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The Urban Legacy of Twentieth Century Missiology

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Jeff K. Walters

abstract

In this “urban century,” it is sometimes easy to forget that urban work is not new to global missions. The purpose of this article is to review the work of four key twentieth century missiologists—Donald A. McGavran, Francis DuBose, Harvie Conn, and Roger Greenway—and consider their impact on the evangelism and missions in urban contexts. The article concludes with a brief analysis of their missiology and its application to twenty-first century missions strategy.

We are living in what could easily be called “the urban century.” In 2008, for the first time in history, more people lived in cities than in rural areas.¹ Much of the urbanization that brought us to this point took place in the last century, at the turn of which less than fifteen percent of the global population lived in urban contexts.² Alongside twentieth century urbanization came significant growth in the evangelical missions enterprise. In 1900, six hundred agencies sent 62,000

¹ United Nations Population Division, “Fact Sheet 1: World Urban Population” [on-line]; accessed 16 March 2009; available at <http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/wup2007/2007wup.htm>; Internet.

² 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.

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 3, Iss. 1 [2021], Art. 2 missionaries to international fields. By 2000, that number had increased to four thousand organizations sending over 400,000 missionaries overseas in some capacity.³ Unfortunately, the growth of the church in cities did not keep pace with the general population growth. Over the last one hundred years, the percentage of believing Christians in cities has declined from 69% to 41%, while at the same time the urban non-Christian population increases by 121,000 per day.⁴

Urban work is not new on the global missions scene. Many have noted Paul's focus on cities, whether the strategy was intentional or not.⁵ The early growth of the church most certainly took place in cities, and urban centers became the base for missionary ventures into the countryside. Conn and Ortiz note that,

For its first three hundred years beyond the coming of Christ, the church saw cities as gifts of God, royal routes to the evangelization of the world. Now the picture is not so bright. In the Western world, the church moves to the outer edges of the city, fearful of what it perceives as emerging urban patterns. In the worlds of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, the cities expand as the population flows toward them, but with notable exceptions, the church feels overwhelmed and moves only slowly to face urban challenges.⁶

There are certainly exceptions. In 1880, British hymnodist Horatius Bonar published his support for missions in Paris, asking, *Does God Care for our Great Cities?*⁷ From its inception in 1845, my own denomination's Board of Domestic Missions immediately sent missionaries into New Orleans.⁸ Harvie Conn traced the historical ups and downs of evangelical engagement of North American cities in his excellent work, *The American City and the Evangelical Church*.⁹ Nevertheless, specific application of missiological principles to urban contexts is a relatively new endeavor.¹⁰

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. It should be noted that these statistics are based on the definition of *Christians* as "followers of Jesus Christ as Lord, of all kinds, all traditions and confessions, and all degrees of commitment," from David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Encyclopedia* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1:25.

⁵ See Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962); Roger S. Greenway, *Apostles to the City: Biblical Strategies for Urban Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978).

⁶ Harvie M. Conn and Manuel Ortiz, *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, and the People of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 79.

⁷ Horatius Bonar, *Does God Care for our Great Cities? The Question and Answer from the Book of Jonah* (London: James Nisbet and Co., 1880).

⁸ Arthur B. Rutledge, *Mission to America: A Century and a Quarter of Southern Baptist Home Missions* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969), 26. For more on Southern Baptist engagement of the city, see my paper, "Embracing the City: A Brief Survey of Southern Baptists and North American Urban Missions," available at <http://northamericanmissions.org/?q=node/491>.

⁹ Harvie M. Conn, *The American City and the Evangelical Church: A Historical Overview* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

¹⁰ Harvie Conn, "The City: The New Frontier" *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (October 1984), 396.

Walters: The Urban Legacy of Twentieth Century Missiology missiologists and urban missions

The purpose of this paper is to consider the contributions of twentieth century missiology to urban missions today. I will consider four significant academic missiologists who directly addressed and influenced urban missions. Naturally, many more than four scholars and practitioners have dealt with the problems and opportunities of city ministry. Time and space restraints will force us to consider only the most influential while recognizing the growing literature in this field.¹¹ Finally, we will briefly analyze both the key points of twentieth century missiology as reflected in the writings of these four missiologists and their application to urban missions today.

donald a. mcgavran

Perhaps no other name is more easily recognized in twentieth century missiology than Donald A. McGavran. At his death in 1990 at age 93, missionaries and scholars recognized McGavran as one of the most influential missiologists of the twentieth century, perhaps even in modern missions history. Kenneth Mulholland argued that “probably no one person has influenced evangelical missions in [the twentieth] century as much as McGavran.”¹² He was a third generation missionary, born on the field in India.¹³ He eventually served as a teacher, professor, academic dean, and was the “father of the Church Growth Movement,” but throughout his life, McGavran was first and foremost a missionary.¹⁴

During his field career, McGavran worked mainly in rural areas. The only exception was during his tenure as mission administrator in Jubbulpore between 1932 and 1937. At that time, Jubbulpore was a city of approximately one million people, and McGavran worked to start a church among the lower castes. This experience proved formative for some of McGavran’s ideas on urban church planting and social ministry.¹⁵ During that period, he studied the mission stations under his direction and found that only 11 of 147 were growing in any way. McGavran began to ask why churches in similar circumstances with faithful missionaries would grow or not.

