

# HOW DONALD MCGAVRAN HAS IMPACTED ONE URBAN CHURCH PLANT AND INDIRECTLY INFLUENCED THOUSANDS OF OTHER CHURCHES: AN ANALYSIS OF THE JOURNEY CHURCH OF THE CITY

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## ***Abstract***

This essay offers five specific principles from Donald McGavran that have directly influenced The Journey Church in New York City, San Francisco, and Boca Raton, Florida, and indirectly thousands of other churches (through the writing and coaching ministry of Nelson Searcy with Church Leader Insights). McGavran's principles of missionary eyes, goal setting, assimilation, homogeneity, and a Great Commission focus have proven invaluable in this church plant and offer a similar value to other churches seeking to make a difference in their communities.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Although I never met Donald McGavran, he has had an enormous impact on my ministry. McGavran's wisdom and work have shaped not only my own urban church plant, but also other churches around the world through my extensive writing and coaching.

I started The Journey Church in Manhattan in 2002. Following the method I have since written about in *Launch: Starting a New Church from Scratch*, my team and I began with six monthly services before our grand opening on Easter Sunday. We had no money, no members, and no consistent place to meet. Given the challenges we were facing in trying to get this young church off the ground, I was ecstatic when one hundred ten people came for our kickoff service. However, the next Sunday I learned my first church growth principle: not everyone who attends church on Easter comes back the following week. We had fifty-five people return. Over the next three months, through my dynamic leadership and charismatic preaching, I grew the church down to thirty-five.

The decline from one hundred ten people to thirty-five people brought me to a crisis point. I realized that if something did not change, we would have to close our doors before the end of the year. I prayed and asked the Lord what we needed to do. Then I panicked. In the process, I also learned my next church growth principle: before God does a work in your church, he must do a work in you. God began to work in me as I transitioned from being a *student* of church growth to being a *practitioner*.

The shift to church growth practitioner was significant for me. Until that point, I had been a student in the truest sense of the word. I was a voracious reader of all things related to growth and evangelism. I had been in hands-on ministry for over a decade, working on staff at small churches and at a mega-church. Until I leapt into the trenches of starting The Journey Church in Manhattan, I had never been in the lead chair. I had never been the one responsible for making the big decisions. As I adjusted to my new role, I began asking myself significant questions: *What does it mean to be a practitioner? How do I put these ideas I've studied into place? How do I really begin to live out the principles I've found to be true?*

During this crucial time in my ministry and in my growth as a leader, Donald McGavran's teaching began to permeate my consciousness. I started discovering the breadth of his wisdom by learning from those who came after him. Through studying the work of Peter Wagner, Elmer Towns, George Hunter, and Gary McIntosh, my interest was piqued about the man who not only trained them, but who also sparked the entire modern Church Growth Movement. Committed to learning all I could about McGavran, I devoured his classic text *Understanding Church Growth*. The insights it contains are so profound that I keep a copy close by and reread it every year.

Because of McGavran's teaching, I began to consider questions like: *Am I taking care of my first time guests? How well am I assimilating newcomers? Am I being intentional about new believer follow up?* Now fully entrenched in my role as a practitioner, I was beginning to understand the necessity of putting proven church growth principles into practice.

Slowly but surely, as my team and I began to pray more than ever before, strive to preach the Word as clearly as possible, and implement McGavran's

teaching into our framework, the church began to turn around. The process was slow and laborious, but The Journey Church survived—and has thrived. Now multisite, The Journey is certainly not the largest church in America. We have never tried to be. Instead, we focus on ministering in difficult communities. Our intentional church planting philosophy is to start churches in areas that are eighty percent or higher unchurched, hence our presence in New York City, San Francisco, and South Florida. In the future, we plan on expanding to Los Angeles and London, in addition to other large, urban areas.

The following five church growth principles from McGavran have proven to be indispensable at The Journey, as we have grown from a congregation of thirty-five into a healthy, large, multicity church, reaching thousands of new believers every year.

### **PRINCIPLE ONE: KEEP MISSIONARY EYES**

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*Christian mission is bringing people to repent of their sins, accept Jesus as Savior, belong to his Body the Church, do as he commands, go out and spread the Good News and multiply churches.<sup>1</sup>*

Adopting McGavran's view of Christian mission has also been described as choosing to have "missionary eyes." When we grasped the importance of having missionary eyes at The Journey, we began to look at our area of service as a true mission field. We went from seeing ourselves as church planters to seeing ourselves as missionaries—an important mental shift whether ministering locally or on an international scale. We had to be intentional about stepping back and objectively observing the people in the environment to which we were called. What were they dealing with? How were they hurting? What did they need from us?

