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## THE LIFE OF DONALD MCGAVRAN: GROWING STRONGER

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*Editor's Note: Gary L. McIntosh has spent over a decade researching and writing a complete biography on the life and ministry of Donald A. McGavran. We are pleased to present the tenth excerpt from Donald A. McGavran: A Biography of the Twentieth Century's Premier Missiologist (Church Leader Insights, 2015).*

***Abstract:***

The 1980s were the major growth years of the Church Growth Movement in the USA. Win Arn's Institute for American Church Growth reached its zenith, and the School of World Mission at Fuller continued to promote Church Growth thinking. Peter Wagner gradually took over the primary role as professor of church growth, as McGavran reduced his teaching load. The issue of what is the primary goal of mission—social justice or evangelism—continued to be one of McGavran's major concerns.

## Growing Stronger

By January 1979, the Institute for American Church Growth was a major contributor to the increase in awareness of church growth among American churches. The Institute had trained more than eight thousand clergy and fifty thousand laity through pastors' conferences and seminars. More than a million people had seen one or more films on Church Growth. One quarter million copies of *Church Growth, America* had been distributed, all within just five years of its inception.

Arn's adaptation of McGavran's ideas did not happen by accident. In the early years Arn did not know much about church growth. Thus, he merely packaged Donald's ideas in creative ways for American churches. Referring to their collaboration on *How to Grow a Church*, Donald admitted, "That was 98% McGavran and 2% Arn but you provided the mechanics without which it would not have been done, and you provided the market." He continued, "Then we produced *Ten Steps*: 90% McGavran 10% Arn, but it also was heavily dependent on your marketing."<sup>1</sup> By teaming together, Donald and Arn captured the imaginations of pastors in America to see the possibilities for conversion growth in their own churches. Plans were on the docket to expand the IACG training in greater ways.

At an executive committee meeting comprised of McGavran, Arn, and Ted Engstrom, Yamamori reviewed a new proposal for training clergy in Church Growth as an extension of the IACG. Yamamori believed that the IACG had just touched the tip of the iceberg, and he desired to expand its influence by founding a Graduate School of Church Growth Studies. The proposal he presented to the board of directors on January 13, 1979, explored a bold plan to offer two graduate degrees: A Master of Church Growth and a Doctor of Church Growth. Yamamori presented data from a preliminary study showing that 74% of pastors and laypersons surveyed were interested in the degree programs. The proposal outlined curriculums for both degrees, as well as several models that might be used in cooperation with existing seminaries. On a personal note, Yamamori shared he was facing financial difficulties. The executive board authorized additional funds to help in his support and agreed to renegotiate his contract after the present one expired in February 1979.

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1 Win Arn to Donald McGavran, July 5, 1979.

George G. Hunter, III, then secretary for evangelism in the United Methodist Church, had been elected to the IACG board of directors in 1978. Regarding the proposal for a Graduate School of Church Growth Studies, he wrote,

I salute you on your pioneering explorations toward a graduate program in Church Growth. It is my considered judgment, as secretary for evangelism for the United Methodist Church, that such a program, —well conceptualized, staffed, and resourced— would indeed fill an important gap in American theological education, the training of ministers, and the charting of the course of Christian outreach among the peoples of North America by leaders and pastors of mainline denominations.<sup>2</sup>

They made no decision at the January meeting, but at an executive committee meeting on February 12, 1979, the committee decided that they would continue to explore the proposal and that they would extend Yamamori's contract to April 30, 1979.

*The Pastor's Church Growth Handbook*, a compilation of articles from *Church Growth, America*, was published in the summer of 1979. The book was given away free to those who subscribed to the magazine. In addition, Arn explained that four new specialty seminars would be offered on Communication: Master Planning; Identifying, Reaching, and Winning New People; Effective Incorporation of New Members; and Applying Church Growth Principles. These specialty seminars were well received and continued to be offered well into the 1980s.

It appeared that the IACG was on its way to another record year, but the board anticipated that the summer would be difficult financially. With his contract set to expire on April 30, Ted Yamamori realized that his position was vulnerable if cash flow were to be negative during the summer, so he made plans to look for another job. He announced his resignation and took a position with Biola College and Talbot Seminary as professor of intercultural studies. The board expressed its appreciation for his service and their anticipation of a continuing relationship in the future. With

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2 George G. Hunter, III, January 13, 1979.

Yamamori's resignation, the proposal for a graduate school was tabled.

Positive response to the training seminars continued to roll in. One letter, from the director of evangelism, worship, and stewardship of the North Indiana Conference of the United Methodist Church, is a good example.

Upon completing our seventh Basic Church Growth Seminar I would like to express my personal appreciation for your leadership. I know that I also speak for many of my colleagues and countless numbers of lay persons in saying that the response to the church growth emphasis here in our Conference has been phenomenal.

All ten districts have participated. Twenty seven hundred persons have been involved. This represents more than 300 churches. There are 640 churches in the North Indiana Conference of the United Methodist Church.<sup>3</sup>

A follow-up study conducted later showed that all ten districts experienced growth in membership and attendance the year after the seminars were conducted.

The Advanced Growth Seminar held between April 30th and May 4 included some new speakers and topics. The list included

Introduction to Church Growth—Win Arn

Biblical Foundations for Church Growth—Art Glasser

Christian Excellence—Ted Engstrom

Growth by Renewal—Robert Munger

Philosophy of Ministry—Ray Ortlund

People Flow—Win Arn

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<sup>3</sup> Director of evangelism, North Indiana Conferences of the United Methodist Church, April 10, 1979.

