

DONALD MCGAVRAN: A MISSIONARY IN INDIA

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- Gary L. McIntosh has spent the last twelve years researching and writing a complete biography on the life and ministry of Donald A. McGavran. We are pleased to present here the third of several excerpts from the forthcoming biography.

Abstract

Donald McGavran served as a director of Christian education and denominational executive in India for the United Christian Missionary Society from 1923 to 1936. During those years he completed a Ph.D. in Education from Columbia University, and met J. Waskom Pickett who helped redirect him into the research on church growth. His interest in evangelism eventually led to his demotion to a field evangelist in 1936; a move that would change his life.

Night fell. Exhausted from the day's events of getting ready for their departure from Indianapolis, Donald and Mary fell asleep about 7:30 p.m. and spent a fair night on the train until they were in the station in Cleveland. Mary Theodora broke into a loud and not very enchanting song in the middle of the night while they changed trains. Soon, they were asleep again as the train click-clacked its way to New York.

Mary rose early on the morning of September 17 to see the Hudson River and woke Donald so they could watch the fascinating banks and flanking hills along the way. Startled to find they were only twenty minutes from Grand Central Station, they hurried to dress. Fortunately, they had the luck of the Irish, or as Donald put it, "God protects fools with children." The train ended up being twenty minutes late.

Arriving in New York, the women went directly to the Arlington Hotel on Twenty-Fifth Street, while Donald checked on the baggage. The newly appointed missionaries' freight was at the Disciples Community House located at 147 Second Avenue. All of Donald and Mary's boxes were there in fair shape. However, he was surprised to discover another sixteen boxes belonging to the other missionaries. Transporting the belongings of all the missionaries would pose a difficult situation in Bombay, but that was a problem to handle in the future. They were in New York with activities to do and places to see.

Mary stayed in the hotel most of the day with M.T., while Donald went to the council office to obtain visas and show some of the other women the ocean around Battery Park. Later at the office of the U.S. Lines, he was delighted to learn that the first ship available for passage from England to India was the *Malaja* sailing November 2. They would have to stay in England a full thirty-three days! Concealing his delight at staying in merry England for a month, he tried in vain to get an earlier sailing. He eventually paid \$520 for passage and arranged for shipping of the freight on a later ship. That evening, Donald played nursemaid while the five women attended the play *Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary*.

The morning of November 18 was spent repairing and changing addresses on nineteen boxes of freight. As the only man on the trip, Donald traveled to Hoboken to see if the trunks had arrived and spent some time with Rev. Auston who came down from Yale to see the family. That evening, they all went to see the play *Loyalties*. When the play was over, the six missionaries happened to meet Herbert Banston who had played the part of a general in the play. Riding about five miles on a subway with him, they were thrilled to find out that Mr. Banston's father had been a pastor, and he had two sisters who were missionaries in India.

Things started hopping on the 19th with more packing, filling out paperwork and declarations for the shipment of boxes, and meetings with members of the World Sunday School Association. By the time Donald returned to the hotel at 12:10 p.m., there were a few minutes of turmoil, for the ship was due to disembark at 1:00 p.m.! Donald had simply miscalculated the time, but forty nerve-racking minutes later, they rushed aboard just in time. A few friends had come to see them off, but there was precious little time to talk. The ship pulled away from the dock, and they waved until all were out of sight. Standing on deck, Donald and Mary watched as Lady Liberty and the skyline of New York faded in the distance. After partaking of an excellent late lunch, Donald went immediately to bed and slept all afternoon. He did not get up for supper, but he bathed, went back to bed, and slept until morning.

Donald and Mary passed the first few days eating, sleeping, straightening their room, and taking care of baby Theodora. She was extraordinarily good, especially jolly in the morning, but on some days suffered attacks of colic.

During the evenings, Donald and Mary had prayers around 10:30 p.m. after reading Hosea for evening devotions.

Captain's dinners in the evening were grand affairs, with everyone dressed up and much to eat. The ocean waves and Donald did not agree much of the time, particularly right after he ate. During the first few days of travel, Donald found himself a bit queasy after eating meals and was always prepared to bolt to the edge of the railing when necessary. Donald focused on reading, writing, and taking his turn caring for baby Theodora. He spent time reading John Dewey's *Democracy and Education* and resolved to memorize the meat of the summary at the end of each chapter.

The days of travel lingered on, and everyone began feeling better as they got their sea legs. All of the traveling missionaries, along with baby Theodora, walked and sang together on the deck. On Sundays, they all attended the church service led by the purser, who was an ungodly sort of fellow who had to read his prayers. At least they found it good to sing Christian hymns with other travelers.

On September 26, while Donald walked along the deck near the railing, he noticed the ship was passing a small sailing vessel similar in size to ones that missionaries in earlier days used for voyages. Considering the courage it must have taken for missionaries a hundred years earlier to travel long distances on the ocean, he marveled at their heroism. It took the ship about two hours to pass the smaller sailing vessel, and it heeled over until it seemed it would swamp when the wake of the ship hit it. Fortunately, it rose back up with no damage.

On the morning of September 28, the ship passed Bishops Rock at 9:00 a.m. The sea was calm, and the McGavrans slept on and off all day, wrote letters in the afternoon, and finally arrived at Plymouth at 5:30 p.m. The dark olive of the hillsides along with the gray-washed rock walls, picturesque white buildings, and rock promontory jutting out to sea made an extremely beautiful scene as the missionaries watched from deck. By midnight, they had reached Cherbourg where they exchanged passengers before proceeding on to London. They remained there for over a month while waiting for passage to India.

