

Great Commission Research Journal

Volume 4
Issue 2 *Donald McGavran*

Article 4

1-1-2013

Donald McGavran and the City

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Recommended Citation

Walters, J. K. (2013). Donald McGavran and the City. *Great Commission Research Journal*, 4(2), 202-215. Retrieved from <https://digitalarchives.apu.edu/gcrj/vol4/iss2/4>

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abstract

As the “father of the Church Growth Movement,” Donald A. McGavran’s impact on twentieth century missiology is undisputed. His teaching on missions in urban contexts holds great value for our rapidly urbanizing world, but those contributions have been studied very little. The purpose of this article is to survey McGavran’s urban missiology, especially as presented in his seminal work, *Understanding Church Growth*.

The twenty-first century church faces a new reality: an urban world. A 2009 report by the United Nations confirmed that for the first time in history, more people live in cities than in rural areas.¹ The United Nations anticipates that the global urban population will double to 6.4 billion by 2050. Africa and Asia have the fastest growing urban populations; both are expected to triple over the next forty years.² Today, over four hundred cities have a population exceeding one million persons. Twenty-one cities worldwide have a population of over ten million.³ The majority

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

² *Ibid.*, 11.

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

Christianity has often been an urban movement,⁴ rapid urbanization has presented special challenges for modern evangelicals. A prevalent anti-urban mentality, the predominance of rural churches, and modern social issues such as poverty, globalization, and homelessness have slowed the evangelical response to the growth of cities.⁵ Missionaries and urban pastors have increasingly asked how to touch urban centers with the gospel.

One missiological school of thought that might have answered questions about urban missions is the Church Growth Movement. Even as urbanization changed the face of Christian missions, this important twentieth-century missiological movement has struggled with an identity crisis. Launched in mid-century by missionary Donald Anderson McGavran, the Church Growth Movement had left its early roots in missionary practice, especially after leadership within the movement shifted to North America in the early 1970s.⁶ Some within the movement have called for a return to McGavran's missiological principles of "effective evangelism."⁷ Even as some scholars and practitioners recognized the importance of urban missions and others the need for a return to McGavran's missiology, they have given little attention to McGavran's own study of missions in urban contexts.

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mcgavran's context

Donald McGavran's life spanned most of the twentieth century.⁸ He was born in India in 1897, the son and grandson of missionaries. After studying in the United States and a stint in the army during World War I, McGavran answered his own

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

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

⁶ Thom S. Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1993), 38–39.

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

⁸ For a brief survey of McGavran's life and influence, see Donald McGavran, "My Pilgrimage in Mission," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 20, no. 2 (April 1986), 53. For a more in-depth study to 1965, see Vernon James Middleton, "The Development of a Missiologist: The Life and Thought of Donald Anderson McGavran, 1897–1965" (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1989).

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call to the mission field, arriving back in India in 1923. He served first in Christian education, then later as field secretary for his mission, the United Christian Missionary Society. In 1935, McGavran returned to the front lines of church planting work, engaging low-caste Satnamis in rural India.

Teaching later on the Church Growth Movement, McGavran outlined five periods in the development of his thought. The first, from 1934–1936, included his experience as field secretary for the India mission. He explained that while he was working with wonderful Christian people, little growth was taking place in the Disciples mission. His exposure to Methodist Bishop J. Waskom Pickett's teaching and research,⁹ along with his own church growth studies in Mid-India sparked the question that would guide his future: why do some churches grow and others do not?¹⁰

204 The second period spanned McGavran's seventeen-year ministry in Satnami evangelism, from 1937 to 1954. He continued with church growth surveys and developed the ideas that led to his influential *The Bridges of God* in 1955. McGavran's ideas caused a great deal of tension with his colleagues, most of whom were engaged in ministries other than evangelism. He saw clearly that hospital, school, and orphanage work—much of which had been his ministry for many years—"would not affect great discipling."¹¹

