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Finding the Way Forward: George Gill Hunter, III

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Ronald K. Crandall

abstract

Ron Crandall recounts some of the significant personal transitions, achievements, and contributions to evangelism and church growth made by his long time colleague. This brief “inside story” captures some of both the professional and personal life of this world-class scholar, and reveals his passionate pursuit to help thousands of churches and millions of secular and disenchanting peoples “find the way forward.” Never content to only talk about evangelism, George Hunter is portrayed as employing every gift available to equip the Church for its apostolic mission to spread the power of “Christ in us, the hope of glory.”

Writing the introductory article for a volume honoring my friend and colleague in ministry for nearly forty years is both a great pleasure and a monumental challenge. Others will help summarize his significant achievements and contributions to the fields of evangelism and church growth. My design is to share in a few pages the story of the man who has been a mentor, friend, and fellow traveler as well as a passionate strategist and scholarly voice to the church to “go and make disciples.”

George Hunter began life in Louisville, Kentucky, on a Friday in June, 1938.

He somewhat lightly describes this event as the day when his parents, George and Barbara, “afflicted me with the full name of George Gill Hunter III.” Perhaps carrying such a lofty title is in part what eventuated over the years to his friends simply calling him “Chuck,” a lifetime nickname. Any attempts to discern the connection between “GGH III” and “Chuck” have led many to false assumptions. It just happened, and he answers and even introduces himself using both—sometimes with humorous results. Once when trying to leave a message for me by phone, he introduced himself to my wife saying, “I don’t think we’ve met, but this is George Hunter, or Chuck Hunter calling.” Bonnie responded, “Well which is it? If you don’t know, how am I supposed to leave a message?”

After the family moved to Florida, George grew up on the beaches and around the ball games that made the state famous. In both high school and college he played baseball and later in life competed as a pitcher in “fast pitch” softball. During these formative years he also became fascinated with body building and weight lifting and has continued to this day to work out and “pump iron,” often winning his age category in competitions.

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In the midst of his high school years, an even more significant fascination occurred—one that not only changed his life and future, but also that of perhaps hundreds of thousands of others. He writes in the dedication of his book, *Finding the Way Forward*,¹ “In gratitude to the people of the Fulford United Methodist Church North Miami Beach, Florida amongst whom, as a teenager, I first found my own way forward.” The die was cast. George Hunter’s heart was captured by God’s amazing grace and the reality of a Savior who was present in the world and could transform individuals from whatever brokenness and longings they might have to be fully redeemed and committed followers of Jesus.

This “way forward” led Chuck first to the Methodist-related Florida Southern College (B.A.), and then on to Candler School of Theology at Emory University (B.D.), Princeton Theological Seminary (Th.M.), and finally Northwestern University, where he earned a Ph.D. in communication studies. These were years of both formal education and personal growth. He served briefly as an associate pastor, but he found his true calling while evangelizing secular people on the beaches of southern California and among the contentious crowds gathered for open air preaching in England. It was in England where he worked for a year alongside two brilliant presenters of the faith, Canon Bryan Green at St Martin’s-in-the-Bull Ring, Birmingham, and Lord Donald Soper of London. Soper preached weekly for more than seventy years from a “soapbox” in the open air at

¹ George G. Hunter, *Finding the Way Forward* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1980).

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Tower Hill or Hyde Park. These mentors taught Chuck many lessons, and their boldness, love of the gospel, and compassion for lost people profoundly influenced his way forward.

10 Ordained as an elder in the Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church in 1965, he was invited in that same year to work with the Methodist Board of Evangelism in Nashville, Tennessee. As one of the leaders of the emerging New Life Mission movement, he actively preached and taught in congregations all across the country. A growing United Methodist emphasis on teaching evangelism in theological education led to his invitation and acceptance in 1972 of the McClesse Chair of Communication and Evangelism at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas. I first became acquainted with Chuck and other United Methodist evangelism leaders at a Congress on Evangelism held in Dallas that focused on Key 73's "Calling Our Continent to Christ." Little came from the Key 73 strategies themselves, but a growing number of major ecumenical and parachurch efforts in evangelism paved the way for the leadership roles that Hunter would play for the next forty years.

While at Perkins (1972–77), Chuck met and married his wife Ella Fay Price, who recently retired as director of psychiatric nursing at Eastern Kentucky University. Their family includes three grown children (Gil, Monica, and Donald), and two grandsons—Simeon and Abram. Their second son, Donald, is named in honor of Chuck's deep admiration for his two mentors and friends Donald Soper and Donald McGavran.

