

“EFFECTIVE EVANGELISM” IN THE CITY:
DONALD MCGAVRAN’S MISSIOLOGY
AND URBAN CONTEXTS

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Jeffrey K. Walters, Sr.

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Introduction

The twenty-first century church faces a new reality: an urban world. A 2009 report by the United Nations confirmed that, for the first time in history, more people live in cities than in rural areas.¹ The United Nations anticipates that the global urban population will double to 6.4 billion by 2050. Africa and Asia have the fastest growing urban populations; both are expected to triple over the next forty years.² Today, over four hundred cities have a population exceeding one million persons. Twenty-one cities worldwide have a population of over ten million.³ The majority of those cities are found in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Even though Christianity has often been an urban movement,⁴ rapid urbanization has presented special challenges for modern evangelicals. A prevalent anti-urban mentality, the predominance of rural churches, and modern social issues such as poverty, globalization, and homelessness have

¹United Nations Population Division, *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2009 Revision* (New York: United Nations, 2010), 1.

²*Ibid.*, 11.

³United Nations Population Division, “Fact Sheet: Mega Cities” [on-line]; accessed 16 March 2009; available at <http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/wup2007/2007wup.htm>; Internet.

⁴Recent scholarship on the history of Christianity in urban contexts includes Harvie M. Conn and Manuel Ortiz, *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, and the People of God* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2001); Harvie M. Conn, *The American City and the Evangelical Church: A Historical Overview* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994); Rodney Stark, *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

slowed the evangelical response to the growth of cities.⁵ Missionaries and urban pastors have increasingly asked how to touch urban centers with the gospel.

One missiological school of thought that might have answered questions about urban missions is the Church Growth Movement. Even as urbanization changed the face of Christian missions, this important twentieth-century missiological movement has struggled with an identity crisis. Launched in mid-century by missionary Donald Anderson McGavran, the Church Growth Movement had left its early roots in missionary practice, especially after leadership within the movement shifted to North America in the early 1970s.⁶ Some within the movement have called for a return to McGavran's missiological principles of "effective evangelism."⁷ Even as some scholars and practitioners recognized the importance of urban missions and others the need for a return to McGavran's missiology, they have given little attention to McGavran's own study of missions in urban contexts.

Purpose

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine and evaluate Donald McGavran's philosophy and strategy of urban missions. I will seek to answer at least three questions: What

⁵Jacques Ellul's *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) is a source of much anti-urban sentiment, but Conn and Ortiz see a long history of anti-urban feeling within Christianity (Conn and Ortiz, *Urban Ministry*). See also Robert C. Linthicum, *City of God, City of Satan: A Biblical Theology of the Urban Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991).

⁶ Thom S. Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1993), 38-39.

⁷Gary Lynn McIntosh, "Thoughts on a Movement," *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 8 (Winter 1997), 11-52; Thom S. Rainer, "Assessing the Church Growth Movement," *Journal of Evangelism and Missions* 2 (Spring 2003), 51-62; Thom S. Rainer, "Church Growth at the End of the Twentieth Century: Recovering our Purpose," *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 6 (1995), 59-71; Ed Stetzer, "The Evolution of Church Growth, Church Health, and the Missional Church: an Overview of the Church Movement from, and Back to, its Missional Roots," *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 17 (2006), 87-112.

was Donald McGavran's understanding of missions in an urban context? How does his broader church growth teaching apply in such contexts? Finally, how might McGavran's teachings be applied in urban contexts today, if at all? While McGavran's attention to cities is less known than his general church growth writings, the application of his church growth missiology has great importance for twenty-first century urban missions.

Donald Anderson McGavran was born December 15, 1897, in Damoh, India.⁸ His parents were missionaries, as were his grandparents. As a child, the young McGavran attended the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 but did not give himself as a missionary until much later. He served in World War I, then graduated from Butler College in Indianapolis.⁹ He became involved in the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) but believed, "My father and grandfather were missionaries. My family has done enough for God. I am going to be a good Christian and make a lot of money."¹⁰ In 1919, however, he attended the Student

⁸There is currently no full biographical treatment of McGavran's life. Vernon Middleton, one of McGavran's students, wrote his dissertation on McGavran's background and is working on a biography. Gary McIntosh is also preparing a book-length biography. At this point, Middleton's dissertation and two works by McGavran himself are the best biographical sources, as are several memorial articles after McGavran's death. Middleton, Vernon James, "The Development of a Missiologist: The Life and Thought of Donald Anderson McGavran, 1897-1965 (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1989); Donald A. McGavran, *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1988); Donald A. McGavran, *The Satnami Story: A Thrilling Drama of Religious Change* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1990); Herbert Melvin Works, Jr., "The Church Growth Movement to 1965: An Historical Perspective" (D.Miss. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1974); Kenneth Mulholland, "Donald McGavran's Legacy to Evangelical Missions," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 27 (January 1991).