With the publication of *The Bridges of God*, McGavran's ministry changed substantially. During an extended furlough, he continued church growth studies in the Congo, the Philippines, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Thailand, and Mexico. Back in the United States, McGavran sought an institution that would be willing to start a "graduate school of church growth and mission." Finally, in 1961, Northwest Christian College in Eugene, Oregon, agreed to host the Institute of Church Growth where McGavran's focus became the training of field missionaries in church growth theory. Men from Asia, Africa, and South America spent nine months in seminars and research on their own fields. Through these projects, McGavran found affirmation of his key principles, including both the opportunities for and the opposition to church growth.¹²

McGavran's influence continued to grow during his tenure in Eugene. The leadership of the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association invited McGavran to address their annual meeting at Winona Lake, Indiana, in 1962. That invitation led

⁹ See J. Waskom Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1933) and J. Waskom Pickett, *Christ's Way to India's Heart* (Lucknow: Lucknow Publishing House, 1938).

¹⁰ Donald McGavran, "The History and Development of the Church Growth Position," Presentation to the faculty seminar, Union Biblical Seminary, India, 17 January 1972. Donald and Mary McGavran Collection, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College, Collection 178, Box 83, Folder 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

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to the annual Church Growth Seminars, which Herbert Works calls “one of
McGavran’s most effective means of reaching the evangelical segment of
Protestantism.”¹³

The Institute of Church Growth remained in Eugene for four years before moving to Pasadena and Fuller Theological Seminary. For many years, Fuller founder Charles E. Fuller and Seminary President David Hubbard had sought to launch a graduate school of missions. They recruited McGavran as the founding dean, and the School of World Mission was inaugurated in 1965. McGavran insisted on retaining the Institute of Church Growth as part of the name of the new school.¹⁴ McGavran later called his Fuller years “the best years of my pilgrimage.”¹⁵

Throughout his career at Fuller, writing and publication became an important part of McGavran’s work. He considered his own writing and the future publication of regional church growth studies an important part of the Church Growth Movement. Even though McGavran saw the genesis of church growth thought much earlier, many historians have viewed the publication of *The Bridges of God* as the beginning of the Church Growth Movement.¹⁶ *Understanding Church Growth*, published in 1970, is the most complete description of McGavran’s missiology, but other writings like *Ethnic Realities and the Church*, while less known, are equally valuable.¹⁷

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Thom Rainer notes that McGavran’s influence diminished after the publication of *Understanding Church Growth*,¹⁸ but McGavran continued to travel, research, and teach for the remainder of his life. He stepped down as Dean of Fuller’s School of World Mission in 1971, but he continued to teach until 1980.¹⁹ Far from diminishing, McGavran’s influence increased as he helped lead the Lausanne Conference on World Evangelization in 1974.²⁰ Donald McGavran died at home in 1990 at age ninety-three. He left a legacy of church growth missiology that continues far beyond the centennial of his birth.

McGavran’s century was one of tremendous change, not only in evangelical missions, but also in urbanization. In 1900, less than fifteen percent of the global

¹³ Herbert Melvin Works, Jr., “The Church Growth Movement to 1965: An Historical Perspective” (D.Miss. Dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1974), 238–41.

¹⁴ Charles H. Kraft, *SWM/SIS at Forty: A Participant/Observer’s View of Our History* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2005), 59–60.

¹⁵ McGavran, “My Pilgrimage,” 57.

¹⁶ Rainer, *Book of Church Growth*, 21–22.

¹⁷ Donald A. McGavran, *Ethnic Realities and the Church: Lessons from India* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1979).

¹⁸ Rainer, *Book of Church Growth*, 38.

¹⁹ Kraft, *SWM/SIS at Forty*, 286.

²⁰ International Congress on World Evangelization, *Let the Earth Hear His Voice* (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), 108–15.

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population lived in urban contexts.²¹ McGavran's only significant period of ministry in a city was during his tenure at Jubbulpore, but he later recognized the growing importance of cities to world evangelization. Many of his students in the Institute of Church Growth came from cities and wrote on urban missiology.²² In *Understanding Church Growth*, he noted, "Cities and larger towns had great meaning for the Early Church and have even more significance for Christian missions in the next half century."²³ In the mid-1960s, McGavran stood in the streets of Mexico City with Roger Greenway, one of the most influential urban missiologists today, and said, "in the future, the frontier of missions will lie in the city. I challenge you to direct your efforts here."²⁴

