

# The Modern Church Growth Movement

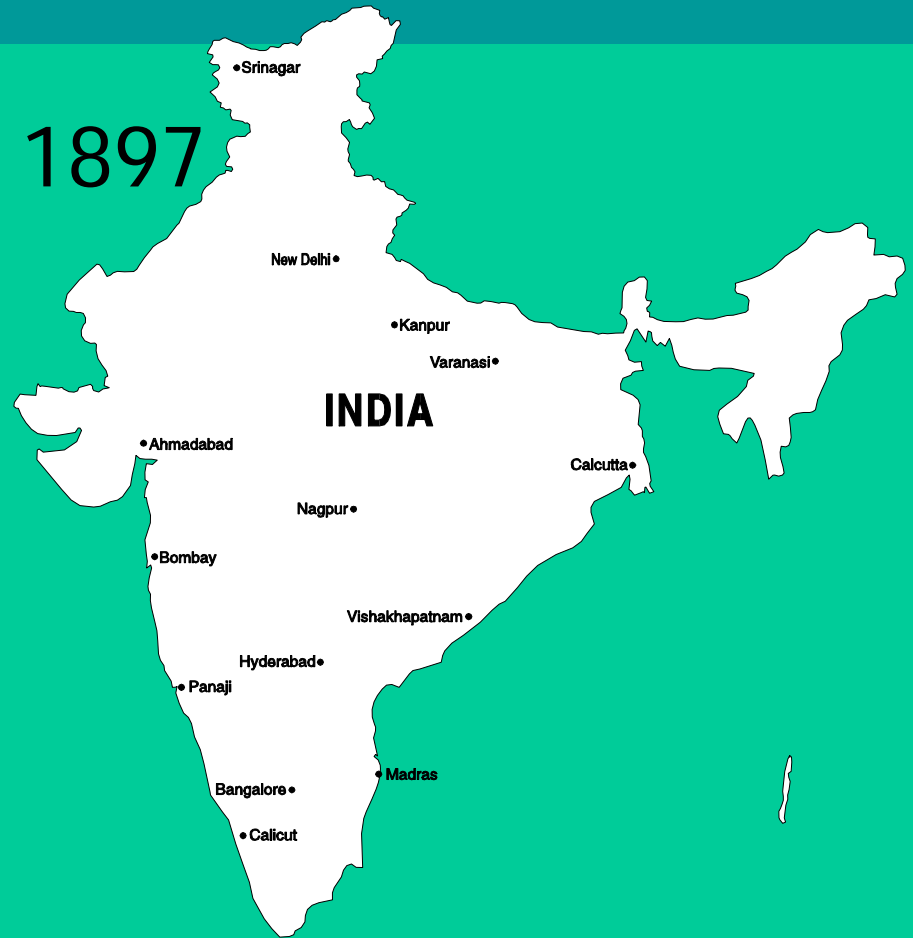
Howard Culbertson  
Southern Nazarene University

12 July 2012

# Donald McGavran

Father of the Church Growth movement

- MK, born in India in 1897
- Grandparents were also missionaries to India



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# Captured by materialism

While a student at Butler University . . .

“My father has done enough for the Lord.  
It is time for me to strike out for myself  
and earn some money.”

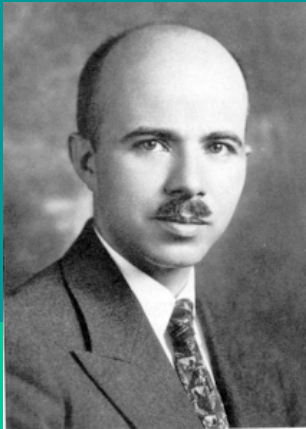


# A change of direction

- Gave life to Christ
- Went to Yale Divinity School
- Would finish Ph.D. in 1937 at Columbia University with a dissertation on Hinduism and Christianity

