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THE CHURCH GROWTH CONTRIBUTIONS OF J. WASKOM PICKETT

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Donald McGavran, the Father of Church Growth has acknowledged.

I neither invented church growth nor am solely responsible for it. Indeed I owe my interest to a great Methodist Bishop, Jarrell Waskom Pickett. In 1934, he kindled my concern that the Church grow. I lit my candle at his fire.¹⁵

Indeed McGavran rightly credits Church Growth's modern origins to the mind and contributions of J. Waskom Pickett. The fact the Church Growth movement has now eclipsed Pickett's name raises some important questions: Who was Pickett? How did he come to do Church Growth research even before McGavran? And what are some of his lasting contributions and insights?

PICKETT'S CAREER

In February 1910, Pickett received a cablegram from E. Stanley Jones, his close friend and roommate from Asbury College, advising him to apply immediately to the Methodist Board of Missions to be sent to India, to replace Jones as pastor of the Lucknow Methodist Church. He applied immediately, was accepted, and soon departed for India. Arriving

¹⁵ Donald McGavran and George G. Hunter III, *Church Growth Strategies That Work* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), 14.

he discovered only 42 full members and 41 preparatory members in the church. Immediately he skillfully organized the church, with the church experiencing tremendous growth, growing to 386 full members and 92 preparatory members during the three years and nine months he led the church.¹⁶

The ministries of J. W. Pickett and E. Stanley Jones are reminiscent of those of John Wesley and George Whitefield. Pickett was a tremendous organizer like Wesley, while Jones was an energetic evangelist like Whitefield. It is interesting to recall Whitefield's lament, "My brother Wesley acted wisely. The souls that were awakened under his ministry he joined in class, and thus preserved the fruit of his labors. This I neglected, and my people are a rope of sand."¹⁷

Pickett's ministry at Lucknow ended when he was diagnosed as having terminal tuberculosis. Returning to America by ship, he prayed for healing. When he arrived in San Francisco, the doctor examining him asked, "Who told you that you had tuberculosis?" When shown the x-rays made in India, the doctor said, "Well, you actually had advanced t.b. when these x-rays were taken, but something wonderful has happened to you since then."¹⁸

Returning to India with his new bride, Ruth, daughter of John Wesley Robinson, missionary bishop to India, Pickett was appointed to Arrah, Bihar, in the North India Methodist Conference. In the town where Pickett lived and worked, a people movement of several thousand Chamars had taken place. People movements were common in North India at this time, occurring also in Presbyterian, Baptist, and other Methodist areas.¹⁹ This experience developed in Pickett a positive

¹⁶Bishop J. W. Pickett, *My Twentieth Century Odyssey* (Bombay: Gospel Literature Service, 1980), 13, 18-19.

¹⁷Although the comparison is valid, Jones' legacy remains clearer than Whitefield's. George G. Hunter III, *To Spread The Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 126.

¹⁸J.T. Seamands, "The Legacy of J. Waskom Pickett," unpublished paper, 2.

¹⁹Donald McGavran letter, 2 February 1989.

attitude toward people movements as a means by which people become Christians.

Bishop James Thoburn is a second source of Pickett's positive attitude toward people movements. Influenced by William Taylor, Thoburn became a strong advocate of the expansion of people movements. Election to the episcopacy elevated him to a position of considerable influence in challenging those who desired slower growth of the church. Thoburn contended that the church should accept the opportunities afforded it to work among the depressed classes.²⁰

The Gangetic Valley was the heart of Hinduism, with no great movement to the Christian faith having taken place. Then about 1926 the National Christian Council met. Some Indian ministers who had been appointed to this national organization, and were themselves of high caste origin, together with a number of missionaries, voiced violent opposition to "mass movements" from the Untouchable castes. "These," they shouted, "were giving Christianity the name of an Untouchable religion. Only low caste people, only Untouchables, were becoming Christians in large numbers." They contended that "all such Untouchable movements ought to be immediately stopped!"²¹

Fortunately, John R. Mott attended the National Council meeting. He advised, "Before we take any anti-mass movement action, let us appoint some missionary to do a nationwide survey of mass movements, then we shall see what is really happening."²²

Consequently, in 1928 Pickett was requested by the National Christian Council of India, Burma and Ceylon to make an extensive in-depth study of people movements in India. Under Mott's guidance, funding was sought from the Institute of Social and Religious Research which was financed as a subsidiary of the Rockefeller Foundation. The Institute decided the study was practical, and if wisely conducted might prove to be of value to the Church, not only in India, but also in other

²⁰Marvin Henry Harper, *The Methodist Episcopal Church in India: A Study of Ecclesiastical Organization and Administration* (Lucknow: The Lucknow Publishing House, 1936), 23, 62, 85.