Historians date the beginning of the Church Growth Movement—so called because McGavran believed that the term *evangelism* had lost its meaning—to the

¹¹ For a bibliography, please contact me at jwalters@sbtn.edu or visit <http://www.urbanministrytraining.org>.

¹² Kenneth Mulholland, “Donald McGavran’s Legacy to Evangelical Missions,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (Jan 1991) [on-line]; available at https://bgc.gospelcom.net/emqonline/emq_article_read_pv.php?ArticleID=2950; Internet.

¹³ Basic biographical information on McGavran is taken from Donald McGavran, “My Pilgrimage in Mission,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 20, no. 2 (April 1986), 53.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

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

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 3, Iss. 1 [2021], Art. 2 publication of McGavran's *The Bridges of God* in 1955.¹⁶ In that book, he first described his understanding of people movements, the principle of receptivity, and the Homogeneous Unit Principle—all part of his missiology that had great influence on global urban missions. He believed that numerical growth was important, as it provided a way to monitor evangelism and provide accountability for missionaries and agencies. If, as he argued, believers must become fruit-bearing disciples and members of the local church, then missionaries could count new believers and determine the effectiveness of their work.

A second phase of McGavran's influence began after he retired from service in India in 1957. After several years of serving as a missions consultant, he took on a teaching role when he founded the Institute of Church Growth at Northwest Christian College in Eugene, Oregon, in 1961. The Institute was designed to provide opportunities for missionary practitioners to learn about church growth methodologies from McGavran himself. Students engaged in intensive research projects on the growth of churches within their own ministry contexts. For some, this meant urban research.¹⁷ The fruit of their projects not only began the application of church growth thought to urban contexts but also provided McGavran with a basis for his later teaching on urban missions.

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

McGavran was also actively involved in the development of an evangelical understanding of missions and evangelism during the evangelical/conciliar debates of the 1960s. 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.¹⁸ McGavran argued that Christian presence without the proclamation of the gospel is incomplete, although

¹⁶ 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).

¹⁷ 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).

¹⁸ See Donald A. McGavran, “The Right and Wrong of the ‘Presence’ Idea of Mission,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (Jan 1970).

Walters; *The Urban Legacy of Twentieth Century Missiology* he recognized certain instances (such as areas of intense persecution) where “presence” evangelism might be necessary. Proclamation of the gospel is a necessary component of evangelism. Other activities such as worship, feeding the hungry, and caring for those in need are necessary in Christian ministry, but they are not missions or evangelism.¹⁹

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

1. Emphasize house churches
2. Develop unpaid lay leaders
3. Recognize resistant homogeneous units
4. Focus on the responsive
5. Multiply tribe, caste, and language churches
6. Surmount the property barrier
7. Communicate intense belief in Christ
8. Provide the theological base for an egalitarian society.²⁰

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McGavran himself noted that, “Research in urban church growth is a department of missions which demands immediate development by all who take the Great Commission seriously.”²¹ McGavran’s emphasis on urban research is the first of three broad categories found in his thought on urban missions. He believed that the key to church growth is found in accurate research on the reasons for church growth or decline, and he encouraged studies of urban churches.

A second broad category of McGavran’s urban missiology is related to evangelism in urban contexts. He understood that homogenous units look different in cities than they do in rural areas.²² He contended that accurate segmentation of city populations would aid the effective proclamation of the gospel, even if he did not elaborate on how such segmentation might look.

McGavran also emphasized church planting as a vital facet of urban missions. He particularly advocated the use of the house church model, even to the point of starting a house church himself.²³ McGavran’s general principles on church planting methodologies, combined with his views on urban church health, illuminate his specific teaching on urban contexts.

¹⁹ Donald McGavran, *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1988), 103; Donald McGavran, “A Missionary Confession of Faith,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 7, no. 2 (November 1972), 138.

²⁰ Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, Rev. Ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 322–30.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 285.

²² *Ibid.*, 243–44; 326–28.

