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The Twenty-first Century Relevance of Donald McGavran

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**THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY RELEVANCE
OF DONALD MCGAVRAN**

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abstract

Donald A. McGavran is widely considered to be the greatest missiologist of the twentieth century. However, recent articles and books often ignore his contributions to mission theory. This lecture presents ten major influences of McGavran on the church in North America, and suggests five ways he challenges missional thinking in the twenty first century.

It is my delight to talk to you tonight about Donald McGavran's relevance in the twenty-first century. As many of you know, I have spent the last twelve years doing research for a biography on McGavran's life and ministry. To date I've written two hundred pages of his biography and plan to finish it this year.

During these years of research, I have come to not only know McGavran fairly well, but to love and respect him more and more. Some have called him the greatest missiologist of the twentieth century, to which I agree. Thus, it will be of no surprise to you to hear that I have been discouraged of late to read some newer books, which simply ignore his influence and accomplishments. I feel that either

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these new authors have not done their homework, or they are exhibiting extreme
bias against McGavran and his views of church growth. However, that is a
discussion for another time and place.

Tonight I suggest that McGavran continues to influence church ministry in the
United States in ten ways, and that he challenges us in five directions. Now I do not
have time to unpack these extensively tonight, but let me review briefly his
continuing influence on church ministry.

mcgavran's continuing influence

Donald A McGavran continues to influence ministry thinking in ten major areas.

valuing the bible

First, McGavran reminds church leaders to hold to the authority of the Bible. In
his early writings, McGavran often assumed the importance of biblical authority
for effective evangelism. As the years went by, McGavran went out of his way to be
clear on the importance of valuing biblical authority. In an interview just prior to
his death, he was asked to make a final comment. In what may well have been his
last published words, he said,

I think that my word would be that all those who seek to proliferate the
Christian faith should lean very heavily on biblical authority upon the one
hand and on the presence of the Holy Spirit on the other. We cannot spread
the Christian faith unless we believe that the Bible is the infallible Word of
God. Its authority is based on the fact that it is what God has said. He intends
for us to obey. We need to recognize it as authority. We need to let it guide our
lives (as quoted in K. Hunter 1990:13).

Clearly, one of the missiological insights that influences church ministry in the
twenty-first century is the belief that the Bible is the very Word of God.

making disciples

Second, growing out of McGavran's faith in the Bible as God's Word, he continues
to press us to remain faithful in obeying the Great Commission. The essential
conviction of mission is that God wants his lost children found and enfolded into
local churches. Jesus Christ gave his disciples the Great Commission, and the entire
New Testament assumes that Christians will proclaim Jesus Christ as God and
Savior and encourage men and women to become his disciples and responsible
members of his church.

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Yet, the Great Commission demands an understanding of *peoples* if it is to be obeyed. Quoting from his favorite passage in Romans 16:25–26, “The Gospel I brought you . . . [is] now disclosed and . . . by Eternal God’s command made known to all nations, to bring them to faith and obedience.” McGavran reminded, “The apostle did not have in mind modern nation-states such as India or America. He had in mind families of mankind—tongues, tribes, castes, and lineages of men” (1970:62).

The Great Commission was McGavran’s missiological motive for mission, but it meant far more than simply taking the gospel to different lands. It meant taking the gospel to all “peoples,” i.e., all families, clans, tribes, and units of the human mosaic.

prioritizing evangelism

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Third, the Great Commission demands that evangelism be the priority, rather than only serving the physical needs of people. While caring for people’s physical, emotional, and intellectual needs is part of our Christian duty, doing so is temporal, but salvation is eternal. Logically, the eternal always outweighs the temporal, thus evangelism must be the priority of the church. McGavran asserted, “God therefore commands those of His household to go and ‘make disciples of all nations.’ Fulfilling this command is the supreme purpose which should guide the entire mission, establish the priorities, and coordinate all its activities” (1970:51).

Within this priority of evangelism, McGavran identified three ways into a church—biological, transfer, and conversion (1970:87–92). That the missiological focus is on evangelism means that the best church growth comes from conversion rather than biological or transfer growth. Kenneth Scott Latourette addressed the issue this way: “The primary assignment of missions is evangelism: the proclamation of the Good News and assisting in the emergence of churches which, rooted in the soil and with their own leaders, will be witnesses to the Good News” (Latourette as quoted in McGavran 1955:xiii).

removing the fog

Discovering the facts of church growth through responsible research is a fourth aspect of McGavran’s missiology that influences us today. Responsible research into the causes and barriers to church growth is an ongoing project for many. God has given us a Great Commission, and we dare not assume that all is going well, or that we are doing the best that can be done. The Lord of the harvest wants his lost sheep found, and we must be accountable to His command. Thus, discovering the

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degree of growth or of decline and stating such facts meaningfully is an ongoing
part of faithful ministry.

being accountable

Closely related to this is a fifth area of influence, that is, the need for accountability for results. McGavran felt “a chief and irreplaceable purpose of mission is church growth” (1970:32). For a church to grow, countable people must be added to its ranks. Since “God . . . is primarily concerned that men be saved, . . . His [church] must also be so concerned. Such mission in today’s responsive world demands a theology of harvest . . .” (1970:34) According to McGavran, “Mere search is not what God wants. God wants His lost children found” (1970:40). “When our Lord commands us to make disciples of the nations,” McGavran writes, “He surely does not consider the job successfully concluded when one in 100 has yielded Him allegiance” (1959:14). While the ultimate growth of the church belongs to God, McGavran contends that God does the work of church growth through his people. How can lost people hear without a preacher? God uses people as his agents to bring about the healthy growth of the church. Thus, as believers, we are accountable to do our best to assist in the growth of our churches and denominations.