²¹McGavran letter, 2 February 1989.

²²Ibid.

countries. The plan was approved and Pickett was selected to undertake the study.

Ten representative areas of people movement activity were chosen for intensive study, representing eight missions and nine churches. Instruments of research were developed, tested, and field research carried out. Three and a half years after undertaking the study, *Christian Mass Movements in India* was published simultaneously in India and America.²³ The book marked a turning point in mission history, demonstrating that the growth of churches must not necessarily be very slow. The accounts of the success of the gospel and of its redemptive power in areas where men and women had accepted it, helped to make people movements acceptable to mission leaders.²⁴

Donald McGavran, field secretary for the seventy missions for the Christian Churches, read *Christian Mass Movements in India* and immediately began an investigation in the mid-India area where many of the missions were. He discovered that of 145 mission stations, only ten had really growing churches. In 135 growth was less than one percent a year. McGavran requested the Mid-India Christian Council to ask Pickett to study the area to discover why this was the case. The Council agreed under the condition McGavran would accompany Pickett throughout the survey. The experience of traveling with Pickett and seeing new congregations being established among the Bhils, Garas, Goans, and others opened his eyes to what God was really doing in India and what missions and denominations all over India should be doing.²⁵ When they were about two-thirds of the way through the study, Pickett told McGavran,

²³Alan Tippett, ed., *God, Man and Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1972), 6-7.

²⁴J. W. Pickett et al., *Church Growth and Group Conversion* (South Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1973), vii.

²⁵Letter from Donald McGavran to J.T. Seamands, 5 August 1986.

"You have been accompanying me and seeing what I do. I have to go now. You carry on similar investigations in the remaining areas."²⁶

Pickett employed two major methods, questionnaires and interviews, to gather his data. McGavran adopted and refined these, adding observation and historical analysis to complete the "package" of research methods widely used today by Church Growth scholars and other missiologists. This establishes Pickett's place in the development of Church Growth methods. Furthermore, many of his research-based conclusions are now fundamental in Church Growth lore. Thus, in the lighting of McGavran's candle, so now the candles of many of us are now aflame.

By the mid-1950's McGavran had taken the church growth insights received from Pickett, universalized, refined, and published them in *The Bridges of God*. While Pickett's insights about Church Growth were largely confined to how Christianity spreads in India and in people movements, McGavran universalized and expanded upon his mentor's insights, applying them to the whole of world missions. According to McGavran,

Pickett did not see that this has been true in all centuries, beginning on the day of Pentecost, when the people who turned to Christ were exclusively Jews. It also occurred most notably when the Armenians as a nation turned to Christ. And between A.D. 420 and 460 when all the tribes in Ireland became Christian.

He did not see or announce that the Great Commission clearly states that the Ultimate Authority in the universe commanded that Christians "*matheteusate panta ethne*" (disciple all peoples of the vast human mosaic), he did see this very clearly in regard to the "mass movements" in India.²⁷

²⁶McGavran letter, 2 February 1989. Pickett's four chapters and McGavran's three were published under the title, *Church Growth and Group Conversion*, and was read widely across India.

²⁷McGavran letter, 2 February 1989.

After *Christian Mass Movements in India* was published, Pickett was elected bishop of the Methodist Church in 1935, located first in Bombay and then in Delhi. This removed him from active Church Growth research. However, he did write three additional books on Church Growth: *Christ's Way to India's Heart*; *Church Growth and Group Conversion*; and *Dynamics of Church Growth*. After retirement in 1956, Pickett became professor of missions at Boston University, consulted for the Methodist Board of Missions, and visited colleges and seminaries as a lecturer on Church Growth.

PICKETT'S MAJOR CHURCH GROWTH INSIGHTS

The pioneering work, *Christian Mass Movements in India*, is foundational to the birth, growth and development of modern Church Growth's methods and principles. Pickett's enduring contributions to Church Growth theory can be delineated in six themes.

