel.<sup>32</sup> Samuel Escobar calls it a type of “evangelistic imperialism” and adds that evangelism should not be separated from the “practice of justice.”<sup>33</sup> Charles Van Engen describes as “unfortunate” the unbiblical split of the two terms.<sup>34</sup> However, Van Engen points out that McGavran was right in his primary emphasis that “women and men become disciples of Jesus Christ.”<sup>35</sup> Secondly was his desire that they become responsible members of Christ's church.<sup>36</sup> Donald McGavran's definition of missions did not reject social action, but cautioned people from calling it evangelism. He hoped that converted men and women would become instruments of social, economic, and political transformation within their context. In fact, in his book, *The Conciliar-Evangelical Debate*, twenty leaders of missions spoke to the question, “What part does the propagation of the gospel properly play in the mission of God today?”<sup>37</sup> McGavran wrote an open letter to J. C. Hoekendijk in which he consistently defined evangelism as the “activity undertaken with the intent of communicating the good news.”<sup>38</sup> He raised

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<sup>30</sup> McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 15.

<sup>31</sup> Donald A. McGavran and Win Arn, *How to Grow a Church* (Glendale: Regal Books, 1973), 80.

<sup>32</sup> Darrell L. Guder, “Evangelism and the Debate over Church Growth,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 48, no. 2 (April 1993): 147–49.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Van Engen, “Centrist View,” in *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: 5 Views*, ed. Gary L. McIntosh and Paul E. Engle (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 142.

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

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

<sup>37</sup> Donald A. McGavran, “Introduction to the 1972 Edition,” in *The Conciliar-Evangelical Debate: The Crucial Documents, 1964–1976*, ed. Donald A. McGavran (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1977), 11.

<sup>38</sup> McGavran, “Essential Evangelism,” 64.

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 4, Iss. 2 [2013], Art. 3 concerns that “if we make everything evangelism there is great danger that no intentional persuasion will be undertaken.”<sup>39</sup>

McGavran’s understanding of conversion is further refined with the introduction of two new terms—“search” theology and theology of “harvest.” McGavran distinguishes between these two terms. Search theology understood that the “goal in evangelism and mission is to go to the lost, help them in every way possible and, in most cases, make known to them the gospel message.”<sup>40</sup> McGavran, however, launched an attack repudiating search theology, charging that these people were merely justifying their lack of effective evangelism. Search theology, according to McGavran, “strenuously denied that results had anything to do with mission.”<sup>41</sup> He added that a mere search detached witnesses “without the deep wish to convert, without wholehearted persuasion, and with what amounts to a fear of the numerical increase of Christians.”<sup>42</sup>

The theology of harvest, in contrast, responds in obedience to a God who wants lost men found. It appears that the primary missiology undergirding McGavran’s harvest theology was the Great Commission and the priority of evangelism. The Great Commission itself presents significant evidence that God’s intention is to find the lost. McGavran did not believe that the Bible allowed for someone to witness to another person and “not intend conversion.”<sup>43</sup> Acting on this understanding of conversion, McGavran said that “mere search is not what God wants. God wants His lost children found.”<sup>44</sup>

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### **sociological and anthropological influence**

Donald McGavran’s understanding of conversion was influenced by anthropology and sociology. When J. W. Pickett’s research was published in 1933, McGavran became an enthusiastic disciple.<sup>45</sup> The crucial question for Donald McGavran was how people converted to Christ through mass movements. His experience in India, his desire to see people come to Christ, and the urgency of the moment led him to conclude that the “church should understand how people, and not merely individuals, become Christian.”<sup>46</sup> McGavran’s research culminated in the publication of a book, *The Bridges of God*, published in 1955. This book has been

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> C. Peter Wagner, *Strategies for Church Growth: Tools for Effective Mission and Evangelism* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1987), 57.

<sup>41</sup> Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 27.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>45</sup> Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth*, 29.

<sup>46</sup> McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 7.

