

## **The Roots of Donald A. McGavran's Evangelistic Insights**

**By**

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The modern emphasis on the growth of the Church is attributed primarily to the pioneering work of Donald A. McGavran. A third-generation missionary, McGavran's concern for evangelism was forged in the furnace of personal work among a poor caste of people in India during the first half of the 1900's. Between 1937 and 1954, McGavran developed new insights on how to win people to Christ and bring them into active church membership. At first he desired to call his new missiological ideas *evangelism*, but found the word highly misunderstood. So he coined the term *church growth* as a new way to refer to evangelism, hoping that he could invest his new terminology with fresh meaning. To McGavran, church growth, or evangelism, simply meant the process of winning people to Christ and incorporating them into a local church where they could grow in their newfound faith. Toward the end of his life he began using a new term—effective evangelism—to reference what he was advocating. In addition to this basic view of evangelism McGavran added an emphasis on keeping track of results, focusing on receptive people, and using pragmatic methods. Like other major schools of thought, McGavran did not develop his ideas on evangelism out of nothing. In reality his evangelistic insights were the result of many forces that converged in his life over a number of years.

What McGavran called church growth, or effective evangelism, has occurred throughout the Christian era, of course, and is not really new. Even McGavran's missiological insights had an early precursor in the thought of Gisbertus Voetius (1589-

1676). Voetius believed that the “first goal of mission is the conversion of the heathen; the second, the planting of churches; and the highest, the glory of God” (Voetius as quoted in Verkuyl 1978:21). These goals comprise a condensed version of McGavran's missiological theory, and it is certain that McGavran knew of Voetius since he is mentioned in *Understanding Church Growth* (1970). However, McGavran did not borrow directly from Voetius and his writings. There were other events in the life of McGavran that served as more immediate precursors of his evangelistic thought.

### ***Family Background***

The roots of Donald McGavran's perspective on evangelism grow out of two families' lines, one from Great Britain and the other from the United States of America. To trace the English heritage of Donald McGavran, one must begin with William Carey (1761-1834).

Widely thought of as the founder of the modern Protestant missionary movement, William Carey was born in the Northampton village of Paulerspury in England. While growing up in a nominal Church of England home, Carey adopted Christopher Columbus as his boyhood hero, listened to fascinating tales from his uncle, a sailor and world traveler, and avidly read *Captain Cook's Voyages*, all of which influenced his vision of the larger world. He made a profession of conversion to Christ in 1779 at age eighteen, and was baptized in 1783 having become a Baptist by persuasion.

An amateur mapmaker, Carey taught geography and began thinking of the world's populations without Christ. His concern for world evangelism became a consuming passion. Gradually he began to reflect upon the Great Commission found in Matthew 28:16-20, and came to the conclusion that Christ's command was binding on all generations, not just the early disciples and apostles. In 1792 Carey published his ideas

in a booklet, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen*. As a result of his persistence, a Baptist society for propagating the gospel among the heathen was founded on October 2, 1792. The organization became known as the Baptist Missionary Society.

The Baptist Missionary Society appointed John Thomas, a Baptist physician, and William Carey as its first missionaries. Carey accepted his appointment to India and began a famous missionary career where he developed the methods of preaching, Scripture translation, print media, and pioneered efforts to move mission churches toward indigenous status (McBeth 1987:183-187). His emphasis on the Great Commission as the primary motive for missions may have been his major contribution to Donald McGavran's missiological thought.

Donald McGavran's maternal grandparents, James and Agnes Anderson, sailed for India from London in July 1854 around the Cape of Good Hope, taking about six months for the journey. Baptist missionaries appointed by Carey's Baptist Missionary Society, they were destined for Bengal, the same region Carey had served in many years prior. While no personal relationship between the Andersons and William Carey has been discovered, they were likely caught up in the missionary spirit to take the gospel to the same land where Carey had served.