the city in mcgavran's writing and teaching

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Influenced by students like Roger Greenway, McGavran began to consider the application of his church growth missiology in urban contexts. McGavran's most influential contribution to urban missiology appeared in the first edition of *Understanding Church Growth* in 1970. *Understanding Church Growth* was compiled from McGavran's teaching at the Winona Lake seminars and in his Fuller classroom. Beginning in the late 1960s, students at Winona Lake asked for more teaching on urban contexts. An evaluation of past seminars in 1969 revealed, "It came out during our discussion that for several years now we have had an increasing number of requests for more emphasis upon urban centers with their peculiar problems and opportunities."²⁵ McGavran responded simply, "We have taken your counsel about urban church growth."²⁶ Future seminars provided opportunities for McGavran to discuss his thoughts on urban missiology.

mcgavran's "eight keys" to discipling urban populations

In a chapter titled, "Discipling Urban Populations," McGavran published his first significant rationale for urban missions as well as eight "keys" for reaching global

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

²² See, for example, Donald A. McGavran and James H. Montgomery, *The Discipling of a Nation* (Santa Clara, CA: Global Church Growth Bulletin, 1980); William R. Read, Victor M. Monterroso, and Harmon A. Johnson, *Latin American Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969); Roy E. Shearer, *Wildfire: Church Growth in Korea* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966); William R. Read, *New Patterns of Church Growth in Brazil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965).

²³ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 278. Unless otherwise noted, all citations from *Understanding Church Growth* are from the 1970 edition.

²⁴ Roger S. Greenway, "My Pilgrimage in Urban Mission" *Urban Mission* (March 1999), 12.

²⁵ Edwin E. Jacques to Donald McGavran, April 15, 1969. WCIU 7.3. William Carey International University and the U.S. Center for World Mission house a significant collection of McGavran's personal correspondence. Unfortunately, the collection remains in McGavran's original filing cabinets and is only now being catalogued. References in this collection will refer to the filing cabinet and drawer. "WCIU, 7.3" refers to the McGavran Collection at WCIU, cabinet 7, drawer 3.

²⁶ Donald McGavran to Wade T. Coggins and Edwin Jacques, April 25, 1969. WCIU 7.3.

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urban centers. His recommendations for ministry in cities reflect his own
application of larger church growth missiology to complex urban cultures.

McGavran recognized that most church growth had taken place through people
movements in rural villages and towns where populations were likely more
homogeneous, where family and social networks (“bridges”) were stronger, and
where lifestyles facilitated evangelism.²⁷ Urban contexts present very different
opportunities and challenges.

Defining the Terms. One of the challenges to any discussion of urban missions
is that of definition. John Palen outlines multiple viewpoints that impact one’s
understanding of the term *urban*, including economic, cultural, demographic, and
geographical definitions.²⁸ None of these is entirely satisfactory. The United
Nations reports urban populations based on each country’s own definition. For
example, in the United States, urban centers are defined by population (2,500 or
more persons) and population density (1,000 persons per square mile).²⁹ In China,
urban areas are designated by the national governing body. Other nations define
any town with at least two hundred residents within a defined border as urban.³⁰
McGavran defined rural and urban in economic terms, saying, “I classify as rural
all those who earn their living from the soil, dwell in villages, and eat largely what
they raise.”³¹ Urban, on the other hand, were those communities of people “who
live in market centers and live by trade or manufacture.”³² Still, he described urban
areas as having populations of at least ten thousand.

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Urban Church Growth Research. At its heart, church growth is about research.
McGavran often decried the “universal fog” surrounding the growth or decline of
churches.³³ Referring to urban contexts, he wrote, “Research in urban church
growth is a department of missions which demands immediate development by all
who take the Great Commission seriously.”³⁴ “Large-scale research,” he continued,
is needed in every major country to reveal what activities, modes of life, and
kinds of proclamation communicate the Christian faith in cities and which do
not. Many illustrations of the latter and some of the former can be readily
obtained; they would cast invaluable light on this urban field in which
Christian mission will spend more than a billion dollars in the next thirty
years.³⁵

²⁷ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 280.

²⁸ J. John Palen, *The Urban World*, 7th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 7.

²⁹ United Nations, *Demographic Yearbook 2005* (New York: United Nations Population Division, 2005), table 6.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 278.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 67–82.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 285.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 283–84.