⁹Herbert Melvin Works, Jr., "Donald A. McGavran: The Development of a Legacy," *Global Church Growth* XXVII, no. 3 (July/Aug/Sept 1990), 6; Mulholland, "McGavran's Legacy." According to Mulholland, McGavran was the last living participant in the Edinburgh conference.

¹⁰Donald McGavran, "My Pilgrimage in Mission," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 20, no. 2 (April 1986), 53; Middleton, "Development of a Missiologist," 12.

Volunteer Convention where he heard John R. Mott speak. “At Lake Geneva,” he wrote of the meeting, “it became increasingly clear to me that a Christian could not thus limit the degree of his dedication.”¹¹ McGavran surrendered his own will to God’s and determined to return to India as a missionary educator. The Great Commission became what he called the “ruling purpose” of his life. Throughout his life, McGavran was first and foremost a missionary.¹²

After ten years as a church planter in India, McGavran became a mission administrator in 1933. He studied the mission stations under his direction and found that only eleven of 147 were growing in any way. McGavran began to ask why churches in similar circumstances with faithful missionaries would grow or not. He encountered the work of Roland Allen and J. Waskom Pickett. Allen published *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours?* in 1912¹³ and *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* in 1927.¹⁴ Both challenged conventional missions strategy and focused on the numerical growth of the church. Pickett studied churches in India, particularly those growing through “people movements,” when large numbers from a particular people group turned to Christ. Pickett and McGavran published a book together in 1936 called *Church Growth and Group Conversion*. It would be the beginning of an influential and controversial career for McGavran.¹⁵

During his missionary career, McGavran worked mainly in rural areas. The only exception was during his tenure as mission administrator in Jubbulpore between 1932 and 1937.

¹¹McGavran, “My Pilgrimage,” 53.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962); Originally published in 1912.

¹⁴Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church and the Causes Which Hinder It* (London: World Dominion Press, 1949).

¹⁵Jarell Waskom Pickett, *Church Growth and Group Conversion* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1973).

At that time, Jubbulpore was a city of approximately one million people, and McGavran worked to start a church among the lower castes. This experience proved formative in some of McGavran's ideas on urban church planting and social ministry.¹⁶

Historians date the beginning of the Church Growth Movement to the publication of McGavran's *The Bridges of God* in 1955.¹⁷ In that book, McGavran outlined his thought concerning the traditional mission station approach, individualistic conversion strategies, and people movements. In *Bridges of God*, he first described his understanding of people movements, the principle of receptivity, and the Homogeneous Unit Principle. *The Bridges of God* was well received in some quarters, but controversial in others. Many in the West believed that McGavran was discounting the importance of individual conversion. As a result, McGavran published *How Churches Grow* in 1959, deemphasizing people movements but continuing to advocate for what would become church growth.¹⁸

McGavran coined the term, *church growth* because of his belief that *evangelism* had lost its meaning. After World War I, the conciliar movement in missiology moved farther away from evangelism toward social concern and action. McGavran believed this to be a terrible mistake, so he began to call his approach "church growth." He believed that numerical growth was important, as it provided a way to monitor evangelism and provide accountability for missionaries and agencies. If, as he argued, believers must become fruit-bearing disciples and members of the local church, then missionaries could count new believers and determine the effectiveness of their work.

¹⁶Vern Middleton, telephone interview with the author, December 18, 2009. See also, Donald A. McGavran, *Ethnic Realities and the Church* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979).

¹⁷Donald A. McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (London: World Dominion Press, 1955; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005).

¹⁸Donald A. McGavran, *How Churches Grow: The New Frontiers of Mission* (London: World Dominion Press, 1959).

A second phase of McGavran's influence began after he retired from service in India in 1957. After several years of serving as a missions consultant, he took on a teaching role when he founded the Institute of Church Growth at Northwest Christian College in Eugene, Oregon, in 1961. The Institute was designed to provide opportunities for missionary practitioners to learn about church growth methodologies from McGavran himself. Students engaged in intensive research projects on the growth of churches within their own ministry contexts. For some, this meant urban research.¹⁹ The fruit of their projects not only began the application of church growth thought to urban contexts but also provided McGavran with a basis for his later teaching on urban missions.

In 1965, the president of Fuller Theological Seminary invited McGavran to join the faculty and become the founding dean of the School of World Mission. Fuller gave church growth thought a well-known platform in evangelical circles. While serving as dean, McGavran remained highly focused on cross-cultural missions as the purpose of church growth. He was a key speaker and leader in many international missions conferences and edited several collections of essays related to missiology.

