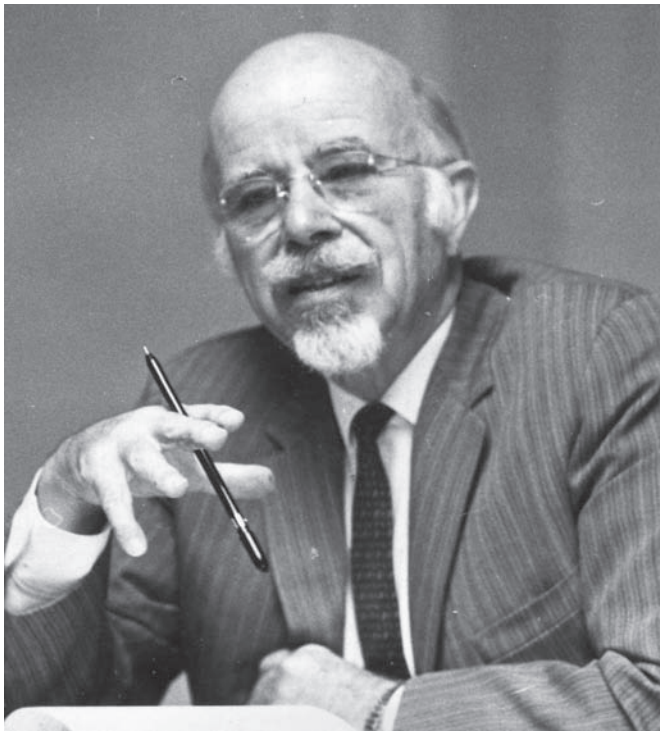


Charles Van Engen

This short essay is about Donald McGavran and his ground-breaking book, *Bridges of God*, that became the cornerstone of Church Growth theory and the foundation of what is now called the School of Intercultural Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. Missiological thinking and missionary practice was transformed by the energy, vitality, insight, and stubborn tenacity of Donald McGavran. Whether they agreed with McGavran or not, after the publication of *The Bridges of God*, mission professors, mission executives, and mission practitioners could no longer do business as usual, nor their usual business.

In my opinion, after John R. Mott, Donald Anderson McGavran is the second most influential missiologist of the twentieth century. He forced the world of mission to reexamine what had been accepted missionary practice for the previous one hundred years. He challenged mission agencies and churches to return to a biblical and classical view of mission that gave center stage to the primary purpose of mission: that it is God's will that women and men become disciples of Jesus Christ and responsible members of Christ's church. This affirmation became the foundation of the Church Growth Movement.



McGavran revitalized global missiological thinking by introducing entirely new disciplines into missiology—and it all began with the publication of *Bridges of God*. McGavran founded what would become the largest school of missiology in the world. Those who studied with him began the Church Growth Movement that quickly spawned branch movements in North America, England, India, Australia, Canada, Korea, and numerous other countries in Asia and Africa. He founded a journal called the *Global Church Growth*. One of his associates, Ralph Winter, founded a publishing house named the William Carey Library. McGavran's teaching and writing stimulated research and writing that resulted in hundreds of published works in numerous denominations. Peter Wagner, McGavran's disciple and colleague, popularized McGavran's writings and, with McGavran, founded the North American Church Growth Movement. A professional society called the North American Society for Church Growth was born to continue the development of McGavran's ideas. From the late 1970s through the beginning of the 1990s, hundreds of pastors in the U.S. studied Church Growth in Fuller's Doctor of Ministry program. In Korea, one of McGavran's disciples, David Yonggi Cho, founded what would become the largest church in the world. Nearly

all the theories about church planting flow from the fountainhead of Donald McGavran's missiology.

McGavran called for the careful examination of social and cultural cohesion that could provide relational BRIDGES along which the Gospel could spread naturally. He suggested that there might be significant cultural and world view factors affecting a group's receptivity or resistance to the Gospel. He challenged everyone in missions to think about people groups rather than isolated individuals as the appropriate audience of Gospel presentation. He called for new converts to immerse themselves—and remain immersed—in their cultures and among their kin, rather than be extracted from their culture into mission stations, as had been the practice during the previous century. He challenged everyone who would listen to find culturally-appropriate ways to present the Gospel.

McGavran forced churches and mission agencies the world over to reconsider the importance of calling persons and people groups to faith in Jesus Christ rather than establish large institutions and build huge buildings, as had previously been the practice of most mission agencies. Donald McGavran and his associates also exerted a definitive, shaping influence on the Lausanne Movement, born in 1974. A host of other movements like DAWN, Adopt-a-People, and Natural Church Development cut their missiological teeth on McGavran's theories. In fact, many of McGavran's ideas are now standard practice for most evangelical Protestant mission agencies. Actually, McGavran's concepts are often taken for granted as the assumed way that evangelical mission is to be done, with little or no awareness of the one who first proposed them, nor of how revolutionary they were in the 1950s and 1960s.

