

The Legacy of Donald McGavran: A Forum

edited by IJFM Editorial Staff

In August of 2013, the Ralph D. Winter Research Center (RDWRC) hosted a forum on the legacy of Donald McGavran. During the second half of the 20th century, McGavran became a global spokesman for church growth. He was a third generation missionary to India, and returned there with his wife, Mary, for some three decades of service. His observations and study of people movements to Christ in India (and in other parts of the world) were sparked by the 1934 publication of J. Waskom Pickett's *Christian Mass Movements in India: A Study with Recommendations*. In 1955, this interest led to the publication of McGavran's seminal book, *The Bridges of God*, and moved him into global significance in the field of missiology.

Last summer's forum was instigated by the recent biography published by Vern Middleton, *Donald McGavran: His Life and Ministry—An Apostolic Vision for Reaching the Nations* (William Carey Library, 2011). The book covers McGavran's life until he became the founding Dean of the School of World Mission at Fuller Seminary in the 1960s. Greg H. Parsons, director of the RDWRC, led the lively roundtable discussion over the course of two days (a list of participants is provided on p. 62). The *IJFM* has now edited those discussions for the general mission public with the hope of making McGavran's legacy more accessible to a new generation of mission leaders. Plans are being made for a similar forum in 2015 on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of McGavran's passing in 1990.



Stewarding the Legacy

Parsons: This forum on Donald McGavran is a first for the Ralph D. Winter Research Center, and we've tried to pull together for 24 hours some of you who either knew him well, worked or studied with him or have just studied his life... Let me just say we feel that stewarding the legacy of McGavran is a high priority to us here. It's something God has put into our hands to do. The US Center for World Mission has McGavran archival materials and also

quite a bit of McGavran's library. Wheaton has a good portion as well, but we also have copies on microfilm of most of that. We've gone through and pre-sorted a lot of it and culled it down, but the entire process is in order to make this available for missiological research.

Richard: I was astonished when I got here—when I moved here to the US Center for World Mission in 2006—and started hearing rumors that there were archival materials on McGavran somewhere. Finally, I went over to the library and looked at the materials and made a bee-line out of there to Greg Parsons' office and said, "This is criminal, immoral; this stuff is sitting here and no one in the missiological community knows that it's here. This is absolutely unacceptable." He agreed with me and we've been campaigning since then to make these archives available.

Walters: I was pursuing a Ph.D. on McGavran's work and I scraped together some money and came out here and spent a week. They set me up, with a filing cabinet next to the table and a

copy machine. And I settled there for I don't know how many hours every day, just going through those files. My formal education was in history up until my seminary work and I was just amazed at the richness at this collection and found enough to write at least a mediocre dissertation!

The Essence of McGavran

Parsons: I thought a good place to start might be to try and determine the essence of Donald McGavran's legacy. Let me start with something that McGavran said: "Churches grow when they expect to grow." It's those who are thinking about growth, those that want to do it, who get into prayer and then are looking for whether they are growing or not. The expectation of growth seems to lead to McGavran's type of questioning: "Why is this? Why is that?" Those are the questions he used to ask students. Vern, as his friend and biographer, what do you think of when it comes to the essence of McGavran's legacy?"

Middleton: That "essence" would be very comprehensive. But, essentially it

has to do with the advancement of the gospel to the ends of the earth. And by that, McGavran would mean the development of the body of Christ in various places—not necessarily churches, but bodies of Christ. When I think of McGavran's influence, I think back to the Indian context of how tribal movements and caste movements were developed and nurtured. He was very cognizant of how the gospel moved and worked within social structures, and how we might utilize these social structures to bring about the growth of the body of Christ in great numbers among particular peoples. I think of the context in which he lived and ministered and the various movements to Christ in that region. In his immediate setting he didn't witness very much in terms of what he called a caste-ward movement; in his setting, the people came from assorted backgrounds to join the body of Christ. So he didn't see in his Satnami context any significant people movements like those he began studying elsewhere. The people movements were over in Orissa (Odisha); he went over and studied that and made

Forum Participants

Vern Middleton: Missionary to India; studied under McGavran; Professor Emeritus of Missiology and Church Growth at Northwest Baptist Seminary; long-time personal friend and biographer of McGavran.

Charles Kraft: Missionary to Nigeria; former Professor of Anthropology at Fuller; prolific author on mission communication and spiritual power; served on the faculty with McGavran.

Paul Pierson: Missionary to Brazil, former Professor of the History of Missions; former Dean of the Fuller School of World Mission.

Alan McMahan: Associate Professor of Intercultural Studies at Biola University; Donald McGavran Church Growth Award, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1998; specialist in global and American church growth; experience in SE Asia.

Brad Gill: Senior Editor, *IJFM*.

Steve Wilkes: Research Professor of Missions, Mid-America Baptist Seminary; PhD dissertation on church growth; American Church Growth leader.

Jeff Walters: Professor of Christian Missions at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; PhD dissertation on the application of McGavran's principles to urban ministry.

Bruce Graham: MA from Fuller SWM (1970s); personal assistant to McGavran (1980s); trainer of South Asians; Office of the General Director, Frontier Mission Fellowship.

Greg Parsons: Director, Ralph D. Winter Research Center; Chancellor, William Carey International University; PhD dissertation on the early life and core missiology of Ralph Winter.

H. L. Richard: Author, specialist and field researcher in Hindu studies who helped found the Rethinking Forum focused on ministry in high-caste Hindu contexts.