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The return of Donald McGavran to India in 1923 was a natural expression of his missionary heritage. However, he brought unique gifts and training that no member of his family or colleagues before him had—he was a specialist in religious education. Most missionaries at that time served in one of three areas—medicine, education, or evangelism—and Donald came to revamp the mission's educational program. The main task before him was to improve the training of teachers, revamp the curriculum, and re-emphasize the first purpose of Christian schools—the establishment of the

kingdom of God. In an article written in February 1925, Donald unfolded the task of the Indian schools as “to give their pupils a thoroughly good education; to bring the non-Christian students to a knowledge of Jesus Christ and into discipleship to him; and with the Christian pupils, to look ahead twenty years, see the church of that day, and mould for it a fit, useful and consecrated membership.”¹ In his mind, the schools provided the best opportunity to evangelize non-Christian students. The longer he worked in India, the more he came to believe that the signs pointed to a ripe harvest through the schools. His mission had worked in India for over forty years, since 1882, and he believed that after forty years of seed sowing, the time for harvest was drawing near.

When he arrived on the field, there were eighty-nine missionaries in the United and Central Provinces of India serving with the United Christian Missionary Society. Sixteen organized churches served 2,298 members and 5,630 Sunday school pupils. Thirteen Christian Endeavor Societies boasted 587 members. Four orphanages cared for 435 children, and 2,865 students attended thirty-two schools.

The school year of 1923–24 turned out to be a banner year for the mission. Low incidences of plague allowed students to attend school regularly, and seventy-six percent of the Harda school students passed final examinations, allowing the school to be recertified by the government. In addition to education, health and fitness received special emphasis. The chief purpose of the educational work, however, was the formation of Christian character among the students. Special attention was given to teaching Bible in all schools. The use of daily worship, singing, special chapel times, camps, and Boy Scout work all aided in imparting religious and moral teaching to the students.²

After Donald and Mary arrived in India in November 1923, Dinanath Tiwari became their teacher of Hindi for an hour a day. They lived with John and Helen at 3 Station Road, Jubbulpore, until May 1924, when they moved to Landour to attend language school for their second year of study. Their total annual income amounted to \$700, and they were just beginning a six-year term of service before they would be able to take their first scheduled furlough back to the United States.

Father and son spent a great deal of time together during that year. The area around Jubbulpore was government forest, actually jungles, which covered the Mandla District Hill and the hilly country north of the city. The jungles were full of wild pigs, sambhar (elk), spotted deer with long branch-

¹ Donald A. McGavran, “Sending the Church to School,” *World Call*, Vol. VII, no. 2 (February 1925): 22.

² “Fourth Annual Report of the Board of Managers to the United Christian Missionary Society,” July 1, 1923–June 30, 1924, 30–38.

ing horns, four-horned antelope, panthers, and tigers. To hunt in the forest required a government permit costing fifteen rupee. The permit allowed a hunter to shoot one elk, two spotted deer, and all of the wild pig, tiger, and panther he could get. Ten days of hunting would often find a hunter returning with a deer, one antelope, a blue bull, a pig or two, and, if he was fortunate, an elk. Tigers and panthers were in the jungle but notoriously difficult to find. In the morning, the roads were often covered with their tracks. At night, one could hear their roars, but to get sight of one in the day was another thing. John was not an avid hunter and not a good shot. Donald, in contrast, liked to hunt. In the winter of 1923–24, father and son went on three or four hunts for a day or two.

Helen McGavran ran the home, which meant a daily period of Bible reading and instruction for the five servants—cook, gardener, sweeper, messenger, and handyman. She had to plan the meals, keep accounts of items purchased at the bazaar, and host out-of-town guests, mostly missionaries from other missions. Mary found it difficult to turn over little Mary Theodora to the ayah, but Helen's wise counsel helped make the adjustment easier. Joyce, John and Helen's youngest child, then a girl of sixteen years old, was sent to school at Woodstock in March 1923, and home to the United States in April 1924. She traveled home with the Harner family who were taking their first furlough. It was a grievous time for John and Helen to see their youngest head home for college, but it was one of the decisions that missionaries had to make. The remembrance that Helen's own father and mother had left their children in England when they returned to India many years before made the transition a bit easier.

Following a year of language study at Landour, Donald and Mary were assigned to Harda. On their way, they stopped at Jubbulpore in October 1924, long enough to pick up their belongings. After that, they saw John and Helen only occasionally. When Donald and Mary gave birth to their second daughter, Elizabeth Jean, Helen arranged to go to the same hill station, Sat Tal, to be present for the birth, which happened on June 6, 1925.

It was at Harda that Donald was appointed as principal over all the mission schools, and Mary taught in the boys high school, superintended the girls school, and worked in various church activities. After inspecting the schools and the teaching staff, it was evident that two primary challenges existed. Buildings desperately needed repair, and instruction in teaching skills needed improvement. As there was little to no money for repairing buildings, Donald turned his attention to improving the quality of instruction. Out of nineteen teachers, only five had any training. All of the teachers did their best, but their methods were antiquated and their ideals low. To meet this challenge, Donald organized a teachers' institute to inspire new teaching ideals and methods. The course of study included theory and practice of lesson planning, methods of teaching reading, and the use of handwork in nature study.