In 1847 a long-standing and successful missionary of the Baptist Missionary Society, William Robinson of Dhaka, wrote, "There is, dear Christian friends, something which causes great distress both to myself and, I believe, to every one in the mission: it is the fear, the almost certainty, that we are labouring in vain" (Robinson as quoted in Stanley 1992:140). Robinson's letter reflected a feeling among missionaries in India's northern regions that their lack of evangelistic success had created a waning of zeal for public support back in England. He felt that the "work in India was 'dying'—dying from lack of missionary recruits, inadequate funding and waning enthusiasm in the British

churches” (1992:140). Thus, it is likely that the Andersons responded to a much-needed call for missionaries to go to northern India sometime between 1847 and 1854.

During the years surrounding 1854, Great Britain was the predominant missionary power. Since the British missionary societies had a high status with the Indian government, they were, so to speak, the official missionary societies. England's rule was accepted without much resentment. Writing in 1954 about his grandparents' missionary venture a hundred years before, McGavran states,

It is difficult, if not impossible, for us to understand the world of 1854. It was not merely a day of sailing vessels, oxcarts, camel trains, hand looms, with jungle unlimited, tigers, panthers, wolves and hyenas on the outskirts of every village, town and city in all India. It was not only a day when there was no knowledge of modern medicine and malaria was supposed to be caused by bad air. It was also a day when men accepted as axiomatic that there were inferior and superior races, that not much could be done to improve the physical lot of mankind, and that war, pestilence and famine were unavoidable fellow-travelers on our journey through this vale of tears (1954:16).

The Andersons selected their field in India with minimal consultation. Denominations cooperated with each other very little, and missionary societies settled missionaries where they thought best. The Andersons found India to be strictly Hindu. McGavran remembers, “When my grandfather would visit a high-caste home, the place where he sat and walked would afterwards be washed with cowdung to render it pure again” (1954:16). The Caste system was accepted as God-given, and Caste rules were strict.

The James Andersons retired in 1890, but their missionary work continued for another hundred years through their children and grandchildren. A son, Herbert Anderson, was appointed as a missionary of the Baptist Missionary Society in 1884 and became secretary of the English Baptist Mission in India about 1900. Then, in 1914, he became the first half-time secretary of the National Missionary Council of India (Stanley 1992:155, 160). Another son worked in government service. Isabelle Jackson, a

daughter, served in Mungeli. Another daughter, Helen, became the wife of John G. McGavran and the mother of Donald A. McGavran.

The McGavran side of the family was Scotch-Irish. They had suffered persecution in Northern Ireland about 1781. Looking back at his family history, Donald McGavran recalled:

In Northern Ireland about one hundred and fifty years ago, a Protestant girl lost her father, who together with a group of fellow-Protestants in a secret prayer meeting was blown to pieces by opposing Roman Catholics. The rest of the family took ship to America. On the way all but one of them, the girl I have mentioned, died of smallpox. Arrived in America she married a fellow-Protestant Scotch-Irishman by the name of McGavran (1954:13).

With this kind of bloodline so committed to the Christian faith, it is little wonder that the McGavrans would be crusaders for the gospel, and highly committed to the Great Commission as their motive for evangelism.

### *Parents' Influence*

In America the McGavran family united through marriage with the Grafton family. The Graftons were farmers living in the area of Bethany, West Virginia. Although it is not known exactly when, the Graftons had joined faith with Alexander Campbell, and what is now called the Restoration, or the Stone/Campbell, Movement. Donald McGavran's great grandfather Grafton helped Alexander Campbell found Bethany College by donating "a considerable amount of money and a considerable amount of land that young men might have the blessings of Christian education" (McGavran 1959a).

Donald McGavran credited his early missionary training and experience to the friendship and guidance of his father. John Grafton McGavran was born in New Cumberland, West Virginia in 1867 and grew up in Ohio. He and his sister Mary sold their farm so they could attend Bethany College. Both proceeded to give their lives to

missionary service in India. He planned to take medical training to be a doctor following college; however, an urgent call to missionary service given by Archibald McLean directed his steps to India.

