

An Interview with Donald McGavran

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The Visionary is fortunate to include in this issue an interview with Dr. Donald McGavran. John Wasem interviewed Dr. McGavran in his home in Altadena, California. The McGavrans lived in the panhandle of West Virginia and were among the earliest followers of Alexander Campbell. John McGavran went to India in 1891 as a missionary of the Christian Churches. Donald McGavran went to India in 1923 and proclaimed the gospel there until 1954. His church growth teachings started at Northwest Christian College, Eugene, Oregon, in 1961. In 1965 he became the founding dean of the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary at Pasadena. He is regarded as the founder of the church growth movement.

WHY IS IT SO CONFIDENTLY STATED THAT NEW CHURCH PLANTING IS THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY TO FULFILL THE GREAT COMMISSION?

McGavran: Because of the very large number of people who have no connection with any branch of the Christian Church. Now we here in America think, "Oh, everybody is a Christian." They belong to this church or that church, and it's simply a matter of getting involved in a particular church. Well, with some people that is so. But for vast numbers of people, their connection with the church is slight. There is a desperate need for new churches to reach into the population which is not being churchied.

THERE IS A COMMON MISUNDERSTANDING THAT AMERICA HAS PLENTY OF CHURCHES. HOW DO WE IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH GO ABOUT DISPELLING THAT?

McGavran: I think we have to feed them facts. The Christian Churches, to a very great extent, have replaced the idea of winning the world for Christ with the idea of church unity. We've got to get back to the idea that 3/4 of the world, or probably 4/5, are non-Christians, and a lot of those non-Christians are right here in North America.

HISTORICALLY, HAS THE RESTORATION MOVEMENT DEMONSTRATED GREAT ZEAL FOR EVANGELISM?

McGavran: For the first fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty years, I don't know just when that period ends, we were a greatly multiplying church. When people went to various places, they would start a church. They were Christians. They didn't believe that you had to have all of this and that. You didn't have to have degrees from Harvard or any of those places. If you loved the Bible and the Lord, you had a church. That is what we need. We need to have people who really love the Lord. Now, I am not against education. I myself

am a graduate of Yale Divinity School and the Union Theological Seminary of New York. I have taught in nine seminaries in the last forty years. However, we need to have congregations that fit all kinds of people.

WHAT CAN WE DO TO RESTORE THE NEW TESTAMENT CHRISTIANITY WHICH PRIORITIZES EVANGELISM?

McGavran: My last book, entitled Effective Evangelism, A Theological Mandate, was first delivered as a series of lectures in Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, a conservative Presbyterian Seminary. Theological seminaries, Bible schools, Bible colleges and Divinity schools all need to have a large number of required courses (I've said five in the book). Everyone must take them. These would deal with the kind of evangelism that leads "the lost" to existing churches and starts new churches.

NEW CHURCH PLANTING ALMOST APPEARS TO BE AN EVANGELICAL FAD IN THE 1980'S. HOW WOULD YOU REACT IF A CHURCH LEADER SAID, "CHURCH PLANTING IS JUST A FAD"?

McGavran: I would simply say to him, "Do you believe yourself to be a New Testament Christian? Do you take the New Testament seriously? Do you believe God wants His lost children found? Do you believe that John 3:16 is true? Do you believe that God really wants all these lost people found?"

WHAT COULD WE DO TO MOTIVATE THE AVERAGE MEMBER OF OUR CHURCHES TO BE CONCERNED ABOUT AND WILLING TO GIVE SACRIFICIALLY TOWARD CHURCH PLANTING AS A MISSION?

McGavran: I think that we've got to maintain that being a Christian means believing the Bible, and willing to live the Bible, and willing to do what God commands us to do in the Bible. That when our Lord tells the story of a shepherd with a hundred sheep, and he lost one of them, he left the ninety-nine and went out to look for the one. What would the Lord do if He had a hundred sheep and eighty-nine of them were lost, and only eleven were in the fold? Would He continue looking after the eleven, or would He go out after the eighty-nine? If He'd go out after the one, He'd certainly go out after the eighty-nine. In short, we've got to speak to the real situation.

WE DISCUSSED EARLIER THE INDEPENDENT SPIRIT THAT OFTEN MARKS THE RESTORATION MOVEMENT CHURCHES. WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN IN ORDER TO OVERCOME THE TERRITORIAL SPIRIT IN THE BROTHERHOOD OF CHRISTIAN CHURCHES THAT TENDS TO RESIST PLANTING NEW CHURCHES?