Sometime during the first half of 1925, Donald faced a major challenge that called forth his organizational and creative ability. Some prominent Hindu men from Harda protested the compulsory prayers in the middle school, saying they were offensive to the Hindus of the town. They threatened to call a mass meeting of the town's Hindu population, about twelve thousand at the time, to protest their boys being taught the Christian religion if the compulsory prayers were not eliminated. After talking over the matter with other school leaders, Donald immediately organized four teams to visit the parents of the students to see if they approved of the school teaching their children the twenty-third Psalm and the Lord's Prayer. Foregoing dinner, the teams immediately began canvassing the parents, and every single parent gave approval for their boys to participate in honoring God in this manner. The following day, the Hindu men returned. Upon hearing of the approval of the parents, they went their way, and the prayers continued.³

The following year, Donald and Mary gave birth to a third daughter, Helen Frances, born June 9, 1926, in Almore, a Methodist mission station in the foothills of the Himalayas. John and Helen were not able to be present for Helen's birth, but John, Helen, Donald, and Mary planned their summer vacations together for several summers thereafter. One summer, both families went to Pachmarhi in the Central Provinces, where at about 3,000 feet high, the climate is cooler than on the plains. Another summer, they took a 1,000-mile trip with a group of other missionaries to Kashmir and up to the meadows above Pahigam, where they lived in tents during the summer. Donald and some other missionaries walked over the 14,000-foot-high foot-bridge to the famous cave of Amarnath. In this cave, water dripping from the roof had frozen into a tall pillar, which was worshiped as the great god Shiv or Maha Dev.

Mary McGavran always sang while she worked, and music was a frequent evening activity for the McGavran family. The entire family gathered around an old Rosewood piano as Mary played hymns and popular songs of that era—"There's a Long, Long Trail A-Winding to the Land of My Dreams," "I'll Take You in My Arms Again, Kathleen," and "Anchors Aweigh, My Lads, Anchors Away!" The piano had once belonged to Helen McGavran, and keeping it in tune in the changing weather of India was a problem. In the blazing heat of the dry season, Mary would put the piano feet in dishes of water to moisten the wood; but in the rainy season, she placed kerosene lanterns below the soundboard to dry it out. Donald loved to sing, too, and the family sang hymn after hymn together by lamplight before they reluctantly went to beds well equipped with mosquito nets. Anopheles mosquitoes abounded, especially in the rainy season, and sleeping nets were necessary as a protection against cerebral malaria.

³ D. A. McGavran, "A Day's Fighting," *World Call*, Vol. VII, no. 6 (June 1925): 43.

Some of the houses in which the McGavrans lived had only wire on the sides and on the door. It was a somewhat Spartan existence, but Mary handled it all with humor and a good deal of charm. Cockroaches were a continual problem, but Mary rid her kitchen of them by pouring boiling water from a kettle into the cracks along the wooden kitchen counter. Ants attacked and ate about anything, so she sat the legs of wooden furniture into small bowls or cups of kerosene to stop them from getting into the clothes. For the first few years of living in India, the family had no refrigerator. Food had to be purchased and cooked each day, and any leftover food was only eaten if it could be reheated to a good boil. Mary would boil buffalo milk and hours later, skim the heavy cream crust for use in baking. Years later, after a Servel refrigerator—similar to what is used in modern recreational vehicles—was obtained, Mary turned the rich buffalo cream into cold ice cream, which was always a treat in the hot season.

Mary could sew a fine seam, but most of the family's clothes were made by a *darzi*, a man who could, after measuring a person and seeing a picture of what was wanted, produce a beautifully fitted and tailored garment from scratch. Of course, Mary supervised the job. She also oversaw the shoe-maker who measured the children's feet by making a pattern with a pencil run around standing feet, and then constructed shoes from sole to eyelet to laces.

With Donald away much of the time on missionary business, Mary naturally became the heart of the family. She also schooled and supervised the Bible Women, those Christian women who entered the homes of Hindu and Muslim women who would not have welcomed any man. A natural and self-trained nurse, Mary handled family illnesses in a quiet way. She knew how to break a fever, lance a boil, and make a tent in which to steam a congested throat or nose. She could treat a bad burn, feed a premature baby with an eyedropper, wrap a sprained ankle, rub a chest with Vicks, and deal with ringworm of the scalp, as well as many other tropical infections.

In 1927, Donald was elected director of religious education for the Indian Mission of the Disciples of Christ, and he chaired the education committee. These roles effectively placed him in a position to bring about a uniformity of instruction and courses across all the mission schools. His work in religious education spread out to interdenominational circles through the India Sunday School Union, the Mid-India Christian Council, and other cooperative committees and organizations. He prepared textbooks and courses and helped to direct the young people's movement in India. Toward the end of his first term of service, he began editing the Hindi section of the church paper.

The UCMS field secretary, Rev. Scott, died suddenly in 1927, and John McGavran was elected field secretary in his place. Unfortunately, his teaching and evangelism work ceased as he took over the administrative role of field secretary. He visited all fourteen mission stations, kept the accounts,

organized the quarterly meetings of the executive committee, and carried on all correspondence with the home office. The work filled his days, and perhaps he worked too hard. In 1928, he suffered three light strokes, which affected his speech. His work as field secretary was given to another missionary, and it was hoped that rest would improve his health. Unfortunately, in 1929, after his health had not improved, John and Mary returned to the United States. For several years, they lived in Indianapolis with their daughter Grace, who was a secretary of the United Christian Missionary Society in the Department of Missionary Education.⁴

John McGavran's missionary career started in 1891 and ended thirty-eight years later in 1929. Throughout all those years, he was a highly loved and respected teacher, colleague, and friend to the eighty plus missionaries serving with the United Christian Missionary Society. He was known to missionaries of all denominations in the Hindi-speaking area of mid-India as the editor of the *Sahayak Patrika*.