Jeff Minard: Director, William Carey Library, publisher of multiple works by the faculty of the School of World Mission.

excellent records and insights on the people of Orissa (Odisha) coming to Christ. He went up to Madya Pradesh to study an incredible thing, the very liberal United Church of Canada was having a people movement to Christ. It was a remarkable thing. He saw these caste-ward movements in southern India, and he went and studied them. There was something essential to McGavran in what he chose to study.

Graham: I'd say he always kept aiming at that goal. The goal of seeing the church grow among different peoples dominated his thinking. He kept emphasizing the same thing over and over and over again. And then, towards the end of his life, when he couldn't see very well, Dr. Winter asked me if I wouldn't spend maybe three months, or so, to go and sit with Dr. McGavran and just try to help him get down on paper what he might want to pass on to a younger generation. And his final book on his last seventeen years in India among the Satnami people was the result. I'd go to his office at Fuller—he was 85 or so—just with a tape recorder and he would dictate what he wanted to say. I'd leave and transcribe it and then return the next day and read and edit it with him. I picked up that book again just a couple of days ago, and now having lived in India for some years, I realize there's a lot of wisdom here that you wouldn't necessarily recognize without knowing the rural Indian context in which a lot of his thinking emerged. And his essence, his conviction about the goal, is captured in that early context.

Walters: I hesitate to speak when there are anthropologists in this room who might say it better, but it seems to me that one of the great aspects of McGavran's legacy is that people ought to be able to hear the gospel and respond to the gospel in their own cultural context, where they are comfortable—not having to cross big cultural barriers in order to hear the gospel. We in the American church

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had really not ever realized that. You know Andrew Walls brings that up with his *Indigenous Principle*. But I think that was one of McGavran's great contributions.

Parsons: Don't we discover the essence of McGavran in his early work *The Bridges of God*? The main idea, if I have it right, is "people like to come to Christ with other people who are similar to them."

Wilkes: What he said was that people tend to come to Christ...

Walters: I think he used the word "prefer" at later points, too.

Receptivity, the Harvest and Deployment

Wilkes: I believe McGavran's legacy was his profound emphasis on going after the harvest. I think it's his focus on the harvest which is his most strategic contribution. McGavran would say: send missionaries where there is a great harvest and hold the rest lightly.

Now, what's happening today, and I speak from the Southern Baptist world which I know the best, seems to be a reversal. We've flipped things and we're focused on unreached peoples, and we're beginning to ignore the harvest. McGavran might very well come along and say that's not right. This is not to say that we should not go after the unreached peoples, but it's to suggest that we keep the balance.

Walters: Is that really how McGavran understood the harvest, though?

Wilkes: He meant where people are coming to Christ. That is what harvest meant...

Walters: I think he was always talking about the edge of the harvest—and the mobility of resources.

Wilkes: No, his emphasis was on finding out who was receptive and putting the major portion of our resources there.

Gill: There is a quote of McGavran's, and Vern, your book picked up on this, where he states that in any population

there are receptive areas. So he didn't treat receptivity across broad basins as "no" or "yes" but in any population there are segments that are receptive... Would you say this was one of his convictions?

Middleton: Yes.

Kraft: Find out the reasons, and apply them to places that are not now receptive.

Wilkes: But that is not to say that he would encourage people to go to areas where they had tried to share the gospel and they saw no response in ten years. I don't think he would say "stay there."

Walters: He never said to leave... he said just don't put all your resources there.

Graham: I remember a kind of tension between the emphasis of Dr. Winter and Dr. McGavran on this. Dr. Winter was trying to stress where the gospel had not gone at all, and McGavran was stressing our going to where the harvest was promising, so there was a little bit of tension there.

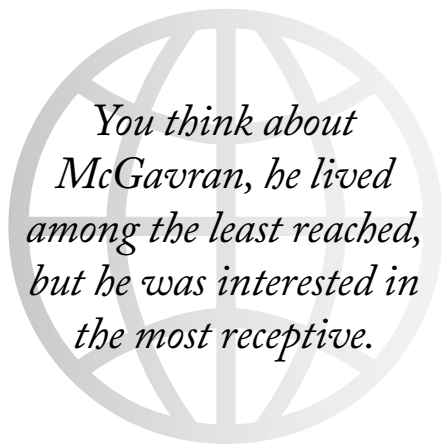
McMahan: It almost seems as if they are advocating different strategies. McGavran most receptive, Winter least reached. Right? But aren't these poles in a creative tension, where one offers a corrective to the other? I mean, when you think about McGavran, he lived among the least reached, but he was interested in the most receptive. So, you wouldn't want to abandon either one of these. I think Winter would say, among the least reached, focus on the most receptive. Right?

Walters: Even amidst these apparent tensions, I think McGavran's focus all those years on evangelism and church planting is a legacy that is part of what has become just common evangelical understanding in the late twentieth/early twenty-first century. Amidst the ebb and flow of the church's concern for justice and social concerns, when he was in India and then at Lausanne '74, McGavran was constantly pushing and reminding us all that we're to be making disciples, making disciples,

making disciples. I think it's a big piece of his legacy.

The Quality of the Man

Pierson: I'm always interested when I come across early indicators of these important figures in mission history. I don't know if you all knew this, but the character of the powerful Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions (SVMFM) was changing at the 1920 convention—the big one, post World War I. McGavran had gone there with Mary, but he was not planning on becoming a missionary. He was going to stay home and make some money. But he had a chat with Robert Wilder, the major motivator of the SVMFM. Do you know that story?



Yeah, he had a personal meeting with Robert Wilder and that conversation with Wilder made him decide that he was going to go to India. In those days, those were pivotal life decisions.

