Donald McGavran and the Church Growth Movement for Ministry, Church and Society

Howard Culbertson
Southern Nazarene University
Donald McGavran
Father of the Church Growth movement

- Born in India in 1897
- Parents and grandparents were missionaries to India
As 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

- While at the university, gave life to Christ
- Felt call to ministry
Back to India

- 1923: Returned to India as a missionary with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
Missionary administrator

- Director of religious education
- Superintendent of leprosy home and hospital
- Translated Gospels into Chattisgarhi dialect
It wasn’t all office work

- Fought off a wounded tiger and a wild boar
- Ended a cholera epidemic
- Climbed the Himalayas
1932-- became the head of mission

Under him:

- 80 missionaries, 5 hospitals, high schools, primary schools, home for lepers

- 20-30 small churches growing at 1% per year
McGavran’s conclusion

- Large amounts of money producing 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?
1936: Pickett was studying the validity of “mass movements” to Christ

McGavran traveled around India with him
1936 McGavran left administrative position; spent next 18 years in church planting

(15 churches/ 1000 converts)
1955 wrote book: “Bridges of God”

- Importance of family/friendship networks
- Hint of Homogeneous Unit Principle

“People like to become Christians without feeling they have to cross racial, linguistic, social or class boundaries.”
1961: founded Church Growth Institute in Oregon; 1965 moved to Fuller Seminary
- Plan: educate furloughed missionaries

1970 Published “Understanding Church Growth”
McGavran and the scientific method

- McGavaran used the scientific method in his studies of church growth and decline
  - Gather data
  - Construct hypothesis (potential solution)
  - Test hypothesis
  - Establish principle
1. When a church is growing, **why** is it growing?

- Look beyond superficial evaluations and get the right answer
2. What **barriers, obstructions or sicknesses** prevent the natural life, vitality and growth of churches?

- Examples: Ethnikitis, “holy huddle,” ghost town problems, people blindness, First Church syndrome, out of space issues, pew paralysis
McGavran’s 3 questions

3. What **reproducible principles** operative in growing churches can be used elsewhere?

- Examples: identify receptive people, reach out through social networks, multiply recruiting units, minister to people’s needs, strategic planning
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?
“God wants His lost sheep found”

How can we do the most effective job in serving Him to accomplish that task?
The Modern Church Growth Movement
MCS edition