

McGavran's "Plain Talk:" How It All Began...

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In 1981 I was a student at the School of World Mission at Fuller Seminary. At the same time I was working with the incipient Perspectives movement, volunteering my time at the US Center for World Mission (now Frontier Ventures). I kept a light class schedule that year because I had been tasked with organizing and editing the first Perspectives Reader and Study Guide.

I was delighted to discover that three times a week, students could sign up to meet with Donald McGavran in his office while he ate his lunch. He was always punctual, allowing exactly 30 minutes. I did this often, usually coming prepared with questions, trying to get him talking about how churches could emerge for the first time amidst peoples that we could consider churchless.

I remember pressing him one day about how he would advise someone beginning work amidst an unreached people group. He rattled off five or six principles, all focused on the goal of "Christward movements." He used the term "cluster of growing congregations," to describe a multiplicity of growing churches, but I'm sure he would have been thrilled with present-day reports of movements using language of cascading, multiplying generations of churches.

At that time we were finalizing the Strategic section of the Perspectives course. The ideas that McGavran had just described would work beautifully in the course. I asked him to write them in an article for the forthcoming Perspectives reader. He agreed, somewhat reluctantly, but worked with our editorial team to produce the "Plain Talk" article. It was one of the last articles that we squeezed into the curriculum. It still serves us well as the lead article for what is now Lesson 14 of the Perspectives course.

Sometime in 1997, Ralph Winter began to extol the worth of the article, speaking of it in conversation as "a jewel of McGavran's thought." He had it reprinted in *Mission Frontiers* in 1997. Twenty years later, in early 2017, Robby Butler noticed the implications of McGavran's statements for frontier mission mobilization. If, as McGavran implies, planting single "conglomerate congregations" by what amounts to "extraction evangelism" is actually a setback, making it even harder for many to follow Christ, then Robby was right to say that our efforts to mobilize and send workers may not only be wasted, our efforts may be largely counterproductive.

Robby took it on himself to rework McGavran's article with some updated language, emphasizing the ideas most pertinent to those aiming to bring about ecclesial movements. I consider Robby's reworking of McGavran's article as a call to tap into the rich heritage of inquiry and research about Christ-following ecclesial movements that we can find in many parts of the church growth tradition. This tradition all began with McGavran's work about how to serve and foment Christ-following, disciple-making movements. Although much of the church growth tradition is dated, there has been considerable theological reflection with insights from social science and history that can strengthen movemental ecclesiology, but only if we make use of it by considering, challenging and advancing it.