My Pilgrimage in Mission

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How did I come to my present concepts of mission? How has my mind changed between 1920 and 1986 concerning Christian mission? What does Christ demand of us today as we carry out Christian mission? To answer these questions in a brief article is difficult, but I shall do the best I can.

The first steps in my pilgrimage were taken during the first twenty-one years of my life in the friendship and guidance of my missionary father and professor of missions. The next steps were taken at a YMCA conference at Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, in the summer of 1919. As a senior at Butler College and chairman of the YMCA committee, I went to Lake Geneva as a dedicated Christian. But I also went there saying to myself, "My father and grandfather were missionaries. My family has done enough for God. I am going to be a good Christian and make a lot of money." At Lake Geneva it became increasingly clear to me that a Christian could not thus limit the degree of his dedication. While there one night in prayer I said, "Lord, I'll do whatever you want. I will go wherever you send. I will carry out, not my will but yours." That purpose has dominated my life.

That Christmas season I attended the Student Volunteer Convention at Des Moines, Iowa. There 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.

Any movement must be carried on in the real world, and since the concepts and understandings of the real world vary from time to time and place to place, the rest of this story will be told in their light. The facts concerning the discipling of the peoples of earth in all six continents, as these became known to me through research and travel, were the background against which my conclusions concerning the missionary task were formed. The five main divisions of this brief account will relate the common and changing understandings of the missionary task and how these affected my God-given purpose.

I. Mission Philosophy in 1920, 1947, and 1968

1. At Lake Geneva and Des Moines, and indeed across the world at that time, mission was held to be carrying out the Great Commission, winning the world for Christ, saving lost humanity. Many leaders of today's mission like to say that discipling the world was merely a reflection of the imperial (colonial) era when Europe ruled much of the world. But any such breast-beating comment neglects the determination present since the day of Pentecost to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth. As the early church—made up of the weak, the foolish, and the things that are not—sought to spread salvation across the Roman empire, it certainly was filled with no imperial passion. In 1920 all missionary societies marched under "eternal God's command" (Rom. 16:25)
to make the gospel known to all segments of society in all regions of the world. This was the dominant mission philosophy of the time.

The convictions were biblically sound. This is what the Bible clearly sets forth. The Lord Jesus Christ steadily intended that the gospel should be spread to the ends of the earth. The last book of the Bible states clearly that at the end, people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation will be there before the throne. The Bible also states clearly that the only way to salvation is through Jesus Christ. John 3:16, possibly the most-loved verse in the entire Bible, states that "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life." If they don't believe in him, men and women will perish—whether they are Americans, Africans, Chinese, or Indonesians. Whether they call themselves Buddhist, Marxist, atheist, nominal Christians, or Hindus makes no difference. Unless they believe on Jesus Christ, they will perish. John 14:6—"No one comes to the Father but through me"—is affirmed by many verses throughout the Scriptures.

2. By 1947, however, another philosophy of mission had begun to spread. This was voiced by William Ernest Hocking of Harvard, whose 1932 book Rethinking Missions maintained that the day of conversion mission was over. From now on mission would be each great religion reconceiving itself in the light of the others. H. Richard Niebuhr, noted professor at Yale Divinity School and a very influential Christian leader in the 1920s and ‘30s, also used to say that mission was everything the church does outside its four walls. It was philanthropy, education, medicine, famine relief, evangelism, and world friendship.

The enormous spread of communism, which maintained that the feudalistic, capitalistic society was inherently unjust to the proletariat, prompted Christians to work for a new social order that would be equally fair to all segments of society.

Furthermore, what missionaries were actually doing played a considerable part. As my convictions about mission and church growth were being molded in the 1930s and ‘40s they ran headlong into the thrust that mission is doing many good things in addition to evangelism. It is feeding the hungry, healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, teaching the illiterate to read, and on and on. The gospel was really news of a better way of life, a more nutritious diet, and a growing democracy around the world.

I could not accept this way of thinking about missions. These good deeds must, of course, be done, and Christians will do them. I myself was doing many of them. But they must never replace the essential task of mission, discipling the peoples of earth. Indeed, all these good deeds must help in its accomplishment.