Growth in the Suburban Church—Charles Mylander

Ethnic Realities in America—Ted Yamamori

Communication and Church Growth—Bob Screen

Spiritual Gifts—Peter Wagner

Management Skills in Church Growth—Olan Hendrix

The Greatest and Holiest Work of the Church—Donald McGavran

Training the Laity for Church Growth—Donald McGavran.

The seminars for local churches, districts, and for professional leaders were a crucial ingredient in the success of the Institute. A financial analysis of the Institute's operations demonstrated how important seminars were to its fiscal viability. In 1978 seminars accounted for 73.67% of the total income and in 1979, 70.74%.

The summer months allowed time for revising the Basic Church Growth Seminar material, and Arn spent the latter part of August and early September teaching church growth in Japan, the Philippines, and Korea. With the growth of the IACG, a need surfaced to employ computers to expedite research and normal business procedures. Arn began working with Jack Gunther from the IBM company to study the system needs of the Institute and make recommendations. The plan was to have computers operational by early 1980.

Donald and Arn got along famously, but one incident in 1979 almost led to their parting ways. The two hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Sunday school occurred in 1980. In an effort to capitalize on the anniversary, Win and Charles Arn decided to write a book highlighting church growth principles applied to the Sunday school. The working title of the book was *How to Grow a Sunday School*. They wanted Donald to write the foreword to the book and sent a rough draft of the manuscript to him. After reading it, Donald felt that the book borrowed too much

from his own church growth books—particularly *Understanding Church Growth*—and gently suggested that the new book was in danger of the charge of plagiarism. Donald’s sensitivity to the plagiarism of his ideas first arose with the publication of *Why Churches Die* by Hollis Green. After reading the galley proofs of that book, he was furious, commenting that it was a “big steal from the beginning.” Regarding Green’s book, Donald commented, “The publisher [was] very apologetic. I was busy and settled far too easily. Merely a cordial statement that he was heavily indebted throughout to Donald McGavran and *Understanding CG*. I should never have let him off so easily.”<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, when Donald read the Arns’ manuscript on Sunday school growth, he felt that it was very much like Hollis Green’s. Donald did not feel the Arns had done this intentionally. “Mind you,” he carefully wrote, “I understand perfectly how this came about. You live church growth and you have heard that lecture so often you can repeat it. . . and have voiced the ideas so effectively that you have made the[m] your own. I understand. . . but still they are my ideas.”<sup>5</sup>

Donald was ready to sever his relationship with the IACG but suggested they simply include an acknowledgment in the book, making mention of their borrowing of ideas from him. The final compromise was to include Donald’s name on the cover, even though he did not write any part of the manuscript personally. The book appeared in 1980 as *Growth: A New Vision for the Sunday School*. With this issue settled, McGavran and Arn continued collaborating well into the 1980s.

Seminars on Church Growth continued in high demand in the United States through the end of 1979. Forty-five seminars, conferences, and workshops were scheduled from September 7 through November 15 of that year. The Basic Church Growth Seminar, designed and written by Charles Arn some years earlier, was the one most in demand, accounting for 33 of the total seminars in the fall of 1979.

However, not all was well, as indicated by the update Win Arn sent to the board of directors.

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4 Win Arn to Donald McGavran, July 5, 1979.

5 Ibid.

A change is taking place across the nation. Attitudes and actions of pastors and denominational executives are changing. The economic “crunch” and inflation are taking their toll. Many pastors and executives are cutting back. The Institute is feeling this as pastors are more reluctant to travel west for the Advanced Growth Seminars. Attendance at these seminars has been down for the second time in a row. (We are praying and increasing our mailings for a large turnout in January. Pray with us.) Two of my own engagements have been recently cancelled. The schedule for seminars in late winter and spring is very thin.

Tie this above with the knowledge that church growth is being widely disseminated through denominational structures, and we must look more closely at the purpose and goals of the Institute. I forecast some hard times from January through next September.<sup>6</sup>

In spite of the concern about declining attendance at the Advanced Growth Seminars, however, and the lack of seminars for the spring of 1980, the best years of the Institute for American Church Growth still lay ahead. The slowdown in seminar attendance and the coming increase in rent did not deter the Institute from making bold plans for the future. Plans were being developed in early 1980 to increase the *Church Growth, America* magazine subscription list from six thousand to twenty thousand people. Thirteen specialty workshops were scheduled from October 1980 through May 1981, and a brand new Sunday School Growth Seminar was being planned.<sup>7</sup>

At the SWM, Donald taught Advanced Church Growth during winter quarter (January–March, 1979). He and George Hunter continued to work on their new book and discussed the possibility of his going to Asbury in April of the year to speak to a gathering of Methodist executives.

Wagner was quite excited about Donald’s newest book, *Ethnic Realities and the Church*. “The book is a gem—finely formed, cut and polished with facet after facet reflecting long experience, deep thinking, profound dedication, breadth of scholarship and research, unflappable optimism

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6 Win Arn to IACG board of directors, November 16, 1979.

7 Report to Institute for American Church Growth board of directors, March 1980, 1.

and soul-stirring challenge to get busy with God's great work," he wrote enthusiastically.<sup>8</sup>

This new book expanded on Donald's understanding of the Homogeneous Unit Principle. In a letter to Francis M. DuBose (1922 – 2009), a professor at Golden Gate Baptist Seminary, Mill Valley, California, Donald remarked,

*Ethnic Realities and the Church* declares that conglomerate, multiethnic congregations and denominations are the most typical kind of churches in India. . . and are one way God has worked to establish the Church. He has blessed this way to the growth of His Church. *Ethnic Realities* also declares that monoethnic congregations and denominations are another way God has blessed. . . and that both ways ought to be recognized as legitimate.