McGavran was also actively involved in the development of an evangelical understanding of missions and evangelism during the evangelical/conciliar debates of the 1960s. Over his career, McGavran grew increasingly concerned with the emphasis on social ministry and justice over evangelism. More specifically, he reacted strongly against efforts to call social ministry "evangelism" and to elevate Christian "presence" over "proclamation" of the gospel.²⁰

¹⁹See, for example, Donald A. McGavran and James H. Montgomery, *The Discipling of a Nation* (Santa Clara, CA: Global Church Growth Bulletin, 1980); William R. Read, Victor M. Monterroso, and Harmon A. Johnson, *Latin American Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969); Roy E. Shearer, *Wildfire: Church Growth in Korea* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966); William R. Read, *New Patterns of Church Growth in Brazil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965).

²⁰Advocates of "presence" evangelism believe that Christians who live out their faith in society are, in fact, sharing the gospel. "Proclamation" is the contrary: the proclamation of the

Some ecumenical leaders viewed “presence” and social ministry as equals, believing that if Christians would serve, others would see that service and respond to the gospel. McGavran argued that Christian presence without the proclamation of the gospel is incomplete, although he recognized certain instances (such as areas of intense persecution) where “presence” evangelism might be necessary. “Please note,” he wrote, “that I endorse presence when the goal is that Jesus Christ according to the Scriptures be believed, loved, obeyed, and followed into the waters of baptism.”²¹ Proclamation of the gospel is a necessary component of evangelism. Other activities such as worship, feeding the hungry, and caring for those in need are necessary in Christian ministry, but they are not missions or evangelism.²²

In 1970, McGavran published *Understanding Church Growth*, the most comprehensive explanation of his church growth thought. He included one chapter on “Discipling Urban Populations” in which he outlined his thoughts on urban missions. McGavran listed eight “keys” to reaching cities:

gospel is necessary for evangelism to take place. The former idea developed as missionaries and national believers encountered other world religions. McGavran saw positives and negatives in presence evangelism. See Donald A. McGavran, “The Right and Wrong of the ‘Presence’ Idea of Mission,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (Jan 1970). While McGavran included persuasion in his definition of evangelism (see the definitions section on page 12 of this prospectus), he did not expand on the idea of persuasion as a third approach to evangelism alongside presence and proclamation. Later, C. Peter Wagner and Elmer Towns built on McGavran’s definition, arguing that persuasion is a necessary third approach. See C. Peter Wagner, Win Arn, and Elmer L. Towns, *Church Growth: State of the Art* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1986), 43-46; C. Peter Wagner, *Strategies for Church Growth: Tools for Effective Mission and Evangelism* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1987), 117-28.

²¹Donald McGavran, “Presence and Proclamation in Christian Mission,” in *Eye of the Storm: The Great Debate in Mission*, ed. Donald A. McGavran (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972), 209.

²²Donald McGavran, *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1988), 103; Donald McGavran, “A Missionary Confession of Faith,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 7, no. 2 (November 1972), 138.

1. Emphasize house churches
2. Develop unpaid lay leaders
3. Recognize resistant homogeneous units
4. Focus on the responsive
5. Multiply tribe, caste, and language churches
6. Surmount the property barrier
7. Communicate intense belief in Christ
8. Provide the theological base for an egalitarian society²³

Thom Rainer identifies the publication of *Understanding Church Growth* as the end of the McGavran era of leadership in the Church Growth Movement.²⁴ After that point, McGavran moved back into focusing on the international mission field and the discipleship of all the world's peoples. Nevertheless, he remained influential. His teaching ministry expanded to conferences all over the world, many of which addressed urban missions. He provided the opening article for a newly formed journal, *Urban Mission*, published in 1983 under the leadership of one of his own students, Roger S. Greenway.²⁵

Donald McGavran died in 1991, but he left behind an extensive body of published works on missions and evangelism as well as a wealth of personal correspondence rich with insight into effective evangelism in urban contexts. Still, his contribution in that field is little known. In his early call for in-depth study of church growth in urban contexts, Francis M. DuBose outlined McGavran's best-known contributions to urban missiology.²⁶ He lists, however, only a few articles in books that McGavran edited and the chapter on "Discipling

²³Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, Rev. Ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 322-30.

²⁴Thom S. Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles* (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 38.

²⁵Donald A. McGavran, "New Urban Faces of the Church," *Urban Mission* I, no. 1 (September 1983), 3-11.

²⁶Francis M. DuBose, *How Churches Grow in an Urban World* (Nashville: Broadman, 1978), 11-13.

Urban Populations” found in the first and second editions of *Understanding Church Growth*.²⁷ Greenway recognizes McGavran’s ideas as the foundation of much of his own teaching on urban missions but has not specifically addressed his mentor’s thought on the matter.²⁸

McGavran himself noted that “Research in urban church growth is a department of missions which demands immediate development by all who take the Great Commission seriously.”²⁹ McGavran’s emphasis on urban research is the first of three broad categories found in his thought on urban missions. He believed that the key to church growth is found in accurate research on the reasons for church growth or decline, and he encouraged studies of urban churches.