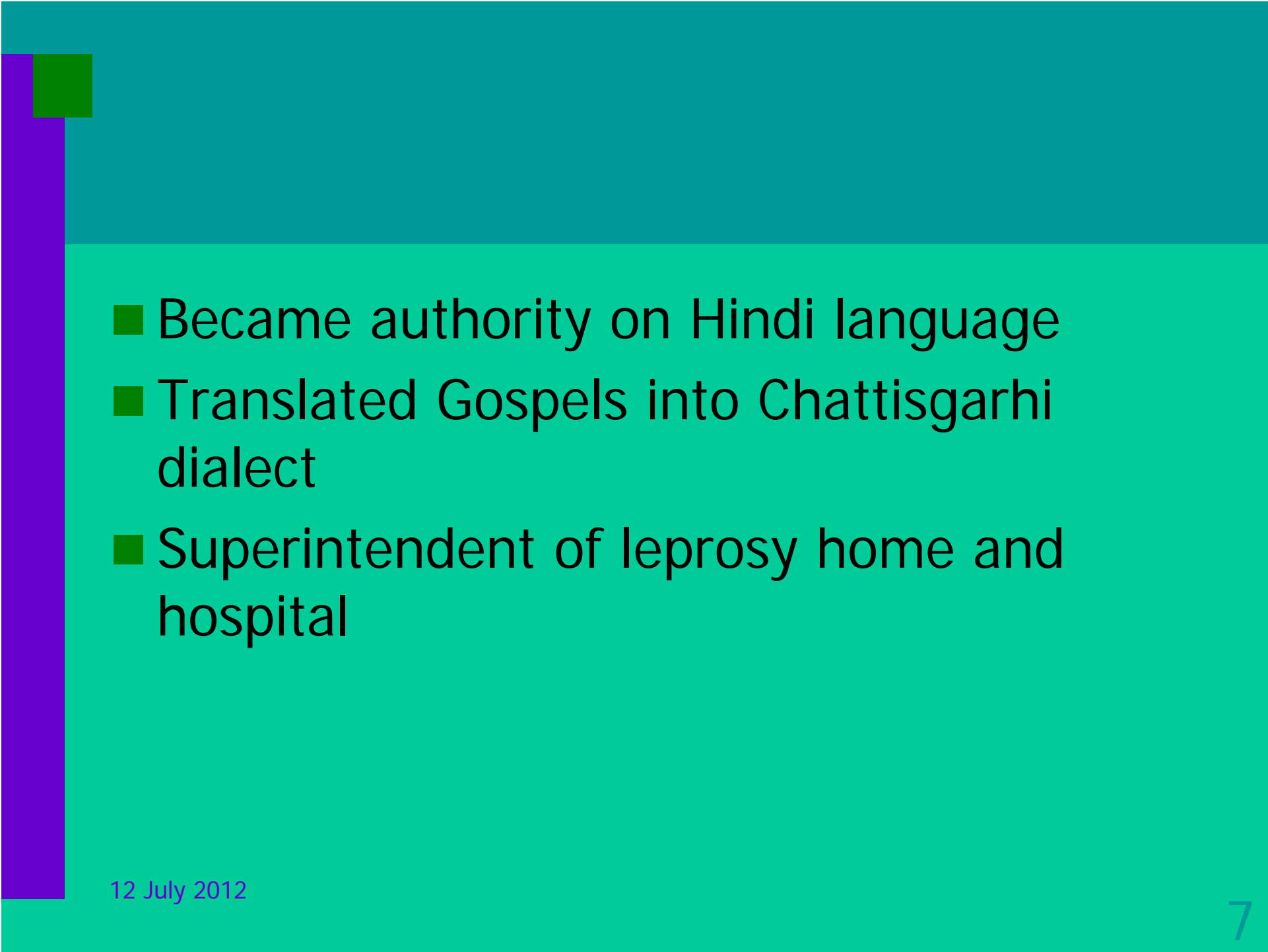
# Back to India

- Returned to India in 1923 with United Christian Missionary Society (Disciples of Christ)
- Placed in charge of mission school system at Harda



## Missionary administrator

- Director of religious education
  - Standardized instruction and curriculum
  - Wrote course outlines
  - Established Christian Youth Conferences

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- Became authority on Hindi language
  - Translated Gospels into Chattisgarhi dialect
  - Superintendent of leprosy home and hospital

- 1932-- became executive secretary of mission
  - 80 missionaries, 5 hospitals, high schools, primary schools, home for lepers
  - *20-30 small churches growing at 1% per year*



# It wasn't all office work



- Fought off a wounded tiger and a wild boar
- Checked a cholera epidemic single handedly
- Climbed the Himalayas



# McGavran's conclusion

- Large amounts of money producing relatively small results
- "It offended my Scottish nature."

So, what to do now?

# Enter: J. Waskom Pickett



McGavran said: “I lit my candle at his fire.”