In 1891, John Grafton McGavran, twenty-four and single, sailed from the United States for India where he served for the next twenty years as an evangelistic missionary. He began by doing solitary mission work in one village and helping out in mission stations located in Harda, Bilaspur, and Hatta. Eventually, he opened a mission station in Damoh, where he worked until 1910. On a personal note, he married Helen Anderson in 1896. One account of their meeting mentions "she met John McGavran while spending a vacation with her parents in the mountains in India, later became his bride in Bombay, and went at once to the Damoh work (McGavran n.d.:22). In time they had four children, among whom Donald McGavran was the second.

The work in India was long and strenuous. John McGavran's first tasks were to look after day schools, Sunday schools, oversee evangelistic work, erect buildings, preach, teach, and care for mission business in Bilaspur. During a famine in 1898, he helped get the Damoh orphanage in working condition, which marked the beginning of a great institution for boys. He and another missionary, W. E. Rambo, were credited with saving a thousand children from starvation.

A furlough in 1910 brought the entire McGavran family to the United States. The family settled in Ann Arbor, Michigan while John earned an M.A. degree (1911) at the University of Michigan. As their furlough drew to a close, concern about the schooling needs of their children arose. Since they had no relatives in the United States with whom they could leave the children, and finding boarding school too expensive, John decided to leave his missionary career and become a pastor. He pastored a church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and eventually became a professor in the new College of Missions in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Both John and Helen taught at the College of Missions until 1922 when the call to India once again became strong. Since three of their children were nearly through college, they decided to return to the land to which they had dedicated their lives. After returning to India, John became manager of the Press, editor of the weekly Hindi newspaper, and a teacher in the Bible College. Later he was elected acting secretary of the mission following the untimely death of the mission secretary. Unfortunately, high blood pressure resulted in him being struck with paralysis. The first stroke was light, but eventually three others followed. After the final stroke, John decided to return to the United States in 1929 so he could receive care from his second son, Edward McGavran, a medical doctor.

Donald McGavran learned about evangelistic work from watching and participating with his father and mother. Reflecting on his father, McGavran wrote, "I find myself more inclined than I ever was before to revere my father. I recognize some of the best parts of me as but reflections of him" (1931:13). McGavran also noted the influence of family prayers. "The greatest single influence in my religious life has been the daily family prayers which were observed regularly in our family. Mother read from the Bible and Father prayed, not eloquent prayers, but earnest and meaningful conversation with a real God" (1931:14). The sacrifice, hard work, and commitment McGavran's parents modeled most likely played a large part in his own missionary practice between 1923 and 1954 in India. The qualities modeled by his parents are readily seen in McGavran's life as well. From the McGavran family point of view, missionaries had a job to do and they were responsible to God to do it well.

### ***Church Background***

The United States never had an established state church, but developed a sort of free market religious economy where all churches had to compete for adherents. This

competition for converts and members was readily visible on the expanding frontier of the United States. The frontier spawned a rugged individualist culture in which people mastered their physical environment, and in which love of freedom was a primary value. Survival in the frontier regions demanded a pragmatic, can do perspective. People practiced an independent log cabin form of hospitality that welcomed itinerant preachers who brought regional and national news, as well as the good news of the gospel. The camp meeting revival alleviated boredom and served as a social catalyst of frontier culture.

It was in this context that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) developed in the 1800s. The Christian Church movement sought to go back to the Bible to determine its identity and direction. Churches that joined this restoration movement renounced all denominational names, repudiated authoritarian creeds, and abandoned any former denominational loyalties. "They were not theologians, but they developed a homespun 'back to the Bible' theological system that has since marked off American from European theology" (Shaw 1966:15-16). As they sought for a pattern, or norm, for Christian practice, they turned primarily to the New Testament. "For them, the Bible became a 'question and answer' book on all matters of faith and order" (1966:77).

The pragmatic, frontier nature of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is seen in the following comment regarding a desire for church statistics in Indiana about 1846.

There was a constant demand for church statistics on the part of leaders in the central part of the state. Congregations, cooperations, and districts were urged to report membership figures, the names of church officers and ministers, and progress in missionary expansion. Hoosier Disciples needed to prove their status to themselves and others, though they probably did not realize it (Shaw 1966:102).