Suarez: Donald McGavran's Understanding of Conversion labeled as the Magna Carta of the Church Growth Movement.<sup>47</sup> His research also demonstrated that the greatest number of people "became Christians by making individual decisions but collectively."<sup>48</sup> He observed that the process of evangelization started with the "recognition that human beings normally cluster together in groups, called peoples."<sup>49</sup> McGavran commented that as long as people marry within the same culture, they see themselves as a "separate race and will have an intense 'people consciousness.'"<sup>50</sup> This process of conversion was known by various names such as mass movements, revival, group movements, and approachable people. Pickett used the term "mass movements," but McGavran insisted that "we shall not use the term 'mass movement' because it was misleading."<sup>51</sup> He did not like the term "mass movement" because it "implies unthinking acceptance of Christ by great masses."<sup>52</sup> Instead, he preferred the term "people movement" because it describes "the way in which a people first become Christians."<sup>53</sup>

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J. W. Pickett affirmed McGavran's understanding of conversion through people movement. He recognized that the "natural growth of the Church is by the conversion of groups." He also, like McGavran, believed that when individual people are "extracted from dozens of different families, clans, villages, and social groups," evangelism is not as effective.<sup>54</sup> Although McGavran strongly believed in people movement conversion, he did not ignore the individual. He believed that individuals influenced groups. In fact, in later years, he also used the term "multi-individual, mutually interdependent conversion."<sup>55</sup> McGavran's lack of clarity of terms and theologies has led to misunderstandings. Many have concluded that people movement decisions to salvation were made by a group rather than by an individual.

Primarily five objections can be made to McGavran's concept of people movement. One objection to people movement missiology is on the basis that going along with the crowd provides no salvation. McGavran argues that decisions are made over a period of time, sometimes over many years, and includes dialogue

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<sup>47</sup> Gary L. McIntosh, "Why Church Growth Can't Be Ignored," in *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: 5 Views*, eds. Gary L. McIntosh and Paul E. Engle (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 13.

<sup>48</sup> Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth*, 35.

<sup>49</sup> C. Peter Wagner, "Recent Developments in Church Growth Understandings," *Review and Expositor* 77, no. 4 (Fall 1980): 510.

<sup>50</sup> J. W. Pickett et al., *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, 5th ed. (South Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1973), 4.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 13.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Pickett et al., *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, 19.

<sup>55</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 340.

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 4, Iss. 2 [2013], Art. 3 among families and friends before the group reaches a decision. This is not, McGavran emphasized, a decision that is made by a leader.<sup>56</sup>

A second objection to people movement missiology is a consequence of McGavran's separation of discipling and perfecting. Some believe this separation leads to cheap grace where people may accept Jesus as Savior but will not obey Him as Lord. However, McGavran's writings are consistent that conversion is about turning away from other idols and evil spirits to accept Jesus Christ as Lord.<sup>57</sup> McGavran's writing has never proposed a conversion where a person accepts Christ as Savior and not as Lord.

A third objection charges that the people movement missiology contributes to "one tribe, one caste, or one-race congregations or denominations."<sup>58</sup> While McGavran acknowledged that "there is some substance to this objection," he also advocated that effective evangelism sometimes requires "a way to become Christian within their social units."<sup>59</sup> If one is not careful, people movement missiology could lead to segregation and prideful attitudes.

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A fourth objection blames people movement missiology as the reason for producing nominal Christians.<sup>60</sup> Specifically, it is McGavran's methodology of evangelizing and discipling that is blamed as the cause for nominality. McGavran argued that in his ministry context in India, conversion was more effective as entire families made individual decisions for Christ, thus preventing the ostracism that was common in the one-by-one mode of ingathering.

A fifth objection against the people movement missiology is the anthropocentric emphasis rather than a dependency on the action of the Holy Spirit. McGavran, however, maintained in his book, *The Bridges of God*, and has repeatedly stated in other writings, "that people movements must not be understood as men's work." Although McGavran did not address the issue often, he believed in the doctrine of election. He attributed the "*gratia preparans*" or preparatory grace as the action of God that turns various "segments of the human race toward faith in Christ."<sup>61</sup>

A natural corollary of the people movement is the homogeneous unit principle. Men like to become Christians without having to cross social, linguistic, or class barriers.<sup>62</sup> McGavran introduced this concept in *The Bridges of God* in 1955. However, it was C. Peter Wagner, a student of McGavran's, who popularized this

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<sup>56</sup> Donald A. McGavran, *Momentous Decisions in Missions Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 103.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>62</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 223.

Suarez: Donald McGavran's Understanding of Conversion principle with the publication of his book, *Our Kind of People*. This has been the most controversial principle of the Church Growth Movement. Many people "wonder how the Church can be ONE in Christ and yet diverse in culture."<sup>63</sup> The premise of this controversial principle is that the Gospel flows easily among groups of people who speak the same language and are of the same social and racial background. McGavran believed that "churches tend to grow when men becoming Christian join others of their own race-tribe, sub-tribe, caste, or clan."<sup>64</sup> Understanding the homogeneous principle contributes to McGavran's thoughts about conversion. McGavran described that people and society build barriers that are not helpful to the proclamation of the Gospel. The homogeneous principle looks for ways to reduce those barriers so that a person does not have to leave his family, language, and culture in order to be a Christian. McGavran insisted in removing all nonbiblical barriers to accepting Christ. He maintained, however, that "biblical hurdles to accepting Christ must, of course, be left in place."<sup>65</sup>