Following his retirement in 1929, John McGavran lived as a semi-invalid for eleven more years. He continued to have small strokes, and they gradually affected his emotional control. His last years were not his happiest, and he wrote to his children, asking that they remember him for the years before 1929. Having a son and daughter in India to carry on their work greatly comforted John and Helen in their later years.

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May and June were vacation time in India due to the long, fiery hot days. Work was slack, and schools were closed during those months. People enjoyed a drowsy siesta from twelve to four. Then, after sunset, the earth cooled off, and people became active. Children played in the moonlight, and their parents sat and chatted. The pastors and missionaries took advantage of this magnificent opportunity by promoting vacation schools for teaching children and illiterate adults. Schools began at 6:30 in the morning with devotions, which was followed by a half hour Bible lesson. Since it was kite-flying season, students made kites, one to keep, and one to give away. The school concluded with a half hour of play. In villages where literacy was quite low, instead of building kites, the students spent an hour each day learning to read. As in many parts of the world, the vacation schools offered opportunities to preach the gospel. Some non-Christian

⁴ Grace Winifred McGavran became a noted leader with the UCMS as a writer of books, dramas, stories, and articles. Her job was to communicate the realities of missionary life and ministry to the churches in the United States. After relocating from Indianapolis, IN, to Vancouver, WA, she worked as a freelance writer for several denominational publishing houses.

children always attended, and in the villages, most of the children were from Hindu or Mohammedan families. The focus was on presenting the gospel in every minute of play, every reading lesson, and every contact with the teacher.

May 1929 found the entire McGavran family venturing into the hills about forty miles from Harda for a combined camping and ministry trip. There they met aboriginal inhabitants of India who were animists rather than Hindus. The valley where they set up camp contained between 3,000 to 4,000 people, and very few could read or write. As far as Donald and Mary could ascertain, no Christian work had been done among the people for thirty-five years. In anticipation of ministering to the people, they brought along a small supply of medicine. This helped immensely, but supplies soon ran out. The major medical concerns were problems with eyes and malaria. One older man had recently suffered severe burns to his arms, back, hips, and chest when his house, which was built on seven-foot-high poles, fell down into his own fire. After dressing his wounds as best they could over six days, they persuaded his family to take him to Harda to the mission hospital, where he received treatment and soon recovered.⁵

That fall, Mary gave birth to Malcolm Howard on October 18, 1929 (his sisters nicknamed him "Welcome"). The following month, they attended the Annual Convention of the Disciples of Christ that met in Jubbulpore from November 15 to 21, 1929. Fifty-one missionaries, twenty-seven junior missionaries, and eleven Indian delegates were present. Mary Theodora, Helen Francis, and Elizabeth Jean were still in school in the hills, but the McGavrans brought along baby Malcolm who, even though he was too young to know it, was welcomed as a junior missionary.

Early in 1930 as Donald and Mary prepared to leave in June for their first furlough, tragedy struck when Mary Theodora, their six-year-old daughter, died of appendicitis on March 1. She had developed a fever on Thursday morning. Doctors examined her and told the McGavrans not to worry, as the temperature was likely caused by malarial indigestion. Donald was scheduled to attend a meeting in Jabalpur, but he hesitated to go. The next morning, Mary Theodora was doing better, so Donald decided to attend the committee meeting. Just a few hours after his departure, Mary Theodora took a turn for the worse. On Saturday morning, she was seriously ill, and Mary decided to take her to the doctors in Nagpur, over 150 miles away by train. As she was leaving, Mary telegraphed Donald advising him of the situation. He immediately made plans to meet them on the way to Nagpur but missed connections and had to wait several hours for another train. Upon examining her, the doctors in Nagpur immediately operated, but it

⁵ Mary Howard McGavran, "Where They Have Never Heard of Christ," *World Call*, May 1929, 36.

was too late. Mary Theodora's appendix had burst sometime the day before. By the time Donald arrived, Mary Theodora had already passed away. Grief stricken, Donald and Mary held a small funeral and returned to Harda.

Mary Theodora's death brought great suffering to Donald and Mary. In a letter to her mother and father, Mary wrote,

Mother and Father,

Now we know how you have suffered. Our life which was so full of happiness seems all at once to have been emptied and we are tasting of sorrow. Little did I ever know what it meant. How we miss our precious big girl! How we did love her. Why oh why—Oh the many many thoughts. Only those who have experienced it know.

All of it is so fresh so hard to realize that I can't write the story. Don has bravely done it for me and how he suffers. Your messages and the thought that you too have born this cross help us and we have faith to believe she is with Him she loved so much yet nothing takes her place.

The precious three left are well and some comfort. Never did we realize what she meant to us. What a help she was! How eagerly she looked forward to coming to you.

Thank God there is a future. Heaven seems nearer and she will greet us all in her dear happy way. I sort of feel maybe she is lonely but I must not.