A second broad category of McGavran’s urban missiology is related to evangelism in urban contexts. He understood that homogenous units look different in cities than in rural areas.³⁰ He contended that accurate segmentation of city populations would aid the effective proclamation of the gospel, even if he did not elaborate on how such segmentation might look. Placing his specific teaching on urban segmentation and receptive populations within the larger range of McGavran’s understanding of homogeneous units will clarify the issue.

McGavran also emphasized church planting as a vital facet of urban missions. He particularly advocated the use of the house church model, even to the point of starting a house church himself.³¹ McGavran’s general principles on church planting methodologies, combined

²⁷Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 278-95; McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, Rev. ed., 314-32.

²⁸Roger S. Greenway, "My Pilgrimage in Mission," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 30, no. 3 (July 2006), 146.

²⁹McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 285.

³⁰McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 243-44; 326-28.

³¹McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 322; Donald A. McGavran, "House Churches: A Key Factor for Growth," *Global Church Growth* XXIX, no. 1 (January/February/March 1992), 5-6.

with his views on urban church health, will illuminate his specific teaching on urban contexts.

Finally, one must consider McGavran's views on social ministry in urban contexts. While he argued that evangelism is primary in all missionary endeavors, McGavran contended that churches in urban contexts must be concerned with justice and social issues. From his own involvement in a fight for equality in Indian culture to his argument that urban missions must provide a theological basis for social ministry, McGavran made an important, if little known, contribution to the field.³²

The examination and application of Donald McGavran's church growth missiology have tremendous application in light of the challenges of today's urban reality. Missionaries striving to share the good news of Jesus Christ among the masses in global urban centers need to understand more clearly how to impact peoples who are gathering in cities. McGavran's research and teaching have guided much missions strategy for the last half century. The application of his teaching in urban contexts has the potential for significant impact in the future.

Definitions

Before describing the background and methodology for this dissertation, it would be beneficial to define key terms. Of particular importance are *mission*, *missions*, *missiology*, *urban*, *church growth*, and *evangelism*. Authors from differing theological and methodological perspectives define these terms differently.

I will follow A. Scott Moreau in his distinction between *mission* and *missions*. Missions is the "specific work of the church and agencies in the task of reaching people for

³²Donald A. McGavran, ed., *Eye of the Storm: The Great Debate in Mission* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972); Donald A. McGavran, "Missiology Faces the Lion," *Missiology* XVII, no. 3 (July 1989), 335-41; Donald A. McGavran, ed., *Crucial Issues in Missions Tomorrow* (Chicago: Moody Press).

Christ by crossing cultural boundaries.”³³ Those cultural boundaries might include the gap between rural and urban. Mission is a broader term comprising “everything the church is doing that points toward the kingdom of God.”³⁴ In this dissertation, I will use missions to refer to the activity of the church aimed at evangelism and the extension of the church where it does not exist. Mission will include that activity but will also encompass the fight for social justice, social ministry, and other ministries of the local church. *Missiology* is the study of missions.

The term *urban* is difficult to define. John Palen outlines multiple viewpoints that impact one’s understanding of the term, including economic, cultural, demographic, and geographical definitions.³⁵ None of these definitions is entirely satisfactory. The United Nations reports urban populations based on each country’s own definition. For example, in the United States, urban centers are defined by population (2,500 or more persons) and population density (1,000 persons per square mile).³⁶ In China, urban areas are designated by the national governing body. Other nations define any town with at least two hundred residents within a defined border as urban.³⁷ McGavran defined rural and urban in economic terms, saying, “I classify as rural all those who earn their living from the soil, dwell in villages, and eat largely what they raise.”³⁸ Urban, on the other hand, were those communities of people “who live in

³³A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, and Gary B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 17.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 17.

³⁵J. John Palen, *The Urban World*, 7th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 7.

³⁶United Nations, *Demographic Yearbook 2005* (New York: United Nations Population Division, 2005), table 6.

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 278.

market centers and live by trade or manufacture.”³⁹ Still, he described urban areas as having populations of at least ten thousand. For the purposes of this dissertation, I will follow McGavran’s definition while recognizing that urban centers have unique cultural, economic, social, and demographic characteristics.

