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Church Growth Missiologist and Defender of the Faith: George G. Hunter, III

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**CHURCH GROWTH MISSIOLOGIST AND DEFENDER OF THE
FAITH: GEORGE G. HUNTER, III**

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R. Daniel Reeves

abstract

Reeves summarizes Hunter's impact in McGavran missiology with professors, church planters and evangelists. He highlights Hunter's pioneering research among secular peoples at Muscle Beach and the fifth century Celtic movement, with broad application for enlisting and equipping disciples. Reeves also emphasizes Hunter's less reported role as friend and trusted advisor, citing his personal experience of receiving encouragement and advice while forming and facilitating the Council on Ecclesiology, a project aimed at reducing counterproductive rhetoric among several popular movements.

We walked into the Magic Castle in Hollywood, California, with one of America's premier missiologists. We later discussed personal matters as well as current issues in missiology and ecclesiology. During such post-conference dinners, this wrestler, magician, and historical scholar on Celtic Christianity would express interest in my family as well as in current writing projects.

Dr. George Hunter is perhaps the most compelling author and spokesperson among the early adopters of Donald McGavran's church growth missiology. Ask

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any of us who were involved during the eighties and nineties. We could count on one thing for sure during our annual gathering: whether in San Francisco, Orlando, Chicago, Kansas City, or Indianapolis, members anticipated the final presentation by George Hunter. No one would leave until he received a copy of Hunter's latest research. Within weeks, most of these copies were reproduced and distributed through participants' training networks.

fond memories and influential encounters

20 During the past several decades, George has been a dear friend and trusted advisor to many of us who were developing ministries moored in McGavran's missiological theories. One of my initial memories of George was sitting next to him during McGavran's advanced church growth class in 1976. A Korean student raised the question, "Dr. McGavran, what is the best way to bring about change in the local church?" Both of us leaned forward with our pens poised. Understatedly, McGavran responded, "I have spent the past sixty years in search of an adequate answer to this question. Here it is: One has to speak reasonably and gradually when and where it matters."

During a San Francisco dinner conversation with George in the mid-nineties, I expressed concerns for the increasing confusion among leading authors and speakers in the field of ecclesiology. Greater fragmentation among congregations was appearing in local communities. Instances of schism within local congregations and denominational families were being reported increasingly. Pastors and professors were writing and speaking against one another. From a distance, these overly harsh attitudes and uninformed accusations appeared to me, and to other seasoned observers of North American congregations, as slanderous. My concern, from the perspective of the general American public, was that we as evangelicals needed to do better at getting along. If not, we would all lose credibility within our particular spheres of personal witness. Additionally, our national collective witness was being compromised. After listening to my assessment, George encouraged me to convene a series of gatherings aimed at lowering counterproductive rhetoric between leaders in several advancing movements.

In retrospect, it appears that the mid-nineties experienced the harshest, most suspicious accusations between evangelical movements. Many committed Christians, especially at the local level, were expressing outrage and embarrassment at being perceived in the same evangelical belief system with certain visible leaders from other evangelical tribes. *How could a person who became aware of these*

Reeves: Church Growth Missiologist and Defender of the Faith: George G. H. H. *divisive exchanges*, I wondered, *simply remain silent?* Heeding George's advice, I began writing letters of invitation. He also suggested that I approach Howard Snyder, one of his colleagues at Asbury. Once again, George was right! Along with Charles Van Engen, Howard Snyder provided a balanced voice at crucial moments, especially during our early gatherings.