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

McGavran recognized the lack of research in urban contexts but suggested his “eight keys” in light of general church growth missiology. Implementation of his recommendations would require contextualization in specific countries and cultures, but, he contended, “these ‘keys’ are in the neighborhood of the truth.”³⁶ His hope was that urban missions practitioners would expand on the keys in the future.

House Churches and the Property Barrier. First, he argued, urban missionaries must “emphasize house churches.”³⁷ McGavran recognized that new churches in urban contexts would face significant burdens including the cost of property for construction of permanent buildings. Also, churches in many parts of the world faced antagonism or outright persecution. He suggested that churches meeting in homes would provide an acceptable alternative to permanent construction, especially in cities. “The house church,” he wrote, “meets all these requirements ideally.”³⁸ In some contexts, house churches eventually grew to the point that they would construct permanent facilities, but in many locales, that would never be the case. Later in his life, McGavran expanded on his argument for house churches, saying that they were likely the best way to reach the diverse populations of modern cities.³⁹ Interestingly, McGavran himself started a house church while living in Eugene, Oregon.

Another of McGavran’s keys, “surmount the property barrier,” overlaps considerably with his emphasis on house churches. He argued that in contexts where house churches were culturally inappropriate or where other barriers prevented meeting in homes, buildings still presented a significant challenge. The best answer was not foreign subsidy or labor, but rather the rapid growth of the church to the point that the members themselves could finance land and construction. “The building bottleneck,” wrote McGavran, “cannot be eliminated by concentrating on it alone. What must be found is a more effective way to communicate the gospel, where the smell of victory is in the air. . . . A church which grows greatly often thereby solves its building problem.”⁴⁰

Lay Leadership. McGavran also recognized the difficulties inherent in house churches. Wear and tear on the host home, weariness of meeting long-term in a

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 285.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 286.

³⁹ Donald McGavran, “House Churches: A Key Factor for Growth,” *Global Church Growth* 29 (January/February/March, 1992), 5.

⁴⁰ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 292.

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small group, and lack of leadership were common problems.⁴¹ Closely related to
this last issue was McGavran's second key: "develop unpaid lay leaders."⁴² He saw
that laymen had been intimately involved in historic urban movements and argued
that raising up leaders from urban neighborhoods would be vital for church
planting in cities. "No paid worker from the outside and certainly no missionary
abroad," he wrote, "can know as much about a neighborhood as someone who had
dozens of relatives and intimates all around him."⁴³ McGavran advocated finding
new believers gifted in leadership and turning the church over to those men as soon
as possible. Far from leaving these young leaders to fend for themselves, he saw the
importance of continued close contact from missionaries and trained leaders.
McGavran was not opposed to formal theological education—much of his last
book, *Effective Evangelism*, was devoted to his views on that topic—but he saw
clearly that urban movements would not take place if they required paid and
formally trained leadership.⁴⁴

Church Planting in Receptive Ethnic Populations. The following three keys to
discipling urban populations related directly to two of the most controversial
aspects of church growth missiology. McGavran argued that reaching cities and
planting urban churches would require missionaries and leaders to "recognize
resistant homogeneous units," "focus on the responsive," and "multiply tribe, caste,
and language churches."⁴⁵ From the earliest development of his church growth
missiology, McGavran argued, "Men like to become Christians without crossing
racial, linguistic, or class barriers."⁴⁶ The Homogeneous Unit Principle, as this idea
has become known, is one of the most foundational and controversial tenets of
church growth thought. The principle begins in the sociological and
anthropological concepts of "peoples" and "segments," which McGavran drew
from his interpretation of the Great Commission. He argued that *ta ethne* in
Matthew 28:19 should be used "in the sense of the mosaic of tribes, clans, and
peoples, each held together as a homogeneous unit by cultural ties."⁴⁷ While he did
not view the use of *ta ethne* in the New Testament as requiring the Homogeneous
Unit Principle, he clearly believed that evangelizing ethnic units was vital to world
evangelization.⁴⁸

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⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 286.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 287.

⁴⁴ See Donald McGavran, *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1988).

⁴⁵ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 287–89.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁴⁷ McGavran, "Dictionary of Church Growth Terms," WCIU 7.1.