Please do not be misled by the fact that *Ethnic Realities and the Church* is chiefly about India. India simply illustrates the worldwide situation. David Barrett, in reviewing the book writes, "While the book is largely about India, it is equally applicable to every other continent. My data shows that people everywhere prefer to join mono-ethnic congregations and join multi-ethnic only when mono-ethnics are not available."<sup>9</sup>

Donald continued to stress the need for brotherhood as long as such a desire for brotherhood did not reduce the growth of a church within a particular segment of a society.

Nominations for the Church Growth Award, which was given to the student who had done research, writing, and speaking on church growth topics, had been left primarily in Donald's hands for the first few years, but he realized that the SWM faculty would eventually be making the selection. He wrote to fellow faculty member Paul G. Hiebert the following recommendations for selecting future recipients of what became the McGavran Award in Church Growth:

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8 Peter Wagner to Donald McGavran, March 12, 1979.

9 Donald McGavran to Francis M. DuBose, March 12, 1979.

As the giving of this award in the future comes into the hands of the faculty—on probably Peter Wagner’s recommendation, I hope that you will bear in mind the present procedures and rules:

The Award Winner must be enrolled in SWIMICG in the year in which [the] [a]ward is made.

He must be judged on hi[s] church growth convictions, speakings, writings, and publications.

If no suitable candidate [a]ppears, the award should not be given. Let it accu[m]ulate till a candidate does appear who speaks, writes and publishes definitely church growth material.<sup>10</sup>

Donald particularly did not want to give the Church Growth Award to a person simply because he served as a missionary, had learned a language, or distributed literature. His desire was that the award be for strict church growth research, speaking, and publication.

Wagner was clearly ascending to the leadership role for the Church Growth School, as Donald realized.

Dear Pete:

At long last, I am reading Hadaway’s evaluation of the C.G. Movement which you kindly sent me on March 23<sup>rd</sup>.

It is interesting, competent and fair. We have done well. God has blessed our efforts.

The next ten years will, however be crucial. Will the fire go out? Will other good things seize the center of the stage? Will holistic mission reassert itself? We shall see.

You will play a crucial role.

Yours in the comradeship of the missionary movement,  
Donald McG<sup>11</sup>

Donald was right, as Wagner would play a major role during the next

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10 Donald McGavran to Paul G. Hiebert, May 12, 1979.

11 Donald McGavran to Peter Wagner, July 4, 1979.

two decades of the Church Growth Movement.

The Homogeneous Unit Principle continued as a hot topic throughout the 1970s and beyond. Criticisms about the HUP seemed to never abate, and as late as 1989 Donald was still answering questions about it. He told professor Flavil Yeakley, Jr., then at Abilene Christian university, that

[t]here is no question that not only Branches of the Universal Church but individual congregations attract men and women of similar education, income, status, and the like.

When I lectured at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia three years ago, I found that while they had found out that there were 51 different segments of the population in Philadelphia, they had planted churches in only two. The Reformed Presbyterians were simply too highly educated, too cultured, too psychologically different to multiply their kind of churches.<sup>12</sup>

Donald found himself defending and clarifying this principle repeatedly. Writing to David Wasdale at St. Matthia Vicarage in London, England, Donald gave further insight on this controversial principle.

I agree with you that the homogeneous unit principle has been formulated first overseas in tightly structured tribal or caste populations, where there is no “non-tribal” or “non-caste” society. In such populations either the Church does multiply congregations within each HU, or does not multiply congregations at all.

But in England and North America while some homogeneous units are almost as distinct as tribes and caste (i.e. Pakistani Moslems, or Chinese, or Jamaicans in London) most homogeneous units are rather vague in outline. The Prime Minister of England is a member of a Labor Union. Sons of coal miners become university professors. And on and on. In such a population the HUP, too rigorously applied, arrays itself against the gradual breakdown of loose ethnic and other units which marks the development of every unified nation, and against brotherhood and “one-ness in Christ,” too.

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12 Donald McGavran to Flavil R. Yeakley, Jr., February 2, 1989.

Christians use the HUP to multiply Christian churches, biblically faithful churches. They must not use it to defend prideful exclusive segregated congregations.

The theological objections to the HUP common in the United States and England assume (erroneously) that evangelization accepting the HUP has denied the unity called for in the Epistle to the Ephesians. Actually HUP congregations and denominations are among the most active exponents of brotherhood and unity. All they affirm is that the practice of complete brotherhood (including inter-marriage) should not be made a condition for baptism. It was not in the New Testament Church and should not be today. It is a fruit of the Christian life, not a pre-condition for faith in Christ. The chief reason for this is (not to justify racial exclusiveness; but) to keep the door to salvation open to those very large blocks of humanity from which currently very, very few are becoming Christian. . . from which to become Christian is “to betray and renounce our people.”<sup>13</sup>

Donald meant to use the HUP as a strategy for inclusion (i.e., for bringing as many people to Christ and His Church) and not for exclusion (i.e., keeping people out of the church).

Some criticized church growth because they assumed it was primarily about techniques and methods. Donald realized that such issues as location, adequate facilities, staff, and procedure did affect a church's potential for growth, but in his mind these were not the primary issues. Instead of emphasizing new forms, Donald believed that the major blockage to growth involved “other good things shutting out evangelism.” Empowering this was “a theology being manufactured to justify the shutting out, widespread erosion of theological certainty as to the authority of the Bible and the exclusiveness of Jesus Christ, and. . . justified relativism which hamstrings evangelism.”<sup>14</sup>

One of the denominations that adopted church growth thought as its primary strategy in the 1980s was the Church of the Nazarene. A passing remark in one of Donald's letters in late 1979 mentioned Bill Sullivan,

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13 Donald McGavran to David Wasdale, October 30, 1979.