Although most biographies of George Hunter emphasize his writing and speaking gifts, very few provide glimpses into his indirect impact as trusted advisor to change agents across a broad spectrum of evangelicalism. My experience as convener and facilitator of the Council on Ecclesiology (ConE) gatherings offers one concrete example. On six different occasions, these two-day conversations with twenty-five leaders listening and interacting with one another from a broad spectrum of evangelical movements inconspicuously released healthy attitudinal ripples among North American Christian leaders. The informal, confidential settings enabled fresh, strategic relationships to form between movements. For example, Emergent's Brian McClaren and Doug Pagitt were able to interact with Michael Horton and other representatives of Modern Reformation and the White Horse Inn. New Apostolic Reformation leaders, Ed Delph and Gary Kinnaman, were able to consider the views of such seminary professors as Darrell Bock (Dallas) and Timothy George (Beeson). One of the most enlightening exchanges occurred between Roberta Hestenes, a World Vision executive and previous president of Eastern Seminary with fellow Presbyterian and president of Westminster Seminary-West, Robert Godfrey.

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On another occasion, Mark Mittleburg and Bill Donahue were able to clear up theological misconceptions about Willow Creek. Alex McManus of Los Angeles' Mosaic movement was able connect in meaningful ways with Paul Chappel, the cross-town seminary president of Kings Seminary. At this same gathering, Dave Ferguson, founder of the New Thing movement in Naperville, Illinois, was able to listen to Jack Hayford lead participants in singing "Majesty," followed by a riveting devotional. Along with the other participants, Dave also heard Elmer Towns present a firsthand historical perspective on Jerry Falwell and Liberty College in Lynchburg, Virginia. During several gatherings, Bishop George McKinney, representing the large Church of God in Christ movement, was able to insert relevant perspectives by African American church leaders who are often overshadowed by more visible scholars and preachers of European descent. With new insights about each other and the dangers of continuing along this destructive path, leaders began to speak about one another in less adversarial tones and more with genuine affection. Conversations were increasingly seasoned with grace and humility.

Today, after six gatherings held during the years 1998–2004 in such scattered locations as Birmingham Alabama; South Barrington, Illinois; Houston, Texas; and Escondido and Van Nuys, California, there is less unhealthy chatter among evangelical movements. The net result of George Hunter's initial suggestion to me is that the heated rhetoric between tribal leaders has lowered. Because of commitments by leaders at the center of evangelicalism, such as Christianity Today, World Vision, and the National Association of Evangelicals, there is greater clarity on issues that previously triggered unnecessary, unhealthy fragmentation. Finally, during the last two decades, a new stream of literature in ecclesiology, authored by ConE participants, has stimulated renewed orbits of enhanced perspectives for the local church in mission.¹

biographical background

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Just as he has invested over the years with many of my missional comrades, George Hunter continues to influence a wide array of emerging leaders in this new century. His formal titles at Asbury Theological Seminary's E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Evangelism include: Founding Dean, Distinguished Professor, Emeritus of Mission and Evangelism, and the Ralph W. Beeson Chair of Christian Evangelism. Altogether he served at Asbury as Dean for eighteen years and Distinguished Professor for ten years. Prior to his tenure at Asbury, he served both a county seat town church in Florida and a congregation of West Indian people in Birmingham, England, and taught evangelism at S.M.U.'s Perkins School of Theology, while also serving as United Methodism's executive for evangelism.

Dr. Hunter is a graduate of Florida Southern College, the Candler School of Theology (Emory University), Princeton Seminary, and Northwestern University. Hunter's writing, teaching, consulting, advocacy, and ministry are recognized nationally and globally. Born in 1938 in Louisville, Kentucky, George Gill Hunter