Evangelism, for McGavran, was “proclaiming Christ and persuading men to become His disciples and responsible members of His Church.”⁴⁰ He taught in *The Bridges of God* that evangelism had a two-fold nature encompassing both *disciplining* and *perfecting*. Disciplining was “the removal of distracting divisive sinful gods and spirits and ideas from the corporate life of the people and putting Christ at the centre on the Throne.”⁴¹ The second stage of “Christianization” was “perfecting,” which was the “bringing about of an ethical change in the disciplined group, an increasing achievement of a thoroughly Christian way of life for the community as a whole.”⁴²

Thom Rainer defines *church growth* as “that discipline which seeks to understand, through biblical, sociological, historical, and behavioral study, why churches grow or decline.”⁴³ Near the end of his life, McGavran frequently used the phrase “effective evangelism” in place of church growth. Positively, the shift was intended to emphasize McGavran’s long held belief that evangelism is at the heart of Christian missions. Negatively, the use of “effective evangelism”

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Donald McGavran, “Conclusion,” in Donald Anderson McGavran, ed., Robert Calvin Guy, Melvin L. Hodges, and Eugene A. Nida, *Church Growth and Christian Mission* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 231; Donald McGavran, “Essential Evangelism,” in McGavran, *Eye of the Storm*, 57; Donald A. McGavran, “Loose the Churches. Let them Go!” *Missiology* 1, no. 2 (April 1973), 81.

⁴¹McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 14.

⁴²Ibid., 15.

⁴³Rainer, *Book of Church Growth*, 21.

was an attempt to stem the criticism that church growth emphasized numbers at the expense of discipleship.⁴⁴

Background

My interest in Donald McGavran and the Church Growth Movement began during my first seminary course with Thom Rainer, then Dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. I had surrendered to Christian ministry not long before, after an education in history and museum science and a brief career in insurance sales. My family and I had relocated to Louisville in hopes of a future in either pastoral ministry or missionary service. Rainer regularly taught “Introduction to Evangelism and Church Growth” using his own text, *The Book of Church Growth*.⁴⁵ He introduced me to the theology and practicalities of ministry through his understanding of church growth as “evangelism that resulted in fruit-bearing church members.”⁴⁶ While I did not pursue my study of church growth missiology much farther during my initial seminary studies, Rainer’s definition became a key part of my understanding of ministry and evangelism.

Another important influence at Southern Seminary was Ed Stetzer, then Director of the Church Planting Center. I had several opportunities to study and work with Stetzer, most notably on several occasions as an intern in the Nehemiah Project church planting internship program through the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. Stetzer built on Rainer’s teaching by pointing me toward the necessity of church planting in global missions. His philosophy and methodology of church planting, as later outlined in works

⁴⁴McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 61, 89.

⁴⁵Rainer, *Book of Church Growth*.

⁴⁶Thom S. Rainer, "Assessing the Church Growth Movement," *Journal of Evangelism and Missions* 2 (Spring 2003), 67.

such as *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age*⁴⁷ and *Planting Missional Churches*,⁴⁸ brought many aspects of church growth missiology to life. He convinced me personally and through his writing of the truth of Peter Wagner's contention that "the single most effective evangelistic method under heaven is planting new churches."⁴⁹

In August 1999, I was called to pastor a small church in Tennessee where I began to put my education to work. I continued my seminary studies in missions, evangelism, and church growth while in the throes of "real-life" ministry. Donald McGavran's church growth missiology, as filtered through the teaching of Rainer, Stetzer, and other Southern Seminary faculty, became more applicable than I might have imagined earlier. I was forced to look at my community through the eyes of a missionary.

The intersection of McGavran's teachings and urban missiology became reality in my ministry when my family and I were appointed as church planters by the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention in March 2003. Our sending agency, which had taken on a strategy of church planting among unreached and under-reached people groups, had begun to focus on urban centers. We arrived in Paris, France, a cosmopolitan and multicultural city of twelve million people,⁵⁰ well prepared to engage French culture with the gospel but with little understanding of urban contexts.

My work as a church planter and strategist for indigenous French peoples in the Paris

⁴⁷Ed Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in Postmodern Age* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2003).

⁴⁸Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2006).

⁴⁹C. Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest: A Comprehensive Guide* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1990), 11.

⁵⁰Institut National e la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques, "Ile-de-France : en résumé" (on-line); accessed 19 April 2010, available at <http://www.insee.fr/fr/regions/idf/default.asp?page=faitsetchiffres/presentation/presentation.htm>; Internet.

region led me to ask several questions. It seemed that most church planting strategies were based on rural contexts. How, for example, did people group strategy (which was very much founded on McGavran's Homogeneous Unit Principle) look in a culturally diverse context?

My opportunity to find answers to some of my questions came when I joined a cohort of students in Southern Seminary's Doctor of Philosophy program in evangelism and church growth. My first group of seminars included one in urban evangelism led by Chuck Lawless. We studied Harvie Conn's and Manuel Ortiz's influential *Urban Ministry*, which addressed many of the issues with which my colleagues and I struggled.⁵¹ Lawless also reintroduced me to McGavran and the Church Growth Movement. In later colloquia on cultural anthropology, Christian missions, and church planting, I consistently returned to McGavran's work for insight into key issues in those fields.