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Typical arguments against the homogeneous principle are accusations of promoting racism or wrong methods, or that it is not biblical. Wayne McClintock has criticized McGavran's homogeneous principles as a "broad and vague concept."<sup>66</sup> Tom Ness, in reviewing *Our Kind of People*, charges Wagner and the Church Growth Movement as racist.<sup>67</sup> Two primary theological arguments are made against the Church Growth Movement in general and applicable to the homogeneous principle. First, there is a segmentation of theology and praxis seen in methodology that is influenced more by sociology than theology. Gailyn Van Rheenen cautions that since methodologies and strategies are never theologically neutral, they "should be shaped by the gospel itself."<sup>68</sup> Second, an anthropocentric focus pervades the idea of homogeneous groups. Many argue the case for a church made up of all kinds of people and reject the idea of homogeneous groups. A common verse used by proponents of this argument is, "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph. 2:14 NIV). Another common verse is, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28 NIV).

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<sup>63</sup> Victor Hayward and Donald A. McGavran, "Without Crossing Barriers? One in Christ vs. Discipling Diverse Cultures," *Missiology* 2, no. 2 (April 1974): 203.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Wayne McClintock, "Sociological Critique of the Homogeneous Unit Principle," *International Review of Mission* 77, no. 305 (January 1, 1988): 109.

<sup>67</sup> Tom Ness, "Evangelism without the Gospel," *Sojourners*, February 1980, 27–29.

<sup>68</sup> Gailyn Van Rheenen, "Reformist View," in *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: 5 Views*, eds. Gary L. McIntosh and Paul E. Engle (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 177.

Francis Dubose presented three theological dangers to the homogeneous principle. He believes that “it assumes an essentially anthropological rather than theological view of man; it assumes an essentially sociological rather than a theological view of the church; it assumes an essentially pragmatic rather than a theological view of strategy.”<sup>69</sup>

Others see the homogeneous principle as positive. Arthur Glasser, while recognizing the arguments against the principle, understands its validity as a missiological strategy. Glasser adds that experienced pastors confirm that homogeneous groupings “can enable one to perceive that practically all churches have tended to grow within particular homogeneous units.”<sup>70</sup> Wayne Zunkel acknowledges the changing landscape of the nation, which is contributing to a more diverse society. Many of the immigrants do not speak English. Zunkel, using Paul as an example, tells churches that this diverse population will be reached “on their own terms, respecting their own cultural heritage, in their own ‘heart language.’”<sup>71</sup> Larry McSwain, while expressing some reservations, acknowledges that “as a strategy of conversion the homogeneous unit principle is sound.”<sup>72</sup> However, McSwain does not accept the homogeneous principle as part of the ecclesiastical structure. A church that allows for structures that separate people according to race, language, or class denies “the gospel which reconciles.”<sup>73</sup>

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While the theological objections to the homogeneous principle are obvious, the sociological and anthropological questions are more problematic. A look at present day churches will quickly display a homogeneous appearance. McSwain admits that “people do respond more readily when they require the least cultural displacement.”<sup>74</sup>

### **ecclesiological context**

Any theology of church growth should begin with a theology of evangelism and conclude with proper ecclesiology. Rainer observes that “the work of effective evangelism (McGavran’s term) is not complete until a person becomes a fruit bearing disciple in a local church.”<sup>75</sup>

Donald McGavran’s understanding of conversion was understood in an ecclesiological context. McGavran’s passion for evangelism cannot be separated

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<sup>69</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 Press, 1978), 129.

<sup>70</sup> Arthur F. Glasser, “Church Growth at Fuller,” *Missiology* 14, no. 4 (October 1986): 416.

<sup>71</sup> C. Wayne Zunkel, “Church Growth: ‘Not Another Evangelistic Fad,’” *Brethren Life and Thought* 25, no. 4 (Fall 1980): 232.

<sup>72</sup> Larry McSwain, “A Critical Appraisal of the Church Growth Movement,” *Review and Expositor* 77, no. 4 (Fall 1980): 530.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 529.

<sup>75</sup> Rainer, *The Great Commission*, 14.

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from church growth. The widely accepted definition of church growth is "all that is involved in bringing men and women who do not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ into the fellowship with Him and into responsible church membership."<sup>76</sup> This definition encapsulates the essence of Donald McGavran's view of the centrality of the church. McGavran's theology and the influences of both sociology and anthropology are expressed in the local church. In McGavran's ecclesiocentric view, it was the church that went out to find and persuade the lost with the message of salvation among receptive people with the goal of conversion and responsible church membership.