²³ *Ibid.*, 322; Donald A. McGavran, “House Churches: A Key Factor for Growth,” *Global Church Growth* XXIX, no. 1 (January/February/March 1992), 5–6.

contexts. While he argued that evangelism is primary in all missionary endeavors, McGavran contended that churches in urban contexts must be concerned with justice and social issues. From his own involvement in a fight for equality in Indian culture to his argument that urban missions must provide a theological basis for social ministry, McGavran made an important, if little known, contribution to the field.²⁴

After the publication of *Understanding Church Growth*, McGavran returned his focus to the international mission field and the discipleship of all the world's peoples. His teaching ministry expanded to conferences all over the world, many of which addressed urban missions. Donald McGavran died in 1990, but he left behind an extensive body of published works on missions and evangelism as well as a wealth of personal correspondence rich with insight into effective evangelism in urban contexts.

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roger greenway

McGavran influenced many in the next generation of urban missiologists, one of whom was Roger S. Greenway. Greenway began his missionary career in 1959, as a Presbyterian pastor in Colombo, Sri Lanka.²⁵ It was a time of great upheaval in the newly independent nation, and the young pastor learned much about working in difficult environments. Greenway was heavily involved in street and open-air evangelism in an effort to grow his church. Thousands of migrants were moving into the city from the surrounding countryside, and Greenway's evangelistic work saw considerable fruit.

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

Greenway's perspective changed radically with a visit from Donald McGavran in the mid-1960s.²⁶ McGavran asked Greenway to take him to the outskirts of

²⁴ Donald A. McGavran, ed., *Eye of the Storm: The Great Debate in Mission* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972); Donald A. McGavran, "Missiology Faces the Lion," *Missiology* XVII, no. 3 (July 1989), 335-41; Donald A. McGavran, ed., *Crucial Issues in Missions Tomorrow* (Chicago: Moody Press).

²⁵ Unless otherwise noted, biographical information on Roger Greenway is taken from Roger S. Greenway, "My Pilgrimage in Urban Mission" *Urban Mission* (March 1999), 6-17.

²⁶ Roger S. Greenway, email to the author, 8 December 2009.

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Mexico City where thousands of families lived in squatter settlements. Greenway recounted,

In a dirty street swarming with flies and kids, McGavran turned to me and said, “Roger, it’s great what you are doing in the mountains. But in the future, the frontier of missions will lie in the city. I challenge you to direct your efforts here.”²⁷

Greenway noted that he had experienced the practical aspects of urban mission in Colombo without recognizing the broader implications of that work. McGavran pointed him toward urban missiology. “More than any other man,” Greenway wrote many years later, “McGavran was my mentor.”²⁸

Greenway launched into a new appointment as director of evangelism for Mexico City. McGavran pointed him toward Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, where Greenway earned a doctorate in missions. His dissertation was later published as *An Urban Strategy for Latin America*.²⁹ In that work, Greenway outlined several principles for urban missions, especially in the Latin American context. His principles were fleshed out in the Urban Institute in Mexico City.

First, effective urban missions requires *training*. Greenway believed firmly that evangelists must have a solid understanding of the Scriptures, of Christian doctrine, and of evangelistic methods. Cities offer unique opportunities to provide such training, including local churches and denominational groups.³⁰ Closely tied to training is *motivation*. Not only are there many distractions in urban contexts, the work itself presents challenges that require strong motivation for missions and ministry. Greenway advocated a constant emphasis on urban church growth and evangelism.³¹ Also important are *goals*. Greenway taught students and practitioners the importance of research and mapping as ways to set goals for urban evangelism.³²

A set of related principles revolves around evangelism. Greenway advocated *house-to-house visitation*. “Once an area of the city had been selected,” he wrote, “the strategy of the institute was to visit every house, selling Bibles, distributing tracts, and making personal contacts.”³³ Greenway’s visitation program placed a heavy emphasis on *verbal witness*. As urban missionaries build relationships, they must share a clear and simple explanation of the gospel. An additional principle that urban missions must be *family-centered* means that evangelists must share the

²⁷ Greenway, “My Pilgrimage,” 12.

²⁸ Greenway, email to author.

²⁹ Roger S. Greenway, *An Urban Strategy for Latin America* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973).

³⁰ Greenway, *Urban Strategy*, 214. Greenway also outlined his strategic principles in “My Pilgrimage,” 12–14.

³¹ Greenway, *Urban Strategy*, 214–15.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 215.

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gospel with the entire family, including children and extended relations in the home. The natural result would be a network of house churches in a neighborhood, Greenway's final principle. Greenway honed his principles of urban missions in Mexico City, then as Latin America Secretary for his mission. He traveled extensively in that role and saw both the barriers to urban missions and the fruit of effective urban evangelism.