Out of his work at the Methodist Board of Evangelism and his teaching years at Perkins, George continued to hone his growing interest in the strategic side of evangelism. This led him to examine the work of Donald McGavran and Alan Tippet at the newly established School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. Although originally their efforts seemed to focus insights for church growth on foreign mission fields, more and more it was becoming evident that the strategies being researched and taught at Fuller were significant for the American scene as well. Dr. Win Arn led the way in this new emphasis by launching in the early 1970s the Institute for American Church Growth. Training seminars, study kits, books, and 16mm films began to pour out of its southern California office. Hunter was captivated by the potential of such methods to challenge existing denominational and local church perceptions that evangelism was mostly the work of "specialized evangelists," and he glimpsed a new "way forward" for his own denomination.

At its general conference in 1976, the United Methodist Church declared evangelism to be one of three quadrennial priorities. No doubt this contributed to

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George Hunter being invited to return to Nashville in 1977 to head up the new
Section on Evangelism of the General Board of Discipleship and develop
strategies to address a decade of denominational decline. In the past, the primary
gift set of those invited to be part of the evangelism staff were themselves excellent
preacher-evangelists who traveled wherever they were invited, to “preach the
gospel,” and offer men and women, young and old, the opportunity to come to
Christ. Hunter had a growing conviction that something more was needed and
began to build a staff of those who could not only present the whole gospel of
Christ to lost people and nominal church goers, but who could also function as
gifted teachers, researchers, writers, and strategists. His design was to assemble a
cohesive team of conceptual leaders to equip local churches, regional judicatories,
and the whole denomination to *go and make disciples*, restoring the Methodist
heritage as a missionary movement and experiencing once again its own share of
church growth.

Perhaps one of the most helpful perceptions Hunter brought to the work of
evangelism in both Europe and America was his often spoken observation, “We no
longer have a home court advantage.” His work with secular and unchurched
people made it clear that we could not start our witnessing conversations and
evangelistic sermons by simply declaring truth and quoting the Bible. This he
referred to as the “deductive approach.”² Rather, he promoted an “inductive
approach”³ that begins by recognizing a deeply felt need in the other person and
connects the gospel to that need. In part he related this to Abraham Maslow’s
Hierarchy of Human Motives, but also to what Donald McGavran had identified as
“receptive people.” Thus evangelism for most of the new breed of unchurched had
to begin where they were, not where we were and wanted them to be.

Obvious correlations began to be made involving both the theological concepts
of “incarnation” and “prevenient grace,” and a growing number of behavioral
science insights from sociology and cultural anthropology. Our witness needs to be
in word and deed, but ultimately relevant to the receiver’s situation in life. The
evangelist must always be dependent on the presence of the Holy Spirit to guide
and enable both the witness and the recipient. Our task is to see where that nudge
of the Spirit is taking place, and then to address the longing or brokenness that
only the healing touch of Christ can ultimately resolve. This confidence in God’s
Spirit still requires that we understand and offer God’s Word, but also that we
listen empathetically to the other’s life story. It makes us more truly partners with

² George G. Hunter, *The Contagious Congregation: Frontiers in Evangelism and Church Growth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), 38.

³ *Ibid.*, 45.

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our risen Lord who reminded us to “remember, I am with you always” in the work of “making disciples.”

Hunter drew heavily on his own Wesleyan theology and the evangelism insights of such Methodist predecessors as E. Stanley Jones, Albert Outler, Sir Alan Walker, and Lyle Schaller. Additional contributors to his growing missiological framework included several from the Fuller Seminary team, including McGavran and Tippet as well as Ralph Winter, C. Peter Wagner, and Paul Hiebert. The list of those constituting the new network of scholars and practitioners would be several pages long and include a wide spectrum of theological and denominational backgrounds. George Hunter found this diverse clustering of passionate colleagues a veritable wellspring of energy that strengthened his own convictions and prompted him both to contribute to the growing body of literature and to give leadership to the movement.

