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## Donald A. McGavran: A Biography of the Twentieth Century's Premier Missiologist. By Gary McIntosh

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## BOOK REVIEW

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### *Donald A. McGavran: A Biography of the Twentieth Century's Premier Missiologist.*

By Gary McIntosh

Boca Raton, FL: Church Leader Insights, 2015.

384pp.

Paperback edition \$46.60, Kindle edition \$19.95.

Reviewed by Keith R. Sellers, D. Min. candidate in Church Growth and Multiplication at The Talbot School of Theology, missionary with WorldVenture Mission.

Very few are as qualified as Gary McIntosh to write a biography about the twentieth century's premier missiologist. McIntosh who holds a Ph.D. in Intercultural Studies from Fuller Theological Seminary has been teaching at Talbot School of Theology, Biola University in La Mirada, CA since 1986. Born in Damoh, India in 1897 to missionary parents, Donald McGavran grew up to follow his parents' footsteps of missionary ministry. His books and teaching inspired a whole generation of missionaries and pastors across the world.

In chapter 1 and 2 McIntosh recounts the first departure of Donald and Mary McGavran from Indiana to India and then weaves in a detailed history of the spiritual legacy, which they inherited from their grandparents and parents. He then describes Donald's birth, childhood, and his parents' adventures in missionary service. Included

is his education at Butler College and Yale University as well as his brief military experience at the close of World War I.

In chapter 3, *Serving as a Missionary*, McIntosh resumes the narrative from chapter 1 about Donald and Mary's departure to India where they set out to improve the education of Indian students. The chapter tells how the tragic loss of their daughter Mary Theodora just before a furlough served as a catalyst for deepening Donald's relationship with God and igniting his fervor for the lost (Kindle Loc. 1238-1248).

Chapter 4 recollects his continuing work among the *Satnamis* during the threat of WWII and severe economic depression. In chapter 5 the author describes McGavran's advancement to a professorship and how his research at Yale University led him to write, *Bridges of God*, which was dubbed the Magna Carta of the Church Growth Movement (Loc. 2033). As a pivotal chapter, it explains how McGavran's travels and research led him to pioneer the Institute of Church Growth at Northwest Christian College in Eugene, Oregon.

Chapters 6,7, and 8 recount the struggles of the Institute of Church Growth and its eventual transfer to the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA. McIntosh lists the events leading to the formation of McGavran's team of heavy hitter missionary scholars-- Ralph Winter, Charles Kraft, C. Peter Wagner, and Arthur Glasser. Chapter 8 explains McGavran's reluctance to open his school to U.S. pastors, and how Win Arn and C. Peter Wagner became vital forces for introducing church growth to North America.

Chapters 9 and 10 tell about the expansion of church growth teaching and seminars from North America to other parts of the world as Wagner and Arn took church growth instruction to newer levels and foreign places, which George G. Hunter predicted ahead of time (Loc. 3929). Chapter 11, *Leaving a Legacy*, describes the prolific growth of the movement beyond Fuller's School of World Mission to denominational institutions and numerous outside publications. The book closes with Donald and Mary McGavran's home going in 1990 as well as seven important contributions of Donald McGavran's legacy that are still relevant today.

Pastors, educators, and missionaries who are looking for inspiration in ministry will find that the biography provides significant detail on a

most inspirational figure. Those not well versed in missiology may miss the relevance of the names and places mentioned in chapters 8 and 9. Such readers should treat names like Winter, Glasser, Kraft, Hiebert, and Tippet as a suggested bibliography for future reading since they all became important contributors to the emerging field of missiology. Their missiological studies became the real foundation for the modern Church Growth Movement in North America. Some readers may accuse McIntosh of being biased toward McGavran and his teachings, but McIntosh does mention the most common criticisms (Ch.5, Loc. 2398-2443), and he even provides a list of publications, which attacked the Church Growth Movement in its early days (Ch.9, Loc. 4249-55). Some readers may find the lists of church growth publications in chapter 11 as a helpful archive, while other readers may want to skip over them. The book functions as an indirect and effective apologetic for the Church Growth Movement.

Pastors, theologians, educators, missionaries, and Christian workers of all specialties will glean many significant lessons from the book. As both a scholar and practitioner, McGavran attempted the profoundly neglected task of marrying theology with missions. Contrary to popular misconception, church growth instruction started as a technical discipline, which was rooted in biblical theology, not in the church marketing trends of the 1980s and 1990s. Nobody can accuse McGavran of having little concern for the downtrodden since much of his early ministry was focused on the education of the poor in India. As a child he witnessed his parents' care of suffering orphans as well as their devotion to rescuing their souls (Chapter 2). Critics cannot justifiably brand his homogenous unit principle as rooted in racism since it was presented as a way to reach more races, not push groups away (Ch.9, Loc. 4217-23). He reasoned that people are more likely to come to Christ when unnecessary social barriers are removed. His movements across denominational lines and his promotion of indigenous ministry demonstrate that he did not hold a triumphalist motivation (Ch.11, Loc. 5232). His influence reached both liberals and conservatives, and both wings criticized him (Ch.5, Loc. 2385-2416). As a man of his times, McGavran believed that scientific research could unlock the discovery of important principles of evangelism, however, his research orientation did not dilute his passion for prayer and dependence on the Holy Spirit. He even wrote devotionals and prayer guides for missionaries so that they might experience God's

power in evangelism (Ch. 3, Loc. 1380-1411). His use of anthropology and sociology in evangelism fulfilled his purpose of reaching people.

As a worthy read, the book provides an incarnational apologetic for the causes of evangelism, assimilation of new believers, church planting and multiplication, and the pursuit of people movements throughout the world. This presentation of a life well lived is perhaps one of the best arguments for Christians to take up the cause of Christ and his Great Commission.