Following our first four-year term on the field, we did not return to Paris, and I joined the staff of Southern Seminary as Associate Director of Professional Doctoral Studies. Because of my experience in Paris and my interest in urban missions, I was soon appointed Associate Director of the newly-formed Wayne and Lealice Dehoney Center for Urban Ministry.⁵² The latter position has allowed me to continue my study of urban missiology.

My first in-depth doctoral level study into McGavran's church growth thought came in a seminar on the theology of evangelism. I wrote a seminar paper on McGavran's soteriology, which allowed me to read a broader range of his published material. The more I studied McGavran, the more I realized that he had many answers to my questions on urban missions.

In later colloquia and seminars, I wrote on church planting ecclesiology, the history of Southern Baptist involvement in urban missions, and the theological relationship between

⁵¹Harvie M. Conn and Manuel Ortiz, *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, and the People of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

⁵²<http://www.urbanministrytraining.org>.

evangelism and social ministry. I found that these research endeavors consistently pointed to McGavran's influence on modern missions.

One of my last missions colloquia focused exclusively on urban missions. As my colleagues and I read the most current research and writing on the subject, I found myself frustrated by the emphasis on social ministry and social justice over evangelism.⁵³ While I believe firmly that the local church should be involved in ministry to the poor and oppressed,⁵⁴ I also believe that gospel transformation is the beginning of social change. McGavran's extensive work on the relationship of evangelism to social ministry has much to say to the contemporary church.

Finally, my studies for comprehensive exams required reviewing the history of the Church Growth Movement. As I looked at the broad span of missions history in the twentieth century, I saw that McGavran was a key figure. His ideas, though often controversial, had great influence on twenty-first century missions strategy. As I noticed the lack of application of church growth missiology to urban contexts, I began to consider research into that question.

On a personal level, I agree with Rainer, McIntosh, and Stetzer that Donald

⁵³See, for example, Eric O. Jacobsen, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003); Phil Mortensen, *For God So Loved the Inner City: Urban Missions and the Forgotten Church* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2008); Ronald Edward Peters, *Urban Ministry: An Introduction* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007); Ronald J. Sider et al., *Linking Arms, Linking Lives: How Urban-Suburban Partnerships Can Transform Communities* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008); Randy White, *Encounter God in the City: Onramps to Personal and Community Transformation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006) for examples. See also Raymond J. Bakke, *A Theology as Big as the City* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997); Raymond J. Bakke, *The Urban Christian: Effective Ministry in Today's Urban World* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1987).

⁵⁴Biblical support for ministry among the poor and need is strong. Key passages include Matthew 25:31-46 and James 2. See also Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson, *The Externally Focused Church* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2004); Timothy J. Keller, *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road* (Grand Rapids: Ministry Resources Library, 1989).

McGavran's Church Growth Movement has been separated from its missionary roots.⁵⁵

McGavran's teaching is both misunderstood and misapplied. Today's world, characterized as it is by urbanization and globalization, can benefit from McGavran's thought correctly applied.

Like his general church growth teaching, McGavran's teaching on urban missions has broad application globally and in North America. My hope is that this study will bring about such an application.

Limitations and Delimitations

I recognize that this study will be limited by several factors. While one important collection of McGavran's personal papers and correspondence is housed at Wheaton College and is well catalogued, the majority of his post-1965 papers are held by the U.S. Center for World Mission in Pasadena and remain in the same filing cabinets in which he left them. Researchers have had free access, so the papers are disorganized and perhaps incomplete. Nevertheless, an extensive body of primary source literature is available that will touch on the later years of McGavran's ministry.

In terms of delimitation, this study will not attempt a full study of church growth thought or the history of the Church Growth Movement beyond a survey. Many resources exist that accomplish such a task,⁵⁶ and any effort to cover the full extent of McGavran's thought would dilute this attempt to concentrate on his urban missiology.

⁵⁵See footnote six above.

⁵⁶See, for example, Rainer, *Book of Church Growth*; Gary Lynn McIntosh, *Biblical Church Growth: How You Can Work with God to Build a Faithful Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003); Gary Lynn McIntosh, ed., *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: Five Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004); Robert Gale Glahn, "A Biblical Analysis of Donald A. McGavran's Church Growth Principles" (Ph. D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1980); Herbert Melvin Works, Jr., "The Church Growth Movement to 1965: An Historical Perspective" (Ph. D. diss., School of World Mission, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1974); Sakari Pinola, *Church Growth: Principles and Praxis of Donald A. McGavran's Missiology* (Abo, Finland: Abo Akademi University Press, 1995).

Finally, this dissertation will attempt to glean McGavran's understanding of urban missions from a wealth of materials, not all of which specifically address urban contexts. McGavran wrote and taught extensively on his key principles of church growth. For example, he covered his Homogeneous Unit Principle in multiple books and articles, as well as dozens of letters and lectures. Only a few of those documents specifically address urban contexts. This study will attempt to apply McGavran's teaching by placing the urban material in the context of the larger body of his work, all the while attempting to avoid any biased reading of the sources.