In 1974, Greenway was invited to address the International Congress on World Evangelization meeting at Lausanne, speaking on urban evangelism, especially among the urban poor.³⁴ In his message, Greenway revealed not only his practical understanding of urban missions but also his sound biblical theology of poverty, missions, and church planting. He focused especially on church planting, outlining several types of urban churches and church planting methods. Greenway recognized cultural issues related to church buildings but suggested that house churches might be the best methodology—if they were associated together with other churches in networks. “The house-church,” he argued, “will probably be the organizational form in which Christianity grows the fastest during the remainder of the century, and therefore church leaders should do everything possible to fit it properly into their ecclesiastical structures.”³⁵

In 1976, Greenway published a small book titled, *Guidelines for Urban Church Planting*.³⁶ 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. Touching on the biblical and theological foundations for urban missions, Greenway also gave the 1976 Baker Lectures at Reformed Bible College, which were later published as *Apostles to the City: Biblical Strategies for Urban Missions*.³⁷

Greenway served as an inner-city pastor in Grand Rapids, Michigan, from 1978–1982. He witnessed firsthand the difficulties of ministry in a transitional neighborhood. Writing of that experience, Greenway noted, “There is no doubt in my mind that this is one of the most difficult frontiers of the whole mission world.”³⁸ Racial and economic tension took its toll on the congregation. Interestingly, Greenway also remembered that he “learned that McGavran's axiom

³⁴ International Congress on World Evangelization, *Let the Earth Hear His Voice* (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), 909.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 918.

³⁶ Roger S. Greenway, ed., *Guidelines for Urban Church Planting* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976).

³⁷ Roger S. Greenway, *Apostles to the City: Biblical Strategies for Urban Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978).

³⁸ Greenway, “My Pilgrimage,” 15.

Walters: The Urban Legacy of Twentieth Century Missiology about homogeneity in congregational development holds true whether we approve of it in principle or not.”³⁹

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

The rural, pith helmet mentality can no longer dominate missions. The realities of an urban world must be addressed. Where once most missionaries were needed in the bush, they now are needed in growing numbers in the cities. Pastors once prepared to minister in villages and small towns, but now they must be ready for urban pastorates and urban mission.⁴⁰

Donald McGavran contributed the first article to the new journal, writing on the application of his Homogeneous Unit Principle to the “new urban faces of the church.”⁴¹

In addition to his work on *Urban Mission* and teaching responsibilities at Westminster, Greenway continued to publish on issues of urban missions. With Timothy Monsma, who also contributed to *Guidelines for Urban Church Planting*, Greenway wrote *Cities: Missions’ New Frontier*.⁴² He contributed several chapters to the book, including work related to both theological and practical foundations for city work. He continued to emphasize ministry among the poor and added a strong section on migrations and minority peoples in urban contexts. Throughout his career, Greenway has carried the banner of urban church growth missiology while adding a distinct theological and biblical base often absent in McGavran’s writing.

francis m. dubose

Less known than McGavran or Greenway was Francis M. DuBose. DuBose was born in rural Alabama, but grew up in Houston, Texas.⁴³ His first pastorates were in small Texas churches, but he often reflected on the poverty he saw in Depression-era Houston and on the problems of immigrants in the Dallas-Fort Worth area where he attended Southwestern Seminary. After completing his Th.D.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Roger Greenway, “Mission to an Urban World” *Urban Mission* I (September 1983), 1.

⁴¹ Donald McGavran, “New Urban Faces of the Church” *Urban Mission* I (September 1983), 3–11.

⁴² Roger S. Greenway and Timothy M. Monsma, *Cities: Missions’ New Frontier 2nd* ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000). The first edition of this work was published in 1989.

⁴³ Unless otherwise noted, biographical material on DuBose is taken from Francis M. DuBose, “My Pilgrimage in Urban Mission” *Urban Mission* (June 1999), 6–16.

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in missions, DuBose accepted a position as Director of City Missions for the
Detroit Baptist Association. “One of the first things I had to do,” he recalled in
1999, “was to try to translate the missiology I had received at Southwestern
Seminary and make it applicable to an American Yankee city.”⁴⁴ He focused his
time equally between encouraging city churches, street evangelism and ministry,
and further study of urban missiology.

DuBose read extensively on urban sociology, anthropology, and on urban
problems. In the mid-1960s, he was involved in community organizing through
several organizations in Detroit in addition to his church planting work. Then, in
1966, DuBose was called to teach at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in
San Francisco, where he spent the remainder of his career.

The majority of DuBose’s writing was in the field of general missiology. In
1979, he edited an anthology of writings titled, *Classics of Christian Missions*,
followed by a missiology text, *God Who Sends: A Fresh Quest for Biblical*
16 *Mission*.⁴⁵ DuBose’s most significant contribution to urban missions was his 1978
book, *How Churches Grow in an Urban World*.⁴⁶ His main concern was the proper
application of church growth missiology in urban contexts, the theme on which he
had written an earlier pamphlet titled, “Megalopolis: City and Anti-City—
Implications for the Mission of the Church.” DuBose emphasized the
missiological importance of cities and the transition from a “rural-urban
dichotomy” to an “urban-suburban” world.⁴⁷

In *How Churches Grow in an Urban World*, DuBose listed twenty principles of
healthy urban church growth. The first three principles—the *spiritual base*,
theological principle, and the *Holy Spirit Principle* are essentially theological.
DuBose argued that the all healthy church growth, urban or rural, must be
scripturally and theologically sound and must be viewed as the work of the
Spirit.⁴⁸ Second to the theological/spiritual base, DuBose believed that healthy
church growth is people-centered. He argued that leadership is vital and that
“God’s method is a man, that is, God works through people.”⁴⁹ God’s work in
cities takes place through evangelism and church planting, which is the work of
God-called men and women.