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focusing on receptive people

A sixth way that McGavran’s missiological insight continues to influence ministry today is by directing our focus to receptive people. McGavran affirmed “the receptivity or responsiveness of individuals waxes and wanes. No person is equally ready at all times to follow ‘the Way.’ . . . Peoples and societies also vary in responsiveness” (1970:216). He suggested the main indicator of receptivity was change. Change might come from people migration, national wars, or a number of other disturbances. If careful observation finds that people are becoming Christians and churches are being formed, then it is “reasonable to assume that other similar segments will prove receptive” (1970:228).

Today we continue to target receptive fields that are “white unto harvest.” This does not mean we abandoned resistant fields, but that we place a priority of winning the winnable (1970:229–232).

using correct methods

McGavran’s emphasis on receptive peoples points us to a seventh area of continuing influence: methods. To be effective, McGavran counseled, “Let churchmen adopt a pragmatic attitude toward methods” (1959:90). This is not

McIntosh: The Twenty-first Century Relevance of Donald McGavran, philosophical pragmatism, that is, the belief that something is only of value if it works. Rather it is simply a reflection of McGavran's common sense experience. Since God wants his lost children found and brought into local churches, and since he will hold us accountable for results, it is prudent to carefully invest in methodologies that produce the fruit of new disciples.

target specific peoples

Perhaps the most popular insight of McGavran's is that Christianity travels best over the natural bridges of family, tribe, and kinship. This was the main thesis of his first book *The Bridges of God*. The old mission station approach most often took new believers away from their natural contexts of family and community, which resulted in limited growth. People movements, on the other hand, came about because new believers were left in their communities where they could be bridges for others to travel across to meet Jesus. The principle of household evangelism was a crucial missiological insight for effective evangelism of specific groups of winnable people, and this approach is still the primary way people become believers in Christ. Thus, targeting the networks of family, friends, and associates is another way McGavran's influence is seen today.

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multiplying churches

The heart of McGavran's missiology is not the growth of single churches per se, but rather the extension of churches into every tribe, clan, caste, family, or kinship group in the world. This means that church planting and multiplication is the very essence of McGavran's missiological agenda. Even today, the more church leaders research what leads to effective evangelism, the more they see church multiplication as the answer.

McGavran advises,

Perhaps the most immediately practical thing for the specialist is to devote regular time each week to church planting—proclamation and persuasion with the intent that unbelievers should accept Christ and be baptized and added to the Lord in new and old congregations (1970:61).

“Today's supreme task is effective multiplication of churches in the receptive societies of earth” (1970:49).

making bold plans

Last, McGavran felt it was important to be intentional about growth, rather than haphazard. His was a positive view of the future of the church. In his missiological view, the Holy Spirit is active in the world, causing peoples to become receptive to

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 4, Iss. 2 [2013], Art. 5 the gospel. It is our responsibility to do the necessary research to discover them, select the correct methods that will communicate effectively, and go forward with much faith by making bold plans to proclaim and persuade as many as possible to believe in Jesus Christ alone for salvation, and to become responsible members of his church. “Church growth seldom comes without bold plans for it” (1970:356). Thus, taking the initiative to set goals and develop bold strategies to win people to Christ and plant new churches is seen in all aspects of church ministry today.

mcgavran’s challenges to the twenty-first century

McGavran’s innovative thought and theory is rooted deeply in the soil of the twenty-first century, and it continues to challenge our missiological thinking.

First, McGavran continues to challenge us to see the locus of our mission in the Great Commission.

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It is common in these early days of the twenty-first century to hear that our mission is to continue that of Jesus Christ himself. Support of this idea most often is taken from Luke 4: 14–22 which is regarded as the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. The basic idea put forth is that since Jesus’ early ministry consisted of preaching to the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed, our ministry should likewise focus on a social justice model.

However, McGavran’s church growth perspective points out that Luke 4 confirms the unique ministry of Jesus as the Messiah. Preaching to the poor, healing the blind, raising up the oppressed, and releasing the captives were specific signs that he was the long-awaited Messiah. While the church must continue to be involved in bringing release to people caught up in these and other forms of captivity, Luke 4 is not our commission.

After fulfilling his own commission, which was primarily dying on the cross and coming back to life in the resurrection, Jesus gave us a different commission in Luke 24.

Thus it was written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending forth the promises of my Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high (Luke 24: 46–49; see Matthew 28:19–20).

