The Modern Church Growth Movement

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Donald McGavran
Father of the Church Growth movement

- MK, born in India in 1897
- Grandparents were also missionaries to India
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
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
- Discipling and “perfection” as part of evangelism
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