⁴⁴ DuBose, “My Pilgrimage,” 9.

⁴⁵ Francis M. DuBose, *Classics of Christian Missions* (Nashville: Broadman, 1979); Francis M. DuBose, *God Who Sends: A Fresh Quest for Biblical Mission* (Nashville: Broadman, 1983).

⁴⁶ Francis M. DuBose, *How Churches Grow in an Urban World: History, Theology, and Strategy of Growth in All Kinds of City Churches* (Nashville: Broadman, 1978).

⁴⁷ Francis M. DuBose, “Megalopolis: City and Anti-city—Implications for the Mission of the Church” (Mill Valley, CA: Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, 1968).

⁴⁸ DuBose, *How Churches Grow*, 169.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

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Four of DuBose's principles focused on the issue of *balance*. He argued that any healthy growth of churches in urban contexts depends on appropriate balance between "organic and influential, quantitative and qualitative, enlargement and multiplication."⁵⁰ To lean too heavily on any one of these areas hinders the spread of the gospel in cities. In addition, DuBose called for *Impact-Penetration Balance*. By this, he meant that evangelism in urban contexts requires both mass evangelism (impact) and small groups (penetration). The third principle of balance is the *Presence-Proclamation Balance*. "Evangelism borne on the wings of ministry," he wrote, "is the first step of church growth."⁵¹ Finally, DuBose presented the *Rhythm Principle*, referring to an "inward-outward balance" of worship and ministry.

Next, DuBose dealt with issues directly related to the peoples of the city. With the *Heterogeneous Principle*, DuBose recognized that the heterogeneity present in every city must influence urban missions strategies. Urban populations are diverse, and churches should reflect that diversity. At the same time, the author offered the *Homogeneity Principle*. DuBose clearly rejected McGavran's Homogeneous Unit Principle as unhealthy and unbiblical, saying, "The New Testament and the homogeneous unit strategy seem in clear opposition both in attitude and practice."⁵² While he argued that the HUP should not be prescriptive in any way, DuBose did recognize that homogeneous units exist in cities, especially in the small "penetration" groups. DuBose saw no conflict between his advocacy of heterogeneous churches and his *Indigenous Principle*, in which he contended for churches that "grow as nearly as possible in a way which is natural, normative, and nonalien to their general and local urban context."⁵³

DuBose proposed that effective urban missions be both *flexible* and *simple*. Rapid change and complexity inherent to urban contexts requires that missionaries and ministers maintain the ability to move quickly. Simplicity often shows in church planting through house churches, a methodology DuBose addressed in *Home Cell Groups and House Churches*, written with C. Kirk Hadaway and Stuart Wright.⁵⁴ A related concept is *responsiveness*, which DuBose referred to as seeking "God's open door."⁵⁵ To balance his principle of responsiveness, DuBose applied the *Principle of Timing*, teaching that all things work not on man's timetable but on God's.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 170.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 129.

⁵³ Ibid., 170.

⁵⁴ C. Kirk Hadaway, Francis M. DuBose, and Stuart A. Wright, *Home Cell Groups and House Churches* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987).

⁵⁵ DuBose, *How Churches Grow*, 171.

Like many urban missiologists, DuBose relied heavily on research and the social sciences (his *Scientific Principle*). While such tools should always remain secondary to theology and Scripture, research can support strategy development and church planting by giving missionaries a clear view of their context.⁵⁶

DuBose's final two principles dealt with relationships. For the larger stage, DuBose offered the *Cooperative Principle*. He argued that missionaries, churches, and Christian denominations must work together for the good of the city. "Unselfish desire for kingdom growth," he wrote, "is the fundamental attitude which makes it all work."⁵⁷ Finally, DuBose presented the *Love Principle*. "Whether it is the larger heterogeneous setting of urban anonymity," he closed, "or the smaller homogeneous setting of primary groups, *agape* love will win its way to hearts and homes."

Francis DuBose was more cautious about urban church growth missiology than was Roger Greenway, but he advocated strongly for evangelism and church planting. He differed with McGavran and Greenway on some issues, but his principles of urban missions reflect much of the thinking of his contemporaries.