¹ See for example: Darrel Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts: God's Promised Program, Realized for All Nations* (Zondervan, 2012); Rodney Clapp, *Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (IVP, 1997); Ed Delph, *Church@Community* (Creation House, 2005); Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (B&H Academic, 2012); Bill Donahue, *Building a Church of Small Groups: A Place Where Nobody Stands Alone* (Zondervan, 2005); Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (B&H Academic, 1999); Jack Hayford and David Moore, *The Charismatic Century: The Enduring Impact of The Azusa Street Revival* (Faithwords, 2006); Michael Horton, *For Calvinism* (Zondervan, 2011); George McKinney, *The New Slave Masters* (Cook Communications, 2005); Mark Middleberg, *Becoming a Contagious Church* (Zondervan, 2007); Mark Galli, *Beyond Smells and Bells: The Wonder and Power of Christian Liturgy* (Paraclete Press, 2008); Brian McClaren, *The Church on the Other Side: Doing Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix* (Zondervan, 2000); Gary McIntosh, and Daniel Reeves, *Thriving Churches* (Kregel Academic, 2006); Erwin McManus, *Unstoppable Force: Daring to Become the Church God Had in Mind* (Group, 2001); Doug Pagitt, *Church Re-Imagined: The Spiritual Formation of People in Communities of Faith* (Zondervan, 2005); Howard Snyder, *Community of the King* (IVP Academic, 2004); Eric Swanson and Sam William, *To Transform a City: Whole Church, Whole Gospel, Whole City* (Zondervan, 2010); Elmer Towns, *Core Christianity* (AMG, 2007); Charles Van Engen, *The Good News of the Kingdom: Mission Theology for the Third Millennium* (Wipf and Stock, 2008).

Reeves: Church Growth Missiologist and Defender of the Faith: George G. H III is a former high school and college baseball player. His friends call him “Chuck,” a lifetime nickname. He later competed as a fast pitch softball pitcher and a weight lifter. He still “pumps iron” and recently became a Certified Fitness Trainer. Curiously, he has also returned to his adolescent interest in magic, especially mental magic.

teaching and publications

George Hunter’s research and writings have often focused on “apostolic” ministry and communication with the West’s growing number of “secular” people who have no Christian memory. His teaching ministry has engaged a full range of denominations in the United States and churches in many other countries—including Canada, Mexico, Bolivia, South Africa, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, England, Australia, New Zealand, Romania, Russia, Moldova, and Brazil. He has written over a dozen books including: *How to Reach Secular People; Church for the Unchurched; The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West . . . Again* (Tenth Anniversary Edition, Abingdon, 2010); *Leading and Managing a Growing Church; Radical Outreach: Recovering Apostolic Ministry and Evangelism; Christian, Evangelical and . . . Democrat?;* and *The Apostolic Congregation: Church Growth Reconceived for a New Generation*—all published by Abingdon Press.

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transition to mcgavran missiology

Hunter’s views on the local church were sharpened during his extensive encounters with Donald McGavran. The relationship began with Hunter’s reading a gifted copy of *How to Grow a Church* (Arn and McGavran) in 1973. After completing the book in two nights, Hunter recognized that McGavran’s range of questions were light years ahead of his own. By this time in his career, George was no starry-eyed freshman. By 1972, he had earned three graduate degrees, including a Ph.D. from Northwestern University. In addition, he had co-authored a text on winning the unchurched secularist, entitled *Making the Church Relevant*. George and his co-authors, Bill Hybels, Dale Galloway, and Walter Kallestad, had already recognized how the shifting patterns in culture would severely impact virtually every aspect of congregation life in North America.

Many of these insights and convictions were unearthed in his early field experience. For example, more than a decade earlier as a divinity student, George was assigned to a summer immersion experience among the peoples of Muscle

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Beach in Santa Monica. This heterogeneous population included the muscle crowd, beatniks, gays and lesbians, prostitutes, addicts, pushers, gamblers, criminals, sunbathers, surfers, roller skaters, shopkeepers, and others, including people speaking several languages. George observed these various affinity groups essentially coexisting on the same turf, with little communication between groups.

According to George, the one thing these disparate groups had in common was their peculiar reaction to him and his strange ideas. Hunter insists that none of them had any idea what he was talking about. They had neither Christian memory nor a serious Christian background. Most did not know or even recognize the Lord's Prayer. Many could not identify the name of the church that they, their parents, or grandparents had tried to avoid. Fortunately, because George had grown up in secular Miami, he was able to identify with them. His intuitions prompted him to begin his conversation where they were, rather than with the church's language. Remarkably, more than a dozen of the many he influenced that summer became believers.