⁴⁸ Donald A. McGavran to David J. Hesselgrave and Donald Carson, May 13, 1980, WCIU 8.2.

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McGavran's Homogeneous Unit Principle was the result of his study of people movements around the world. He argued that "the idea of the homogeneous unit is very elastic," saying that in various places it might be based on ethnicity. In other locales, the "common characteristic" might be geography, language, or class.⁴⁹ Homogeneous units looked differently in rural or urban environments and in Western or non-Western societies. The HUP affected not only evangelization, but also impacted church planting as missionaries worked to reach out to "the fringes" of each group. Effective people movement strategies required working through people who would reach out to their own.

210 The "principle of receptivity" was McGavran's practical application of his theological understanding of God's work in salvation. People movements are a "gift of God," and peoples become open to the gospel only when God opens their hearts to the gospel. "Receptivity does not arise by accident," McGavran argued. "Men become open to the Gospel, not by any blind interplay of brute forces, but by God's sovereign will. Over every welcoming of the Gospel, we can write, 'In the fullness of time God called *this* people out.'"⁵⁰ McGavran's receptivity principle went far beyond a theological precept; it had significant practical implication. *The Bridges of God* was written to encourage missionaries, particularly those working in India, to move beyond the traditional mission station approach.⁵¹ McGavran argued that "the era has come when Christian Missions should hold lightly all mission station work."⁵² In the face of dwindling financial resources, he advocated a flexible approach that allowed mission leadership to shift personnel and finances to receptive fields and peoples.⁵³

McGavran expanded on the receptivity principle in *Understanding Church Growth*. Receptivity, he argued, should be a guiding factor in determining mission strategy. "Correct policy," he wrote, "is to occupy fields of low receptivity lightly."⁵⁴ He added boldly, "That receptivity determines mission method is obvious."⁵⁵ Church growth advocates research the fields and use the information gleaned to determine where resources are best used to accomplish the Great Commission.

Applying the principles of homogeneous units and receptivity is more complicated in urban environments. "The city," wrote McGavran, "is not a

⁴⁹ Donald A. McGavran, "The Genesis and Strategy of the Homogeneous Unit Principle," presented to the Lausanne Theology and Education Group, May 30, 1977. WCIU 8.4, 2.

⁵⁰ Donald McGavran, "Why Neglect the Gospel-Ready Masses?" *Christianity Today* 10, no. 15 (April 29, 1966), 18.

⁵¹ Donald A. McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (London: World Dominion Press, 1955; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005), 67.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 109.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 112–13.

⁵⁴ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 230.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 231.

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homogenous whole, but rather a mosaic made up of hundreds of segments of society, a few responsive, many indifferent, and a few highly resistant. The obedient and intelligent steward of God's grace recognizes this and plans his work in light of it."⁵⁶ McGavran argued that accurate research would point to specific parts of the urban mosaic where evangelization and church planting could take place. These areas often prove to be new immigrants longing for some connection to one another, to struggling groups facing difficulties integrating into new urban cultures, or to newcomers desiring to join the dominant culture.

McGavran was a strong advocate of ethnic and language churches. He resisted the tendency in cities to gather believers from scattered homogenous units into single churches. He referred to such churches as "urban conglomerates," and contended that such congregations have a very low evangelistic potential due to the lack of relationships outside the church.⁵⁷ The ideal of bringing individuals from diverse backgrounds together was misguided, according to McGavran. "The first business of the church," he argued,

is not to fuse the various populations of the metropolis into one people. The establishment, in each linguistic and ethnic group, of congregations whose members worship God with delight in their own mother tongue should be the aim. If any disagree with this principle, I suggest that he go and "worship" with a congregation of whose services he understands only one word in three! When city churches set themselves the task of discipling out to its fringes each ethnic unit in which there are already some Christians, and multiplying ethnic churches as the best means of accomplishing the task, discipling the cities will become much more possible than it is today.⁵⁸

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

Evangelism and Social Ministry. McGavran's final two keys dealt directly with evangelism. Evangelism, for McGavran, was "proclaiming Christ and persuading men to become His disciples and responsible members of His Church."⁵⁹ Most importantly, evangelism was the primary task of the church and missions. He spoke very clearly in *Effective Evangelism*, saying,

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 287.