Methodology

A study of Donald McGavran's church growth missiology as related to urban contexts must begin with an examination of his published works. I have gathered copies of most of McGavran's books in my personal library, but others must be found in the James P. Boyce Library at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary or at other libraries participating in the inter-library loan program. Another important primary source held in Boyce Library is a complete run of the *Church Growth Bulletin*, which McGavran edited for much of his career.⁵⁷ The publication includes his own articles as well as those he chose for publication. The *Church Growth Bulletin* later became *Global Church Growth*, and Boyce Library holds a complete set of that publication.⁵⁸

At the commencement of this research, I spent two days surveying the papers of Donald Anderson and Mary Elizabeth (Howard) McGavran housed at the Billy Graham Center Archives at Wheaton College. The collection is an extensive one, including ninety-nine archival boxes of letters, manuscripts, lecture notes, photographs, and video tapes. My purpose in visiting was to assess the extent of McGavran's work on urban contexts. I was pleasantly

⁵⁷Institute of Church Growth, Northwest Christian College, and Fuller Theological Seminary, *Church Growth Bulletin*, 1964-1980.

⁵⁸*Global Church Growth Bulletin*. Santa Clara, CA: O.C. Ministries, 1980.

surprised to find numerous letters and lectures dealing directly with urban missions. A more in-depth study, planned for later in this research, will yield deeper insights into his thought as well as even further material.

The Donald McGavran Collection housed in the library at the U.S. Center for World Mission in Pasadena holds McGavran's correspondence and other primary source material covering the period from the founding of the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary until his death. While this collection is not catalogued or organized, it should offer a fuller view of McGavran's work during the period of his greatest influence. A second smaller collection of materials related to McGavran's missionary career is found in the Thomas W. Phillips Memorial Archives at the Disciples of Christ Historical Society in Nashville. I plan to utilize both collections.

McGavran's former students and colleagues are an additional source of valuable information on his church growth missiology. I have interviewed Vernon Middleton, McGavran's personal friend and biographer, concerning his knowledge of McGavran's urban thought. Middleton also has an extensive personal library of McGavran materials and is very familiar with the collection housed at the U. S. Center for World Mission. A second resource will be Roger S. Greenway, one of McGavran's former students and a leader in urban missions. Finally, Gary McIntosh, a lifelong student of McGavran's missiology, has agreed to support my research.⁵⁹ Additionally, I have scheduled interviews with former students such as Ebbie Smith, a well-known Southern Baptist missiologist. I will also attempt to interview former colleagues including C. Peter Wagner and Charles Kraft. Finally, interviews with McGavran's critics will balance my research. I plan to talk with René Padilla, Samuel Escobar, and Manuel Ortiz, all of

⁵⁹McIntosh is the author of several books on McGavran and the Church Growth Movement, including *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: Five Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) and *Biblical Church Growth: How You Can Work with God to Build a Faithful Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003).

whom have criticized McGavran's thought, especially the Homogeneous Unit Principle.⁶⁰

Secondary sources on McGavran, the Church Growth Movement, and the movement's critics are readily available in the Boyce Library and by inter-library loan. Several doctoral dissertations have been written on McGavran's life and work, including some by former students.⁶¹

⁶⁰For example, see C. Rene Padilla, *Mission Between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985). C. Rene Padilla, "The Unity of the Church and the Homogeneous Unit Principle," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 6, no. 1 (January 1982): 23-30. Samuel Escobar, "From Lausanne 1974 to Manila 1989: The Pilgrimage of Urban Mission," *Urban Mission* VII, no. 4 (March 1990): 21-29. Manuel Ortiz, *One New People: Models for Developing a Multiethnic Church* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1995).

⁶¹Among the best are Vernon James Middleton, "The Development of a Missiologist: The Life and Thought of Donald Anderson McGavran, 1897-1965" (Ph. D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1989); James C. Smith, "Without Crossing Barriers: The Homogeneous Unit Concept in the Writings of Donald Anderson McGavran" (Ph. D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1976); Robert Gale Glahn, "A Biblical Analysis of Donald A. McGavran's Church Growth Principles" (Ph. D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1980); William Nolan Burkhalter, "A Comparative Analysis of the Missiologies of Roland Allen and Donald Anderson McGavran" (Ph. D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1984); Shawn Leroy Buice, "A Critical Examination of the Use of Selected New Testament Passages in the Writings of Donald A. McGavran and C. Peter Wagner" (Ph. D. diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 1996); Patrick Julian Melancon, "An Examination of Selected Theological Topics in the Thought of Donald A. McGavran (Church Growth)" (Ph. D. diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997); John Albert Crabtree, Jr., "Donald A. McGavran's Theology of Evangelism and Church Growth as a Basis for Theological Education," Th.M. thesis, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997); John Albert Crabtree, Jr., "The Divergence of Donald McGavran's Church Growth Movement in North America, 1955-2000" (Ph. D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2004); James Douglas Tucker, Jr., "Post-McGavran Church Growth: Divergent Streams of Development (Donald A. McGavran)" (Ph. D. diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 1998); Gary Lynn McIntosh, "The Impact of Donald A. McGavran's Church Growth Missiology on Selected Denominations in the United States of America" (Ph. D. diss., School of Intercultural Studies, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2005); Todd Alan Benkert, "A Biblical Analysis of Donald A. McGavran's Harvest Theology Principle" (Ph. D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008).