*Oh Mother and Father.
Your own, Mary*

Donald was especially anguished and blamed himself for not arriving in time to be with Mary. The fact that she had had to care for Mary Theodora alone the day of her death was unbearable. For the next week, he was unable to do anything. Yet, the pain caused Donald and Mary to fall back on their faith in Christ. In a letter dated March 13, Donald stated, "We know as we have not known before that there is life beyond the grave. She is with Jesus, whom she loved. We shall see her again."⁶

This event served to turn Donald's life in two new directions. His spiritual life deepened, and he became more concerned for evangelism. Over the next few years, his life and ministry underwent serious reappraisal. Two

⁶ Letter from Donald McGavran to Stephen Corey, March 13, 1930, quoted in Middleton, 35.

years later, in December 1932, he shared about his spiritual pilgrimage with longtime friend David Rioch:

My optimism comes from a winning back a feel of the spiritual world. Consciousness of that spiritual world with which this phenomenal world is so completely intermingled and which gives meaning and significance to the phenomenal world faded out for some years, not entirely but largely. It is coming back now and with it comes a feeling that life's burdens are easier to bear and the great goals are worth fighting for.⁷

Mary Theodora's death made him aware of the shortness of life, and thus the importance of reaching as many people as possible with the gospel of Jesus Christ. After considerable thought in August 1931, he wrote to Cy Yocum, the general secretary of his mission in Asia, "I personally think that the whole present distribution of mission forces needs to be reconsidered in an attempt to put more of our force into direct persistent evangelism."⁸ He could not have known it fully at the time, but this was to become his watchword for the rest of his life.

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After visiting family in Indianapolis during the summer of 1930, the McGavrans relocated to New York where Donald began studies for a Ph.D. in Religious Education. The Ph.D. program was a joint effort between Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University, with the degree awarded by Columbia. Donald matriculated on September 27, 1930, as the Dodge Missionary Fellow. He specialized in education, taking courses such as "Educational Approach to Christian Professional Leadership," "Story Writing, Story Telling, Art, and Handicraft in Religious Education," and "Research and Experimentation in Religious Education." He did take one course on philosophy of religion (Theism), but the remainder of his courses was all related directly to the field of education. His course of study amounted to thirty-four units of credit, not including a preliminary dissertation research project and the actual dissertation. Of those thirty-four units, all but the three-unit course on Theism was in the field of education. Eighteen units of his work were taken at Columbia, with the remainder at Union. The World Convention of Churches of Christ was held in Washington, D.C., from October 19–23, 1930. Donald was a featured speaker on Wednesday, October 22, when he spoke on the subject of "India's Consciousness of Christ."

⁷ Letter from Donald McGavran to David Rioch, December 21, 1932, quoted in Middleton, 35.

⁸ Letter from Donald McGavran to Dr. Cy Yocum, August 30, 1931, quoted in Middleton, 35.

All of his course work was completed during the 1930–31 school year, and in the fall of 1931, he finished his preliminary research and experimentation project for his final dissertation. He passed his examination for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in May 1932 and received a confirmation letter on May 23 stating, “You have now completed all the requirements for the degree with the exception of the deposit of seventy-five printed copies of your dissertation in the Library.”⁹ Final copies of his dissertation were deposited with Columbia University in 1935, but the degree would not be awarded officially until August 7. The subject of his dissertation was “Education and the Beliefs of Popular Hinduism.”

Building on the research from his dissertation, Donald corresponded with Galen M. Fisher, executive secretary of the Institute of Social and Religious Research located in New York City, concerning the potential of obtaining funding for further research in India. Mr. Fisher wrote in reply, “Your dissertation impresses me and Dr. Fry as a significant pioneer study and as pointing the way to more extensive and widely representative studies of a similar sort not only in India but ultimately in our countries.”¹⁰ Little did Mr. Fisher understand how prophetic his words would be. Donald would continue to be involved in research—not studies of education, but studies on why churches grow and decline. Funding for further research would have to wait, however, primarily due to the growing economic challenges of the Great Depression being experienced around the world.

Donald, Mary, and their three children set sail for their second term of service in India on September 12, 1932. Upon his arrival in India, Donald was elected to succeed W. B. Alexander as secretary-treasurer of the India Mission during the annual convention held in Jubbulpore from November 17–23, 1932. Mr. Alexander had served as secretary of the mission for fifteen years and was going home for a delayed furlough. The Golden Jubilee of the Disciples of Christ in India were celebrating fifty years of service between 1882 and 1932. Donald took over a mission where 178 missionaries (123 women and 55 men) had given a combined total of 2,545 years of service in India.¹¹

Many challenges lay ahead for the young mission secretary, and holding the mission together during financial depression was a primary one. Funding from home was reduced by fifty percent, and sometimes only twenty-five percent was received. It took calm nerves, strong management, and lots

⁹ Letter from Howard Lee McBain, Dean, Columbia University, to D. McGavran May 23, 1932.

¹⁰ Letter from Galen M. Fisher to D. McGavran, July 12, 1932.

¹¹ During the first ten years (1882–1892), twenty-seven missionaries went to India; 1892–1902, forty-six; 1902–1912, forty-one; 1912–1922, forty-five; 1922–1932, nineteen. Ten men, twenty-two women, and nineteen children had died. See “Celebrating Fifty Years’ Service In India,” *World Call*, March 1933, 24–25.

of faith to lead the mission during the early 1930s. The home office strongly suggested that mission stations, hospitals, and schools must be closed, but in an article to the church in America, Donald and his colleague, Victor Rambo, implored the churches of their brotherhood to continue sacrificial giving. Writing in the spirit of a debate, the two missionaries wrote,

Churches of Christ, you have challenged us to this work. We now refuse to quit. We will be insubordinate. We will listen to God rather than to men. Though you tell us we must close more stations, more schools, more hospitals and dispensaries, we say that we cannot, and we challenge all individuals that love the Lord to choose whether you will stand back of us or fail us at this time.

We are appealing for the life of the work. We ask you to support the cause, to obey Christ's command. We have given our lives. We ask you to give yours, too—to the very limit, of prayer, and interest, and of funds.