Prodded from without and stimulated from within, I was galvanized into action by a remarkable discovery. In the section of India where I worked, 145 areas were scenes of missionary effort by denominations from America, England, Sweden, and on and on. I discovered that in 134 of these areas the church between 1921 and 1931 had grown at only 11 percent a decade. It was not even conserving all its own children. But in the other eleven areas the church was growing by 100 percent, 150 percent, or even 200 percent a decade. Why was this happening? A vast curiosity arose within my breast. There must be a key to Great Commission mission, and I resolved to find it.
3. Until January 1968 my thinking about fulfilling the Great Commission and doing the many other good things that need to be done had been largely conditioned by observation of what I and most missionaries were actually doing. The campaign to remake the world being carried on by the great Life and Work movement and many other Christian thrusts in the 1930s and '40s was a good thing, but it was not, despite Niebuhr and Hocking, a part of essential Christian mission. In January 1968, however, a radical change in my thinking took place. Up until then I had not considered the insights that God had given me as in any way opposed to those being promoted by the World Council of Churches and its Division on World Mission and Evangelism. Alas, in January 1968 as I read with amazement the documents that prepared the way for the great Uppsala assembly, I saw that if Uppsala endorsed what the preparatory documents said, the World Council of Churches and all its member denominations would be turning away from mission as Christianization to mission as humanization. Instead of seeking to disciple panta ta ethne, winning them to Christian faith, and multiplying churches among them, the effort would be to spread brotherhood, peace, and justice among all people regardless of what religion or ideology they espoused.

This emphasis also greatly distressed Drs. Alan Tippett and Ralph Winter, the other members of the School of World Mission faculty at that time. Consequently, the May 1968 issue of Church Growth Bulletin (now Global Church Growth) asked in big black letters across the front page, "Will Uppsala Betray the Two Billion?" The whole issue was devoted to exposing and discussing the massive error of the new definition of mission. Geneva was greatly disturbed, and much correspondence ensued. The September issue of Church Growth Bulletin was devoted to Geneva's answers to our position. The November issue of that year was the Uppsala issue no. 3, in which we sorrowfully recorded that we believed that the World Council of Churches had really betrayed the 2 billion and was heading in a direction not biblically justified.

II. My Insights as to Essential Christian Mission in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1960s
Moved by this curiosity and the changing convictions about the nature of mission, my church-growth convictions gradually formed and crystallized. I began to rethink the goals and methods of my own and many other neighbor missions—Baptists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians. What would all these surgings of thought mean for essential mission? In the 1920s, when as principal of a mission high school I was dealing essentially with high-caste boys, I taught all the Bible classes myself. These high-caste boys were the section of the population to which God had sent me, and I was doing my best to win them to Christian faith.
But I did not then know how churches grow, how peoples become Christian. For example, barring only the Syrians in Kerala, 98 percent of all the rest of the Christians in India at that time had come from the Untouchables and the Tribals. I did not realize that all the "respectable-caste" Hindus—hundreds of millions of them—thought of "becoming a Christian" as "joining a very low caste." It was, for example, as whites in Alabama might think if they were invited to become Christians by joining a black church.
Consequently, while for six years I worked hard and, I trust, intelligently at winning the "respectable-caste" people in that district, I won no converts. Rather, I concluded that the children or grandchildren of these young men who had studied the Bible so faithfully might actually become members of a Christian congregation and propagate the faith among their own castes.

In the 1930s as I read Waskom Pickett's *Christian Mass Movements in India*, my eyes were opened. I suddenly saw that where people become Christian one by one and are seen as outcasts by their own people, as traitors who have joined another community, the church grows very, very slowly. The one by one "out of my ancestral community into a new low community" was a sure recipe for very slow growth. Conversely, where men and women could become followers of the Lord Jesus Christ while remaining in their own segment of society, there the gospel was sometimes accepted with great pleasure by great numbers.

In 1932 my mission had elected me to be its field secretary, and in 1936 it said to me in effect, "Since you are talking so much about evangelism and church growth, we are going to locate you in a district where you can practice what you preach." Since this meant turning from the work to which I felt God had called me—namely, Christianization through Christian education—I resisted the location. But finally, believing that it was God's direction, I accepted it, and for the next eighteen years I devoted myself to the evangelization of one caste, the Satnamis.