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harvie conn

A final missiologist who made a significant contribution to urban missions was Harvie Conn, longtime professor at Westminster Seminary. Conn was born in Canada but began his ministry as a church planter in New Jersey. He received degrees from Westminster seminary, and then worked for a decade in Seoul, Korea, as both a professor and urban evangelist. Ministry to the marginalized, including the homeless and prostitutes, marked his time in Korea. Conn taught missions and apologetics at Westminster beginning in 1972, leading out in the school's urban academic programs. He followed Roger Greenway as editor of *Urban Mission*, serving in that role from 1989–1999.⁵⁸

Conn taught and published extensively on urban missions, covering topics ranging from theological and biblical foundations to history to practical applications. While he did not leave a list of "keys" or "principles" of urban missions, his writings cover a series of themes that serve as an overview of Conn's urban missiology. His concern that urban missionaries have a solid biblical and historical foundation is evident, as is his desire that missionaries understand their context through study and research. Perhaps above all, Conn's emphasis on a holistic view of evangelism and social transformation shines throughout his work.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Biographical information on Harvie Conn is taken from an obituary prepared by Larry Sibley, Director of Public Relations at Westminster. It is available at <http://www.missiology.org/EMS/bulletins/conn.htm>.

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In 1982, Conn entered the conversation about evangelism and social ministry.

Throughout much of the twentieth century, theologians and missiologists argued about the proper relationship between proclaiming the gospel and meeting human needs. While not specifically related to urban missions, Conn's *Evangelism: Doing Justice and Preaching Grace* clearly reflected his own background in Korea and his further study of missions theology. He argued that evangelism and social ministry are "two sides of the same coin" and cannot be separated, even if they are not identical activities of the Christian church.⁵⁹ He expressed his frustration with what he referred to as "apartheid" between evangelism and social ministry, saying,

Who is more naïve? The liberal leaders of what we now call "the social gospel" with their passionate concern for a broken world and their never-ending optimism of how we may rectify it? Or the evangelical who has given up on the world's headaches in favor of a stripped-down form of evangelism reduced to four spiritual laws? Or the evangelical social activist who does not see intercessory prayer as the first and constant component of our "social evangelism?"⁶⁰

19

Conn viewed proclamation, presence, and prayer as part of a unified whole in the lives of believers and churches.

A second area of emphasis in Conn's writings is on dispelling various myths regarding cities and urban missions. In *A Clarified Vision for Urban Mission*, he outlined seven myths, generalizations, and misunderstandings that block evangelical churches from engaging urban contexts.⁶¹ He argued that many of the barriers, such as *depersonalization*, *secularization*, and *privatization* stem from fear and stereotyping rather than reality. Where they are real, the myths provide opportunities for urban missionaries to reach into the lives of urban peoples. In one particularly interesting chapter, Conn challenged the notion that cities are only made up of the poor or of particular races. He argued that missiologists must move beyond race and ethnicity when studying urban people groups.

Conn also promoted the use of research in urban missiology and its impact on strategy development. Writing in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* in 1986, Conn noted that, "our students need to know 'how to read cities.'"⁶² Unfortunately, he wrote elsewhere, "Until very recently church growth research has been rural in its focus of attention."⁶³ To that end, he developed a reader of practical tools for his

⁵⁹ Harvie Conn, *Evangelism: Doing Justice and Preaching Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 9.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁶¹ Harvie Conn, *A Clarified Vision for Urban Mission: Dispelling the Urban Stereotypes* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).

⁶² Harvie Conn, "Missions and Our Present Moment in History" *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (April 1986), 183.

⁶³ Harvie Conn, "The City: The New Frontier" *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (October 1984), 396.

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 3, Iss. 1 [2021], Art. 2 students, his *Urban Church Research: Methods and Models*.⁶⁴ The book contained dozens of articles, bibliographies, and research instruments designed to help urban ministry practitioners understand their city. Much later, Conn included a section on urban research in *Planting and Growing Urban Churches*, comprised of three articles and a valuable resource list. Conn emphasized the need for research that is usable not only by academics, but also by practitioners.⁶⁵

The structure and contents of *Planting and Growing Urban Churches* reveal much about Conn's viewpoints on urban missions. Beginning with the section on research, Conn moves to chapters teaching the application of research to urban strategy and the application of urban strategy to church planting and development. Conn believed that research is not the end of urban missions, but it is rather the beginning as it supports contextualized church planting and leadership.