We are sure to succeed. We have a hold on the Indian people and they have a hold on us. Those in charge of evangelistic work, schools, and hospitals are going to fight for the continued existence of their work.¹²

It was during this time that Donald began seriously thinking about the church's growth. The most direct influence that started McGavran thinking about church growth was J. Waskom Pickett about whom McGavran would later say, "I lit my candle at Pickett's fire."¹³ Pickett served in India for forty-six years as pastor, editor, publisher, secretary of Christian councils, and bishop in the Methodist Church. In 1928, he was asked by the National Christian Council of India, Burma, and Ceylon to make an extensive study of Christian mass movements in India. The study required the development of research instruments, tests, and study of ten representative areas. The results were published in *Christian Mass Movements in India* (1933).¹⁴

The impetus for Waskom Pickett's study was the growth of mass movements throughout India. Since the days of William Carey, nearly one hundred and fifty years, missionaries in India had struggled to win Christian converts one by one in the face of Hindu and Mohammedan resistance. Then, suddenly, caste-wise religious revivals began, and people started coming to Christ in masses, sometimes entire villages at a time. Such movements caught most missionaries off guard, and they struggled to ascertain

¹² Donald McGavran and Victor Rambo, "A Message to the Churches in America," *Christian Evangelist*, Vol. LXXI, no. 22 (May 31, 1934): 3–4.

¹³ McGavran, Donald A. and George G. Hunter III, *Church Growth: Strategies That Work* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1980), 14.

¹⁴ For the complete story of J. Waskom Pickett's life and ministry, as well as the details on his study of mass movements, see Arthur G. McPhee, *The Road To Delhi: Bishop J. Waskom Pickett Remembered* (Bangalore, India: SAIACS Press, 2005).

the meaning of it. While some missionaries welcomed mass movements to Christ, others were highly critical. Critics wondered if such movements were truly Christian. They asked if it were not better to win one convert and educate him or her rather than to win numerous converts who were raw as to Christian faith, hoping to educate them later. Pickett's study sought to find out how effective mass movements really were at winning and discipling new Christian believers.

McGavran read Pickett's book and wrote a review that was published in the June 1935 issue of *World Call*. He was thrilled with the results as Pickett found them and wrote, "There came a book sent by God and its name was *Christian Mass Movements in India*." He continued with words of praise for the book.

Out of it all comes a striking validation of the Christian message. Here is a book which for the Christian worker is full of thrills. It tells about a gospel that works. It tells of hundreds of thousands of lives redeemed. It tells of the way in which Christ is being accepted by the thousands in India. One leaves the book with a feeling that *Jesus does save*. He is doing it today.

If anyone feels downhearted about the progress of Christianity, if anyone wonders whether missions are really worth while, let him read *Christian Mass Movements in India* and thrill with the certainty of the saving power of Jesus Christ. Here is the most significant missionary book of the twentieth century.¹⁵

Pickett's book established the integrity of Christian mass movements in India. Converts to Christ through these movements were growing in the faith, turning from idols, throwing away charms, and rejecting magic and evil spirits. Alcohol consumption among converts decreased markedly, and even Hindu and Mohammedan observers admitted that Christianity had lifted the untouchables. The major conclusion resulting from Pickett's intense study was that mass movements, or group movements as some preferred to call them, were valid and legitimate in God's plan for India's redemption.

One outcome of the study of mass movements was the firm belief among many missionaries that the Holy Spirit was propelling a definite and extensive proclamation of the gospel and that a time of peculiar opportunity for advance was upon them. As secretary of the mission, Donald gradually became convinced that the missionaries should devote more time to direct evangelism of Indian people. In an effort to encourage the missionaries to embrace evangelism, he wrote a devotional guide that he hoped would advance his colleagues' understanding of God's mission in the world. Titled "A Guide for Devotions Amongst Those Who Will Place Prayer for Revival

¹⁵ Review of *Christian Mass Movements in India* by Donald A. McGavran, "Book Chat," *World Call*, Vol. XVII, no. 6 (June 1935): 29.

in a Place of Primacy. Giving to It a Full Hour Each Day,” part of the meditation reads:

It is the will of God that all men everywhere should know and follow His Son, our Saviour. That whosoever believeth on Him should not perish.

It is the will of God that we, whom he has called to His service, should be instant in evangelism day in and day out, seeking to win men and women to definite discipleship to Jesus Christ. Into all the world, teaching, preaching and baptizing them.

It is the will of God that we should prepare ourselves for this great task physically, mentally and spiritually, that we may not waste the precious days he has given to us and may bring as many as possible to the fold. Be ye wise as serpent[s].

It is the will of God that in our plans for the day, we place first things first. He gives us insight into the spiritual value of all our daily duties and wills that we should do only those which fit in with our calling [as] redeemers of men.

It is the will of God, that we conceive of our task in heroic proportion. Nothing is too great for His power. Ask and ye shall receive. Faith will remove mountains. It is the will of God that all these people be saved.

It is the will of God that we pray. Prayer will unloose the flood gates of power. Prayer will bring to salvation a nation.¹⁶

His charge to his comrades in Christ's work was to devote an hour each day in intercessory prayer for the salvation of the peoples among whom they each worked. "Prayer is essential," Donald wrote. "The prayer program will take a full hour. Let us use the guide every day. Let every morning see us on our knees waiting before Him undergirding the revival with prevailing prayer, praying the key people on these lists into the Kingdom of God."¹⁷ He wrote with great assurance that a mass movement was about to break forth among the Satnamis, the Gonds, and the Chamars. His evangelistic eyes believed that people were looking for a Savior, expecting a Messiah. A people movement was ripe to happen.