14 Donald McGavran to Peter Wagner, November 13, 1979.

who became director of Church Growth for the Nazarenes for over two decades. Donald remarked, “Your education, Pete, of the Nazarenes is bearing very good fruit in every way. They are off and running. I had a district superintendent from North Carolina, Bill Sullivan, who is training 200-300 Class Three leaders. When he gets that done, his 54 congregations will start to reproduce themselves in a big way. You will have him in your class this January—good man.”<sup>15</sup>

At 82 years old, Donald was coming to the close of his teaching career. The SWM faculty desired to honor him, as well as to maintain an association with him as long as reasonably possible. Thus, Dean Glasser approached the Faculty Senate: “We herewith petition the Administration to make possible the continued association of Dr. McGavran with the SWM faculty, for the coming year. We recommend that he be reappointed—Senior Professor of Mission, Church Growth and South Asian Studies.”<sup>16</sup>

As the 1980s began, changes were in store for the School of World Mission. For one, Dean Glasser passed on the deanship to Paul Pierson (b. 1927). After ten years of service to SWM as dean, Glasser continued on as senior professor. In his outgoing article published in *Theology News and Notes*, he wrote of McGavran,

Our founder and senior mentor, Dr. Donald A. McGavran, continues with us in good health and good heart. Although his 82<sup>nd</sup> birthday is now behind him, the latter years of the '70s saw him produce what many feel have been his best books—separate studies on the churches in India and Zaire. And, from the sounds that filter through to my office from his tireless typewriter, I can well believe that the '80s promise “more to follow.” Indeed, in his class lectures and at special SWM convocations he continues to stir us to be more fully caught up in the task of making Christ known, loved, and served throughout the world.<sup>17</sup>

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15 Donald McGavran to Peter Wagner, December 16, 1979.

16 Arthur Glasser to Fuller Faculty Senate, May 25, 1979.

17 Arthur F. Glasser, “Handing on the Torch,” *Theology News & Notes* [1980, 27(1)]:4.

Glasser had overseen the expansive influence of the School of World Mission on the world scene. Beginning with the Lausanne Congress for World Evangelism (1974), SWMers had participated in virtually all major gatherings during the remainder of the decade—most recently the Consultation on World Evangelization (COWE) held in Pattaya, Thailand. SWM was just beginning to respond to the American scene and the missiological debates of the 1980s.

When Glasser retired in 1980, Paul E. Pierson was appointed to take his place. A pastor and former missionary to Brazil, Pierson held a PhD in New Testament and church history. With extensive experience in evangelism, church planting, and education, hopes ran high that he would lead the SWM-ICG into a new missionary thrust in the 1980s. As he assumed the duties of dean in June, Pierson highlighted several challenging issues for the school. Among these was the importance of continuing research on unreached people groups, especially the Hindus, Muslims, and Mainland Chinese. Then, since Southern California was one of the most ethnically diverse locations in the world, he wanted SWM to function as a laboratory of cross-cultural witness.

From his own experience in Europe, Pierson knew how resistant and nominal people residing in the midst of the old Christendom could be. He believed that it was crucial for SWM to evaluate the life and outreach of the historical church in the life of what was being learned from the Third World. Pierson appreciated Donald's and the SWM-ICG's emphasis on church growth, but he also felt the need for the school to think seriously about qualitative growth. His background in Latin America, which tends to view church growth almost exclusively as Protestants and Pentecostals won from nominal Roman Catholic culture, and his time in Europe ministering among nominal Europeans, had led him to a concern about church renewal, or, in his thought pattern, qualitative growth. He asked, "Can our understanding of church growth evolve sufficiently, without losing its focus on evangelism and church planting, to deal with these issues?"<sup>18</sup>

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18 Paul E. Pierson, "Receiving the Torch," *Theology, News and Notes*, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA (March 1980), 7.

That was a revealing question, for although no one realized it at the time, Pierson's interest in church renewal signaled the beginning of a change in the SWMs direction. One person who raised the issue was David Rambo, vice-president of overseas ministries for the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA). In a letter written in May 1980, he first thanked Donald for his continued interest in the C&MA and then promised, "We're sending more people your way and will continue to do so as long as the Institute of Church Growth does not become lost in the School of World Missions."<sup>19</sup> Rambo saw the potential danger of church growth evangelism and church planting being downsized in the midst of an academic missiology focused on many good things. Donald immediately wrote to dean Pierson sending him a copy of Rambo's letter. He alerted Pierson to the reality that

Dr. Rambo is typical of the whole Conservative Evangelical company of missions (EFMA IFMA) from whom we have always gotten most of our research associates (students).

These missionary societies send their men to us because they like the stress on effective evangelism/church growth. They are not enamoured of academic missiology, theory, controversy, sterile debate, fine spun ideas as to what ought to work.<sup>20</sup>

Donald felt church growth was beginning to be lost in the School of World Mission and asked Pierson to "exercise your authority steadily in the favor of sound missiology cast in forms which appeal to the missions from which we shall get students."<sup>21</sup>

At the Council on World Evangelism, debate had swirled around two issues key to the Church Growth Movement—the primacy of evangelism in the mission of the church and the people approach to evangelism. Donald was not involved, but Wagner presented a plenary report promoting the people approach to evangelism. After much debate, the congress affirmed the primacy of evangelism, but the people approach to evangelism had

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19 David L. Rambo to Donald A. McGavran, May 8, 1980.