I wish that I could record that I was hugely successful, but this is not the case. Perhaps 1,000 individuals were won to the Christian faith, but no caste wide movement to Christ resulted.

By 1950 accessions from that caste had almost ceased. True, there were fifteen new small village churches, but the movement had stopped. I now realize that during those years God was teaching me how peoples (segments of society) become Christian, what methods of evangelism God blesses, and what he does not. During those years several denominations asked me to make on-the-spot studies of growing churches in several provinces of the great nation of India. In 1953 I wrote a manuscript entitled "How Peoples Become Christian." After being examined and finally rejected by Friendship Press in New York, this was published in 1955 by World Dominion Press in London under the title *The Bridges of God*. A few months later it was imported by Friendship Press and sold under an American cover. Dr. Frank Price, head librarian at the Missionary Research Library in New York, called it the most-read missionary book in 1956. It described the ways in which growing churches had, and much more often had not, been established in many parts of the world. It has played a determinative role in church-growth thinking ever since.

The McGavran family came on furlough in the summer of 1954. My church and mission in India and I myself desired that we go back to India after furlough, but my board, the United Christian Missionary Society of Indianapolis, intrigued by my church-growth discoveries, sent me to various parts of the world to research the growth of churches there that it and neighboring denominations had planted. These years added very considerably to my understanding of how
churches grow in various countries of the world and how they do not. In 1959 I wrote the book entitled *How Churches Grow*. Like *The Bridges of God*, it too, after being rejected by four publishers in America, was published in England by Sir Kenneth Grubb of the World Dominion Press and in the United States by Friendship Press. It too had a pronounced influence on the course of events.

In 1958 it became clear to me that I must resign from my missionary society and found an institution that would teach how mission could carry out God's command to disciple *panta ta ethne*. Since in 1958 I was sixty-one years old, my mission executives thought that I was doing a foolish thing. They urged me to reconsider. Three seminaries to which I proposed a department of church growth refused to have anything to do with the matter. Finally an undergraduate college in far-off Eugene, Oregon, said that it would call me as a member of its faculty, allow me to start the Institute of Church Growth, and give three $1,000 fellowships a year to career missionaries on furlough who wished to attend the institute, provided only that I would teach one course on missions to the undergraduates. The northwest corner of the United States was not a promising place in which to start an interdenominational Institute of Church Growth. However, since it was the only opportunity, I seized it with both hands, and on January 2, 1961, the Institute of Church Growth at Northwest Christian College in Eugene, Oregon, opened with one lone student, the Rev. Keith Hamilton, a United Methodist missionary to Bolivia.

During the next four years fifty-seven missionaries on furlough from many different boards of missions studied at the institute. Each year we awarded the thousand-dollar fellowships to three outstanding missionaries on furlough. All career missionaries who attended did a careful research on the growth of the churches planted in the region where they worked. Thus researches on many denominations in Bolivia, Iran, India, Japan, and many other countries were completed. In 1961 the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association invited me to address its September meeting in Winona Lake, Indiana. As these executives heard my presentation, they said, "All our missionaries on furlough ought to be getting this significant point of view, and all executive secretaries ought to know these facts about the actual growth of the church in each of their fields. Let us ask McGavran to conduct an annual church-growth seminar at Winona Lake in the first week of September. To it we will send our missionaries who are on furlough that year."

Dr. Edwin Jacques of the Conservative Baptists ran the seminar, Dr. Byron Lamson of the Free Methodists (whose headquarters is at Winona Lake) hosted it, and Donald McGavran was for five years the sole teacher. In the late 1960s I was joined by Dr. Alan R. Tippett and Dr. Ralph Winter. These annual seminars, which touched over a thousand missionaries, had a pronounced effect on church-growth thinking.

Then too each year at Eugene one or more eminent missionary authorities from New York, Fort Worth, Wheaton, Springfield, and other centers delivered the annual church-growth lectures. These were then published, and added an important dimension to the church-growth movement.
The annual lectures of 1963 were especially noteworthy. These were delivered by Calvin Guy, Melvin Hodges, Eugene Nida, and Donald McGavran, sitting around a large oak table. About forty mission executives filled the room. After each of the twelve lectures, questions from the floor were answered. The manuscripts were then revised in the light of the discussion and published in 1965 by Harper & Row under the title, *Church Growth and Christian Mission.* What was later published as *Understanding Church Growth* was the subject material of my teaching during those Eugene years.

