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Introduction

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Alan McMahan, General Editor

It is a special privilege of mine to bring you this particular issue of the *Great Commission Research Journal* as it is focused on commemorating one of the greatest thinkers and influencers in the modern church growth movement, George G. Hunter, III. “Chuck,” as he is known by many, was one of the original founders of the American Society for Church Growth, the predecessor organization of what is now called the Great Commission Research Network. It is this academic society that produces this Journal, in partnership with Biola University.

My relationship with Dr. Hunter is more than that of a professional association. It goes beyond an academic appreciation for his groundbreaking research into the field of evangelism. My first encounters with Dr. Hunter were so significant it changed the direction of my life!

My personal journey into the field of church growth began as I sat under the teaching of Dr. Hunter as a Th.M. student at Asbury Seminary in 1987. Having already been persuaded by the keen thinking of Ravi Zacharias, who was in an earlier day a professor in my M.Div. program, I was by now committed to making evangelism a prominent part of my ministry. Dr. Hunter tapped into this passion and enlarged my thinking beyond what could be done by a small group of individuals to unlock the potential of an entire church to reach the harvest field in

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the local community and abroad. I remember in one class after hearing Dr. Hunter speak I turned to one of my classmates and said, “this might be the most amazing class lecture I have ever heard!” My classmate responded, “ I know! And I now recognize this is what called me into ministry!” Dr. Hunter’s classes soon became the event not to be missed each week as he brought clarity and conviction to this most important activity of the church. Every class session deepened my own sense of call and focused my next steps. I cannot under-estimate the significance of this for my future career. Later as a missionary in Indonesia and then as a seminary professor in the U.S., I repeatedly reflected on the lessons I learned under his mentoring and instruction. Since those early days our paths have intersected many times and each time I come away the richer.

4 George Hunter’s impact on the field of evangelism and church growth grew out of the McGavran school of thought that valued field-based research integrated with deep theological convictions. Hunter’s own writings were infused with historical perspective, current studies in effective evangelism, and a focused intensity that left the reader informed, motivated, and strategically aligned for relevant engagement with the world. His contributions significantly extended McGavran’s early work and deepened it by reflecting on the historic lessons of the expansion of Christianity through time. Rather than rehearsing what others had already said, Hunter’s writings explored new ground. As a result his writings not only birthed new innovations in ministry but prophetically called the church back to its founding mission and purpose. His students and the many others who read his books or listened to his lectures fanned out around the globe armed with the tools and perspectives that added to the explosive growth of the church in our day.

One of Hunter’s favorite church growth jokes recounts the story of two moose hunters that had flown by small plane into the northern reaches of Canada to search for trophies of their hunting prowess. Upon bagging their prey, an especially large moose, they proceeded to load the plane. Despite the protests from the pilot that their load was too heavy for safe travel, they convinced him to take off anyway for the trip back home. Shortly after takeoff the plane crashed in the woods. As the two hunters crawled out of the wreckage one hunter said to the other, “Well at least we got a couple miles further than where we crashed the last three years!”

And this is the story of many churches. Despite the advice of the pilot, the load limits of the plane, and a history of disasters the church keeps hoping year after year that the strategies that had failed in the past will somehow produce success tomorrow. It is time we learned from research what produces the successful results that God intends!

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George Hunter has dedicated his life to help the church conduct an honest assessment of its strategies and take new steps to fulfill its high and noble calling in calling the nations into fellowship with the King. We would all do well to follow his example.

So, in this volume of the *Great Commission Research Journal* we celebrate the life and ministry of George Hunter, the statesman, prophet, strategic thinker, and poet laureate of the church growth movement. May his tribe increase!

Featured in the first part of this volume are five articles written by Dr. Hunter's colleagues, reflecting on his impact upon the movement and the growth of the church. As fellow pilgrims they are in the best position to speak on his behalf.

Starting off is Ronald Crandall who was a faculty colleague with Hunter at Asbury's E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Evangelism, who later became the Dean to continue the direction established by George Hunter as the founding Dean of the School. Crandall's article gives an "insider" story of Hunter's professional and personal life.