12 During the years he served as head of evangelism for the United Methodist Church (1977–83), his goal was to generate both resources and “schools” of evangelism that could instruct pastors and key lay people in these principles and offer them a variety of clear strategies by which they could find their own way forward to greater fruitfulness for God’s kingdom. Three important steps in this undertaking were featured in the United Methodist film, kit, and book released in 1980—*Finding the Way Forward*. In summary, the path forward was presented as: (1) Identify People to Reach, (2) Identify and Provide Ports of Entry for New People, and (3) Identify Ministries for Growing Disciples.⁴ Discipleship could never be reduced, in his thinking, to an initial decision for Christ. Growth in discipleship or the Wesleyan idea of entire sanctification in divine love meant that the task of evangelism was larger than merely getting decisions or baptisms or church members. It could never be less than “their maturity in Christ, their spiritual pilgrimage *toward* what Mr. Wesley called their ‘Christian perfection.’”⁵

In 1982, preparing for participation in the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies held at Keble College in Oxford, England, Hunter read through the works of John Wesley and presented a major paper on Wesley as a church growth strategist. In 1983, after consulting with Asbury Theological Seminary on the best way to launch an E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Evangelism, he was invited to come and be its first dean. The name for the school was more than a way to honor one of the great twentieth century missionary-evangelist-writers who had attended Asbury College. Jones was himself an exceptional man ahead of his time. Although he went to India to convert

⁴ Hunter, *Finding the Way Forward*.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

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others, he found his own life and approach to evangelism profoundly changed as he encountered both new cultural realities and experienced the Holy Spirit teaching him how to listen and learn as much as he talked and taught. His model of cross-cultural, incarnational, Christ-centered, Holy-Spirit-empowered, conversion-focused, personal and social kingdom of God-oriented ministry was to be an important characteristic of the new school bearing his name. Those of us who had found our bearings as Wesleyan evangelists and missiologists were already deeply indebted to E. Stanley Jones for making sense and finding the middle way through the various dichotomies and argumentative divides so often faced by Christian scholars.

As he had done before, George Hunter began to recruit additional team members to staff the new undertaking, including persons who could bring both heart and head for the task. Two cultural anthropologists were brought to the faculty as well as experienced and academically qualified linguists, missionaries, and evangelists. This new team, composed of both men and women, each with cross-cultural experience, found an exceptional cohesiveness as they together designed a new curriculum, a new classroom and office space, and new networks for contacts with like-minded colleagues around the world. A Th.M. was first on the new degree agenda, to be followed by a D.Miss., and ultimately by the Ph.D. in Intercultural Studies. Hunter was already recognized as a strong scholar, a good administrator, and a maturing published author; but one of his finest gifts was nurturing younger colleagues in their own publishing. I, for one, was a recipient of that encouraging nurture, as were several of my other colleagues in the E. Stanley Jones School. Although most of us had already done some writing for publication, it became evident that we needed to become increasingly visible to the world as recognized contributors to the disciplines of evangelism and missiology.

In the hectic and often crazy schedule of getting a new school up and running, it is quite amazing that George Hunter continued to produce the amount of writing that came forth from his own research. Perhaps the truly classic text that emerged first connecting all of the dots was *To Spread the Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit*. The book opens with this quotation from Charles Wesley penned in 1744.

When first sent forth to minister the word,
Say, did we preach ourselves, or Christ the Lord?
Was it our aim disciples to collect,
To raise a party, or to found a sect?
No; but to spread the power of Jesus' name
Repair the walls of our Jerusalem

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Revive the piety of ancient days,

And fill the earth with our Redeemer's praise.⁶

Drawing largely on the work he had done for the Oxford Institute in 1982, Hunter set forth in this text what he calls "six mega-strategies" linking the early movement work of John and Charles Wesley with the growing insights of church growth research. In the book's introduction, he describes these strategies as "universal principles that can be adapted to any mission situation, any time, any place."⁷ That's a strong statement, but he intended it to be as bold as the early Christians were in their confidence that "the Spirit of God was upon them and had anointed them to preach good news."⁸ Thus the first chapter was entitled, "The Recovery of Apostolic Confidence," a theme that appears again and again in articles and books that follow.

As the notoriety of the E. Stanley Jones School spread, one of the truly significant contributions Chuck made was nurturing his original vision of a school for equipping new scholars and leaders in mission and evangelism for both North America and the Two-thirds World. The following is taken from the 2013 Academic Catalog of Asbury Theological Seminary:

Like any graduate school of mission, the E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Evangelism prepares people for mission in the two-thirds world. . . . The School, however, is also intentionally distinctive in several respects. The curriculum's focus includes the new mission fields of North America and Europe.⁹

The commitment was to expand the theological, historic, cultural, and strategic frameworks of both international and North American academic and mission leaders.