Wilkes: I think one usually remembers whenever they heard this man for the first time. He came to our Southern Baptist school when he must have been eighty-four years old. I was just a PhD student sitting among faculty members in a meeting with him. I just sat in a little corner and watched how he got up and in that same manner of his said, "You're too busy for me to do anything casual with you, so I have prepared a lecture." I remember the points to this day. I don't know if I

took notes, but I remember the points. I was already a McGavran man, you could say, and I was chomping at the bit with him there among us. He said, "America will never be won to Christ by the existing churches of America. Its seminaries are training people to pastor existing churches. The seminaries are not prepared to win America to Christ." I bought into it.

Kraft: Overall, we need to realize that in speaking of McGavran, we're talking about something that is truly miraculous. That God would get a hold of somebody from the most liberal of mission boards, and the most institutionalized mission approach that you could imagine, and make a McGavran out of him is something to behold.

Wilkes: Was he very, very liberal?

Middleton: Coming out of Yale, yes, he was.

Kraft: But he changed. He became more of a fundamentalist.

Middleton: I do cover this in my book in greater detail, but this change came while he was in India through the tragic death of his daughter Mary Theodora. For a few weeks he went into a definite depression as a result of this loss, and he blamed himself. It was as he came out of that depression that he started to respond more warmly to the Lord, and he talks of walking with the Lord in a number of his letters, how he regained his love of the Lord. From that point on, he never turned aside from the Lord.

Kraft: Another miraculous thing was when he was going through that transitional period between his work in India and when he arrived at Fuller. He was trying to teach church growth in very liberal schools in the States, and one witnesses his tenacity, that he didn't get discouraged and quit. He very well could have given up on everything, including the Gospel. But he had a single focus. It's possible to point out the kinks in this man's armor, but

this man was a marvelous miracle in the way he just hung in there.

Walters: Having only studied McGavran's writings and correspondence, having never met the man, I'm interested in how he talked about the scriptures. He was accused as a missiologist of being "a-theological," which is obviously not true; how did he talk about the Bible? In faculty meetings, in class, in his life and in his conversation, how did he use the Bible?

Kraft: In my experience he went to certain scriptures a lot, but he paraded one Greek phrase [*panta ta ethne* more than any other]. But he had become a literalist, so to speak, which was quite different from his upbringing. His theological stance was reactionary.

Walters: In terms of trying to know him better, Vern, you mention in your book that early on McGavran began memorizing large portions of scripture.

Middleton: Well, this was a discipline within the family. For instance, he could quote the entire gospel of John.

Walters: Really?

Middleton: Oh yes. This was a discipline of his. He could quote large portions of the word of God and store it as a reserve in his mind. He was a very sharp thinker.

Wilkes: Wow. He should have been a Baptist!

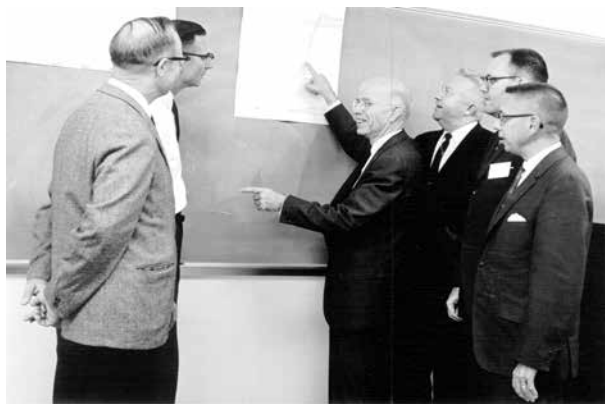
Graham: I think we need to place this particularly within the Indian context, a rural situation where oral communication and rote memory is the way people learned. McGavran would go in and teach them how to memorize Psalm 23, or how to memorize the Ten Commandments. He would memorize and carry certain verses with him, certain passages, using them over and over again. Vern, I think you shared with us one time that this came into his prayers and devotion.

They were not afraid to ask the inconvenient question, to stir the pot, or to color outside the box... a characteristic of any good missiologist.

Middleton: Yes, his prayers were almost like quoting Scripture. When he prayed, he prayed the word of God.

The Practitioner-Scholar

Kraft: McGavran fought against what I see as one of Satan's best tools, and that is the tendency towards "intellectualism." McGavran knew this was why he and his missiological faculty were not respected even among the theological faculty of his own school. We were looked down on as practitioners, as those who get the job done. There's a sort of understanding that you go to



seminary to get the important thing, which is correct theology. If a few people get saved on the way, that's good, too. McGavran was a personal force that pushed us beyond an intellectualism that says that the theoretical academic stuff is primary. McGavran was a practitioner/scholar who talked about harnessing the academic disciplines for the gospel. I know we harnessed the discipline of anthropology as best we could.

Pierson: I think another vital characteristic of McGavran's scholarship was asking inconvenient questions. Now, even though I succeeded McGavran and had occasions of interaction with him, I didn't know him as well as Ralph Winter, whom I knew from

Princeton in the early 1950s. Both these men displayed this characteristic: they were not afraid to ask the inconvenient question, to stir the pot, or to color outside the box, however we might say it. And I think that is a characteristic of any good missiologist. But that would be McGavran—he was not afraid of dispelling the fog, or however you want to put it, but asked the questions that nobody else wanted to ask.

Wilkes: McGavran and Winter were willing to make statements about certain mission groups or certain teams, which were not according to protocol. McGavran did it a lot. It's almost embarrassing to read at times. But underneath were difficult questions that needed to be asked.

McMahan: Wouldn't you say that one of his contributions was his pragmatism? I mean he got criticized for that, too, but he wanted to look at what worked and what was actually happening rather than spinning around in circles in academia.

Kraft: Fierce pragmatism.