20 Perhaps the *magnum opus* of Conn's writing is *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, and the People of God*, completed and published by his Westminster colleague, Manuel Ortiz, after Conn's death.⁶⁶ Likely the best current text on urban missions, *Urban Ministry*, summarizes Conn's passion for the subject and his desire that urban missionaries be equipped for their task. The first of the book's three major divisions provides background with a survey of urban history, biblical and theological approaches to the city, and an attempt to define "urban" and "city." The following sections provide tools for ministry in the urban context, focusing especially on leadership development as a key to such ministry. Together, the three sections provide what Conn and Ortiz describe as a "full-orbed understanding of urban ministry" and address the heart of the authors' argument that "across the globe, urban realities require that Christianity develop an agenda that addresses more than church planting or evangelism."⁶⁷ The historical development of the city as a center of influence and power, the biblical view of the city as a reflection of the kingdom, and the modern reality of the city as home to the peoples of the earth combine to make urban ministry a vital calling for the church.

Conn and Ortiz spent considerable time describing and explaining the importance and use of urban research, contending that like a cross-cultural missionary, the urban minister must enter a new culture as a learner, bond with that culture, and learn to contextualize his or her ministry within that new culture.

⁶⁴ Harvie Conn, comp., *Urban Church Research: Methods and Models, Collected Readings* (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1985).

⁶⁵ Harvie Conn, ed., *Planting and Growing Urban Churches: From Dream to Reality* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).

⁶⁶ Harvie M. Conn and Manuel Ortiz, *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, and the People of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 13, 21.

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They concluded with an in-depth description of the necessity of leadership development in the city, a section they considered the most important part of the book. Urban ministry must involve raising up leaders from within the city. The authors provided a detailed rationale for such ministry as well as suggestions for a leadership development curriculum. Again, Conn and Ortiz emphasized the cross-cultural nature of urban ministry by urging ministers to train indigenous leaders who know the field and can contextualize ministry to suit that field.

Finally, Conn and Ortiz returned repeatedly to the topic of Conn's earliest work on the relationship between evangelism and social ministry. "To seek [community] development without centering on Christ as our confession," the authors write, "is to be reductionist. On the other hand, to do evangelism while ignoring the concerns of the poor and the powerless is also reductionist."⁶⁸ All of the authors' arguments on the subject culminated in this point: the mission of God through the city is hampered by sin, both personal and systemic, and must be addressed through both evangelism and social ministries of justice and peace.

21

Harvie Conn's contributions to the field of urban missiology are wide ranging and rich. His emphasis on balance, holism, and evangelism are, in many ways, a synthesis of other writers represented in this paper. In all his work, Conn sought to push the church toward the cities of the world and equip the church to engage the peoples found in global urban contexts with the gospel.

missiological legacies for the twenty-first century

The legacies of twentieth century missiology, as reflected in the teaching of Donald McGavran, Roger Greenway, Francis DuBose, and Harvie Conn, equip the twenty-first century church for many aspects of urban missions. At the same time, unanswered questions remain. In conclusion, we will survey the key contributions as well as some remaining questions.

advocacy

Urbanization is a reality for twenty-first century missionaries. Whether one is working in the heart of a mega-city or in surrounding communities influenced by urban culture, missions strategists must consider cities. McGavran spoke correctly when he told Roger Greenway that the future of frontier missions was the city. Each of these four missiologists spoke passionately on behalf of global urban centers, pointing churches and leaders to the spiritual and physical needs there. In many ways, Conn's *American City and the Evangelical Church* served as an attempt

⁶⁸ Ibid., 348.

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to convince American churches of the needs and possibilities of urban evangelism.
As missionaries face greater and greater urbanization and larger and larger cities,
urban centers will continue to grow in strategic importance.

research

One of the key influences of church growth missiology is research and the use of social sciences. Thom Rainer defines *church growth* as “that discipline which seeks to understand, through biblical, sociological, historical, and behavioral study, why churches grow or decline.”⁶⁹ McGavran studied the growth of churches through careful research and advocated the use of social sciences to help missionaries learn culture and communicate the gospel. Conn and Ortiz affirmed that “using information from the social sciences helps us achieve kingdom goals—but more than that, the social sciences enhance the way our goals are initially set.”⁷⁰ All four missiologists referenced in this paper point to good research as foundational for urban missions. Understanding the city is the first step to reaching the city.

22

holistic mission

The twentieth century debates over the relationship between evangelism and social ministry have had a tremendous influence on urban missions. Both Conn and DuBose argued for a proper balance between the two. McGavran argued fiercely for the priority of evangelism but included in his key points of urban discipleship the importance of providing a foundation of a “just social order.” Greenway and Conn repeatedly called for churches to engage the poor.

A second facet of holistic mission is reflected in DuBose’s concept of “balance.” He argued for proper balance between mass evangelism and small group discipleship, between inward focused worship and outward focused ministry, and between proclamation and presence. One of the most important contributions of twentieth century missiology to urban missions has been the debate over these issues. In the twenty-first century, urban missionaries have recognized that city ministry is more a “both/and” than an “either/or.”

church planting and evangelism

At the same time, missiology in the last century grew in its emphasis on evangelism and church planting. McGavran argued for church planting as the most effective method of evangelism and discipling in cities. Greenway advocated churches in every urban neighborhood. Reflecting on the state of urban missions in 1999,

⁶⁹ Thom S. Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles* (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 38.