20 Donald McGavran to Paul Pierson, May 15, 1980.

21 Ibid.

been somewhat misunderstood. While the feedback was positive, members needed more time to digest this new approach to evangelism.

Looking back, it was evident that God had blessed the SWM-ICG. They had assembled a world-renowned faculty, launched the new field of missiology, energized the concept of unreached people groups, and entered the emerging field of North America. Originally, the SWM-ICG faculty had not viewed America as a mission field. They had not been interested in involving themselves in the debate in North America. In their minds, that was something the FTS should do. Besides, they did not desire to divert attention away from the unfinished task of taking the gospel to all the tribes, clans, and peoples of the world. The United States was not considered a mission field in the 1970s, but that perspective changed during the 1980s, as more and more people came to the realization that there was a larger concentration of non-Christians in North America than in 95% of the countries in the United Nations! When this reality was accepted, it was only natural for the dynamic of the SWM-ICG to turn to North America.

Glasser queried Donald in March regarding his desired level of involvement in teaching at the SWM. The correspondence appeared to be a gracious way of letting him know that the Fuller administration wanted him to be around but to curtail his teaching load. "I have discussed with the FTS administration," wrote Glasser, "our united desire that you continue to occupy your present office whether you teach courses or not. I am happy to report that the Provost and President agree that you should have access to your office for as far in the future as you wish. Indeed, we must keep Donald Anderson McGavran at the center of the SWM for as long as he wishes to remain in our midst!"<sup>22</sup>

Glasser informed Donald that he had been reappointed as senior professor of mission, church growth and South Asian studies.

Of course, you can be sure that all of us on the SWM faculty are truly grateful to the Lord that you desire to continue in harness with us in the common task. Your presence, friendship and participation in the work of the SWM are much appreciated. Indeed, we wonder where we would be without your constant attention to "the priority"

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22 Arthur Glasser to Donald McGavran, March 31, 1980.

and your faithfulness in reminding us of your obligation to keep the SWM on track. God has certainly given you “the grace of discernment.” You see farther down that track than we do!

A new crop of SWMers will be on hand with their candles, and we will want to set them burning from your flame.<sup>23</sup>

Glasser expressed his personal appreciation for McGavran and his wife and encouraged him to take time to rest during the summer months.

For most of his teaching career, Donald had focused on applying Church Growth ideas to peoples and countries other than the United States. A development took place in 1980, however, as he planned a departure from his normal emphasis toward a focus on the United States. He explained his thinking to Bob Meye, dean of Fuller Theological Seminary:

In the winter quarter I shall be teaching a course, CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURES. . . . I am planning a departure. I intend to use most of my time discussing adapting to culture in the United States. And not to the cultures of American ethnic minorities either, but to the cultures of the great white majority, the middle class and upper class whites, the university elites, the upper crust, and rulers of the media, political parties and labor unions.<sup>24</sup>

Donald’s purpose in this course was to discuss what was a biblical and permissible adaptation to the culture within the United States. In the 1970s he had felt the SWM was “leaning too far in the direction of an uncritical adaptation to other cultures, to a deification of pluralism for pluralism’s sake.” His desire for this “planned departure” was to discuss the same issues as related to the American Church Growth scene. The course was accepted by the FTS administration and cross-listed for theology and missiology students.<sup>25</sup>

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23 Art Glasser to Donald McGavran, June 5, 1980.

24 Donald McGavran to Robert “Bob” Meye, October 2, 1980.

25 Donald McGavran note, October 6, 1980.

Charles W. Bryan, vice-president for overseas operations of the foreign mission board of the Southern Baptist Convention, invited Donald to speak at its winter staff conference from January 26-30, 1981. Bryan sent a letter to Dean Pierson requesting Donald's release from teaching so that he could speak at this training event. Pierson's reply demonstrated a magnanimous attitude and willingness to share Donald with others. "He is such a valuable resource," wrote Pierson, "that he must be made available to the whole church of Jesus Christ, as God continues to give him strength."<sup>26</sup>

Everyone realized that Donald would retire someday. His energy level, being high, often disguised his real age and the toll all the travel was taking on his life. By 1981 he seriously envisioned retiring and working out of his home.

Dear Dr. Pierson:

In continuation of our conversation of a month ago, I think I should inform you that it is my strong present inclination to withdraw from the School of Missions faculty on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 1981. I shall have by then served the School of Missions for sixteen years. Several tasks which I want to do await my retirement. Under your effective direction, the School is prospering. On the other hand, because I teach here, many opportunities to serve the cause of missions do open up before me. As I serve them, the School of Missions and Fuller Seminary appear before the missionary world in a favorable light. So I have swung to and fro in regard to what I ought to do. Nevertheless at present I am inclining strongly toward terminating my relationship and working entirely out of my home. At your convenience, I think we ought to talk about the matter.

Having heard nothing for some time about my proposal that Fuller start a Missionary Archives, I presume that the seminary administration regards it rather coolly. If this is the case, I think I ought to withdraw my offer and plan to put my archives elsewhere.

As you may imagine, I regard the School of Missions and Fuller Seminary with affection. Being the founding dean of the School

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26 Paul Pierson to Charles W. Bryan, October 29, 1980.

of Missions, it was my privilege to develop a curriculum and a fundamental purpose—rather new among schools of missions—which have been widely copied. They are proving of great value in the carrying out of the Great Commission. If under your direction the School of Missions keeps its fundamental purpose bright, if our graduates are steered away from contemporary deviations and firmly based on effective world evangelization, then this School of Missions will continue, for many years, to lead the missionary enterprise of many lands.