Parsons: You had to be ready for these questions. I remember that McGavran was asked to teach over at a church in the valley, but he was old and needed a ride. The class asked for volunteers to drive McGavran, and as it turned out, a young man who was on his way to serve in the Cameroon raised his hand. So, from Pasadena back and forth to the class, McGavran was just peppering this young guy with questions: do you know about this part of the world, these people, and the work over there in Cameroon? I mean, McGavran absorbed that kind of information from anyone who was a student who was doing anything, anywhere.

Pierson: I was sitting with him on his porch chatting with him during those last few months. The last question I remember (we were talking about the growth of the church in Nepal) is that he wanted to know which groups were being reached and which ones were not being reached. Vintage McGavran. It was the last conversation I remember having with him.

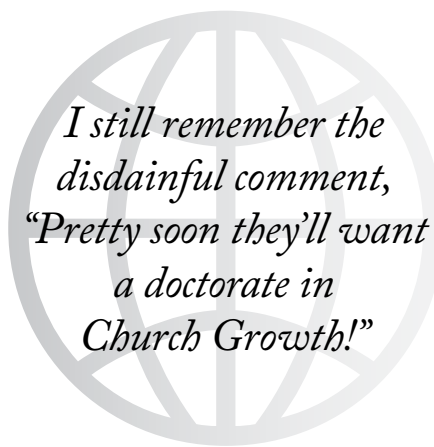
McMahan: I think that one of the things that comes out of McGavran's legacy is a preference for research analysis. Our discussion made me reflect on my earlier work at the Alliance Theological Seminary and the innovation—I don't know that they were the first, but they were certainly one of the first—that combined social science and theology into the seminary curriculum. It was a finishing school for missionary candidates and a little bit innovative in its day. Seminaries didn't typically hire anthropologists.

Kraft: I had been at the Hartford Seminary Foundation, at the Kennedy School of Missions, and then on the faculty at UCLA when I joined McGavran's faculty at Fuller. At Hartford, we came in as missionaries and went out as anthropologists and linguists. Now, McGavran established his School of World Mission to reverse that trend. When it was going well, if you came in as an anthropologist, you went out as a missiologist. Now it's reversed again, and it's gone the other way. Now we develop specialties, like Islamics, Children at Risk, and so forth, which are various sub-specialties with no real integrating core. (I have suggested that our core should be Incarnational Ministry because everybody can agree on that). But McGavran established the core of church growth that we all rallied around. Now, mind you, his faculty didn't all agree 100% on things then, either, but we were all committed to seeing the Gospel go forth and churches getting started. I've diagramed this out in my book on the history of the SWM/SIS at Fuller, and

you'll see that the intention is that a discipline like Anthropology was to be "Anthropology for Christian witness" and not just "Anthropology for the sake of Anthropology."

Influence and Resistance

Pierson: When I was Dean [at the School of World Mission], we were trying to get our DMiss program approved by ATS. It had been tentatively approved and it went to an ATS meeting and some of the people were against it. And I still remember a very disdainful comment by the president of one seminary who said, "Pretty soon they'll want a doctorate in Church Growth!"... I'll never



forget that. We did get it approved, but not immediately. But the whole concept of missiology in ATS was not recognized very much in those years, in the 1980s. Actually, it was the late Orlando Costas who got up and spoke in favor of it, and as a Latin American and Dean at Andover Newton, he carried a lot of weight... There's been a lot of growth in that... in Missiology as a recognized discipline, but 30 years ago, it was not very much the case and McGavran was seen as irrelevant to the main work of the Church, I think. Would that be fair to say?

Kraft: Yes.

Pierson: [I mean irrelevant to] the so-called main-line denominations. The more marginal groups, who were more

missiologically-oriented, were certainly much more open to his ideas. But his own denomination basically rejected him. And by the way, it's fallen from two million to 800,000 since 1950—his own denomination—which may be a lesson to them. We always hear we're a post-Christendom, post-Western, post-Colonial, post-everything kind of culture. None of us knows fully what that means, but McGavran's insights certainly need to be applied to our rapidly changing culture. None of us exactly knows how... there will be a lot of mistakes along the way. But we need to see it that way.

Kraft: A lot of people were stunned by his early writing, like *The Bridges of God*.

Richard: I was working in McGavran's original context of India when I read *The Bridges of God*, and I have to say, that one read and I was convinced. I started asking folks and leaders in mission about these ideas. I told them, "This is the only way it's going to happen. This is sound historical documentation on how things happen." (We were praying for North Bihar in particular because that's the state we were in). But they were all opposed to it. "No, no, this is terrible, because of all the nominalism and rice Christianity that comes out of these mass movements." But we had a kind of separatist bias in our ecclesiology, a "pure church" orientation, and during my early years in India there were no warm vibes towards McGavran. But, to me, his historical case studies were unanswerable and his historical documentation was sound.

Pierson: When I went to Brazil, I somehow came across that same book, *The Bridges of God*. A Mennonite missionary and I organized a little study group at our language school around that book. Then, after starting churches in the far interior on the Brazil-Bolivian border, I was asked to go teach in a seminary, where I began to teach missions and I used some of McGavran's stuff. When I was elected president of Seminary of the North in

Recife, I was included on the Council of Theological Education of the Presbyterian Church of Brazil, and at that time there was financing for a theological professor to come annually and lecture. I corresponded with McGavran and got him to come, because at that time the Presbyterian Church in Brazil wasn't growing very much.

Middleton: He was sensitive to the dynamics of peoples and groups and how they were coming to the Lord. So he wanted to help us understand that these movements arose out of certain patience, ministry, cultivating, and then the movements would begin.

Richard: Well, the irony in India is that no one wanted them... the greatest one out of India of course is the Punjab story, but who did it?...

Wilkes: What's the book?