**III. The Best Years of My Pilgrimage**
In 1965 President Hubbard of Fuller Theological Seminary invited me to become the founding dean of Fuller's third graduate school— the School of World Mission. He told me that my main task was to recruit seven full-time professors and make this graduate school serve the missionary cause around the world.

I moved from Oregon to Pasadena, California. The school opened with fifteen graduate students. As we added member after member to the missions faculty, career missionaries and national leaders from all over the world started flowing into the School of World Mission. In 1983-84 it enrolled over 400. During the past twenty years missionaries, national leaders, and mission executives from over eighty denominations have studied here. Numerous books on church growth and effective mission have been published. The revolutionary concept that mission in the future must reach *and disciple* groups of unreached people in every nation and continent was born here and has multiplied amazingly in many lands. Other schools of missions have borrowed extensively from the emphasis here propounded.

Most of all this was done by my colleagues, not by me. Nevertheless, but for the church-growth movement and the Institute of Church Growth in Oregon and the graduate School of World Mission in Pasadena, these things would not have been done. The sovereign God ordered this amazing sequence of events, which has done so much to reinvigorate the missionary movement and adapt it to this rapidly changing world. In this new world the number of non-Christians is growing rapidly every year. But the number of Christians is growing even faster. This changing world is far more responsive to the Christian message than it has been in any previous age. No wonder I call the years 1965 to 1985 the best years of my pilgrimage.

**IV. Recognizing the Three Essentials of Mission/Church Growth**
Underlying all the foregoing paragraphs is the conviction that the *first essential of mission/church growth is to realize that God wants his lost children found and enfolded.* Eternal God commands church growth. Jesus Christ gave his disciples the Great Commission, and the entire New Testament assumes that Christians, as a normal part of their lives, will proclaim Jesus Christ as God and Savior and encourage men and women to become his disciples and responsible members of his church.

This first essential has been responsible for all missionary expansion. Only men and women who believed this implicitly would have been able to leave home and country and venture out to the far corners of the earth, often to meet sickness, sorrow, and death. The missionary movement
will continue only as long as this conviction remains unshaken in the minds of multitudinous Christians, congregations, and denominations.

The second essential of church growth has also played a most important part. My church-growth thinking started in the early 1930s when I discovered the very small church growth that my own and sister missions had achieved in the preceding decade. Discovering the facts of church growth is the second essential of all mission/church-growth thinking. Since the world's linguistic and ethnic units, and economic and financial strata, are multitudinous and since churches multiply in them at very different rates, discovering the facts of church growth in each is at once seen as an enormous and many-faceted enterprise. Responsible research into the effectiveness of mission must be done. The 100,000 and more missionaries in the world today must not press forward with blindfolded eyes. Mission executives must know the facts concerning whether the churches their missionaries plant are static, declining, or growing; and if growing, are they growing slowly or rapidly? Could they grow much more rapidly if the national leaders and missionaries used methods that God is blessing to generate great growth in their own and other segments of society?

Getting such data on church growth is often blocked by the promotional aspect of missions. Money for missions must be raised. Every mission executive and missionary sits in two chairs.

In the promotional chair the person is telling quite truthfully of the good and encouraging things about the missionary enterprise. However, the person, when sitting in the diagnostic chair, is recounting the exact situation—not raising money, but stating precisely where the project now is, how many lost people have been found and enfolded. The missionary and the mission executive must sit in both chairs, but they must never talk or even think promotionally while sitting in the diagnostic chair.

In other words, those obeying the Great Commission and working at discipling panta ta ethne must know year by year how rapidly men and women are believing on Christ and becoming responsible members of his body, the church.

A large part of the pronounced effect of the church-growth movement on mission policies, programs, and goals has depended heavily upon true understanding of the facts of church growth. Graphs of growth showing rising, level, or declining lines have become commonplace among mission executives and mis-siologists. This has happened despite vigorous opposition by some whose labors resulted in little or no growth. The Lord of the harvest does want to know whether his laborers are bringing in one sheaf every ten minutes or every ten years.