God grant you and the School His richest blessings in the years ahead.

Very sincerely yours in Christ,  
Donald McGavran<sup>27</sup>

Donald and Mary had carefully saved correspondence throughout their years as missionaries in India. Each time they journeyed home on furlough, approximately once every seven years, they had brought papers to Indianapolis. Over the course of their lives they had collected approximately twenty-three boxes of archived materials, covering the years 1923-1965. Originally, the Northwest Christian College planned on housing the materials in a missionary archive. Unfortunately, a financial crisis had arisen that had made it impossible for the school to follow through on organizing the archives.<sup>28</sup> Donald had offered his collective archives to FTS, but when it became apparent that Fuller was cool to the idea of starting a missionary archive he decided to withdraw his offer and seek to place the materials elsewhere. He eventually placed them primarily in two locations—the Billy Graham Center Archives in Wheaton, Illinois, and the U.S. Center for Missions Library in Pasadena, California.

Donald and Arn were collaborating on a new book. Tape recordings had been made of McGavran's lectures presented during the traveling seminar in 1977. The transcriptions of those lectures formed the foundation of their new book. The two signed a contract with Tyndale House Publishers

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27 Donald McGavran to Paul E. Pierson, March 28, 1981.

28 Donald McGavran to Paul E. Pierson, no date, but sometime in 1980.

on April 14, 1980, but the exact title was still in question. The working title on the contact was *Biblical Foundations of Church Growth*, but Donald was not happy with this. The book was finally released in 1981 as *Back to Basics in Church Growth*. It contained six chapters and is the closest Donald ever came to writing a theology of church growth. The book still serves as a clear presentation of McGavran and Arn's staunchly evangelical position. Its content attests to their belief in the authority of the Bible, the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world, the importance of fellowship and the church, and commitment to the Great Commission.

When Pierson took over as dean, he brought with him a keen interest in leadership development. As the SWM-ICG faculty discussed the possibility of adding a concentration on leadership to the curriculum, they naturally turned attention toward possible faculty to teach in that field. A former student who had studied at SWM from 1979 to 1981, Robert "Bobby" Clinton (b. 1936) soon came to mind. He had impressed both Wagner and Kraft while serving as their teaching assistant and had completed a doctor of missiology degree in ethnotheology under Kraft in 1981.<sup>29</sup> By 1984 the concentration in leadership had become so popular that a search was made for a second professor of leadership. Edgar "Eddie" Elliston (b. 1943) was hired in 1985. He had studied under Tippett and Orr at SWM in the mid to late 1960s and had worked as a teaching assistant to Winter. While serving on the mission field in Kenya and Ethiopia, Ellison had completed a PhD in cross-cultural education at Michigan State in 1982.

Kraft had envisioned a SWB program for Bible translators ever since his coming to Fuller and had tried moving in that direction by recommending two part-time faculty members, Tom (1939-1985) and Betty Sue (b. 1943) Brewster, in 1975. However, the Brewsters were focused more on language learning than on Bible translation. Kraft turned his attention to R. Daniel Shaw (b. 1943), whom he had originally met in 1980 when Shaw taught a translation course at SWM while on furlough. Shaw held a PhD in anthropology from the University of Papua New Guinea. He also had extensive experience in Bible translation work, a natural fit to begin a new translation program at the SWM.

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29 Charles H. Kraft, *SWM/SIS at FORTY: A Participant Observer's View of Our History* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2005), 156.

Similar to Kraft, Glasser had harbored a desire for the SWM to focus part of its program on China. No doubt his experience as a missionary to China played a major role in his interest in starting a program for Chinese and Chinese Americans. The opportunity came in 1982 when Che Bin Tan (b. 1937) was hired to launch a Chinese Studies Program. He held a PhD in theology and had been instrumental in founding the China Graduate School of Theology in 1975. The program ran for only nine years but raised the visibility of training persons of Chinese ancestry.

Donald had little to do with these new additions to the faculty, and the variety of new directions—leadership, Bible translation, and Chinese studies—demonstrated the movement away from the core church growth missiology established in the early years of SWM-ICG. There were all good and needed areas of training, but the continued diversification effectively removed Donald’s church growth missiology from the core of the curriculum.

By 1981 the term *Church Growth* was beginning to lose its technical meaning. In a letter to Elmer Towns, Wagner explained, “I recall seeing an article in which the Xerox corporation, pioneers in photocopying, lamented over the fact that their brand name had become a generic term and that some were making ‘xeroxes’ on a Minolta! Those of us associated with the original Church Growth Movement would like to hope that a similar thing will not happen with our ‘brand name.’ . . . It seems to me that those who originally coin such terms (when it is possible to trace them), should have the privilege of determining their meaning.”<sup>30</sup>

Donald rejoiced at the “tremendous advances in church growth thinking” that Wagner was making. He believed that “nothing less than a turn around, which has affected the Evangelical wing of the Church and will affect the Conciliar Wing, is in the making.”<sup>31</sup> He had read and written appreciatively of Wagner’s new book, *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel*. He was, however, concerned with the use of the concept “Gospel of the Kingdom.”

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30 Peter Wagner to Elmer Towns, October 12, 1981.