Richard: *People Movements in the Punjab* [by Fred Stock], but it's very much the same thing all across India. When these things started, in this case it was the Presbyterians in the Punjab, they hated it. They didn't want anything to do with it. They thought this kind of movement was embarrassing.

Pierson: Here's part of the history that I asked Fred (he and I were Chemical

T*he irony in India is that no one wanted anything to do with it. They thought this kind of movement was embarrassing.*

Engineers together at Berkeley), and he said "Well, if I hadn't gone to Fuller my first furlough, I would not have returned to Pakistan." And they went on to have a very fruitful ministry, and now their son Paul and their son-in-law Mark are as well... It's a very interesting example of McGavran's influence on just one family, to say nothing of countless others.

Gill: How often do you think that's the case? McGavran rescuing frustrated, depressed missionaries.

Pierson: I think this was typical for much of his influence.

Middleton: Most of the time when McGavran came for Church growth seminars in India, he would go across India and different places and then he would head to Bangladesh and end up at the seminary there. And out of that came some very significant movements in Bangladesh.

Richard: But he started a lot of controversy when he went into Bangladesh, in the 1980s, maybe in the late

1970s, when he said, "the Muslims of Bangladesh are not interested. The Tribal peoples and the Hindu minority are all responsive. Why are you people wasting your time with the Muslims?" I think if he were here today, he would retract that statement. The stuff that is happening among the Muslims in Bangladesh today is overwhelming and it's not unrelated to those years of seemingly fruitless labor.

Research and Principle

Middleton: McGavran told me an amusing story. In India in 1954, he sent his family home and he wanted to go across Africa. So he went to the ticket office and asked how much a ticket across the Indian Ocean to Mombasa would cost. "About three hundred dollars." McGavran said to himself, "Well, I don't have that kind of money." But he saw all these Indians going across, so he asked, "What do they pay?" "Well, they pay 15 dollars and they sleep on the deck," he was told. He said, "Give me one of those tickets." So, he slept on the deck across the Indian Ocean to Mombasa and that's when he made his trek across Africa doing research on the African churches. He told me when he came back that he predicted there were about twenty million Christians in Sub-Saharan Africa at the time, something like that. He said he predicted there'd be about three hundred million by the end of the century. He said, "I couldn't get the article published. They thought it was too optimistic. They didn't believe me."

Pierson: I remember his story about sleeping on the deck. That was the 1950s McGavran.

Middleton: He was away three months from his family...



Pierson: And he would have been about fifty-something?

Middleton: Ah, yes, he was about 57.

Wilkes: Good gracious!

McMahan: One of the things that strikes you about McGavran is his real emphasis on accountability. That's part of the inconvenient questions that he asked, right? That was part of the drum beats he kept bringing up. You know, we measure growth by counting people in a fellowship of believers. You can tell us you are doing mission stuff out there, but where is the accountability in it? Did he get blowback? I know he did because people said it was all about numbers. That's one of the big criticisms, but it comes out of that emphasis on accountability.

Kraft: I think Winter articulated it with, "If there is anything to count, count it." But he also said we're not interested in this debate about quality vs. quantity, because we're only interested in quality. But we find out about quality by counting stuff.

Graham: I think Dr. Winter would add another [dimension] to that: it's not just quality or quantity, it's about growth. He always wanted to calculate the growth of groups... One reflection I have had on the way McGavran framed his analysis of church and the coming to faith is the impact of years living and working in an agricultural environment. You think of India, where you know, it's farmers, it's sowing, it's all of that kind of thinking and terminology. This is how McGavran understood and described the dynamics of growth. You think about the Church now, and it seems like so much of our church and our thinking now is shaped by a business model of how a business functions.

Wilkes: I think another major contribution is (I haven't examined it enough to make this statement but I'm going to make it anyway), I suspect that probably the majority of evangelical

mission societies, agencies that exist today, use some of McGavran's thinking without even knowing it. I think his thinking has pervaded so many people, it's just sort of "out there"... and people are saying "I hate church growth," and they're out there using it!

Kraft: I don't think McGavran would care if some people took his ideas. He would say, "Do what they want to do with them."

Pierson: But the issue is, are the principles being understood and applied well? That's the real issue.

Richard: Thinking about this legacy—and it's a legacy for today—in many ways I think we need to look at today's



context. A massive part of our context is the church planting movement "hype." I'm a bit irritated by what seems to be an implicit presentation that these ideas came down from heaven to the Baptists and they acknowledge no debt to McGavran. There's no admission the man ever existed. But another problem is a simplistic repackaging of McGavran: the latest publications on movements to Christ among Muslims are only looking at recent movements, since the year 2000. Surely you need at least two decades before you can do any meaningful analysis of a movement. McGavran was analyzing historical movements over decades, and there wasn't a risk that he was promoting "fly-by-night" phenomena

as the "real thing." What is the lasting value of movements? Institutions have to develop or there is no hope that a movement will persist. But do you hear a word about it? Nothing. Just the simplistic telling of Bible stories all over the place and the gathering of statistics. But no statistics of the back door. Attrition is never mentioned. It's in this context that a more comprehensive understanding of McGavran is critical.

Walters: This idea that McGavran's ideas have filtered out into the missiological community without people recognizing them is both good and bad. It's good in that the ideas are generally accepted, and it's bad because ideas can become trivialized and superficial and people can forget the theological and anthropological undergirding.