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McGavran was motivated by the lostness of men. His entire ministry was dedicated to discovering effective ways to reach the lost. He believed in the biblical truth that all people without Christ are hopelessly condemned. He used words such as "lost" and emphasized "finding" as more important than "searching." He believed that the most important task of the church was "to lead God's lost sons and daughters back to Him."<sup>77</sup> Perhaps the clearest statement about sinful man is found in his description of the "doctrine of the lostness of the human race," which is one of "eight axioms" for an evangelical theology of missions. In describing the fall of man, he states that "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>78</sup>

McGavran was motivated by the transformational message of the Gospel. He spoke about "Presence and Proclamation in Christian Mission" in a paper he presented in 1968.<sup>79</sup> There, he recognized that proclamation needed little explanation, for the word was "thoroughly biblical and its messages clear."<sup>80</sup> However, McGavran suggested that the term "presence" was a reaction to what was perceived as "harsh, direct, and ineffective" results of the proclamation of the Gospel. The World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) coined the term "presence" in 1964 after they concluded that "words like evangelization, witness, and mission all suggest a Christian behavior of speaking before listening, of calling people away from their natural communities into a Christian grouping, and of a preoccupation with the soul at the expense of the whole of life."<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1976), 14.

<sup>77</sup> McGavran, *Momentous Decisions in Missions Today*, 14.

<sup>78</sup> Arthur F. Glasser and Donald A. McGavran, *Contemporary Theologies of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 95–96.

<sup>79</sup> Donald A. McGavran, "Presence and Proclamation in Christian Mission," in *The Conciliar-Evangelical Debate: The Crucial Documents 1964–1976*, ed. Donald A. McGavran (South Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1977), 205–18.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>81</sup> Glasser and McGavran, *Contemporary Theologies of Mission*, 95–96.

McGavran argued against those who say missions is “anything that is done outside the four walls of the church.”<sup>82</sup> Others, McGavran said, used the term to mean “presence-dialogue.” He concluded by saying that he endorses the term “presence” provided the goal is “that Jesus Christ according to the Scripture be believed, loved, obeyed, and followed into the waters of baptism.”<sup>83</sup> He solidified this statement with a more biblical declaration “that all may belong who accept Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the Scripture.”<sup>84</sup> He later, in 1970, redefined missions as “an enterprise devoted to proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ, and to persuading men to become His disciple and dependable members of His Church.”<sup>85</sup> The goal for those who hold to a strategy of persuasion is not decisions for Christ but “responsible church members.”<sup>86</sup> This is consistent with McGavran’s understanding of the Great Commission mandate to “make disciple of all nations” as nothing less than disciples of Christ as the end product.

McGavran wanted to prioritize his evangelism by going first to the receptive people. He observed that some areas are more receptive to the Gospel than others. Factors that affect responsiveness are usually related to changes in people’s life. For example, people moving to new areas, those affected by political domination, the experience of freedom from control or acculturation are all factors that affect responsiveness. McGavran’s interest in the receptivity of people to the Gospel was rooted in a responsibility to both the Great Commission and the stewardship of resources. McGavran’s curiosity was not an intellectual exercise but rather a “joy that in knowing these variations we may be more faithful in the discharge of our stewardship and commission.”<sup>87</sup> People and financial resources should go to the most responsive areas. In 1955, he said that “evangelism can be and ought to be directed to responsive persons, groups and segments of society.”<sup>88</sup> George Hunter, making application to the North American context, counted the principle of receptivity as “the greatest contribution to the Church Growth Movement to this generation’s world evangelization.”<sup>89</sup> Ralph H. Elliott was a representative critic of the principle on the basis that it usurps emphasis from the sovereignty of God. He also feared that many needy areas would be neglected because they are not receptive.<sup>90</sup> Elliott assumes that areas of poverty are the least receptive. However,

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<sup>82</sup> McGavran, “Presence and Proclamation in Christian Mission,” 205.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 26.

<sup>86</sup> Wagner, “Recent Developments in Church Growth Understandings,” 514.

<sup>87</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 257.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> George G. Hunter III, *The Contagious Congregation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 104.

<sup>90</sup> Ralph H. Elliott, *Church Growth That Counts* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1982), 73–77.

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McGavran's principle does not mean to abandon the lower socioeconomic classes. If the people in a depressed area were responsive, the principle would call for an increase in resources for ministry.