Initially the "American" part of this formula meant primarily attracting traditional denominational leaders from the United States and Canada, while the "indigenous" students were mostly attracted from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. By 2001, however, the definition of "indigenous" began to make a shift from "internationals" to the largely overlooked "indigenous" Native American population. A key group of its leaders met that year for the first NAIITS Conference (North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies) held in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Two members of the ESJ faculty attended. In the years following, key leaders supporting the position of contextualized theological education and evangelism for the Native community met with Hunter and the ESJ

⁶ George G. Hunter III, *To Spread the Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁸ Luke 4:18.

⁹ <http://www.asburyseminary.edu/academics/>

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 5, Iss. 1 [2013], Art. 2 faculty, and soon after chose to enroll in either the D.Miss. or Ph.D. program. In 2004, the NAIITS conference was held at Asbury Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. The changes and challenges this new partnership produced in the whole atmosphere of the ESJ scholarly community was revolutionary. Worship, language, theology, and both mission and American history had to be reexamined. World mission could no longer be thought of as something “over there.” Cultural anthropology had come home to roost and was not always easily understood or accepted—especially by faculty and students in the traditional School of Theology. Drums, feathers, smoke, and sweat lodges were not a normal part of American evangelicalism. It was a new day.

After giving administrative leadership to the ESJ School for eighteen years and being named Asbury Seminary’s first distinguished professor, George “retired” as dean in 2001 to return to teaching and give more time to writing. During those eighteen years as dean, however, he added four additional books to his 1987 volume, *To Spread the Power*. Each one held to his established pattern of extensive new research that helped secure a “classic” quality to the work. *How to Reach Secular People* (1992) established clearly that at least in secular society, “modernity” was lost and “postmodernity” had to be considered the new culture to be addressed when offering the gospel to the West. In 1996, he followed with *Church for the Unchurched*, picking up his long trumpeted theme that the church by its nature is intended to be *apostolic* and exists for God’s mission to reach the lost, the last, and the least, not merely to care for the already gathered.

Following a sabbatical researching St. Patrick and Celtic church history in the isles of Britain and Ireland, he released in 2000 *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West . . . Again*. Hunter contrasts the “Roman” approach to evangelism (civilize them to our ways first, and then focus on individualistic, left brain, cognitive Christianity) with Patrick’s “Celtic” way (reach them where they already live, focusing on community, nature, right brain, feelings, imagery, and prayer). Through these observations, he makes it possible for many of us to recognize the tensions that have existed in the church for two thousand years, and to see a way to address post-moderns and reach the West again. In 2000, Abingdon published *Leading and Managing a Growing Church*, which made the case for uniting skills that often seemed to get divided. Simply put, good leadership requires good management. Otherwise, we could all end up holding what George Whitfield described as his “rope of sand.”¹⁰

Other books followed and will receive additional discussion later in this volume, but one deserves special attention. In 2003, Abingdon Press published

¹⁰ Stanley Ayling, *John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Edition, 1981), 201.

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Radical Outreach: The Recovery of Apostolic Ministry & Evangelism. The theme is not new, but Hunter addressed it in a new way. Over the years, he had come to appreciate and explore recovery movements such as Alcoholics Anonymous. As he became acquainted with congregations investing their primary outreach to “people thought to be unreachable, even ‘hopeless,’”¹¹ he wanted to define true New Testament “apostolic” ministry as much more than simply gaining rededications of nominal Christians or even professions of faith by “our kind of people.” The broken people Jesus and the early disciples touched, healed, and brought to new life were seen by most as far outside the boundary of possibility. Once again, today more vital and growing congregations are investing in this kind of “radical outreach.” Hunter examines several but zeros in on the story of First Baptist Church of Leesburg, Florida, and its pastor, Charles Roesel.

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First Baptist Church’s vision emerged gradually; but by the mid-1980s, they were serving and reaching sharecroppers, migrant workers, neglected people, homeless people, unwed mothers, addicted people, at-risk children and youth, and abused women, as well as artistically talented people and up-and-outer people with some wealth and political power.¹²

Although not the only emphasis, one of the unique themes addressed in this book is the extensive degree to which addictions are continually expanding in secularized western society. Hunter’s insights and appreciation for expanded lay ministries and the power of the Holy Spirit to make all people into “new creations,” wonderfully encourages a way forward for evangelism among those lost in the traps of our growing secular and postmodern world.