McMahan: I've seen this from the vantage point of the American Society for Church Growth. After working in Asia, and teaching Missiology, which is when I really became a student of McGavran, I came back to do a PhD at Fuller. I began to travel with Carl George doing church growth consulting; I started attending the ASCG meetings and eventually became the president. But I became perplexed by the question of what had happened to the church growth movement because, by the mid-1990s, it was in a state of decline in North America. And you know what? There were flaws in it that sort of led to the decline. But it drove me back to studying McGavran again to compare [the 1990s] to the material produced during the heyday of church growth. What does it mean to rearticulate McGavran's vision to the next generation? Is it still relevant? Because there was actually quite a lot of hostility I encountered throughout the country towards church growth and people who were very dismissive of McGavran—and that was an interesting journey.

I have come to the conclusion that McGavran's missiology was really quite a bit different than the church growth practice in the U.S. and there is a bit of

a disconnect there. As it became faddish in the U.S. and proliferated to thousands of churches, with all the church growth conferences and church growth products, and as places like the Charles E. Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth were shrink-wrapping it all into a tape, a workbook, or a textbook, it became a paint-by-numbers kind of an approach that many people adopted. But it was inherited by people who really didn't have cross-cultural experience, who didn't have missiology. It became more of a technique. And when you didn't think about the context, and you didn't have the missiology to think about your context, you didn't really know how to analyze your community. So the failures began to multiply in the application of these principles. I don't think it's McGavran's fault, but one of the real challenges, now, is how to encounter the audience that has dismissed it as being erroneous, those who threw the "baby out with the bath water" kind of thing.

Walters: When we were appointed to go to the field, we were going to be church planters in Paris. I thought I was well prepared for French culture and West African culture, but when I got there, my culture shock was the city. I'm from the white suburbs of Memphis and I'm a country-leaning suburban boy, so when I walked out of my Paris apartment and looked both directions, there were more people and definitely more colors and languages than had been in the whole town where I had pastored. It was pretty shocking. I began to ask questions like: what is a people group here? What is a homogeneous unit? Although I vaguely remembered that phrase from my school, McGavran began to come back to me, ... so I read all of McGavran's work and I was struck by its value for the urban questions I was asking.

The Concept of Culture

Kraft: The impression that we had of McGavran was that he was seeing stuff that nobody with his background

McGavran's missiology was quite different than the U.S. church growth practice [which] became a paint-by-numbers kind of approach.

could be expected to see. But he was missing a lot of the intermediate stuff. What you guys are saying about the demise of McGavran's principles could be rectified if we could correct and fill in the places where he missed. He recognized his weaknesses in the area of culture, which is why he was so attracted to Tippett.¹ The problem was that McGavran didn't understand him. Tippett was broader and deeper than any missiologist either before or since. He had an incredible intellect. And, with the help of William Carey Library, we're now seeing many of Tippett's unpublished volumes coming off the press. I was the junior to Alan Tippett and I could see that his role was to try and help McGavran navigate some of the objections to his approach. McGavran was such an enthusiast he could play the same tune on any fiddle and on any string of any fiddle, and he didn't see a lot of the cultural implications of what he was advocating. The problem was nobody understood Tippett. Students would come out of the

Introduction to Anthropology course saying, "There was something really important there but I can't quite figure out what it is." One of the first things they did, was to turn that Intro course over to me. McGavran was pretty uncomplicated in a lot of ways. And Tippett was incredibly complicated. So, it was a fun ride.

I think McGavran regretted ever having hired me, but you can't be weak on culture. When you know what's going on culturally, then you are able to adapt to various situations. The whole phenomenon of insider movements that is being debated is an illustration of where we need to be clear on receptor-oriented communication. You have to ask questions about where the receptors are, what will appeal to them, what will attract them—this kind of thing is the next step beyond McGavran, I think. He would study situations and come up with all kinds of data, but I think this data should have been vetted by anthropologists.



I don't want to criticize McGavran because what he did and the way that he went at it was so unpredictable given his background. I mean this is a guy that's beyond predictability. His head and his heart were in the right place. He'd say to the incoming missionaries, "Figure it out. Research. Find out what's gone right, what's gone wrong." All this considered, the criticism that he's light on culture is pretty much irrelevant, I think. Nobody can do all things, and he didn't do all things. He was focused. He was driven. Tippett was by his side, and by the time Paul Hiebert joined our faculty we had a pretty solid anthropological understanding.

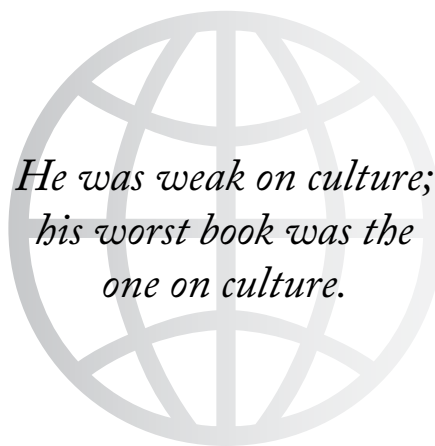
But he was weak on culture. His worst book was the one on culture, entitled *The Clash between Christianity and Culture* or something like that. It was a terrible book. If not in that book, then somewhere else, he said that Christian culture is a culture where more than 50 percent of the people are Christian. He chose to use a term like, "Christian culture." I mean, culture is like a table. It's like a road. It's something that's there to be used by anybody, by non-Christians or Christians. If he spoke of Christian structures, we might deny that right away, because Christian people use structures in a way that's either favorable to the gospel or not favorable; they use the same structures that the enemy uses, but they use them for God's sake. God's put certain things into the human environment that are there for us to use as Christians.

So we needed to step beyond McGavran. He saw stuff, but we had to help him figure out how to get there. And the problem wasn't so much with the places where people movements were happening, as the places where they were not happening, but could happen—finding out under what conditions a society could move into a people movement. Remember, McGavran's last assignment in India was a failure at this point. He couldn't get a people movement going among

the Satnami, but I don't think that's a permanent thing. I think it could be worked out.