As the Christian Church movement progressed, its leaders sought every expedient means of doing missions and missionary work. It seems likely that much of the pragmatic

attitude toward the use of means in McGavran's evangelistic thought was rooted in his own denominational history.

### ***Student Volunteer Movement***

The ministry of John R. Mott and the Student Volunteer Movement influenced McGavran during his college years. The missionary awakening at Mount Hermon, Massachusetts in 1886, which was led by Dwight L. Moody, resulted in one hundred students dedicating themselves to missionary service and the founding of the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM). The SVM slogan—"the evangelization of the world in this generation"—became a watchword for missions during the first two decades of the twentieth century. As a senior at Butler University, McGavran attended the Student Volunteer Convention at Des Moines, Iowa during the Christmas break of 1919. Describing that event he recalled,

There it became clear to me that God was calling me to be a missionary, that he was commanding me to carry out the Great Commission. Doing just that has ever since been the ruling purpose of my life. True, I have from time to time swerved from that purpose but never for long. That decision lies at the root of the church-growth movement (1986:53).

The influence of the Student Volunteer Movement in its early years helped solidify McGavran's commitment to evangelism, the Great Commission, and to countable results.

### ***Educational Influences***

McGavran attended Butler University (B.A., 1920), Yale Divinity School (B.D., 1922), the College of Mission, Indianapolis (M.A., 1923), and, following two terms of missionary service in India, Columbia University (Ph.D., 1936).

Following his graduation from Butler University, McGavran made his way to Yale Divinity School, specifically to study under the church historian Kenneth Scott Latourette. Latourette's teaching helped McGavran see the growth of the church

throughout the nineteen hundred years of Christianity, and he began to believe that such growth was to be expected wherever churches ministered among receptive peoples.

Later, he studied for his Ph.D. degree at Columbia University's Teacher's College. Training in educational theory at Columbia was greatly influenced by John Dewey. "Dewey spent slightly over a quarter of a century on the regular faculty of Columbia University. He was appointed in 1904 and retired in 1930; the next decade he spent as an emeritus but active professor, drawing a full salary and continuing to teach graduate students" (Ryan 1995:156). While McGavran must have encountered Dewey's educational pragmatism during his studies at Columbia, McGavran never mentions or credits Dewey for any of his evangelistic insights.

### **Historical Development**

When McGavran went to India as a missionary in 1923, he worked primarily as an educator under appointment with the United Christian Missionary Society of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). In 1929 he became director of religious education for his mission before returning to the United States to work on his Ph.D. at Columbia University. After his return to India, he was elected field secretary in 1932 and placed in charge of administering the denomination's entire India mission. It was during the late 1920s and early 1930s that the stirrings of what would eventually become Church Growth evangelistic thought began to develop in McGavran's mind.

### ***J. Waskom Pickett***

The most direct influence that started McGavran thinking about church growth was J. Waskom Pickett, of whom McGavran was fond of saying: "I lit my candle at Pickett's fire" (G. Hunter 1992:159). Pickett served in India for forty-six years as pastor,

editor, publisher, secretary of Christian councils, and bishop in the Methodist Church.

Reflecting how John R. Mott influenced him to look for results, he writes,

Acting on advice given to me by the great missionary statesman, John R. Mott, I had determined to challenge every assumption that I could recognize as underlying the work of my Church in India, not to prove any of them wrong, but to find out, if I could, whether they seemed to be right or wrong as indicated by their results (1973:6).

In 1928 Pickett was asked by the National Christian Council of India, Burma, and Ceylon to make an extensive study of Christian mass movements in India. The study required the development of research instruments, tests, and study of ten representative areas. The results were published in *Christian Mass Movements in India* (1933).