Missionaries approach situations differently. They are willing to endure more difficulty. They understand spiritual warfare and often spend more time on their knees. Approaching every day from a missionary perspective has had tremendous impact on how my staff and I think about what God has told us to do. For example, when recruiting others, we are essentially looking for those who are willing to be missionaries without getting their passport stamped. After all, crossing the Hudson River into New York City feels like crossing into international territory, in many ways.

We have found it particularly important to cultivate missionary eyes in staff members who come from highly church areas. Staff from the "Bible belt," for instance, have to be intentional about recognizing that what they took for granted in their previous areas (such as basic biblical knowledge or

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<sup>1</sup> "Interview with Dr. Donald McGavran." *OMS Outreach* 18(2): 82–83 (quoted in Gary L. McIntosh, "The Life and Ministry of Donald A. McGavran: A Short Overview," presentation, ASCG annual meeting, November 2005, 77).

a general understanding of the value of attending church) does not apply in their new mission field.<sup>2</sup> Not only do we have to be diligent about helping them understand their new ministry context, they must also be willing to adopt the missionary perspective so critical to ministering effectively.

Sometimes it gets difficult to maintain my own missionary heart. I get so caught up in doing church that I forget to think like a missionary. One of my favorite exercises is to spend some time sitting at one of the many outdoor cafés in my neighborhood, watching the people stream by. I remind myself that eighty percent of those I see are unchurched. I remind myself of their hurt, their darkness, and their spiritual emptiness. Taking time to observe the people in the community to which God has called me always stokes a sense of responsibility within me and refreshes my missionary eyes.

## **PRINCIPLE TWO: SET GODLY GOALS**

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*Nothing focuses effort like setting a goal. As Christians seek to do effective evangelism, they need to set membership goals. Goal setting focuses their efforts on the main task.*<sup>3</sup>

Goal setting is a largely overlooked concept in the church world, but McGavran understood the importance of setting godly goals and spoke on the topic often. His views resonate with me, as I am a goal setter by nature. Over the years, we have worked at The Journey to incorporate wise, God-directed goal setting into our church growth strategy. Through this process, I have learned that while there are good goals we can define and toward which we can work, there are also goals we should be careful about setting.

We have learned to keep goals focused on areas where we have the ability to control key factors, while resisting the temptation to set goals that should be exclusively God's business. For example, one time we set a goal for first-time guests at The Journey, but I am not sure that is something we are able to control. We can pray for guests. We can set a goal to train one hundred percent of our people to invite their friends. We can do measured, strategic outreach in the community. However, we likely should not set a specific goal for the number of guests who will come from those efforts. We have no control over who walks through our doors; only God does.

In the same vein, The Journey has never set a conversion goal. Conversion is not something we can control. We can, however, set goals that God might bless in order to bring more people to a place conducive to conver-

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<sup>2</sup> See Barna's recent study on the "least churched cities in the U.S.," which ranks each of The Journey's ministry areas in the top 11 "churchless cities" (San Francisco—1; New York—10; West Palm Beach—11). Accessed 4 February 2016, <http://cities.barna.org/barna-cities-the-top-churchless-metro-areas/>.

<sup>3</sup> Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., rev. and ed. C. Peter Wagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 265.

sion. For example, we set goals for the number of people involved in doing servant evangelism projects, receiving evangelism training, and actively sharing their faith. These goals allow us to do our part without trying to encroach on God doing his.

We believe that this approach is in line with the way the apostle Paul depicts goal setting. Paul “presses on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14). This prize is likely “the full and complete gaining of Christ for whose sake everything else has been counted loss.”<sup>4</sup> The goal and the prize are two separate entities; it is in attaining the goal that one receives the prize. To use Paul’s athletic imagery, the goal is the finish line, and the prize is the reward for having completed the race.<sup>5</sup> Applying this to goal setting in the church, we believe that the prize (which only God can give) is conversion, but we strive toward specific goals in hopes of seeing this prize of conversion realized in the lives of those to whom we minister.