On Hinduism

Richard: Speaking of McGavran's influence on us, I'm not a deep student of McGavran for another reason. Although I was in his world of India, I got side tracked into high caste Hindu stuff, which has been my focus for twenty-five years now. And I got threatened with being excommunicated from this wonderful McGavran group when I criticized his treatment of Hindu theology. I completely disapprove of McGavran's mindset in his systemization of Hindu theology. McGavran was aware of Subba Rao and



the movement I studied in my Master's degree. His concern was whether this movement would develop "into a form of Hinduism or a form of Christianity." There's so much to unpack in that expression, but in the spirit of McGavran's concern for ethnic realities, I believe this is a false black and white dichotomy when we examine it closely. I believe a movement like Subba Rao's could still be a form of Hinduism, and still be Christ-centered, and it should not become a form of Christianity. Anyway, I don't know how far we're going to get into this kind of stuff, but where I have gone may sound too negative towards McGavran. Maybe his concern that this particular movement could develop into either a form

of Hinduism or a form of Christianity could have been defended. But the expression itself raises the question of whether McGavran really understood just where the principles he spelled out would lead. So I am criticizing McGavran because I have taken his principles into some places that he didn't take them. I am essentially a McGavranite, and following him and criticizing him is how I view that role.

Wilkes: You don't have to agree with everything he said.

Parsons: You know it is interesting, and really unfortunate that the book *Churchless Christianity* (which is really a terrible title—it should be "Christianity-less Churches in India"), Hoefer's book, despite being written before McGavran died, was stuck in India and never got printed. Finally, we found a copy and it was printed ten years later, the first William Carey Library edition, but McGavran never saw it. I could go back to the time I interviewed McGavran and he talked about being the principal of the school and all those little Hindu boys and girls were learning their Bible verses, but never becoming Christians. But those schools were the foundation of this movement of people who follow Christ outside the church—of millions of people—which Hoefer and others researched, and yet which McGavran never, at least on earth, knew had happened—these whole other movements that are separate from Christianity in India.

Wilkes: What are we saying? That they were part of Hinduism, but they embraced Jesus as their god?

Richard: Well, "part of Hinduism" means anything under the sun.

Wilkes: So they don't renounce the Hindu community?

Parsons: They're a part of the Hindu community... wouldn't that be a more accurate way of putting it?

Richard: Yeah.

Pierson: And that's, of course, a big issue now with "insider movements" in Islam, a huge issue.

A New Generation and a New Context

Richard: McGavran's legacy needs to get to teens and twenties, who today are all caught up with justice. Here we come with some old guy with a goatee who's been dead for decades. No one wants to listen to that.

Walters: Just because McGavran said it, doesn't mean people are going to believe it. It's not like saying Thomas Jefferson said something, right? So to a lot of people it means nothing to say that this is McGavran, this is what he taught, without talking more about what it means.

Richard: So, how do we steward this legacy when our present context is so strong for justice, for eradicating prostitution and emancipating kidnapped and trafficked women? My own daughter has been in the slums of Varanasi these last two years under APU's [Azusa Pacific University's] program on Transformational Urban Leadership—which is wonderful stuff, and I'm very excited my daughter is doing it. She's got it all mixed with a McGavran heritage. She doesn't want to go to Delhi where it's all church-based thinking; she wants to go into Kolkata (Calcutta), partly because of some of my writings. They say the Church is not going to be able to do it [in Kolkata], so they are working outside of "Christendom," whereas in Delhi they are main stream Christendom. So my daughter, who already knows Hindi and wants to develop her Hindi, will not go to Hindi-speaking Delhi. She is driven by the justice issues and the slum issues. How are we going to talk McGavranism into that world?

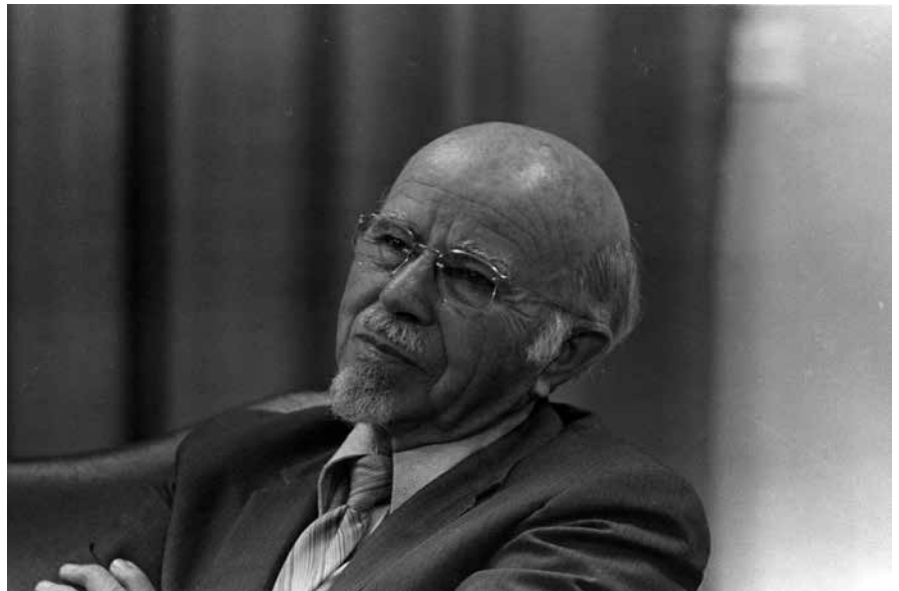
Walters: We've got to be sure that we are answering the questions that people are asking. And, in fact, my students are asking, maybe not in the

M*cGavran's legacy needs to get to teens and twenties, who today are all caught up with justice. How do we steward this?*

same words, the same kind of questions that McGavran asked: "Why?" They're not asking, "Why aren't churches growing or not growing?" but they are asking, "Why, as the world changes, aren't people coming to Christ? Why aren't these movements happening? How do we do that?" And they're tired of formulas. I mean, so many people are looking at Church Planting Movements and

the way to preserve McGavran's legacy is to apply it in today's context.