He went further than just preparing a prayer guide and submitted resolutions for adoption at the next annual convention. He sought the establishment of a Band of Witnesses in each church whose members would observe a daily devotional, put aside an offering to support evangelism, seek to win one person to Christ every three months, bring the new believer into the Band of Witnesses, and plan and pray with other members of the Band. In addition, each member of the Band was to pledge at least one night a week to do personal evangelism among the people they served.

¹⁶ Donald A McGavran, unpublished devotional guide dated September 1934.

¹⁷ Ibid., 4.

McGavran also believed that it would be sound strategy to deliberately seek for mass movements in his area of ministry. Yet, he thought it would be best to cultivate a spirit of expectancy first and to stress greater faith in the power of God to redeem his people as individual and as groups. Thus, the focus on prayer came first, but strategy soon followed. The focus on evangelism required a reallocation of workers and budgets, not only within, but also across mission and church lines. Christian mass movements in India demanded a mobilization of resources to be able to advance God's kingdom. This would create many challenges as mission leaders resisted the realignment of resources around a new purpose of evangelism rather than education.

Nevertheless, Donald believed that a revival was coming to India in the very near future. The Pentecost experience of three thousand coming to Christ in a single day was common in India of the early 1930s, and Donald felt he was often walking "knee deep in miracles." Mass movements were the "greatest apologetic Christianity has ever had," he claimed in an article written for the *Christian Evangelist* in 1935. "A religious revival of vast proportions is possible in the India field of the Disciples of Christ," he declared. "Five hundred people tremble in the balances during the coming years."¹⁸

In the midst of Donald's excitement about mass movements, another heartbreak took its toll. Sometime in 1933, Chester and Miriam Terry joined Donald and Mary in Jubbulpore. They quickly became like brothers and sisters. The Terrys had completed study at the Kennedy School of Missions, and then went to Edinburgh, Scotland, where Chester completed study for his Doctor of Philosophy degree. As they prepared to go to India, they received sad news in 1933 that funds were not available for them to receive appointment as missionaries. Donald wrote to them saying that if they would pay their own way to India, agree to no guarantee of a salary, and be willing to accept board and room only, the mission would be glad to have them. It was a bold move on Donald's part, but the Terrys responded and made their way to India, much to the delight of the McGavrans. A short time later, on April 11, 1935, Chester Terry, Donald McGavran, and others were on an evening hunt. Chester's shotgun accidentally discharged, killing him almost instantly. Donald did not get to him until he had been dead for some time. Chester's death hurt Donald and Mary deeply, but they took courage from the strength of Miriam whom they tried to comfort. Upon later reflection, Donald wrote, "How it could have been permitted I do not know, nor understand. The veil is drawn on some things. But this I know, that the story of love poured out for an alien people, recklessly, without counting the cost, and with a cheery good nature, nerves me on to venture more for God; and I am sure that it will others, too. God will use him to multiply life and live."

As 1936 broke upon his world, Donald expressed enthusiasm for his life and work. "It is a good time to be living, lots to do, lots of responsibility

¹⁸ Donald A. McGavran, "The Coming Revival in India," *The Christian Evangelist*, June 13, 1935, 1-11.

devolving on one, lots of scope for activity, health and strength, and the joy of life—what more could one ask of God! . . . Our work here goes well. We are living at a time when the possibility of large groups of men and women, whole castes, coming to Jesus Christ looms very large.”¹⁹ This happy report glossed over a change, which was to be God’s providential design for an even greater work in Donald’s life in years to come. W. B. Alexander, the former mission secretary, returned to India in 1935 and was reelected mission secretary in place of Donald. A report on the annual convention held in November 1935 said, “This releases Dr. D. A. McGavran for work in the evangelistic field where he has shown such definite ability in leadership during the past few years . . . and also for literature work, and for a few months with Dr. Pickett in the Mass Movement work.”²⁰ Later in the year, Donald reported, “The Mission asked us, who are, as you know, specially trained for educational work to give up school work for the time being and move out into a mud house twenty miles north of Mungeli.”²¹ The purpose of the move, which was also being requested of two other families, was to make a concerted effort to evangelize the friendly untouchables, mainly Chalmars. The Chalmars, about 100,000 people in the Disciples’ territory, were leather workers that members of other castes considered untouchable, but the mission saw them as an approachable caste. The original idea was for three missionaries to engage in intensive evangelism for just two years, but it turned out to be seventeen years for the McGavrans.

Donald was discouraged by the request. He was, after all, a specialist in education with a Ph.D. from the respected Columbia University Teacher’s College. It was clearly a demotion, as evangelists worked with the poorly educated and illiterate people. However, being loyal to the Disciples Mission, he told his supporters, “We are called on to make a major adjustment but are glad to do it for the sake of the work.”²² These, and other words he expressed publically, disguised a deeply felt sting of rejection. The truth was that many of his fellow missionaries and administrators were not happy with his emphasis on evangelism and mass movements, so they voted him out of office. Looking back on this incident fifty years later, Donald remembered that in effect the mission said to him, “Since you are talking so much about evangelism and church growth, we are going to locate you in a district where you can practice what you preach.”²³

The mission tried to put a good face on the demotion by telling Donald that the evangelistic appointment was a measure of the mission’s confidence in him. As proof of their trust in his evangelistic abilities, the mission estab-

¹⁹ Report from Donald McGavran in *The Butler Alumna Quarterly*, Vol. XXIV, No. 4 (January 1936): 253.