1. PRAGMATIC RESEARCH BASED ORIENTATION. A distinctive of Church Growth's approach to mission is its pragmatic research based orientation. Pickett was the first to use this approach in finding out how people become Christian. He writes in *Christian Mass Movements in India*:

It is disturbing to read book after book about modern missions without finding so much as a hint about either what helped or what hindered church growth. In many books the author seems eager to prove that the missionaries have done everything according to God's leading and that if no church has come into being it means only that God's time for saving souls has not come: "the disciples' duty is to sow the seed and leave it to God to produce." How different this is from the command of Jesus, "Make disciples of the nations!"²⁸

²⁸J. Waskom Pickett quoted in *Church Growth: State of the Art* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1986), 17.

Thus, Church Growth takes a fiercely pragmatic approach in evaluating results, employing data to determine faithfulness and effectiveness in the Church's mission.²⁹

2. PEOPLE MOVEMENTS. Pickett's research on people movements led him to conclude their validity as growth models.

Donald McGavran defines people movements:

A people movement results from the joint decision of a number of individuals - whether five or five hundred - all from the same people, which enables them to become Christians without social dislocation, while remaining in full contact with their non-Christian relatives, thus enabling other groups of that people, across the years, after suitable instructions, to come to similar decisions and form Christian churches made up exclusively of members of that people.³⁰

Each phrase of McGavran's definition builds upon the others to construct a complete definition of a people movement.

Pickett explained that people movements

constitute for many the most natural way of approach to Christ. The more individualistic way preferred in Western countries is not favored by peoples trained from early childhood to group action. To object to [people] movements is to place obstacles in the path along which an overwhelming proportion of Indian Christians have come to profess faith in Christ Jesus. We see no reason to believe that any considerable proportion of [people] movement converts could have been brought to Christ

²⁹C. Peter Wagner, Win Arn and Elmer Towns, *Church Growth: State of the Art* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1986), 17.

³⁰Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 335.

along any other path. Nor do we see any reason that they had been led by any other way.³¹

Indeed, important decisions in many cultures are made as a group, vis a vis the Western way of making individual decisions. If the group process is bypassed in societies that make group decisions, no people movement takes place and social dislocation results in the lives of the few converts received. McGavran, under Pickett's encouragement, accepted this anthropological principle and developed the Homogenous Unit Principle: "People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers."³²

3. SOCIAL NETWORKS. Pickett demonstrated that Christianity spreads most contagiously along the social networks of credible Christians and among social units as opposed to across social networks. This principle is illustrated in the classic case of Ditt, a lame little man of the untouchable Chuhra caste. Upon his conversion Ditt returned to his people, and experienced a period of ostracism. But he persisted, and as Pickett writes,

Three months after his baptism he reappeared in Sialkot and presented his wife, his daughter, and two neighbors as candidates for baptism. He had taught them what he knew; they professed their faith and their purpose to follow Christ and had walked thirty miles to be baptized. After examining them, instructing them, and praying for them, Mr. Martin administered the rite, whereupon they immediately started back to their village. Six months later Ditt brought four other men who were also judged ready for baptism.... The missionaries were now convinced that a work of God was in progress in Ditt's village. Ditt's humble occupation of buying and selling hides took him to many villages. Wherever he went he told his fellow Chuhras of Christ. Many abused him, but an increasing

³¹Ibid., 335.

³²*Church Growth: State of the Art*, 17.

number heard him patiently, and before long, groups here and there began to follow his lead. In the eleventh year after Ditt's conversion, more than five hundred Chuhras were received into the Church. By 1900, more than half of these lowly people had been converted, and by 1915 all but a few hundred members of the caste professed the Christian faith.³³

"The spread of the Christian faith along a person's social network is Pickett's greatest insight," declares Donald McGavran.³⁴

4. REACH THE MASSES. In most seasons, in most nations, "the masses are more responsive than 'the classes'." Pickett's research and experience convince him that

there is strong reason to believe that the surest way of multiplying conversions of higher caste Hindus is to increase the scale on which the transforming, enriching and upward lifting grace of Christ is demonstrated in the depressed classes. And one certain way to arrest the movements of the higher castes to Christ is to turn away from the poor and despised.³⁵

This insight challenges most missionaries who seem to desire "quality" Christians, implicitly meaning middle-class Christians, whom, McGavran asserts

disdain unwashed congregations of the masses. Yet, the material needs of the masses may reflect their spiritual need. In many cases, they are usually more receptive to the Gospel and its transforming power than are the higher classes. They have little to lose in contrast to the upper castes who are blind to their spiritual need and perceive

³³Hunter, 92-93.