God has blessed our church greatly through servant evangelism. Throughout each year, we train groups of people to go into the community and show God’s love to others in a practical way. For example, a group of volunteers might go to the park on a hot day and distribute to runners cold bottles of water and an invitation to church. We term every person we encounter a “servant evangelism touch” and set goals for how many servant evangelism touches we hope to make during different seasons.

One year, we set a goal to make one million servant evangelism touches. We were a church of less than a thousand at the time, but we embraced the God-sized goal of touching a million people in our city. Ultimately, we did not quite hit that goal, but the excitement that surrounded it pushed us to reach more people than we ever would have otherwise. Our members and regular attenders were on the lookout for opportunities to make a servant evangelism touch everywhere they went. Such is the beauty of goal setting. As McGavran teaches, specific goals focus our efforts and increase our effectiveness even if we fall short in the end.

The year we set the goal of one million touches, we were meeting in an off-Broadway theater in midtown Manhattan. One Sunday, a handful of members came to me at the end of the service and said, “There’s a crowd of people downstairs lined up to get into the theater for an event this afternoon. We want to go do servant evangelism.” We had enough extra granola bars from a breakfast we had hosted that morning, plus invitation cards for the current preaching series, for them to make a go of it. With my blessing, they went downstairs to start evangelizing.

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<sup>4</sup> Peter T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 433; cf. Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, WBC 43 (Waco: Word, 1983), 154–155.

<sup>5</sup> O’Brien, *Philippians*, 429.

After I finished the next service, I made my way down to see how they were doing. As I approached the crowd, I saw a marquee that read, “Gay Porn Awards.” We were doing servant evangelism for people in line to get into the Gay Porn Awards! On top of that, our current teaching series, as highlighted on the invitation card we were distributing, was a relationship series called, “Pure Sex.”

Fast-forward two and one-half years. After I gave a convocation address at Liberty University, a young man approached me. He introduced himself and said, “Somebody from your church gave me a granola bar when I was standing in line for the Gay Porn Awards in New York a couple of years ago.” He said, “I never came to your church, but the invitation was enough to get me out of that line and point me back toward where I needed to be.”

God-sized, God-breathed things can happen when you step out and set a goal. We may have only made about forty touches that day in New York, but one young man’s life was changed. Additionally, those forty touches counted toward the million we were trying to make over the course of the year. While we did not hit the goal, we made about 865,000 touches in twelve months. Those touches have led to countless stories of God changing lives, as is evidenced by our record number of baptisms that year.

We have set many other goals along the way. Years ago, we set a goal to be a seven-day-a-week church. We wanted to have people from our small groups doing community service in some form or fashion every single day of the week. We have hit that goal consistently for a number of years now.

We also set goals for the number of people in our small groups. In fact, one of our most controversial goals is to have 110% participation in our weekly groups. Many have misunderstood this goal. They question how 110% participation is even possible. Our goal focuses on 110% of our average attendance. If our average attendance each week is one thousand people, it is not the same thousand people every week. Some come every other week, some once a month. The mix is always slightly different.

Based on one thousand attenders, our goal is to have eleven hundred people in groups. We want everyone who calls The Journey home, even if they are not there every Sunday, to be in a group. I am not sure we have ever hit 110%, but we have been over 100% several times. When I compare that percentage to the average small group ministry, which garners about 30% attendance, or a good Sunday School, which gets about 50%, we are glad we set the focused, God-sized goal we did.

### **PRINCIPLE THREE: HARNESS THE POWER OF ASSIMILATION**

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*Church growth follows where Christians show faithfulness in finding the lost. The purpose is not to search, but to find. When existing Christians, marching obediently under the Lord’s command and filled with his compassion, fold in the wonders and feed the flock, then churches multiply.*

*But, when they permit men and women who have made costly decisions for Christ to drive back into the world, then indeed, churches do not grow. Faithfulness in proclamation and finding is not enough. There must be faithful aftercare. Quality goes hand-in-hand with quantity.<sup>6</sup>*

If there has been one approach at The Journey that has influenced our growth more than anything else, besides the amazing blessing of God, it has been our assimilation system. We learned the value of assimilation early in our church's life. In that first year, when our church was steadily declining, I felt God saying to me, "What are you doing with those first time *gifts* that I am sending you?" I said, "Wait a minute, you mean the first time *guests* that you are sending me?" God said, "No. Every week I send you first time *gifts*. How are you responding to those gifts?" I said, "Well ... I'm counting them. There are usually about twenty people in the room. I can look around and say, 'I have never seen you, I have never seen you,' and I'm writing down a few of their names when I catch them." God said, "Maybe you can do better than that."