²⁰ Leta May Brown, “Forward—With God—In India,” *World Call*, March 1936, 27.

²¹ Report from Donald McGavran in *The Butler Alumna Quarterly*, Vol. XXV, no. 3: 245.

²² *Ibid.*, 246–247.

²³ “My Pilgrimage in Mission,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 10(2): 53–57.

lished a new post for him as administrative secretary of evangelism with responsibility for promotion, inspiration, and improvement of evangelism. Alexander, the newly elected secretary, promised his support, and on that basis, Donald accepted his new appointment, believing he could continue his emphasis on evangelism among his mission colleagues. It could have worked. It should have worked. However, it did not work. Once Donald had moved his family and was in the new position, he experienced opposition, mostly from the new secretary. Alexander did not want Donald's leadership involvement in the mission in any way. In an effort to smooth things out, Donald gave up his administrative role as secretary of evangelism, but even that did not help matters. He was still on call to do promotion for evangelism, but he never received any calls to do so.

Alexander and other mission leaders started criticizing Donald, saying that he refused to play unless he was the whole show. The facts demonstrated otherwise. Though he had not desired to move, Donald willingly relocated his family, took up his new position with gusto, and predictably threw himself into the work. When necessary, he stepped out of his administrative role to remove the threat his leadership placed on the new secretary. Clearly, Donald did not have to be the whole show, but whenever he took up a task, he stridently moved forward promoting, encouraging, and challenging others to get in step with his ideals. His debating skills rose to the surface as he forcefully spoke and wrote about the static state of the mission regarding evangelism. Much of his rhetoric was misunderstood, but to say Donald was not cooperative was incorrect. It was more likely that Alexander was jealous of or threatened by Donald's forceful leadership. He believed that some members of the mission would continue to attack him personally, but he declared, "I shall refuse to fight back, to say any unkind word about either of the Alexanders. I am not working for them or for the mission. I am working for God and he will see in this decision the truth concerning the situation, namely that in an effort to promote the well being of the work I am burying self more than I ever have before, and deliberately letting the period of ingathering start (for it is going to start) under people who would never in this world have started it."²⁴

In the end, Donald decided he must withdraw from all mission leadership. In a letter to a missionary colleague, Donald expressed his feelings, "God will use me in the local work. Maybe this situation is a leading that for the time being I am to withdraw from mission leadership, and devote my energies wholly to the local situation."²⁵ While Donald could not have known it, God was more concerned about the missionary than the mission at this time in his life. Serving God as an evangelistic missionary among the lower caste Satnamis was to be the proving ground for the theories for which Donald would become world renowned.

²⁴ Personal letter to Tom [last name unknown], Mungeli, C. P. India, November 14, 1937.

²⁵ Ibid.

Perhaps exacerbated by the pressures of finding himself in a new role, in August, Donald became quite sick, was diagnosed with appendicitis, and underwent an operation on August 31. As the McGavrans adjusted their roles from administration and education to evangelism of a lower caste people, their family was growing up. Jean and Helen, eleven and ten years old, were in fifth grade, and Malcolm was in the second grade, no longer the baby in the family. A new baby was on the way. Mary gave birth to Margaret Winifred on November 26, 1936. Some called her “Winnie the Pooh.”

As the wife of the secretary of the mission, Mary had given her time to entertaining folk from out of town and planning and attending meetings of various kinds. Yet, she always had time to sing with her children, hear their prayers, and talk with them about their troubles. Her garden was always well attended, and she and the girls kept their home bright and cheery with fresh flowers. Jean was motherly and sympathetic. Her ability to think deeply at such a young age made her appear mature for her age. Helen was joyful and full of life, always surprising everyone with clever statements or some new joke, the outcome of her extensive reading. Malcolm was all boy. At times he was affectionate, but at other times, he was quite indifferent. He inherited a lovely singing voice, no doubt from his mother, which may explain the fact that he was a favorite among the other women.

Donald loved his family but often was away on mission tours. He traveled throughout the neighboring countryside spreading the Word of God in villages, which averaged about 300 residents each. During half of the year, he slogged along muddy pathways, walked ankle deep in water between rice paddies, and waded waste deep across rivers swollen with rain. He stayed with village families, living on a dirt floor and dining on rice and bean soup. The only concession he made to Western life was the use of a mosquito net, which he attached to the bed where he slept. Over the years, he walked or rode a bicycle thousands of miles, which helped him stay in shape. He carried big burdens of the mission, promoted mass movements, and literally wrote thousands of letters every month. At times, he may not have fully realized how much his family wanted him to be active in their lives. Ruth Mitchell, who visited the McGavrans in India in June 1936, recalled, “His very soul is on fire with love for and desire to help these depressed people. To kneel in evening family prayer and hear him plead so earnestly, so fervently for their well being and for guidance in the work he is trying to do, I consider a rare privilege.”²⁶

About the Author

Gary L. McIntosh is one of the foremost experts on the life and ministry of Donald A. McGavran. His most recent book, *What Every Pastor Should Know: 101 Indispensable Rules of Thumb for Leading Your Church* (with Charles Arn), was the 2014 Outreach Magazine book of the year for Leadership. Gary L. McIntosh, D.Min, Ph.D is professor of Christian Ministry & Leadership at Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, La Mirada, California.

²⁶ Ruth Irene Mitchell, “A New Missionary Speaks,” *World Call*, June 1936, 32.