⁵⁷ Donald A. McGavran, *Ethnic Realities and the Church: Lessons from India* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1979), 162–65.

⁵⁸ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 290.

⁵⁹ Donald McGavran, "Conclusion," in Donald Anderson McGavran, ed., Robert Calvin Guy, Melvin L. Hodges, and Eugene A. Nida, *Church Growth and Christian Mission* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 231; Donald McGavran, "Essential Evangelism," in McGavran, *Eye of the Storm*, 57; Donald A. McGavran, "Loose the Churches. Let them Go!" *Missiology* 1, no. 2 (April 1973), 81.

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While the church ought certainly to carry out other activities, such as worship, the instruction of Christian children, the feeding of the poor, and the promotion of justice, for example, it must devote a larger share of its resources, its prayers, and its power to proclaiming the gospel, finding the lost, and bringing them home to the Father's house.⁶⁰

This emphasis on the priority of evangelism was not new. In *How Churches Grow*, McGavran outlined the New Testament "unequivocalness" of mission, declaring that mission is, simply, "proclamation or witness of a life or death message."⁶¹ Speaking to Canadian church leaders in 1974, McGavran listed as one of ten keys to the church growth school of thought, "Finding the lost and bringing them back to the Father's House is a chief and irreplaceable purpose of the Church in the modern world."⁶²

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While on the mission field, McGavran decried the loss of meaning in the word, "evangelism." He believed that the term "had been emasculated" by those who thought evangelism to be "decisions for Christ that never reached the stage of baptism and church membership" as well as by missionaries who "had gutted it by confining its use to the good deeds done in schools and hospitals and leprosy homes." The phrases "church growth" and, later, "effective evangelism," were McGavran's effort to counter those who sought to diminish in one way or another the biblical call to proclaim the gospel.⁶³

Over his career, McGavran grew increasingly concerned with the emphasis on social ministry and justice over evangelism. More specifically, he reacted strongly against efforts to call social ministry evangelism and to elevate Christian "presence" over "proclamation" of the gospel. In the late 1960s, some missionaries and leaders advocated living peacefully with other religions in order to win them with loving care rather than offensive proclamation. McGavran argued that Christian presence without the proclamation of the gospel was incomplete, although he recognized certain instances (such as areas of intense persecution) where "presence" evangelism might be necessary. "Please note," he wrote, "that I endorse presence when the goal is that Jesus Christ according to the Scriptures be believed, loved, obeyed, and followed into the waters of baptism."⁶⁴ Proclamation of the gospel is a necessary component of evangelism. Other activities such as

⁶⁰ McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 103.

⁶¹ Donald A. McGavran, *How Churches Grow: The New Frontiers of Mission* (London: World Dominion Press, 1959), 60.

⁶² McGavran, "Ten Prominent Elements in the Church Growth Point of View," WCIU 10.1.

⁶³ Donald McGavran, "Church Growth and Evangelism," unpublished manuscript, WCIU 1.1.

⁶⁴ Donald McGavran, "Presence and Proclamation in Christian Mission," in Donald McGavran, ed., *Eye of the Storm: The Great Debate in Mission* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972), 209.

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worship, feeding the hungry, and caring for those in need are necessary in
Christian ministry, but they are not evangelism.⁶⁵

Above and beyond the simple proclamation of the gospel, McGavran saw the need in urban contexts to “communicate intense belief in Christ,” his seventh key to discipling urban populations.⁶⁶ He recognized in church history the impact of believers who followed Christ at all costs. In cities, where cultural complexity and harried lifestyles seemed to blind individuals to the activity around them, the church must be a shining light in the dark world. McGavran cited Scripture to support his contention that the bold witness of believers in the face of suffering and persecution would speak loudly to urban dwellers. He declared, “The spread of Christianity throughout urban populations is due to no mere human appeal to dissatisfied groups of men.” “It is rather,” he continued,

that believers submit themselves to God, believe His revelation, accept His Son as Savior, receive the Holy Spirit, and press forward as new creatures, earnest of the New Heaven and the New Earth in which shall be no more anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall worship Him, and the Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign forever and ever.⁶⁷

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Such faith and passion lived out in cities created opportunities. Urban contexts are locales in which “presence” supports “proclamation.”