31 Donald McGavran to Peter Wagner, March 2, 1981.

I know that there are perhaps a dozen passages where The Word speaks of “the Good News of the kingdom of God”; yet I doubt if we help the cause by equating “the whole duty of Christians,” the whole task of applying Christianity to contemporary life, and of implementing what we perceive to be God’s will for man under these circumstances with “The Gospel.” I think we are on sounder biblical grounds when we limit the word “Gospel” to the unquestioned good news that when weak sinful burdened men and women believe in Jesus Christ, accept Him as Lord and Saviour and become responsible members of His Body, the Church, then their sins are forgiven, the burden rolls off, they walk [in] light and are saved. That is truly good news, very good news.

In the dozen or so passages where Scripture speaks of “the good news of the kingdom,” this must be understood as “The good news that King Jesus has come. Salvation is now available.” The Lord clearly announced that those who would follow Him must be prepared for a very hard road indeed, be persecuted, leave father and mother, have no place to lay their heads, etc.; at the same time, they would at once be members of the elect, would be in the everlasting kingdom, would be the redeemed, the Body of Christ. That, not the resulting duties, is the good news of the kingdom.<sup>32</sup>

Critics of the Church Growth Movement have often disagreed with Donald’s perspective that the gospel of the kingdom is synonymous with the gospel of salvation.

During 1981 articles continued to flow from Donald’s creative mind. “The Entrepreneur in Modern Missions” spoke of the need to develop differing strategies to reach the lost as times changed. In this article Donald listed five stages of his missionary career and the changes in strategy that he made in each stage. The first stage was in the early fifties, when he realized the Mission Station Approach was holding the church back from evangelizing the lost. He had developed the people movement and bridges of God concepts as ways to answer this problem. In the later fifties he learned that a lack of interest in disciple making was a major barrier. In response,

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32 Donald McGavran to Peter Wagner, October 30, 1981.

he had determined to raise interest in the church's fundamental purpose. When the early sixties came around, he felt that a lack of anthropological knowledge was hindering the church's advance. He answered this challenge by designing strategies based heavily on sociological sciences and by calling to the faculty of SWM-ICG anthropologists. A fourth stage had occurred in the late sixties when the Conciliar wing of the church had begun to overlook the discipling of the nations. McGavran's strategy was to point out the new theology and theory, while calling the church to hold steady to classical evangelism. Finally, in the seventies, he began to see that the older mission agencies and churches were abandoning the younger churches, while surrendering the call to evangelize the unreached multitudes. This called for a new strategy and he began to focus on challenging the older churches and missions not to leave the younger churches alone to complete the missionary task. His point throughout the article is that new strategic fronts must be developed as the world changes.

By the 1980s church growth thought had begun to wane as the integrating force in the SWM. In the 1960s the School of World Mission was formed chiefly around the church growth paradigm. Students came to Fuller to study with Donald and learn the fresh insights coming from the Church Growth School of Thought. When the 1970s dawned, Wagner was added to the faculty as the second professor in church growth studies. Other changes took place in the SWM, but the church growth emphasis continued strong. There were no core courses, but everyone who graduated from SWM took two courses in principles and procedures of church growth. Later principles and procedures was reduced to one course, but strategy of missions and advanced church growth were added. Almost all students continued to take those courses.

Eventually, church growth became just one of five core curriculums. All students continued to take principles and procedures, but fewer took the remaining two advanced courses in church growth. By the mid 1980s church growth could no longer be viewed as the integrating force in the curriculum. With Donald's retirement, Wagner became the sole professor of church growth on the faculty. By 1982 students who were graduating with "church growth eyes" were more the exception rather than the rule. Indeed, the bulk of Wagner's teaching on church growth was occurring in

the doctor of ministry program, where he taught twelve units of church growth, versus only four units at SWM. Of the 175 students taking courses in winter quarter 1982, only 22 took the advanced course Strategies of church growth. Wagner hoped that a second professor of church growth would be hired once the McGavran Chair of Church Growth was established.<sup>33</sup>

Nonetheless, the Church Growth Movement was in full force by the 1980s. Twenty-one magazines—e.g., *Christianity Today*, *Christian Life*, *Eternity*—had devoted entire issues to the topic. *How to Grow a Church* topped the list of church growth books with total sales of 115,000, and Wagner's *Your Church Can Grow* had 80,000 copies in circulation. Arn's *Church Growth*, *America* magazine reached 6,000 people each month, and 60,000 pastors, executives, and lay leaders had attended basic, advanced, and specialty seminars on church growth. The CEFI had trained additional thousands, and about 700 pastors had received at least 12 units of academic church growth training through Fuller's D.Min. program, with some 200 receiving 24 units of training. Of the 102 D.Min. dissertations written by 1981, 46 (amounting to 45%) were on church growth. Donald continued to defend the Church Growth School in a response to the article "Missiological Pitfalls in McGavran's Theology," written by Gary Bekker. His rejoinder appeared in the April 1982 issue of the *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, where he sought to demonstrate his commitment to biblical ecclesiology and Trinitarian theology.<sup>34</sup>

One of the disappointments in Donald's career was the fact that his own denomination—Christian Church Disciples of Christ—had not, for the most part, adopted church growth thinking. He was delighted, therefore, to discover that a Disciples of Christ minister was doing a doctoral dissertation on the Christian Church Disciples of Christ. "In reply to your kind letter of May 12<sup>th</sup>," he wrote, "let me say that I am very pleased that at long last there appears to be a church growth movement taking shape in the Christian Church Disciples of Christ." He continued, "It pleased me greatly that our Brotherhood (which lost 32% of our members between

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33 Peter Wagner, "Church Growth in the SWM Curriculum," Pasadena, CA: Unpublished article (February 8, 1982).