Who was this man?

- 1910 -- E. Stanley Jones convinced J. Waskom Pickett to apply for missionary service to India
- Interest aroused in "mass movements" to Christ
  - 1920's Controversy over mass conversions piques Pickett's interest
  - 1930-31 Pickett surveys mass movement phenomenon throughout India

- 1936 Pickett was asked to survey central India  
McGavran traveled with him

# Pickett's legacy

- Pragmatic research-based orientation
- People movements
- Awareness of social networks
- Need to reach the masses
- Study of converts' motives
- Disciplining and "perfection" as part of evangelism



## Pickett is one of us

- Something not to be overlooked for our theological tradition:
- McGavran's mentor was a Methodist.

- 1936 McGavran left administrative position; spent next 18 years in church planting
  - (15 churches/ 1000 converts)



# Birth certificate of church growth movement

- 1955 Published “Bridges of God”
  - Fostering people movements versus mission station approach
  - Hint of Homogeneous Unit Principle

- 1959 Published "How Churches Grow"
- 1961 Church Growth Institute in Oregon
  - Plan was to educate furloughed missionaries
  - Began with one student, a Methodist missionary to Bolivia.
- 1964 "Church Growth Bulletin"

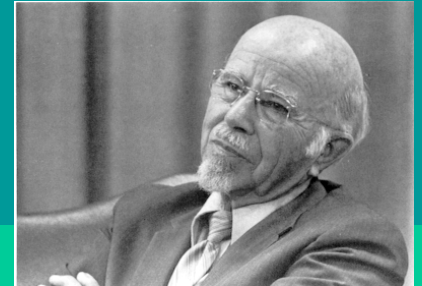
- 1965 Moved to Fuller Seminary

- Movement went from global to dominated by North Americans

- 1970 Published "Understanding Church Growth"



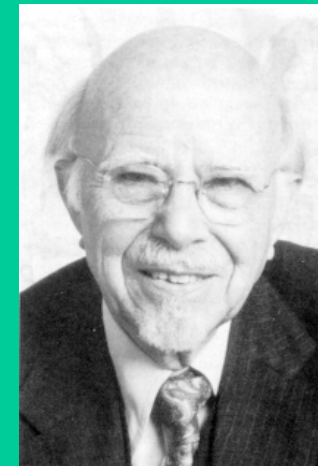
# McGavran's 3 questions



- When a church is growing, **why** is it growing?
- What **barriers, obstructions or sicknesses** prevent the natural life, vitality and growth of churches?
- What **reproducible principles** operative in growing churches can be used elsewhere?

# Lessons from McGavran

1. Value of a few close support people
  - Wesley / Whitefield contrast
2. Clear focus
3. Optimism
4. Value of edification and encouragement



# Lessons from McGavran

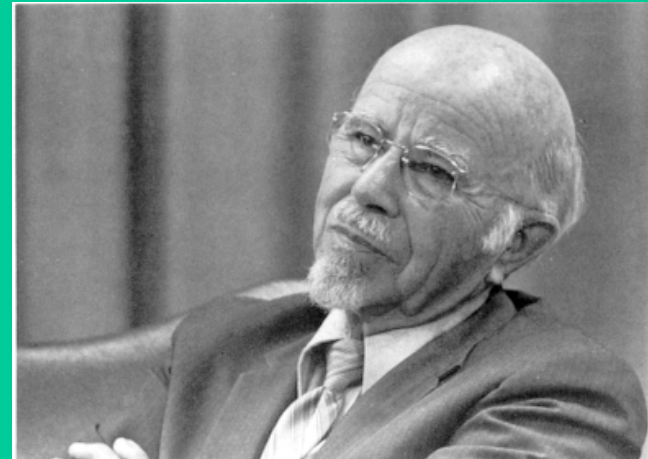
5. Humility

6. Enormous energy

Much of his work done after age 65

7. Vision

8. Incredible tenacity



# Philosophic Core

Material from Elmer Towns

- Homogeneous units

Main barrier to conversion needs to be theological and not something else

- People movements

- Focus on receptivity . . . the “good” soil

- Use of scientific methodology

Wesley’s sanctified pragmatism

- Church planting

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# McGavran's use of scientific method

- Identify problem
- Gather data
- Construct hypothesis  
(potential solution)
- Test hypothesis
- Establish principle



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End

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