Receptivity also helped McGavran to understand how people come to Christ. McGavran saw receptivity as an essential tool to determine effective evangelism. Interconnectedness is seen in McGavran's principles and their relationship to his understanding of conversion. He believed in peoples, not individuals, coming to Christ (people movements) through relationships between family, caste, and tribe (homogeneous units) that formed bridges for group conversions among a people prepared by God (receptivity). His end goal was to see people come to Christ.

From his passion to see peoples reached, to the potential force for evangelism and church planting, he believed that "one of the qualities of a healthy church is church growth."<sup>91</sup> He defined church growth as a "process of spiritual reproduction whereby new congregations are formed."<sup>92</sup> In other words, effective evangelism must lead to new gatherings as a consequence of people coming to know Christ. McGavran warned,

Conversion growth is the only type of growth by which the Good News of salvation can spread to all the segments of American society and to earth's remotest bounds. The goal of mission is to have a truly indigenous congregation in every community of every culture. When that occurs, and only when that occurs, we may be sure that the Gospel has been preached to every creature. Patently, this goal requires enormous conversion growth.<sup>93</sup>

### observations

Donald McGavran's understanding of conversion was clouded with the conflicting theological and sociological views that consequently impacted his methodology. While his pragmatic teaching certainly was not free of criticism, his missiological contributions cannot be overlooked.

Donald McGavran believed in the authority of the Word of God. McGavran's theological development shifted from a liberal to a more conservative biblical position. His view that the Bible was the authoritative Word of God became foundational to ministry. It was this biblical foundation that explained his beliefs about lostness, Jesus Christ, conversion, and salvation.

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<sup>91</sup> Wagner, "Recent Developments in Church Growth Understandings," 514.

<sup>92</sup> Pickett et al., *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, 98.

<sup>93</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 98–99.

Donald McGavran viewed conversion growth as the only type of growth that can impact lostness. He was consistently steadfast in his position that a person without Christ is condemned to eternity in hell. It was this understanding that gave him a sense of urgency to find lost people.

Donald McGavran believed that Jesus Christ is the only solution to the problem of sin. It is through Christ alone that a lost person can receive salvation by knowing and trusting Christ through a personal relationship. McGavran believed and taught the substitutionary atonement of Christ.

Yet, Donald McGavran's view of conversion lacked a clear theological explanation as to how men become Christians. Most of McGavran's explanation of conversion relied on methodology more than on theology. It is obvious that it is in the praxis where sociology and theology conflict with each other. For example, in the description of people movement, McGavran explained and analyzed the methodology rather than how a person comes to Christ. Again, in his description of the homogeneous unit McGavran emphasized the relational bridge that allows for the Gospel to cross without barriers among tribes, caste, and races but failed to explain how someone becomes a Christian.

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His distinction between discipling and perfecting additionally did not help clarify how a person comes to Christ. Although in his second book, *How Churches Grow*, published in 1959, he did see discipling and perfecting as indistinguishable in the conversion experience. He also consistently used terminology that separated discipling from perfecting. This separation of terms became a hermeneutical difficulty that made his theology suspect.

McGavran's explanation of persuasion evangelism demonstrates his struggles in clearly articulating what conversion is. His priority in helping converts become "responsible church members" appears to be part of salvation instead of a result of salvation. McGavran's writings, however, support his understanding that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, and in Christ alone.

## conclusion

McGavran's difficulty in clearly articulating his theology of conversion in relationship to sociological and anthropological influences does not take away from his contributions to the field of missiology and the impact to Southern Baptist ministries. Today, many churches and denominations have benefited from McGavran's contributions to church growth.

Donald McGavran helped the church understand the importance for cross-cultural ministries. This is an invaluable contribution to missions agencies and

Suarez: Donald McGavran's Understanding of Conversion churches around the world. The growing multicultural population in North America can be enriched by the principles learned from McGavran's vast contribution to missiological research.

Donald McGavran helped the church understand the benefits of sociological and anthropological insight. In the search to discover how people become Christians, McGavran was influenced by the fields of sociology and anthropology. His contributions, though controversial, gave the local church measuring tools for accountability and strategic planning. Additionally, these two disciplines also helped the church understand the role culture plays in how a person becomes a Christian.

Donald McGavran's missiological concepts have been further refined and adapted into Southern Baptist ministries and agencies. Today, what he called "peoples movement" is called Church Planting Movements. The "homogeneous unit" is called people groups, and "receptive people" are called target or focus groups. While Donald McGavran did not clearly articulate conversion from a theological perspective, he did consistently communicate that church growth was conversion growth, effective evangelism leads to the growth of a church, and that evangelism was a priority.

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