³⁴McGavran letter to J.T. Seamands, 22 August 1986.

³⁵Hunter, 81.

themselves as having much to lose. If the Church is to be faithful to the Gospel, she must reach the masses. Redemption and lift will occur, eventually making the men and women middle-class.³⁶

5. MOTIVES OF CONVERTS. Why do men and women become Christians? This is a sensitive issue. The evangelist must beware lest his or her suspicion of motives deters the one seeking salvation.

Pickett's research down plays the role of the convert's motives in an entire chapter in *Christian Mass Movements in India*. Important emphasis are:

The subject of motives is always difficult. . . . Its consideration encounters much prejudice and excites strong feeling. Many Christians think it necessary to examine with great care the motives of all who seek entrance to the Christian Church. . . . Others, fearful of placing themselves in the position of judge, take the attitude that whosoever will may come, and while trying to stimulate motives that they consider proper, scrupulously refrain from prying beneath the voluntary declaration of the enquirer.³⁷

Pickett goes on to point out that

the gospel often awakens in the mind of the receptive hearer a desire for self improvement and a fuller, as well as a better life, appreciation of kindness shown him, hope of escape from century-old wrongs previously endured without question, and ambition for his children. . . . Some of us see in the desire of the Sweeper (caste) . . . to be treated like respectable people, to secure for their children some other work than the cleaning of cesspools and privies, and to obtain help against oppression, not evidence

³⁶McGavran, 283.

³⁷Pickett, 152.

of unworthy motives, but, rather support for their claim that they have admitted Jesus to their midst.³⁸

Pickett's most startling finding about motives concerns the impact motives have on Christian achievements. After interviewing 3,947 individuals, examining them closely about their reasons for becoming Christians and ascertaining their attainments in the Christian faith, Pickett found four basic types of motives in becoming Christian. The four motives found are: 1. spiritual motives; 2. secular motives; 3. social reasons; and 4. natal influences (those related to Christian upbringing).

As might be expected, those who became Christian from spiritual motives had higher attainments than those who came from secular and social motives. The great surprise in Pickett's findings, however, was the small degree of difference between the Christian attainments of those who came from secular and social motives. Thus, Pickett showed conclusively the motives with which people turn to Christian faith play a smaller role in developing Christian character than good post-baptismal care. Converts who come for reasons other than spiritual become good Christians when they become parts of congregations which faithfully worship God. However, converts who come from spiritual motives and become parts of poorly led and neglected congregations become weak Christians.³⁹

The Apostle Paul understood this principle. Addressing the problem of motives, he admitted that some were preaching from envy and strife while others were preaching from love. In all cases, "Christ is preached; and therein I do rejoice" (Philippians 1:18).⁴⁰

6. DISCIPLING AND PERFECTING. Pickett's research also distinguished between "discipling" and "perfecting." Discipling refers to a person's acceptance of the Christian faith, while perfecting is the spiritual growth that occurs afterwards in a person. Both are important and must

³⁸Ibid., 154.

³⁹McGavran, 173-175, 364.

⁴⁰C. Peter Wagner, *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel: A Biblical Mandate* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1981), 73.

be carried out constantly by the Church in her mission. But Pickett saw this point more clearly than have his successors:

Perfecting the saints is impossible without discipling. People who do not win converts do not prosper spiritually. Wherever I have seen Christians concentrating on perfecting their own life and neglecting their mission, there I have seen people going backward spiritually.⁴¹

CONCLUSION

J. Waskom Pickett was a man who loved God and humanity, exerting his life attempting to bring the two together. The Christian Church is greatly indebted to the researched Church Growth insights and contributions made by Jarrell Waskom Pickett.

⁴¹Donald McGavran, *How Churches Grow* (London: World Dominion; New York: Friendship Press, 1959), 98.