As supervisor of eighty missionaries, five hospitals, several high schools and primary schools, evangelistic efforts, and a leprosy home, McGavran had become deeply concerned that after several decades of work his mission had only about thirty small churches, all of which were experiencing little growth. At the same time, he saw “people movements” in scattered areas of India where thousands of people in groups, rather than as individuals, were coming to Christ. He wondered why his denomination’s churches were growing at only one percent a year, while other churches were seeing much higher rates of conversions to Christ. McGavran read Pickett’s book, enthusiastically endorsed it, and recommended to his mission headquarters in Indianapolis, Indiana that they employ the services of Pickett to study why similar mass movements to Christ were not happening in their ministry area of mid-India. McGavran assisted Pickett in the study and became the chief architect of the study in Madhya Pradesh. The results of the study were published under the title *Christian Missions in Mid-India* (1936), which was later revised as *Church Growth and Group Conversion* (1956). From his collaboration with Pickett, McGavran was introduced to research as a way to analyze the health of churches and entire denominations.

Through this study, McGavran discovered that of the 145 areas where mission activity was taking place, 134 had grown only eleven percent between 1921 and 1931. The churches in those areas were not even conserving their own children in the faith. Yet, in the other eleven areas the church was growing by one hundred percent, one hundred fifty percent, and even two hundred percent a decade. A curiosity arose within his breast that was to occupy his life and ministry until his death. He wondered why some churches were growing, while others, often times just a few miles away, were not. He eventually identified four major questions that were to drive the Church Growth movement worldwide, and in the United States of America.

- What are the causes of church growth?
- What are the barriers to church growth?
- What are the factors that can make the Christian faith a movement among some populations?
- What principles of church growth are reproducible (G. Hunter 1992:158)?

In 1937 McGavran wrote a book called *Founders of the Indian Church* in which he turned the spotlight on humble Indians who began people movements. The ideas that later developed into his evangelistic thought are rather remarkably present in this publication. This was the creative period in McGavran's life, as he was applying Pickett's insights to Indian history, literature, and social structure. McGavran later called this "a most creative period" (1973).

### ***Evangelistic Field Work***

During this same time period, McGavran was quietly changing his view of mission and theology. In the formative years of his childhood, *mission* was held to be carrying out the Great Commission, winning the world for Christ, and saving lost

humanity. This perspective fit nicely with McGavran's missionary heritage, and was the view he held when he returned to the United States for his higher education. While attending Yale Divinity School, McGavran was introduced to the teachings of the influential Christian professor H. Richard Niebuhr. According to McGavran, Niebuhr "used to say that mission was everything the church does outside its four walls. It was philanthropy, education, medicine, famine relief, evangelism, and world friendship" (McGavran 1986:54). McGavran espoused this liberal view of mission and evangelism when he went to the mission field in 1923. As he became involved in education, social work, and evangelism in the real world of India, however, he gradually reverted to the classical view that mission was making disciples of Jesus Christ. Commenting on this change, he wrote,

As my convictions about mission and church growth were being molded in the 1930s and '40s they ran headlong into the thrust that mission is doing many good things in addition to evangelism. I could not accept this way of thinking about missions. These good deeds must, of course, be done, and Christians will do them. I myself was doing many of them. But they must never replace the essential task of mission, discipling the peoples of earth (1986:54).

As McGavran's theological views turned more conservative, and his studies of growing churches increased, he began to fervently encourage his mission and fellow workers to engage in direct evangelism. When his three-year term as mission secretary was up in 1936, he was not reelected. According to McGavran, in effect the mission said to him, "Since you are talking so much about evangelism and church growth, we are going to locate you in a district where you can practice what you preach" (1986:56). It was clearly a demotion as evangelists worked with the poorly educated and illiterate people. Believing that it was God's leading, however, McGavran accepted his new appointment and spent the next seventeen years trying to start a people movement to Christ among the Satnami caste. He felt his work was somewhat successful, but no people movement resulted. About one thousand people were won to Christ, fifteen small village churches

were planted, and the Gospels were translated into Chattisgarhee. The years did, however, see the formation of his evangelistic insights out of the hard realities of missionary service. He was no ivory tower theoretician!

