

# **Donald McGavran**

## **The Father of the Modern-Day Church Growth Movement**

by Nelson Searcy

***“Accept the fact that God wants His lost children found, brought into the fold and fed.”***

Donald Anderson McGavran (December 15, 1897 – July 10, 1990) came from a family of missionaries, and served for decades as a missionary to India and China. He’s best remembered as one of the premier missiologists of the twentieth century, and is considered the father of the Church Growth Movement.

### ***A focus on barriers to successful evangelism***

As a missionary, McGavran saw that the gospel spread quickly in some areas, while in others it didn’t. This led him to identify barriers that would hinder evangelism, and differences in socioeconomic status as major obstacles for evangelism. He stressed the importance of reaching families and social groups all at once, rather than reaching one person at a time with the gospel. McGavran’s insights led to a major change in the methods that missionaries and other church leaders used to identify and prioritize groups that might be receptive to evangelistic work.

### ***Spreading the word about Church Growth***

In the mid-1950s, McGavran began traveling throughout the world to study effective evangelism, and teaching and writing about the insights he’d gained. He established the Institute of Church Growth in Eugene, Oregon in 1957 and the School of

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## CHURCH GROWTH CHAMPIONS: DONALD MCGAVRAN



*C. Peter Wagner and Donald McGavran on the campus of Fuller Theological Seminary, which McGavran founded in 1965*

World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary in 1965.

He continued to speak and write, even after he retired from Fuller in 1981. By the time of his death in 1990, he was acknowledged as a leading figure in the early days of the Church Growth movement. McGavran's insights have influenced generations of church leaders who are seeking to reach lost people with the gospel.

### Education and family background:

- McGavran was born in India and was the third generation of missionaries in his family. As of 1954, his family had a total of 279 years of service in India.
- He was saved at the age of 14 and baptized at the First Christian Church of Tulsa, Oklahoma.
- McGavran credited his early missionary training to his father, John McGavran.
- He attended Yale Divinity School (B.D., 1922) and Columbia University (Ph.D., 1936).
- He served with the United Christian Missionary Society (Disciples of Christ) in India from 1923 to 1955.
- McGavran married Mary Elizabeth Howard in 1922. They were married until her death in 1990, just three months before Donald McGavran died. The couple had six children (five daughters and one son).



*The McGavrans in India: Winifred, Malcolm, Helen, Jean, Mary and Donald*

## CHURCH GROWTH CHAMPIONS: DONALD McGAVRAN



*Donald McGavran and Win Arn discussing principles of church growth during the filming of How Churches Grow in 1974*

### **In his lifetime, Donald McGavran:**

- Experienced a call to ministry at a conference in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin in 1919.
- Fought for the U.S. Army in France during World War I.
- Was fluent in Hindi and Chattisgarhee, a regional language of central India.
- Fought a wild boar, according to C. Peter Wagner.
- Scaled the Himalayas during his time as a missionary to India.

### **Major accomplishments:**

- Founded the Institute of Church Growth at Northwest Christian College in Eugene, Oregon and the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. He trained thousands of church leaders in church growth principles at these institutions.
- Served as secretary-treasurer for his denomination's mission agency in India from 1933 to 1936.
- Began publishing the Church Growth Bulletin in 1964, a newsletter that went out to thousands of church leaders worldwide, and continued as editor until 1981.
- Wrote at least 19 books, co-wrote or edited nine others, and wrote numerous articles for Christian magazines.
- Created the Institute For American Church Growth in 1973, along with Dr. Win Arn, to provide information and research on North American church growth.
- Taught at many colleges and universities, including Drake University, Phillips University, the College of Missions (Disciples of Christ) and Bethany College.
- Studied church growth patterns all over the world, in such places as the Congo, Thailand, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Jamaica, and among the Yakima Indians.



### **McGavran on his call to ministry:**

“It became clear to me that God was calling me to be a missionary, that he was commanding me to carry out the Great Commission. Doing just that has ever since been the ruling purpose of my life. True, I have from time to time swerved from that purpose, but never for long. That decision lies at the root of the Church Growth Movement.”

### **Notable Quotes:**

“Why not use an output term (i.e., church growth), rather than the traditional term of input, (i.e., evangelism)?”

“Analytical tools are available for pastors and concerned laypeople to determine whether their own churches have desirable growth patterns.”

“Let us analyze causes for growth and non-growth. Let us remember that the task is indeed great and complex and ours is only one part of the whole. Let us ask God to forgive our sins – and push resolutely forward as if we had not sinned. There is much ground to be gained and there are many adversaries to be overcome, and the day is far spent.”

“Church growth follows where the lost are not merely found but restored to normal life in the fold – though it may be a life they have never consciously known. Faithfulness in ‘folding and feeding’ – which unfortunately has come to be called by such a dry, superficial term as ‘follow-up’ – is essential to lasting church expansion.”

“Many good programs of evangelism exist. Church-growth evangelism’s merit is that it focuses attention on methods and aims which intend the growth of churches.”

“Every person wants to become a Christian without crossing racial, linguistic or cultural barriers.”

“I am not at all sure that we want to drop ‘church growth.’ It has come to mean exactly what it was intended to mean across great reaches of the world. It is a pity to give up something as successful and meaningful, and start defining a new term. But if it has to be done, let’s get a term which has in it strong defenses against the reinterpretation of evangelism which is going on all sides.”

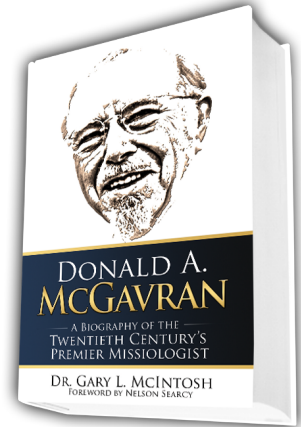
“We stand in the sunrise of missions.”

“Christian mission is bringing people to repent of their sins, accept Jesus Christ as Savior, belong to His Body the Church, do as He commands, go out and spread the Good News, and multiply churches.”

## CHURCH GROWTH CHAMPIONS: DONALD MCGAVRAN

### Notable books by and about Donald McGavran:

- *Donald A. McGavran: A Biography of the Twentieth Century's Premier Missiologist*, a new biography by Gary L. McIntosh, with a foreword by Nelson Searcy (Church Leader Insights)
- Understanding Church Growth (with C. Peter Wagner) (Eerdmans Publishing)
- Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions (Wipf & Stock Publishing)
- Ten Steps For Church Growth (with Winfield C. Arn) (HarperCollins)
- Church Growth: Strategies That Work (Creative leadership series) (Abingdon Press)



### For further study:

- Bio from Wheaton College's Billy Graham Center: [www2.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/GUIDES/178.htm#301](http://www2.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/GUIDES/178.htm#301)
- Bio on The Traveling Team website: [www.thetravelingteam.org/articles/donald-mcgavran](http://www.thetravelingteam.org/articles/donald-mcgavran)



**Nelson Searcy** is the Founding and Lead "Renegade" Pastor of The Journey Church. He's the author of over 90 church-growth resources and 15 books, including including *The Renegade Pastor: Abandoning Average in Your Life and Ministry*, and the 10th anniversary edition of *Fusion: Turning First-Time Guests into Fully Engaged Members of Your Church*. He's also the founder of [www.RenegadePastors.com](http://www.RenegadePastors.com) and [www.ChurchLeaderInsights.com](http://www.ChurchLeaderInsights.com), a ministry to over 50,000 Senior Pastors.

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