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What surprised George most about these various micro culture citizens was their contrasting perceptions of Jesus Christ and his church. On the one hand, they demonstrated an interest in Jesus and his teachings, as well as what it means to follow him. However, they were not nearly as intrigued with local churches. In fact, the majority of those within these particular secular tribes which George later refers to as "barbarians," had already formed an opinion about churches from the reactions of their peers: ". . . boring, irrelevant, and not interested in people like us."

Even those who discovered faith that summer were reluctant to attend church with George. Among those who did attend with him, none would agree to go a second time. With an acquired tribal fluency in body language, these new followers of Jesus sensed intuitively that church people either did not care about them or were suspicious of them. Their perceptions coincided with what their tribal grapevine had taught them. Even though nearby churches assumed the way they did church was "normal Christianity," the way they presented their values were not engaging people like these new friends of George.

evangelizing pre-christian people

These rare anthropological insights during the early 1970s preceded an important area of Hunter's subsequent research. Indeed, his fifth century historical analysis of the Celtic movement presented to the Academy of Evangelism in 1997 and later published as *The Celtic Way of Evangelism* qualifies as a strategic breakthrough for

Reeves: Church Growth Missiologist and Defender of the Faith: George G. H North American local churches yearning for evangelism effectiveness. Among his original insights, I have selected the following as particularly relevant for local churches in mission:

1. *The Celtic movement thrived in a context resembling the emerging postmodern micro cultures.*

A host of New Barbarians substantially populate the Western world once again; indeed, they are all around us. . . . Often, they are thought to lack “class.” They may have unshined shoes, or body odor, or grease under their finger nails; in conversation, they might split an infinitive or utter an expletive.²

Hunter further describes these North American new arrivals as secular in the sense that they have never been substantially influenced by the Christian religion:

They have no Christian memory and no church to “return” to. Many have never acquired a “church etiquette” (they would not know when to stand, or where to find Second Corinthians, or what to say to the pastor after the service), and they are not “civilized” or “refined” enough to fit and feel comfortable in the church down the street. . . . many New Barbarians are addicted, and their lives are at least sometimes out of control around some substance, such as alcohol or cocaine, or some process, such as sex or gambling. Many Western cities appear, at least at times, to be taken over by the New Barbarians.³

2. *The Celtic overall achievements as a movement were astonishing.* As Hunter’s study substantiates, Patrick’s bands multiplied mission-sending monastic communities, which continued to send teams into settlements to multiply churches so that within two or three generations all of Ireland had become substantially Christian.

Celtic monastic communities became the strategic “mission stations” from which apostolic bands reached the “barbarians” of Scotland, and much of England, and much of Western Europe.⁴

3. *The Celtic movement spawned some of the most enduring strategies for enlisting and equipping disciples.*

a. *Seeker Mentoring.* According to Hunter, Patrick’s monastic communities invented a particular form of dyad. One person was either a seeker or a new Christian. The other was called a soul friend. Rather than being a superior, the

² George Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 96.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

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more experienced Christian came alongside the less experienced friend with a view
of encouraging a relationship of vulnerability and accountability.

b. Small Groups. One person, who was recognized as devout, would lead each
group of approximately a dozen people. Everyone participated in a small group
that ministered together, and that included seekers along the way.

c. Apostolic Teams. They were constantly forming teams to reach the
settlements in their region. They planted churches that in turn proliferated
additional congregations, small groups, and various ministries.

d. Worshiping Congregations. Starting from the beginning of the movement,
each monastic community proliferated worshiping congregations of fifty to
sixty people. The size was determined primarily by the length of available
lumber.

4. *The Celtic movement was halted in the eighth and ninth centuries by a hierarchical
control resembling the bureaucratic structures of contemporary denominational
headquarters.* Ultimately, what caused their disappearance in the two centuries
following the Synod of Witby in 664 was the control of the Roman way over the
Celtic way. The Romans were more conservative. They insisted upon cultural
uniformity rather than allow for shifts in methodology. Celtic Christianity adapted
to the people's culture in matters such as hairstyle. The Romans wanted Roman
cultural forms imposed upon all churches and people.⁵

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⁵ Ibid., 40–41.