BUILDING BRIDGES OF GOD DURING CALAMITY: LESSONS LEARNED FROM INDIA

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abstract

The Church Growth Movement has historically placed a priority on evangelism over that of social action. From a church growth perspective, if social action takes priority, evangelism is eventually lost amid the numerous good things that a church can do. In contrast the thinking of the missional church declares it is possible keep evangelism and social action in balance with neither gaining a priority edge. Using a real story from the missionary life of Donald McGavran's father, John G. McGavran, this article illustrates that when social action does, as it often must, take first place over evangelism, effectiveness in evangelism is often lost.

Famine in India has been an ongoing problem for centuries. A total of fourteen famines are known to have ravaged the people of India between the years 650 to 1902. While the land of India is fruitful, and its people are industrious, the climate is not always favorable. Without the summer monsoons to provide water for irrigation, the prospect of drought is an inherent aspect of India's climate.

As one would expect, India's many famines resulted in the deaths of millions of people. During the great famine that occurred from 1022 to 1033, entire provinces were totally depopulated. Between 1630 and 1642, when not a single

drop of rain fell for two years causing the Deccan famine, over two million people died.[1] In the Bengal famine of 1770 an estimated ten million people died. The Chalisa famine from 1783 to 1784 killed eleven million in Uttar Pradesh. The Orissa famine of 1866 caused two and a half million deaths. The list of famines and deaths goes on and on, but these few examples provide a startling picture of how famines impacted the people of India.

mcgavran's orphanage work

A great famine began in India in 1875 that lasted through the first decade of the 1900s. Eight to ten million Indians died during this time, with over five million deaths between 1876 and 1878 alone, and another four and half million in 1899. It was into this challenging period of time that Donald A. McGavran's father, John G. McGavran, sailed for India in 1891. He was twenty-four years old. Once in Bombay, he traveled an additional four hundred miles by train to Harda, a town of about six thousand people located in the northwest corner of Central Provinces. Immediately, John was put to work in the dispensary mixing medicines, visiting temples, and overseeing the mission school.

Missionaries from the Foreign Christian Missionary Society (Disciples of Christ) had entered Harda just nine years earlier in 1882. When G. L. Wharton, the pioneer missionary, began the work of the American Christian Churches and Churches of Christ in India, he found that missionaries from other denominations and societies had already taken up posts in the larger district headquarters. Since missionaries felt it was wrong to minister in the same place, he sought a town that was unreached and determined that the Harda Tahsil, which was located on a railroad, was just right. Each district in India has several Tahsils or headquarters, similar to county seats. Harda was the Tahsil for one of the sub-districts in the Central Provinces.

Fifteen missionaries of the Christian Churches lived in Harda, Bina, Bilaspur, and a few more stations. Their annual convention took place in Harda in November, and it was decided that Harda had too many missionaries. The mission wanted to expand its impact into the native state of Kawardha some sixty miles west of Bilaspur and thirty miles west of Mungeli. John was selected to relocate to Mungeli with instructions to investigate Kawardha and obtain land for a mission bungalow and workers quarters. In due time he went to Balispur by train, then by foot and oxcart to Mungeli and Kawardha.

[1] A famine in China during this same time period led to the collapse of the Ming dynasty in 1641.

While exploring the opportunity for a mission work in Kawardha, John met and befriended the raja, a local nobleman. Although the raja was friendly and welcomed the Christian Church mission, he indicated he would not give them free land. They could, of course, purchase land if they wished. The Hindus did not want another religion in their town, so any land the mission purchased would of necessity be outside the town. Evangelistic touring brought John to Kawardha several times, during which he found five possible locations to build a bungalow.

Evangelistic touring, as the missionaries called it, was typically done in the cool season between October and March. John and Hiralal, his native helper, traveled to various villages in the area of Mungeli and Kawardha. They either walked or used an ox-drawn tonga, a two-wheeled cart with a canvas top over two seats. Travel by tonga was slow going, between two to four miles an hour depending on conditions of the road. Piled high on one tonga were all of the supplies—tents, beds, chairs, tables, boxes, and suitcases—while the missionaries rode in another one or just walked. Camp was established as near a river or talao (small lake or estuary) as possible to easily obtain water. The presence of visitors and the work of setting up camp attracted curious onlookers who were invited back in the evening for a meeting. After lighting some lanterns, John and his helper would begin singing. When people arrived, he read the Bible, preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and invited them to become Christ's disciples. Many variations of evangelistic touring occurred, but generally this is the way evangelistic methodology was used at the time.