George Gill Hunter III has used his gifts well and been recognized around the world as a major contributor to renewing Christ’s charge to the church to “go and make disciples of all.” The United Methodist Church has elected him twice to its general conference held every four years; and six times he has served as an elected delegate to its Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference. In 1980, he received the “Philip Award” from the National Association of United Methodist Evangelists for leadership in evangelism. He was a founding member of The Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education launched in 1973, served in various positions on its executive committee for eleven years, and received its Charles G. Finney Award in 2002 for “outstanding contribution to the advancement of Christian Evangelism, Mission, and Church Growth.” He was co-founder of the American Society for Church Growth in 1985, served as its second president, and received its

¹¹ George G. Hunter III, *Radical Outreach: The Recovery of Apostolic Ministry & Evangelism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 15.

¹² *Ibid.*, 150.

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Donald McGavran Award for “contribution to the Church Growth movement” in 1996. Internationally George Hunter participated and offered valuable service and leadership to the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies from 1982 to 2002. He was a member of the World Methodist Council and served on its evangelism committee from 1977 to 1991. He also was an active member of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism from 1980 to 1986, and held membership in the National Communication Association, the Rhetoric Society of America, and last but not least—The International Brotherhood of Magicians.

Perhaps this last membership provides a way to conclude this short introduction to the person and work of George Hunter that will not be found in his awards or books, at least not the ones that have been published. In recent years, his childhood interest in magic has become an all-out pursuit of amusing and amazing feats that truly baffle. His focus has shifted from card tricks and other illusions with various objects to Mental Magic, where he has taken the title of “Mentalist Subordinaire.” I’ve attended with him a local magic club meeting. As with almost every arena of his life he did not go unprepared to take notes on a stack of three-by-five cards stuffed in his shirt pocket along with several pens. Here is the best thing about watching him fill out the cards: what he records, he remembers and puts into practice.

In addition to having hundreds of such cards, Chuck collects from all over the world the pens he writes with. He has a special interest in “real” ink pens, although some ballpoints are acceptable. Another interesting set of scribbles to be found on those cards is his lifelong collection of illustrations, stories, and jokes. Many of these find their way into his teaching, preaching, and conversations, but not so many show up in his books. However, over the years, the stories morphed from what might be called typical “jokes” to a very specialized category: “*You might be a redneck church if . . .*” To my knowledge, although submitted for publication, this book has still not hit the streets. In fact, several publishers determined it was not their kind of material. If you ask him, he can rattle off about 50 such creative zingers in the spirit of Jeff Foxworthy, and he has contrived over 150. Recently he reminded me of this one: “You might be a redneck church if your baptismal is stocked with catfish.”

Whatever Chuck adopts as a new hobby or interest, he invests his unusual talents and intellect in making it much more than a casual and occasional distraction. This is perhaps one of the most attractive qualities of George G. Hunter III. He is unquestionably an outstanding scholar and a disciplined and productive writer. However, evangelism, church growth, Christian witness, and life itself are much more than mere subject areas for analysis and discussion. Being

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Christ's witness to the fullness of life is truly his passion and active pursuit. It started as a teenager when someone reached out to him with an invitation to follow Jesus as the Savior and Lord. That conversion experience opened up his heart, soul, mind, and strength to be God's man for helping others find their way forward into the kingdom of God. His efforts have now crossed several decades, and untold numbers of lives have been changed by God's grace through his witness as Scripture, the Holy Spirit, and Christian friends have shaped him, corrected him, equipped him, and nurtured him "from one degree of glory to another." George Hunter is by no means a perfect man, but I, for one, am a better man because he has been part of my life. Hats off to you, my friend. Thanks for helping me and many others find *the way forward*.

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Dr. Ron Crandall served for 25 years as Professor of Evangelism at Asbury Theological Seminary and retired in 2008 as Dean of the E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Evangelism. Currently he is Executive Director of ABIDE, a program for renewing smaller membership churches under the auspices of SLI (Spiritual Leadership, Inc.). His special areas of research and writing include: ministry and evangelism in smaller churches, Christian witness, and Wesleyan contributions to Christian leadership. His most recent publications include *Turnaround and Beyond: A Hopeful Future for Small Membership Churches* (Abingdon, 2008) and *WITNESS: Learning to Share Your Christian Faith* (Discipleship Resources, 2007).