As a colleague, who for much of his career served "in the trenches," first as a missionary then a church consultant, Dan Reeves provides the "practitioner's perspective" on George Hunter's impact on him personally and professionally on the wider community. Reeves is in a good position to assess Hunter's impact on the field of practice where real life becomes the testing grounds for theory and theology is lived out in fact.

Next, Gary McIntosh takes the reader through a review of 18 of Hunter's books to show his impact both within the Wesleyan tradition and to the larger Christian audience. This is, of course, a moving target since George Hunter has published at least two more books since then, including *Should We Change our Game Plan* (2013).

Exploring further the lessons from history as highlighted in one of George Hunter's more popular books, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, James Farrer confirms the relevance of these principles for reaching today's modern barbarians. Like Hunter, his research lifts the reader's focus from merely following the latest fads to consider enduring truths of relating the good news to a pagan context.

In similar fashion, Bob Whitesel follows Hunter's lead in learning from the ministry of John Wesley. Making the case that the missional movement of today may be losing the holistic focus that characterized some of the most vital renewal movements in history, Whitesel retraces the footsteps of Wesley while conducting his recent sabbatical research. The insights he gathered argue against a blind following of the most recent, most popular method to consider a ministry that relates the gospel to all of life, the transformation of the whole person.

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The preceding five articles all directly pay tribute to George Hunter as a missiologist in the tradition of Donald McGavran who nevertheless pioneered new territory in the research of how the church grew in history and how it effectively can reach the world today. The next five articles explore a wider variety of topics that expand our understanding of how the Great Commission is advanced.

Daryl Thompson makes the case that the North American Church has been too much influenced by models borrowed from Western European Christendom that has resulted in missional drift. He calls on pastors to arrest this drift toward institutionalization by returning mission to a central focus of the church's ministry. This one step alone will go far toward renewing church vitality.

Making a distinction between evangelism methods that produce decisions and those that produce enduring disciples, Charles Arn stresses that we must honestly evaluate the methods we use by the fruit they yield. His conclusions are not only based on what pragmatically works but strangely align with what we learn from scripture. Good lessons emerge from his study.

Kenneth Priddy takes us next through a biblical and theological study to discover in the pages of the Old and New Testaments the shifting meaning of the phrase, "the gathering of the saints." He goes on to show the significance of this study for today regarding evangelism and the completion of the Great Commission.

Jonathan Kim offers a quantitative study of the personal and institutional factors affecting the ministry tenure of Asian American pastors. This study has implications for the growth and health of many immigrant churches as they seek to respond to the problems caused by short pastoral tenures and unresolved conflict.

We conclude this section with an article submitted by Melissa Pratt, the senior pastor of a growing church in Scott Depot, West Virginia. As a conference speaker at the Turnaround 20/20 Conference¹ in October Pastor Pratt presented an engaging case study of how one church refused to accept the barriers that would limit forward progress. The case study offers a tangible example of visionary leadership and the commitment of a local congregation to overcome the forces restraining growth.

Due to the unprecedented number of articles featured in this issue of the Journal we have chosen to not include notices of dissertations and theses as we usually do. In the next issue we will return to our normal pattern. Nevertheless, this issue continues to feature book reviews of significant works in the field of Great

¹ This conference was convened through the partnership of the Great Commission Research Network and the Society for Church Consulting on October 22–24, 2012 at Lifeway Publications in Nashville, TN. This year's Turnaround 20/20 Conference is scheduled for October 14–16 at the same location. Registration information is available at: <http://www.turnaround2020.com/home>

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Commission studies. We appreciate the insights afforded by an outstanding team of reviewers including: Allan Karr, Randy Willis, Charles Salmon, Jeremy McGarity, Matthew Costner, Jihoon Lee, and Jeffrey Medina. Their insights and critical evaluation will help readers quickly identify useful resources for their continued growth.

Finally, I want to express thanks for the fine editorial work of Mike Morris, our Book Review Editor, and Gary McIntosh, our editor for Articles, as well as the careful eye of our Technical Editor, Laura McIntosh, and the undaunting support of Joy Bergk, our Publications Manager. This team of gifted individuals continues to make this helpful material available to the wider community. Much appreciation goes to them.

Finally, to George Hunter, to whom this issue is dedicated . . . we are all indebted to you for reminding us the noble calling of the church to engage the harvest. May God continue to bless you in the years to come!