For instance, [there's] what I've been thinking about for four years. I'm a people group guy, you know, and I'm an HUP [Homogeneous Unit Principle] guy. But I got into a city and boom: what in the world is a people group in a city? What does it mean, you know, all this mix up of people?



saying, "Well, that's interesting, but it's not very helpful," because whether Garrison intended those to be a series of formulas or not, that's how my students interpret them. I guess McGavran had the same problem. I mean, here's the thing: he described these movements, but what are the questions [for these movements]?

So what are the questions for today? And how do we answer them in a way that's, you know, appealing? They see poverty and McGavran together and they're interested in the question it raises: how are we answering that question? What's the application? I think

We're not in a village any more where we can meet under a tree and we're not, you know, even in a country with a caste system where those boundaries are reasonably well defined, so what does [the concept of a people group] mean [in an urban context]? This generation is still buying into the missiology; they just don't know what it means for them anymore.

Parsons: I think another factor, too, is the way the younger generation takes in information. They're not the kind that would go sit in on a seminar or even read a book unless they are forced to. So the question, in part, is how are we trying to communicate to them?

Pierson: There was an assumption in the early missionary movement that when enough people became Christians, then social justice—and social transformation—would come about almost automatically. I think of a certain publication out of Princeton at the end of the 19th, early 20th century that exaggerated that assumption. Early missionaries were not against social transformation. They believed in it. They were just naïve in how easily they thought it would come about, and naïve in their understanding of how difficult the structures of injustice were to break. Personally, I think McGavran was probably kind of naïve about that, too.

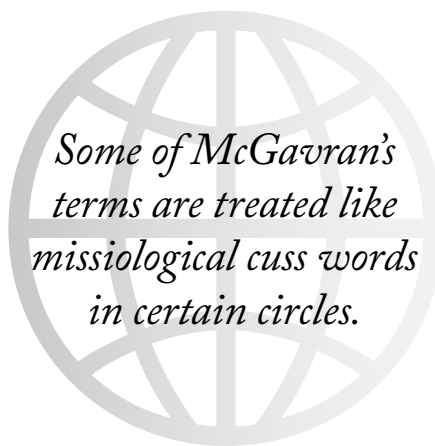
Gill: The consequence is that some of the terms from McGavran's thinking are treated like missiological cuss words in certain circles which prioritize social concerns. The whole social transformation stream that emerged from Lausanne 1974 had a very hard time with the Homogenous Unit Principle. It was critiqued in '82 by Rene Padilla, and you've got a lot of that school of thought still thinking that they have successfully "dissed" McGavranism. It's out there and it's active or they think they probably have laid the HUP to rest. What's really promising is that we finally have publications, like Vern's book, which are coming out and correcting the stereotypes that have arisen around McGavran. We're fighting popularizations which have arisen in reaction to an insufficient understanding of McGavran.

Walters: I'm thinking of one of the leaders in the whole multi-ethnic church movement who spent years just slamming McGavran. Slamming, slamming, I mean... the anti-Christ McGavran. He said you can't be the true church unless you are multi-ethnic, this sort of a thing. About three years ago he reversed himself completely and put out an e-book that McGavran was right and that he hadn't really understood McGavran.

Wilkes: I really, really believe that nobody in history has ever brought

together a set of principles like McGavran's that helps win the world to Jesus. Well, if that's the legacy of McGavran, it's not just the past, but it's the future. I wouldn't say we need to start another church growth movement because that's not going to happen necessarily. We don't need to use the term "church growth" today. I'm not sure what term we do need to use.... I've been looking for the right one. But we do need to reintroduce to a new generation these principles that are the best way in history to win peoples to Christ.

Kraft: Well, my point earlier today was to have a central focus. We once had a central focus on church growth that's inappropriate today, I think, but what's



going to substitute for it? What is it that we can all endorse, commit ourselves to, make enemies over, whatever.

Richard: You suggested in the context of Fuller to alter terminology to focus on "incarnational ministry."

Kraft: Incarnational ministry, yeah.

Richard: Incarnational ministry seems too broad for what we're talking about. We're thinking more narrow.

Pierson: I'm thinking of the verse from the closing words of Romans, that all the *panta ta ethne* will come to believe and obey. That's the focus of mission and that's McGavran's focus—you can call it church growth, but it's really that the people of every

ethne will come to believe and obey and be part of all those who will be gathered into churches. We probably need to find new ways of stating that. I think people who are working among the urban poor are doing a very valid and important ministry, but the ultimate goal again is for every ethne to come to believe and obey. And what that means in any context is going to change. But, this is a different way of stating McGavran's focus of church growth. Church growth is not about the numbers of the churches, it's about people of every ethne coming to believe and obey. So that's the goal of mission, and however we couch that, whatever terms we use, that's what we want to say. Because there are a lot of people out there who have different goals and a different understanding of mission, but that's the ultimate focus, the biblical focus, McGavran's focus, and our focus. **IJFM**

Endnote

¹ Alan Tippett was a mission anthropologist who served with McGavran first in Oregon and then on the faculty of the School of World Mission. His voluminous unpublished works are presently being published by William Carey Library twenty-five years after his death.