We are presently at a stage in the development of the Church Growth Movement in which many people use the term "church growth" with little or no relationship to the original, theoretical foundation of the movement—and sometimes with seemingly little understanding of the theory itself. I am often asked to explain the foundational tenets of Church Growth theory. My answer is that Church Growth theory is founded on Donald McGavran's missiology, as he articulated that primarily in *The Bridges of God* and in the first edition of *Understanding Church Growth*. McGavran defined mission in this way:

Up to this point, mission has been widely defined as "God's total program for (humanity)," and we have considered the alternatives arising from that definition. Mission may now be defined much more meaningfully. Since God as revealed in the Bible has assigned the highest priority to bringing men (and women) into living relationship to Jesus Christ, we may define mission narrowly as an enterprise devoted to proclaiming the Good News of Jesus

Christ and to persuading men (and women) to become His disciples and dependable members of His Church. (*Understanding Church Growth*. 1970, p35)

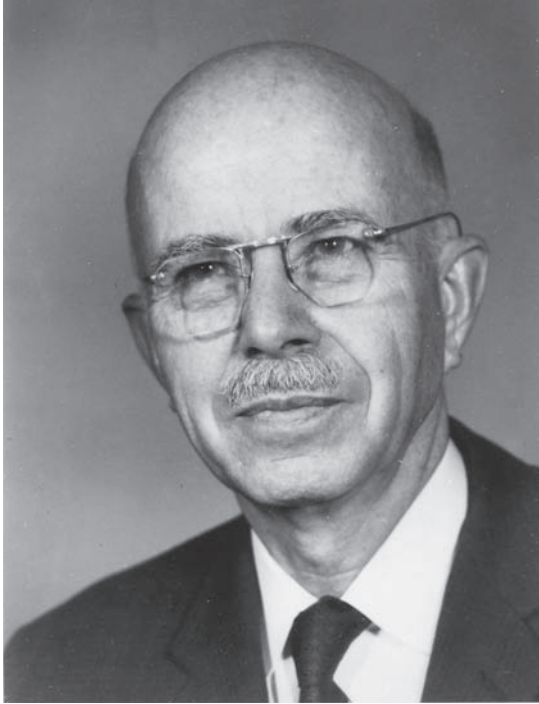
From his earliest research efforts in India, in partnership with J. Waskom Pickett, McGavran was interested in how a group of Christians interfaced with the context (he called this being an “indigenous church”), and what attitude those Christians exhibited toward each other and toward those in their context who were not yet Christians. As can be appreciated from a reading of *Bridges of God*, McGavran was interested in numbers only, as these represented the men and women who had come to faith in Jesus Christ.

McGavran was adamant that women and men should not have to cross unnecessary cultural barriers to become Christians. This affirmation is two pronged. It recognizes the sinfulness of humans and their need for conversion (thus there are necessary barriers), yet they are to be free to do this within their own cultural modes (thus there are unnecessary barriers).

Like a building constructed of five columns, Church Growth theory is grounded upon a foundation of Scripture that draws from a classical reading of the Bible regarding God’s mission (*missio Dei*). The foundational value of McGavran and the Church Growth Movement is that God does not want any to perish, but rather desires that all would come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). Church Growth theory utilizes all appropriate social sciences and many other related disciplines in order to find culturally and socially appropriate ways to invite women and men to become disciples of Jesus Christ and responsible members of Christ’s church. When this occurs, the church grows. Grounded in that biblical perspective, the following five pillars could be visualized as supporting the roof of Church Growth theory and practice.

- A. The God Who Seeks is the Merciful God Who Finds. McGavran: “IT IS GOD’S WILL . . .”
- B. The Lost World of People is the Context of God’s Finding Mission. McGavran: “. . . THAT LOST WOMEN AND MEN BE FOUND . . .”
- C. The Central, Saving Grace in Jesus Christ. McGavran: “. . . BECOME . . . DISCIPLES OF (JESUS CHRIST) . . .”
- D. The Holy Spirit is the Principle Agent of the Growth of the Church. McGavran: “. . . AND BROUGHT . . .”
- E. The Church: Primary Instrument/Penultimate Goal of Church Growth McGavran: “. . . INTO RESPONSIBLE MEMBERSHIP IN CHRISTIAN CHURCHES.”

The foundation of these five pillars is God’s mission as revealed in the Bible.



This foundation is self consciously rooted in the deep cultural themes of each distinct context. The arch that holds the five pillars together is McGavran's definition of mission: "It is God's will that women and men become disciples of Jesus Christ and responsible members of Christ's Church." The roof of this building is a creative, entrepreneurial, free-wheeling, open-ended, contextually-appropriate, and biblically faithful proclamation that Jesus is Lord.

The ultimate goal of mission in Church Growth theory is not the church: it is the coming of the kingdom of God. One day the church will cease to exist and "every knee shall bow" (some willingly and some unwillingly) before Jesus Christ. The New Jerusalem will be the final reality in which the church as we know it ceases to exist. Thus the health, growth, and development of churches is merely a penultimate goal of mission. The final goal of Church Growth missiology is the blessed hope that people (the ethne) will be gathered from every tribe, tongue, family, and nation around the throne of the Lamb. All other missional objectives pale in importance to this central, biblical vision of Church Growth.

Here, then, is Donald McGavran's legacy, for which we are deeply grateful as we celebrate the forty years of ministry of the Fuller Theological Seminary's School of Intercultural Studies.

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