After that, my staff and I began thinking about how to better welcome first time guests and what kind of follow up work we should be doing each week. We started asking questions like: *How should we welcome newcomers? How can we create an environment in an Upper West Side Manhattan culture where people will want to give us their contact information? How do we reach out to them without them scaring them off? What will make them want to come back? Can we develop a process for this?*

Over time, we began to develop our assimilation system, a small portion of which I detail in my book, *Fusion: Turning First-Time Guests into Fully-Engaged Members of Your Church*. In fact, we became laser-focused on assimilation. I knew that if I could get first time guests to come back a second time, they would be more likely to become regular attenders. As regular attenders, they would be more likely to experience the truth of the gospel, be convicted by the Holy Spirit, follow God in faith, trust Jesus for the first time, follow him in baptism, and begin to grow as disciples.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Biblical scholars and sociologists have noted the same phenomenon in both Scripture and society. As Rodney Stark writes, "*Conversion ... occurs when, other things being equal, people have or develop stronger attachments to members of the group than they have to nonmembers*" (Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996], 18, italics his). See also John Lofland and Rodney Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective," in Charles Y. Glock (ed.) *Religion in Sociological Perspective: Essays in the Empirical Study of Religion* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1973); Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 74; Willem Kox, Wim Meeus, and Harm't Hart, "Religious

God helped me recognize that my role as a pastor was not just to proclaim or to feed, but also to fold, as McGavran teaches. Now, I get an assimilation report each month, and I consider it the most important monthly report I review. Recently, our assimilation rate hit an all-time monthly high: 41.9% of our first-timers came back for a second visit. Unfortunately, that month was followed by a month where we hit an all-time low, with a retention rate of just 31.5%. The next month we were at 33.7%, and then the month after we were back up to 37.7%. These are important percentages for me to study. They also help with setting goals for assimilation rates we would like to maintain throughout the year. As part of the intentional goal setting I mentioned above, we have an ongoing God-sized goal of maintaining a 40% assimilation rate.

At The Journey, we have discovered that if we can get a first-time guest in the door, one out of three—and sometimes closer to one out of two—of them will come back. When they return, the assimilation and discipleship process continues. They hear the gospel preached, rub shoulders with believers, and begin to grow spiritually. Assimilation is so key that now, when pastors I coach ask me where they should begin in their efforts to improve the state of their churches, I tell them to start with assimilation. It is foundational to everything we do as church leaders.

## **PRINCIPLE FOUR: BE MINDFUL OF THE HOMOGENOUS**

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### **UNIT PRINCIPLE**

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*Men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers.*<sup>8</sup>

The Homogenous Unit Principle is the most controversial idea McGavran purported. This principle holds that every individual wants to become a

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Conversion of Adolescents: Testing the Lofland and Stark Model of Religious Conversion,” *Sociological Analysis* 52 (1991), 238; Eugene V. Gallagher, “Conversion and Community in Late Antiquity,” *JR* 73, no. 1 (1993), 14; Douglas A. Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 128–36; and Matthew C. Easter, “The Anabaptist Vision of the Church and Faith in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” in Joel B. Green and Tim Meadowcroft (ed.), *Ears That Hear: Explorations in Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013), 162–165.

<sup>8</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 223. The homogeneous unit is simply a section of society in which all the members have some characteristics in common. Thus, a homogeneous unit (or HU, as it is called in church growth jargon) might be a political unit or sub-unit, the characteristic in common is that all the members live within certain geographical confines (95). He goes on to say, “The homogeneous unit is an elastic concept, its meaning depending on the context in which it is used. However, it is a most useful tool for understanding church growth” (96).

Christian without crossing racial, linguistic, or cultural barriers. McGavran first arrived at this truth by observing the problems missionaries were having in India because of the country's caste system. In short, he found that it was difficult for someone from a lower caste to effectively share the gospel with someone from a higher caste, and vice versa.

Therefore, if a missionary were thought to be associated with a lower caste system, he or she could not witness well to those in a higher caste. However, if the missionary were perceived to be part of the same caste that he or she was trying to reach, the potential converts were much more open to the gospel message. Right or wrong, McGavran held that this principle applies to every type of people group. Like reaches like. While there are exceptions, people generally prefer to hear the gospel and to worship within an environment where the other people are like them.