McGavran points us to the Great Commission as our motive for ministry, a commission that demands we preach the good news of Jesus Christ’s death, burial,

McIntosh: The Twenty-first Century Relevance of Donald McGavran resurrection. Indeed, that Jesus came to “seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10).

Second, McGavran continues to challenge us to see evangelism as our priority.

Our commission is to go lovingly, yes. To go caringly, yes. To go with healing, yes. Most importantly, however, is to go sharing the gospel of salvation through the death burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Observation demonstrates that where social service is prioritized over evangelism, very little evangelism actually occurs, a fact recognized by Steven Sjogren, founder of *Servant Evangelism*, who comments:

One of my ongoing frustrations in *Servant Evangelism* has come in seeing people verbalize the Good News. The tendency of human nature is to speak little in the context of serving others. It is rather easy to recruit people onboard with the serving part of the equation (the “S”). The evangelism (the “E”) is more challenging. Works of love are powerful in themselves, but without an accompanying verbalization of WHY we are doing these things we are cutting things significantly short. In other words, we need to live out a capital S *and* a capital E lifestyle (*Servant Evangelism* website).

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As Bishop Leslie Newbigin said, “Service must never be substituted for evangelism” (*Church Growth Bulletin*, 1966: 174). McGavran continues to challenge us to see that the most precious service we can render to our non-Christian neighbors and friends is help them come to faith in Jesus Christ, who alone is the way to eternal life.

Third, McGavran continues to challenge us to make new disciples.

Spiritual formation is now one of the hot topics in our churches. The underlying supposition of spiritual formation is that if Christians only get better, they will naturally reach out to share their faith with others. To many folks in the spiritual formation movement, evangelism is a superficial activity, and the effort to add to the church is suspect. The really important activity is to strengthen the meditative life of every saint in the church.

The call to renewing and nurturing existing believers into the fullness of Christ is a worthy objective, but the Great Commission is only fulfilled when new believers are made out of the raw material of secular humanity. The truth is we need spiritual formation of old disciples *and* the making of numerous new disciples. It is not either or. It is both and.

The twenty-first century is not the time for introverted spiritual formation under the assumption that once the saints come to maturity they will reach out and make new disciples. Jesus sent the twelve out to witness for him *before* they were mature, and in the process they were spiritually formed. Spiritual formation of

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those who are currently saints is actually helped by streams of newly converted
disciples entering our churches. As McGavran noted, “Multitudes of new
Christians feeding on the Word, lifted by the fellowship of the Church, and
available to the Holy Spirit are the surest way to renewal” (*Church Growth Bulletin*,
1965: 94).

Fourth, McGavran challenges us to see the importance of the church.

It is popular today to hear church leaders say, “It’s not about the church, it’s
about the kingdom.” However, McGavran declares that it is, in fact, about the
church. Jesus, of course, spoke often of the kingdom, but he told his twelve
disciples that he would build his church (Matthew 16:18). Following his
resurrection, the apostles worked to build and strengthen the church (Acts 15:1;
16:5), and Paul declared in Ephesians that Jesus is “head over all things to the
church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all” (1:22–23). Later,
after talking of the mystery of Christ that Jews and Gentiles are fellow heirs
through the gospel, Paul affirms that this “manifold wisdom of God” is “made
known through the church” (3:10).

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The idea of a churchless ministry where believers may somehow exist in the
kingdom somewhere, but who knows where, is inadequate. The idea of the
congregation of God’s people runs deep in the Old Testament with the people of
Israel, as well as in the New Testament gathering of believers into local churches.
True believers in God are always incorporated into a community of faith. The
bottom line is *it is about the church*. McGavran challenges us to do away with
unclear thinking of a fuzzy kingdom and focus again on planting specific, local
churches into which new believers can be added through the corporate rite of
baptism.

Fifth, McGavran challenges us to obediently make disciples.

The question concerning man’s obedience and God’s sovereignty in Christian
mission keeps coming back again and again. In some theological circles there are
presently critics who like to make the point that God is sovereign and therefore
sufficient to accomplish evangelism *without* human agency. Of course, I readily
admit, God is sovereign and does not need us to accomplish his purposes on earth.
However, no honest Christian would deny either God’s sovereignty or our
responsibility.

McGavran challenges us to hold these two truths in equilibrium, granting both
the sovereign working of God, as well as the necessary obedience of his servant
people. As his obedient saints, God calls us fellow workers (*sunergoi*, I Corinthians
3:9). The concept is implied throughout the New Testament. In all cases the one
given the role of worker is required to be obedient. For example, in the parables of

McIntosh: The Twenty-first Century Relevance of Donald McGavran the pounds (Luke 19:11–28) and the talents (Matthew 25:1–30), a master gives gifts to servants who are considered responsible agents. At the end of each story, the master holds his servants (co-workers) responsible for how they used the gifts.

In a similar manner McGavran calls us to trust in our sovereign Lord, while asking us to act obediently to our responsibility. The sovereign Lord commissioned us to make disciples. To that many will say, “God willing.” I am convinced that God is willing. The question is are we?

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