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Chapter 1 introduces the research question by examining the current state of global urbanization and urban missions. Alongside the study of urban missions will be an outline of the rise of Donald McGavran's church growth thought through the twentieth century, including the rise and decline of the Church Growth Movement's missiological emphasis. The research problem itself will be presented, outlining the intersection between McGavran's missiology and urban missions. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a description of the background of the study, the research methodology, and a brief survey of current literature.

Chapter 2 will include a more in depth biographical study of Donald Anderson McGavran and an outline of his church growth missiology. The biographical section will survey McGavran's missionary career and the development of church growth thought throughout his career, focusing especially on his later leadership and teaching ministries. The chapter will conclude with an outline of key principles of church growth missiology.

Chapter 3 will present an overview of McGavran's understanding of urban missions, beginning with a description of the growing influence of urban centers over the period of McGavran's career. The chapter will include an explanation of McGavran's understanding of the universality of church growth principles and a survey of McGavran's writing and teaching directed specifically at urban missions. Because much of McGavran's influence on cities came through his students at the Institute of Church Growth and the School of World Mission at Fuller

Theological Seminary, the chapter will include a brief outline of his students' work. Finally, the chapter will address criticisms directed at McGavran's missiology.

The final three chapters will go deeper into three key elements of McGavran's urban missiology that have application to contemporary urban ministry. Chapter 4 will address McGavran's contention that research is a key to church growth, with an emphasis on his advocacy of urban research. The body of the chapter will focus on McGavran's extensive research in global urban centers, along with that of his students at the Institute of Church Growth and the School of World Mission at Fuller.

Chapter 5 will explain McGavran's understanding of evangelism in urban contexts. Within this understanding, three important facets of evangelistic strategy will be addressed: the Homogeneous Unit Principle, the Principle of Receptivity, and church planting. While these facets of church growth thought are well known to church growth practitioners, they have special applications in complex urban contexts. The chapter will conclude with application of the principles.

Chapter 6 will delve into McGavran's work related to "holistic" missions and his understanding of the relationship between social ministry and missions. McGavran's leadership in the conciliar/evangelical debates will be addressed, as will his own work related to social justice issues. McGavran received some of his strongest criticism on this matter, so the chapter will also include a survey of the criticism and his response.⁶²

⁶²For examples of McGavran's critics, see McIntosh, *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: Five Views*; Gary Lynn McIntosh, "A Critique of the Critics," *Journal of Evangelism and Missions* 2 (Spring 2003), 37-50; C. Rene Padilla, *Mission between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985); Darrell L. Guder, "Evangelism and the Debate Over Church Growth," *Interpretation* 48, no. 2 (April 1994), 145-55; Gary Bekker, "Missiological Pitfalls in McGavran's Theology," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 18, no. 2 April 1982, 10/3/2008; Larry L. McSwain, "A Critical Appraisal of the Church Growth Movement," *Review and Expositor* 77, no. 4 (Fall 1980), 521-38; C. Rene Padilla, "The Unity of the Church and the Homogeneous Unit Principle," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 6, no. 1 (January 1982), 23-30.

Chapter 7 will answer the final research question, how might McGavran's teachings be applied in urban contexts today, if at all? I will conclude the dissertation by summarizing and reinforcing insights from McGavran's teaching on urban missions. Drawing from previous chapters, I will make application to the contemporary urban context.

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VITA

Jeffrey K. Walters, Sr.

PERSONAL

Born: April 20, 1968
Parents: M. Kirk and Gail Walters
Married: Melanie Lynn Hasting, December 29, 1990

EDUCATIONAL

Diploma, Germantown High School, Germantown, Tennessee
B.A., Belmont College, 1990
M.A., Auburn University, 1992
M.Div., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2002

MINISTERIAL

Pastor, Smyrna Baptist Church, Chapel Hill, Tennessee, 1998-2003
Church Planter, International Mission Board, Paris, France, 2003-08

ACADEMIC

Associate Director of Professional Doctoral Studies,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008-
Associate Director, Dehoney Center for Urban Ministry Training,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008-

ORGANIZATIONAL

Evangelical Missiological Society
Great Commission Research Network
Evangelical Theological Society