Given the Homogenous Unit Principle, I struggled with how to reach a city as diverse as New York. I was not sure how to decide what audience on which we should focus. While I was wrestling with this issue, a wise pastor advised me, "Don't worry about it so much at this point. Hold services for a few months, see who shows up, and then call that demographic your target." That is exactly what we did. After several monthly services, we took a good look at the type of people coming through our doors and asked ourselves what they had in common. Then we tried to reach more like them, as McGavran's principle dictates.

What Rick Warren has said is true: it takes all different kinds of churches to reach all different kinds of people.<sup>9</sup> It is also true that the most effective churches focus their efforts. More success comes from focusing on a specific demographic rather than broadly trying to reach everyone. Some argue that the Homogenous Unit Principle is constricting, but I have found that it leads to more freedom and fruit.

At The Journey, we have used the Homogenous Unit Principle to identify the type of people we are best at reaching and to help multiply our efforts in those communities. During the first decade of our church, we were most effective at reaching artists and young professionals. As such, we focused our servant evangelism efforts on places like the backstage door of Broadway theaters after the nightly performances or in the center of Wall Street at the end of the business day. This allowed us to attract more of the type of people we were already attracting, which led to synergy, connection, and growth.

The Homogenous Unit Principle has also been criticized for perpetuating a segregated church.<sup>10</sup> We have not found that to be the case. For McGavran,

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<sup>9</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 36.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, David Swanson, "Down with the Homogeneous Unit Principle?," *Christianity Today* (August 2010; accessed 4 February 2016: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2010/august-online-only/down-with-homogeneous-unit-principle.html>).

as for us, the homogeneous unit is best understood as a section of society in which all of the members have characteristics in common, and this need not be limited to racial identity. A homogeneous unit might be comprised of any number of characteristics that the members share within certain geographical confines. As such, it is an “elastic concept.”<sup>11</sup>

When we began thinking through how the Homogenous Unit Principle applied to starting The Journey, our prayer was that the church would look like the city. New York City is highly multicultural, and The Journey is a true reflection of that diversity. The race and class composition inside our church largely matches the demographic makeup of Manhattan. We have discovered that, for us, homogeneity is centered not on race or class, but on life situations, interests, and common activities.

Now that The Journey is larger and operates in multiple cities, our focus is much broader. Since we have more people, we can reach different segments of society and minister to all types. Nevertheless, as the church grows and matures, we are seeing a new homogenous unit arising in our church: the unity of Christ, just as Paul expected (Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11).

#### **PRINCIPLE FIVE: STAY FOCUSED ON THE GREAT COMMISSION**

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*These good deeds must, of course, be done, and Christians will do them. I myself was doing many of them. But they must never replace the essential task of mission, discipling the peoples of Earth.*<sup>12</sup>

One of McGavran’s early driving concerns was that the term *evangelism* was becoming watered down. Rather than referring to the spreading of the gospel, it had become confused with educational and social programs. Therefore, he coined the term *church growth* as a way to describe the work of the Great Commission. At its core, church growth is about effective evangelism; it is about a passionate focus on reaching people for Jesus. As McGavran noted, the good deeds that many call evangelism are beneficial, but they are not evangelistic by default. Churches have to do more than serve the community. That service must contain an intentional effort to share the gospel message.

Early on in a church plant, most churches are very committed to the Great Commission. In fact, they are willing to live and die by it. As churches grow older and larger, however, keeping a strong external focus on fulfilling the Great Commission becomes more difficult, even when the pastors are personally committed to evangelism.

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<sup>11</sup> “The homogeneous unit is an elastic concept,” therefore, “depending on the context in which it is used” (McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 96).

<sup>12</sup> Donald A. McGavran, “My Pilgrimage in Mission,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (1986), 54.

Recognizing this danger, we have intentionally made it a defining goal at The Journey to keep a relentless, laser-like, uncompromising focus on the Great Commission. We strive to filter every decision we make through the lens of Jesus' words:

Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age (Matthew 28:19–20).

## **CONCLUSION**

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McGavran's work continues to impact The Journey Church to this day. After our tumultuous beginning, God used, and is still using, McGavran's principles to grow us into the church that Christ wishes us to be. Now firmly into our second decade of ministry, I eagerly and prayerfully look forward to what the future holds as we continue to be guided by God's Word and McGavran's timeless church growth principles.

### **About the Authors**

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