34 Donald A. McGavran, "Response," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* [April 1982], 82–83.

1965 and 1975) is now waking to the extreme importance to EFFECTIVE evangelism.”<sup>35</sup>

An interview with Donald appeared in *OMS Outreach* during 1982, in which he shared details of his life story. One insight of the interview is the clarity of his view of Christian mission. As he summarized it, “Christian mission is bringing people to repent of their sins, accept Jesus Christ as Savior, belong to His Body the Church, do as He commands, go out and spread the Good News, and multiply churches.”<sup>36</sup> It had been his life message that evangelism had been confused with numerous other good things, such as education, catechism classes, medical relief, and social programs. While Donald felt that all good works were necessary and helpful, they were not evangelism. Evangelism was an input term meaning that the lost should be won to Christ; when that was done, they should be baptized and brought into the church. The result was an output term—Church Growth! As coined by McGavran, church growth is just the expected result of being obedient to the Great Commission. Church growth was, and is, effective evangelism.

In the August-September 1982 issue of *Mission Frontiers*, the Bulletin of the U.S. Center for World Mission, the establishment of the McGavran Library, to which McGavran bequeathed a major portion of his personal library and papers, was announced. McGavran’s library was arranged on the shelves at the U.S. Center in the same manner and position in which it had them in his own library.

In 1982 FTS came to offer a new course, co-taught by Wagner and Wimber. Widely recognized as MC510, it focused on healing. The course created quite a stir at Fuller, as well as among others who heard about it. Naturally, people desired to know Donald’s viewpoint, and *Christian Life* interviewed him for an article. In the article he admitted that he came from a denomination that did not emphasize healing but indicated that his own research over a 10- to 15-year period had led him to change his mind regarding the subject: “There are many causes of church growth. In some cases there has been great church growth without any healing at all. But on the other hand, a great deal of church growth has taken place by virtue of

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35 Donald McGavran to David Waser, May 23, 1982.

36 “Interview with Dr. Donald McGavran,” *OMS Outreach* [1982], 4-7.

healing campaigns of one sort or another.” He concluded, “We must avoid thinking that the healing ministry is the only open door. It is not. God uses many methods. Our Lord used many methods. He healed, yes. But He also taught. So it is the total picture that we’ve got to see.”<sup>37</sup>

The essential Church Growth principles, as developed by Donald, could be summarized in three statements. First, the essential conviction of mission/church growth is to realize that God wants His lost children found and enfolded. Church growth explodes from the life-giving nature of the eternal God. Jesus Christ gave His disciples the Great Commission, and the entire New Testament assumes that Christians will proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and encourage men and women to become His disciples and responsible members of His church.

Discovering the facts of church growth is the second essential principle of church growth thinking. Responsible research into the causes and barriers to church growth must be completed. God has given us a Great Commission, and we dare not assume that all is going well or that we are doing the best that can be done. The Lord of the harvest wants His lost sheep found, and we must be accountable to His command. Discovering the degree of growth or of decline and stating such facts meaningfully is crucial to faithful ministry.

The third essential principle is developing specific plans based on the facts that are discovered. Taking the initiative to set goals and develop bold strategies to win people to Christ and plant new churches must be the practical results of meaningful conviction and research.

These three statements of the philosophy of church growth thought form the elements of McGavran’s church growth thinking. While other principles and concepts would be added to church growth thought in the ensuing years, these elements continue to define the core.<sup>38</sup>

Donald continued to contribute articles to various publications, even as he curtailed his travel and speaking engagements due to his advancing

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37 Donald McGavran, “The Total Picture,” *Christian Life* (October, 1982), 39-40.

38 Church Growth Thought can be summarized in seven foundational principles: People Movements, Pragmatic Research, Scientific Research, Social Networks, Receptivity, Priority of Evangelism, and the Central Purpose of Disciple-making. See Gary L. McIntosh, “The Church Growth Movement,” in *Leadership Handbooks of Practical Theology* Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 31-41.

age. The January 1983 issue of *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* published "The Priority of Ethnicity," in which he appealed for leading people to Christ within their ethnic and social classes. He also answered fears that his strategy would perpetuate segregation and injustice.<sup>39</sup>

After reading *On The Crest of the Wave* by Wagner, he wrote a kindly letter to Wagner praising the new book. Donald continued to keep up with the theological understanding of the missiological issues of the early 1980s. He told Wagner,

The essential question in all the confusion which surrounds mission and which permeates every discussion of evangelism, social action, and many other responsibilities which fall on Christians is the authority of the Bible.

If it is God's revelation, written by men, of course, but God's revelation nevertheless, then we must believe John 14:6 and kindred passages. But millions of Christians do not believe that the Bible is God's revelation at all.

While the leadership of the large conciliar denominations and state denominations has very largely lost any real belief in the Bible as God's Word (and assiduously conceals such loss by all manner of circumlocutions), most of the rank and file of practicing Christians still believe in the Bible as God's revelation.

THE ONLY WAY in which justice, according to God's own code revealed in the Bible, is going to be practiced by Marxists, Hindus, Muslims, Secularists, Buddhists, and others is for very, very large numbers in each of these camps to become ardent Bible-believing followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. Someone needs to shout this across America and Europe. Perhaps you.

So, Pete, the battle goes on. If the Church Growth Movement can keep on insisting that accomplished enrollment of men and women in Christ's body is a God-commanded duty and privilege, much will have been accomplished.<sup>40</sup>

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39 Donald A. McGavran, "The Priority of Ethnicity," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* [1983], 15-23.

40 Donald McGavran to Peter Wagner, August 29, 1983.

From this letter and the article in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, it is certain that Donald continued to be concerned that the priority of evangelism be held firm.