In the 1890s many villages in India were fringed with vast forests or jungles in which tigers, panthers, wolves, pythons, elk, spotted deer, red dogs, and wolves could be found. Herds of black buck and wild pig roamed the fields eating the crops. Not only was it dangerous to move about near the forests, but also the villagers often harbored superstitions about the unknown. Once, while camped out on an evangelistic tour, John shot three ducks, which fell into a nearby talao. He asked some of the people who were watching him to swim out and get the ducks. Acting fearful, they refused to do so, saying, "There is a dev, a god, in the talao. He will pull under any man who ventures to swim there." John inquired about alligators, snakes, and other possible sources for such a legend. Although the people said that no one had ever seen the dev, they were certain one lived in the lake. The thought came to John to swim out and retrieve the ducks to show the villagers that such a god really did not exist. By this time a crowd had gathered around the lake, and they begged him not to swim out into the lake. "The British will blame us for your death," they pleaded. But John assured them that there were enough witnesses at hand who would vouch that he was warned. They still

implored, indicating that about a year earlier a man took an elephant into the talao to drink, and both the elephant and the man were pulled under and never came up. Since John knew it was nearly impossible to drown an elephant, he felt even more certain that this was just a legend with no basis in fact. So, even though the people tried to dissuade him, he laughed and waded into the talao, commenting that there was no dev and that he was not afraid. When he reached the deeper water, about fifteen yards from shore, John noticed a slimy weed wrapping around his legs and arms. Growing within a foot or two of the surface, the talao was full of a fine-tentacled green weed, which would certainly pull a person down if his legs got caught in them. The villager's superstition was not so silly after all, and was well grounded in fact. He then swam back to the shore and found a plank of wood, which, upon returning to the talao, he pushed in front of him. By resting most of his weight on the plank, he was able to swim on the surface of the water, reach the ducks, and bring them back to shore. On the way back, he took a sample of the weed to show to the villagers. It did not do any good. He was shocked to find that the villagers did not follow his own logic. Instead of proving that no god existed in the talao, John's brave act simply led the villagers to believe that he was a greater god than the one in the talao. To his horror, they brought a chicken and sacrificed it to him! If any people needed to be converted to Christ, it was the people of Kawardha.

A sequel to this story took place about twenty years later. Donald McGavran's brother, Edward, had never heard the entire story from his father, but got the full report on a hunting trip with an associate who had been with John when he shot the ducks and retrieved them from the talao. As it turned out, Edward and the associate were not far from that particular talao, which was called by the villagers the Enchanted Lake. Talaos are often places of worship for neighboring villages, and temples with intricate carvings usually are built with steps leading down to the lake. Outside the temple proper are altars and idols before which offerings and sacrifices are laid. Asking around, Edward and his companion found that this particular talao was well known in the area where they were hunting. Venturing to the talao, they found that it was still very much the center of community life in those parts of India, and looking around they noticed that some of the altars and idols had sacrifices and offerings before and on them. One altar, with no apparent idol, had an unusual amount of offerings. Edward asked a local priest what god or goddess that specific altar honored. His reply was that it was "to a white god who was here twenty years ago and who went into the Enchanted Lake and came out alive."[2]

[2] This particular story is told in several places often with slightly different details. This version is a compilation of two different versions. One version is found in the *McGavran Family History* and the other in *McGavran Family Stories*, 200–206. Both are in the author's personal archives.

Continued ministry in Kawardha was not to be, unfortunately. Famine conditions prevailed throughout India, and thousands of children were orphaned as parents and extended families died. At the annual meeting of the mission in the fall of 1894, it was decided that orphanages were the priority. Kawardha would have to be given up. John disagreed and told the other missionaries he did not think giving up Kawardha was God's will for his life. His twelve fellow missionaries felt otherwise, and since he was the newest, youngest, and only dissenter, he decided the counsel of his colleagues was surer ground. Accepting their counsel, John relocated to Damoh in December 1894 to start an orphanage. One hundred years later, Kawardha was still unoccupied by missionaries.

It was a desperate time in many parts of India. Over fifty thousand people died in Bombay that year from the impact of infectious diseases such as bubonic plague and small pox. Multitudes of orphans were roaming the land, many dying like flies. They kept pouring into the orphanage. John's primary job was to care for approximately 435 orphaned boys, as well as to alleviate the suffering of those in need as far as resources allowed. Writing in his diary, John noted, "The boys arrived today. They are all too far gone. Most of them will be dead before morning."[3] Orphans were gathered up and put on trains, sometimes from as far away as three hundred miles. Several usually died along the trip to Damoh, but thankfully most were saved. It was not always easy. Years later, Donald McGavran related the following story, as told to him by his father.