⁷⁰ Conn and Ortiz, *Urban Ministry*, 257.

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Conn wrote, “Evangelism and church planting don’t seem to get as much attention as economic justice, environmental issues, or the feminization of poverty. Urban mission connections form on international and citywide scales . . . but how many concentrate their planning on new strategies for new church planting and growth?”⁷¹

A concern for evangelism and church planting does not conflict with a desire for balance and holistic missions. All four of these missiologists advocated strongly for city transformation by the proclamation of the life-changing gospel.

simplicity

Closely related to church planting in the minds of these missiologists was DuBose’s principle of simplicity. He argued that the overwhelming complexity of city life demanded simplicity in methodology and practice. Often, this principle was reflected in a movement toward house churches in urban contexts. McGavran’s first principle was to “emphasize house churches.” He did not condemn the use of church buildings, but McGavran understood the difficulty of acquiring property and buildings in urban contexts—one of his principles also dealt with removing the property barrier to growth.

23

leadership development

Hundreds and thousands of churches require hundreds and thousands of leaders. Greenway’s first principle of urban missions was training—leaders require preparation and theological education appropriate to the context. McGavran suggested developing a corps of unpaid lay leaders, training them using methodologies fitting the locale. Conn and Ortiz provided the strongest argument for leadership development and recognized the differences between leadership in rural and urban contexts. Twenty-first century urban missionaries must develop methodologies to draw indigenous leaders from the churches themselves and prepare them for leadership.

the great unanswered question: peoples in the city

Ralph Winter, in his outline of three eras in missions history, described the key contribution of the twentieth century as an emphasis on unreached peoples.⁷² Unfortunately, people groups and their makeup in cities is the unanswered question of urban missions today. As DuBose so clearly pointed out, heterogeneity

⁷¹ Harvie Conn, “Urban Mission: Where Are We Now?” *Urban Mission* (June 1999), 4.

⁷² Ralph D. Winter, “Four Men, Three Eras,” in Ralph Winter, Stephen C. Hawthorne, Darrell R. Dorr, and Bruce A. Koch, *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2009), 253–61.

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 3, Iss. 1 [2021], Art. 2 and homogeneity are both present in urban contexts. McGavran and Greenway both advocate strongly that church planting strategies should take into account homogeneous units. McGavran acknowledged that such groups look different in a city. He often referred to “population segments” that went beyond ethnic and race identification. “The city is not a homogeneous whole,” he wrote, “but rather a mosaic made up of hundreds of segments of society.”⁷³ The urban challenge is determining who the segments are.

So, the questions remain: What is a people group in the city? How long are immigrant groups a “homogeneous unit” before they become, in mixture with the majority culture, something entirely new? What about the second and third generations? Fortunately, many scholars and practitioners are discussing these issues today, including in papers presented at this meeting. Twentieth century missiologists pointed us toward the importance of people groups. We must continue to apply biblical and practical thinking to the concept in urban centers.

24

Closely related to the question of people groups is the rapidly growing issue of migrations and diaspora missiology. We cannot study the question in depth here, but urban missions in this century must consider the peoples arriving in global urban centers every day. Greenway studied rural-to-urban migration in his dissertation, and Conn considered the issue, challenging the church to be aware of the plight of refugees.⁷⁴

Conclusion

In spite of some unanswered questions, the legacy of twentieth century missiology to twenty-first century urban missions is strong. Donald McGavran, Roger Greenway, Francis DuBose, and Harvie Conn learned through extensive study and experience many of the principles that we take for granted today. Their influence, however, goes far beyond the academy or points of strategy. They pulled back the curtain and exposed to the church the needs and opportunities of global cities. Practitioners like Ray Bakke and Timothy Keller are leaders of the next generation, but they drew strongly on these four men. As we consider how best to engage the great global urban centers with the gospel, we stand on large shoulders.

Perhaps we would do well to conclude with Harvie Conn’s desire for the future: Let urban mission direct its attention to “the desires of the poor” (Job 31:16–22)—and more. Let it also call the poor and rich to personal repentance and faith. Let urban mission “dress itself in righteousness like a garment” and let

⁷³ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 287.

⁷⁴ Harvie Conn, “Refugees, the City, and Missions” *Urban Mission* (December 1997), 3.

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“justice be its cloak and turban” (Job 29:14)—and more. Let it also proclaim the fulfillment of righteousness and justice in the atoning work of Christ. Let urban mission exhibit credibility in its lifestyle—and more. Let that credibility be displayed in the planting and growth of the messianic community we call the church.⁷⁵

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⁷⁵ Harvie Conn, “Urban Mission: Where Are We Now?” 4–5.