### ***Founding a Movement***

With his work among the Satnamis coming to a close, McGavran took his vacation in 1951 in the hills north of Takhatpur to begin writing a manuscript titled "How Peoples Become Christian." In addition to his own ministry among the Satnamis, McGavran had done on-the-spot studies of growing churches and people movements in several provinces of India for several denominations, and he was eager to share his discoveries with others. He hunted for one hour in the morning and evening, spending the time in between working on his manuscript. The rough draft manuscript was completed in 1953, but McGavran thought it was too strictly India. The McGavran family came to the United States on furlough during the summer of 1954. His mission granted a request to route his travel home through Africa so he could study people movements on that continent. In seven nations he saw twenty missions and hundreds of churches. He rewrote sections of his book, and it was eventually published in 1955 under the title *The Bridges of God*. This book has been labeled the *Magna Carta* of the Church Growth movement, as it is the primary document from which the movement grew. It became the most read book on mission theory in 1956 and has played an influential role in missiological thinking ever since.

After arriving in the United States for his furlough, McGavran went directly to Yale University where he had been granted a research fellowship. He used the time to continue his research and begin writing a new book. Following the furlough, McGavran intended to return to India, but his mission board was intrigued by his church growth discoveries and sent him to various parts of the world to research the growth of churches

in other countries. The study added considerably to his understanding, and he published a second book *How Churches Grow* (1959b).

In 1958 McGavran decided to found an institute through which he could teach his newly developed evangelistic theories. On January 2, 1961, the Institute of Church Growth at Northwest Christian College opened with one lone student. Over the next four years, fifty-seven missionaries studied at the institute while on furlough. God was at work behind the scenes preparing McGavran for even larger influence around the world. Eventually he would move on to found the School of World Mission (1965) at Fuller Theological Seminary, a move that propelled the spread of his evangelistic ideas into all parts of the world. McGavran's continued travels and research eventually resulted in the publication of *Understanding Church Growth* (1970), which is considered to be his *magnum opus*.

### **Conclusion**

McGavran's view of evangelism is rooted in his family, church, education, and early religious experience. His emphasis on the Great Commission as the motive for evangelism is likely sourced in William Carey, and his family's long heritage with the Baptist Missionary Union. No doubt his commitment to fulfilling the Great Commission was strengthened by his experience with the Student Volunteer Movement while in college. McGavran's sense of personal responsibility to some extent is rooted in the example of his parent's missionary practice of hard work and sacrificial commitment.

Most interestingly, however, is the impact that McGavran's church heritage seems to have played in developing his pragmatic approach to evangelism. The American frontier of the 1800s, in which the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was birthed, created an attitude that one could accomplish almost anything. People either mastered their environment, or the environment mastered them. A spirit of common sense pragmatism was a tacit core value of the Christian Church that influenced the McGavran

family's entire approach to evangelism. It is probable that McGavran was also shaped by his exposure to the educational philosophy of John Dewey at Columbia University while working on his Ph.D. in the early 1930s. However, since McGavran's denomination reflected practical American values, I am inclined to give more credit to McGavran's religious heritage than to his exposure to Dewey's philosophy at Columbia for his pragmatic emphasis.

While there were numerous precursors, the heart of McGavran's view of evangelism was formed in the harsh realities of missionary practice. The encounter with Pickett introduced McGavran to the importance of conducting field research as a way to challenge assumptions and evaluate actual results of evangelistic practice. McGavran's focus on research became one of the primary missiological insights of his emerging evangelistic thought.

The seventeen years of evangelistic fieldwork with the Satnami caste molded McGavran's theory among real people facing life, death, famine, and drought. He saw first hand the "bridges of God" in action as he won nearly one thousand Satnamis to Christ and the Church. He experienced the changes in resistance and receptivity to the gospel brought about by political, social, and economic conditions. He wrestled with the liberal-conservative theologies of his day, and how they actually worked out on the mission field. Out of this crucible came his missiological insights on the primacy of evangelism, the resistance-receptivity of peoples, and pragmatic methods.

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