To be sure, accurate portrayal of the ethos (segment of society) being discipled is essential. Contributory information such as the following is needed: How does this people group think? What are its religious convictions? What are its cultural configurations, its economic and educational position, and its hopes and dreams? What ways of stating the gospel ought to be most effective in this people group? The sciences of sociology, anthropology, psychology,
comparative religion, and communication help carry on church-multiplying evangelism. So does a good understanding of political aspirations and economic progress.

Equally truly, none of these ought to be idolized. Each fact is important only as it throws light on the degree of church growth. He to whom "All authority has been given ... in heaven and on earth" (Mt. 28:18) commands us to matheutosate panta ta ethne, and all setting forth of these contributory informations must be done in order to carry out that command.

If a vivid appreciation of the biblical mandate for church growth is the first dominant characteristic of church-growth thinking, discovering the degree of growth or of decline and stating these facts meaningfully is the second.

Planning all mission activities in the light of what is being achieved is the third essential. Those carrying on Christian mission are constantly tempted to substitute helpful activities of one sort and another for discipling the peoples of earth. Thus ministering to the physical needs of people, laboring to create a more just society, and bringing the tremendous advantages of modern medicine to great populations are all urgent and greatly needed tasks. They ought to be done but never substituted for effective evangelism. This is the third essential of church-growth thinking.

V. Mission/Church Growth/Effective Evangelism

In the 1950s and '60s the new definition of mission took over missionary society after missionary society among the conciliar churches. As the overwhelming emphasis of the World Council of Churches turned to attempts to make this world a better place in which to live, regardless of what people believed about Christ and the Bible, it became increasingly clear to me that the word "mission" must be understood as essentially those activities that multiply churches, that win the lost, that disciple unreached peoples—namely, church growth. The phrase "mission/church growth" must come again to mean what the New Testament church did as it multiplied churches across the Roman world.

Evangelism is, of course, an essential part of mission and church growth; but it must be effective evangelism. The word "evangelism" as commonly used has several different meanings. It may mean simply proclaiming the gospel, hoping that someone will hear it but not knowing whether anyone becomes a responsible member of an ongoing, soundly Christian church or not. There is an evangelism that limits itself very largely to reviving the faith of existing Christians. Many other forms of evangelism exist. All these are good activities. I have engaged in many of them myself. Nevertheless, evangelism, if undefined, is too broad a word to describe what Christ commanded. "Effective evangelism" enlists in Christ's school all segments of human society, and incorporates in his body, the church, all the ethnic and linguistic units of the world.

Mission/church growth/effective evangelism is this new and definitive statement of the underlying purpose of the Bible. God wants all people to believe on Jesus Christ, become members of his body, be filled with the Holy Spirit, and live in him. The Holy Spirit leads Christians everywhere in this direction. Anything less than this is not biblical.

I was delighted to find that growth is an essential idea in the New Testament. The Lord Jesus constantly spoke about it. The apostles and early Christians practiced it. New Testament theology demands it. For example, the theology of the book of Romans demands vigorous, continual, and effective winning of men and women to membership in Christ's church.
Conclusion
To sum it up, church-growth convictions began with the theological understanding of the Scripture in relation to the unwon world, which was common in 1920, and they were sharpened and hardened by the diversions from biblical positions voiced with increasing frequency after 1930.
Church growth insists that God wants his lost children found. These lost children may live north or south, east or west, in all six continents, in every region of the world. All must be found and encouraged to become Christ's disciples and responsible members of his church. This is what church growth insists on. The multiplication of congregations in every segment of society in every nation—growth—is and must remain the steady goal of the church.
This brief account of how these convictions grew and developed in my mind is only the beginning of an adequate statement. My understandings were broadened by the thoughts of many others. The church-growth movement is the convergence of the missionary convictions of many who march under the Great Commission. No one person has created it. It takes different forms in many different regions of the world. Nevertheless, the experiences recounted above do form one strand in the tremendous surge toward church growth that marks the Christian world today. I trust that many others will write of their personal experiences and the way in which these have encouraged obedience to the clear command of the triune God.

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