McGavran: I suppose you mean that the church in Altadena would say, "All

Altadena is ours."

McGavran: I think the answer to that is, "How many do you have in your church?" and "How many people are in Altadena?" and "Do you think that your congregation can really reach into all parts of that great area?"

A UNITY OF PURPOSE CAN HELP OUR CONGREGATIONS COMBINE THEIR RESOURCES TO PLANT CHURCHES IN STRATEGIC AREAS. COULD YOU SUGGEST FROM YOUR OWN OBSERVATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES AREAS THAT YOU WOULD CONSIDER TO BE STRATEGIC, WHERE THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH OUGHT TO BE DIRECTING THEIR RESOURCES AND PLANTING CHURCHES?

McGavran: I think there is no one area in the United States where there is no spiritual darkness. I think that you could go to almost any segment of the United States and you would find great unchurched areas. The thing about the United States that most Americans don't like to think about is that we are a mosaic of mankind. We're a lot of different kinds of people. I'd like to see a group of Christian churches saying, "We're going to start ten Indian Christian churches, where all the people attending are Indians, and all the women wear saris, and when they cook their food for the church suppers, there is the right amount of pepper in it!" People will go to churches where they feel at home.

DO YOU BELIEVE THAT IN MANY OF THE ETHNIC GROUPS THAT POTENTIAL LEADERS WOULD BE RESPONSIVE TO ANGLOS WHO REACH OUT TO THEM IN LOVE TO HELP THEM FOUND CHURCHES AND WIN PEOPLE?

McGavran: Yes, if the Anglos say, "We're not going to remain as leaders of the church. You're the leaders of the church. We do want to get you started and we'll be very friendly to you. We'll come to you, and you come to us. We may give you some financial help through the years." Now I don't want it to sound as if it's too simple. It's not.

DUE TO THE ECONOMIC CHALLENGE OF CHURCH PLANTING, WHAT DO YOU FEEL THE FUTURE OF BIVOCATIONAL CHURCH PLANTING IS FOR CHRISTIAN CHURCHES?

McGavran: It is quite necessary. I think that there must be a lot of people who earn their living outside, but who spend part of every week as a preacher, concerned that no one be lost.

WHAT RECOMMENDATIONS DO YOU HAVE FOR OUR BIBLE COLLEGES AND SEMINARIES AS THEY SEEK TO GRADUATE STUDENTS WHO HAVE

WHAT WE'VE COME TO CALL "CHURCH GROWTH EYES"?

McGavran: Last evening, I was talking to a couple of men from Canada. They said to me, "We like what you are saying. We must make our Bible College teach its students that we've got to multiply churches." There is no way to spread anything but to preach it, to live it, to write books about it, to write articles about it. I'd like to see the Christian Churches publish a magazine devoted exclusively to church growth.

I MIGHT SAY THAT THE VISIONARY FOR WHICH THIS INTERVIEW IS BEING DONE HAS AS ITS LONG-RANGE GOAL TO DEVELOP INTO A JOURNAL AMONG THE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES TO PROPAGATE CHURCH GROWTH THINKING AS WELL AS CHURCH PLANTING METHODOLOGY AND EXPERIENCES.

McGavran: I think that's excellent. I hope that goal is realized. I also want to caution you that church growth gets a lot of opposition. Some believe that church growth is merely concerned with numbers. We are concerned with something much more important. We are concerned with Christian life, with quality, with reality. Mere numbers... who wants mere numbers?

WHAT COUNSEL, ADVICE, OR CHALLENGE WOULD YOU PLACE BEFORE YOUNG CHURCH LEADERS TODAY?

McGavran: Unless we grow, we are not really doing God's business. Unless we are bringing in the lost, we are not really doing God's business. Unless we can find those who are poor sinners and make them saints, we are not doing our work. In other words, as men like yourself and others look at it, we must see that as the central task. Having done that, then I think that it helps to see the unchurched multitudes as the multitudinous pieces of mosaic and then to see which pieces of the mosaic are the most receptive. Go to the pieces that are receptive, where the people will hear, and multiply churches through them. And find out the means that God is blessing for the multiplication of churches among them. Now all that will take work, all that will take prayer, and all that will take thinking. But as we do that, we will find that God will open door after door for us.