> One seven-year-old boy came in, and when a plate of rice and lentils was put before him, he just looked wearily at it. He was too far gone to eat. John had a sudden idea. He told another boy to try to snatch the plate away. The seven-year-old fought him off angrily—and then started to eat with relish. After that for several days the regular routine was to excite him with attempted stealing of his food and then watch him eat. He survived and became a teacher in the mission schools at Harda.[4]

Orphans were housed in grass-roofed sheds. The eight feet high walls were made of sun dried bricks. Most sheds had thatched roofs, but a few had tiles. Consistent maintenance was necessary, or the roofs would leak badly in the raining season.

By 1897, rains had fallen, boys were no longer coming in such large numbers to the orphanage, and people settled into normal routines in Central Provinces. There was no disbanding of the orphanage, however. Most of the orphans had no idea

[3] Quoted by Donald McGavran in *McGavran Family History*, page 31.

[4] McGavran Family History

who their parents were or from what village they had come. They had arrived at the orphanage when they were only two to three years old. Even if their extended families and villages were identified, none of their families would take them back. They had eaten Christian food at the orphanage, and thus were considered out of caste.

With all of these factors in mind, John and the rest of the missionaries in Damoh moved forward to build a permanent orphanage. They replaced the thatched structures with new dormitories. The boys slept on new brick and mud beds about two feet high, built with smooth sides to help keep the snakes and scorpions out. A housefather named Alfred Aleppa, a well-known Christian from South India, was hired. School buildings were built with a total of eight classrooms so the boys could receive a good education. To train the boys for the time when they would leave the orphanage, a farm and a carpentry shop were started. The boys built fences to keep pigs away from the plants, dug wells for irrigation, and cared for the crops. The school served as a means of evangelism, and a few of the more intelligent and dependable boys were trained as teachers. Those who learned the Bible and spoke well were discipled to be evangelists, and, it was hoped, to be pastors of churches in the future.

six insights for making disciples during calamity

As God's providence would have it, in the 1930s Donald A. McGavran would find himself in a position to evaluate the impact of the early missionary work of the Christian churches in India. Along with Methodist Bishop J. Waskom Pickett, McGavran conducted pioneer surveys in India assessing the growth of the church in mid-India. The results of their studies were published in several books: *Christian Mass Movements in India*,[5] *Church Growth and Group Conversion*,[6] and *Christ's Way to India's Heart*.[7]

These studies produced several insights that were learned from the work among orphans, as well as work in education and medicine.

1. First, calamities cause the redistribution of resources, redistribution that is not always effective for making disciples. The famine forced the missionaries to abandon evangelistic work in Kawardha. While compassion for the many orphans could not be neglected, the fact that

[5] J. Waskom Pickett. *Christian Mass Movements in India*. Lucknow, India: Lucknow Publishing House, 1933.
[6] Donald A. McGavran, et al. *Church Growth and Group Conversion*. Lucknow, India: Lucknow Publishing House, 1936.
[7] J. Waskom Picket. *Christ's Way to India's Heart*. Lucknow, India: Lucknow Publishing House, 1938.

work never resumed in Kawardha makes one wonder how many souls were lost for Christ that might have been saved.

2. Second, conversion of all members of a social unit is more desirable than the conversion of a single individual. While individual conversions are important, closely linked individual decisions in a common social group are most effective in building disciples. Orphans who accepted Christ often found themselves standing alone once they left the orphanage with no social network for support.
3. Third, new converts must remain in organic relationship to their families and social networks. The natural avenue for the spread of the Gospel is through family and friendship relationships. Since the orphans were converted apart from their social and family networks, evangelism was stopped short of its maximum potential.
4. Fourth, the Gospel spreads best among people who are in a state of receptivity. Natural calamities, such as famines, often provide the necessary disruption of people's lives that allows them to be influenced by the Good News of Jesus Christ. Orphan boys were open to the teachings of Christ due to their state of mind and physical situation produced by the famine.
5. Fifth, conversions and church growth only occurs where the Gospel is preached. During natural calamities, good people respond with economic aid, distribution of food and clothing, and provision of shelter. While all of these good things are necessary and right for Christian people to provide, no Christian movement arises where the preaching of the Gospel is neglected. The orphans learned the Twenty-third Psalm, the Ten Commandments, and heard about the Good News of salvation through their schooling and medical care.
6. Sixth, the fruit of conversion—growing disciples—is most often found where the church is kept central to the mission. The bottom line is that unless local churches are established, discipleship is checked. When local churches were organized and available, the fruit of discipleship among orphans remained even after they left the orphanage in later years. Where no local churches were available, many drifted away from the Christian faith or into a secular lifestyle.

Looking back on fifty years of ministry among orphans in India, McGavran found that some of the boys, who grew up in the orphanage, accepted Christ, and went on to serve as pastors and mission workers among their own people. A few others continued on as faithful disciples in the midst of great persecution.

Unfortunately, the number who continued in the faith was often much smaller than might have been desired.

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