Finally, McGavran saw the necessity of social impact on the process of discipling cities. Effective evangelists in urban contexts, he argued, “provide the theological base for an egalitarian society.”⁶⁸ While McGavran rejected the notion that social ministry or efforts at social justice equated evangelism, he recognized that cities are often places of great injustice. Rather than social activism, however, McGavran argued that believers must teach, as part of their active discipling, a biblical base for just society. He believed that evangelization would lead to greater equality and healthier cities. Such teaching would even bolster church planting. “Provision of a sound theological base for an egalitarian society,” he concluded, “should aid the multiplication of Christ’s churches in towns and cities. Christianity would be recognized as the religion which provides bedrock for urban civilization.”⁶⁹ In urban populations touched by atheism, communism, secularism, and other godless philosophies, the only valid answer for mankind is Christ.

⁶⁵ McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 103; Donald McGavran, “A Missionary Confession of Faith,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 7, no. 2 (November 1972), 138.

⁶⁶ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 292.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 293.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 295.

McGavran’s “eight keys” to discipling urban populations had significant influence on urban missions. Soon after the publication of *Understanding Church Growth*, McGavran and Wayne Weld published a workbook on church growth principles for Latin American church leaders. They condensed the “keys” from eight to six, combining the principles related to homogeneous units and removing the final emphasis on social justice.⁷⁰ In 1976, Roger Greenway published a small book titled, *Guidelines for Urban Church Planting*.⁷¹ He recruited a group of urban missionaries to consider application of Donald McGavran’s eight “keys” for urban missions in their own contexts. Greenway himself provided the opening essay, which served as something of an “exposition” of McGavran’s principles.

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McGavran continued to teach frequently on urban discipling around the world. In one conference held in Korea in 1976, he expanded on his work in *Understanding Church Growth*, declaring, “We share God’s unswerving purpose for the salvation of men by liberating the cities into the Freedom of Christ.”⁷² He outlined seven “keys to urban church growth” that differed somewhat from those in *Understanding Church Growth*. McGavran retained his emphases on house churches, receptive populations, and language and culture churches but added the necessity of accurate research and independent churches.⁷³

With the publication of *Ethnic Realities* in 1979, McGavran made his most detailed contribution to the Church Growth Movement’s understanding of mono and multiethnic churches. In 1983, Roger Greenway launched *Urban Mission*, one of the only academic journals dedicated to urban missiology. McGavran contributed the first article, expounding upon his ideas for ethnic and language churches among the mosaic of people groups in urban contexts.⁷⁴

McGavran also grew from the work of his own students. He frequently recommended books written by urban church growth practitioners, many of which were published by students at the Institute of Church Growth. The “Discipling Urban Populations” chapter of the revised version of *Understanding Church Growth* shows the influence of research flowing from both the Institute for Church Growth and Fuller’s School of World Mission.⁷⁵ Unfortunately, the urban missions chapter was removed from the last edition of the work, released in 1990.

⁷⁰ Donald McGavran and Wayne Weld, *Principles of Church Growth* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1971), 12–13.

⁷¹ Roger S. Greenway, ed., *Guidelines for Urban Church Planting* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976).

⁷² Donald McGavran, “Liberating the Cities into the Freedom of Christ,” unpublished lecture notes, Donald and Mary McGavran Collection, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton, IL. Collection 178, Box 90, Folder 1.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Donald McGavran, “New Urban Faces of the Church” *Urban Mission* I (September 1983), 3–11.

⁷⁵ Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 314–32.

Donald McGavran's contributions to modern urban missiology are relatively unknown but still significant. Essentially, his writing and teaching on the topic were applications of his general church growth missiology to a specific context. He recognized his own shortcomings in the area and called for deeper study into discipling urban populations—a call relatively unheeded. In today's urban world, his is a call that must be answered. McGavran's guidelines for urban missions are still current but must be accurately applied. By maintaining his emphasis on solid research, contextually appropriate church planting, and fervent evangelism, twenty-first century missionaries continue McGavran's legacy of "effective evangelism" for the city.

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