Calling from Death to Life: Donald McGavran and the Relationship of Evangelism and Social Ministry

Jeff K. Walters, Ph.D.

(Dr. Walters is Assistant Professor of Christian Missions & Urban Ministry at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.)

In one sense, the historic roots of Donald McGavran’s church growth missiology were in the debates over the relationship between evangelism and social action.¹ In an unpublished 1971 manuscript describing the Church Growth Movement, McGavran wrote that the term “Church Growth was first used because the word evangelism had been emasculated by both the right and the left.”² He acknowledged that the “right” had struggled to understand the complete meaning of evangelism by an emphasis on “seed sowing” and neglect of baptism and church membership. He wrote,

The left had gutted it by confining its use to the good deeds done in schools and hospitals and leprosy homes, “indirect evangelism,” service substituted for discipling, Inter-church aid substituted for missionary work.³ Throughout his missionary and teaching career, McGavran worked to keep the priority of evangelism in front of world Christianity. He firmly believed that social ministries were an important part of church ministry, but the Great Commission demanded a focus on proclamation of the gospel, even in the face of social problems and injustices.

McGavran believed the relationship between evangelism and social ministry⁴ to be essentially a theological issue but with practical and strategic implications. The purpose of this article is to engage this relationship, especially as argued in McGavran’s missiology.

Historical Development of the Debate

Historians, Bible scholars, and theologians trace the Church’s involvement in social ministry to the earliest days of the New Testament. As the gospel spread, so did the Church’s participation in the lives of the communities in which it was planted. Jesus’ ministry was characterized by the proclamation of the Kingdom, healing, and ministry to the poor (Luke 4:18, 7:22, et. al.). In the fourth century, Roman Emperor Julian complained that Christians took care of not only their own, but also the pagan poor.⁵ The earliest modern missionaries, like William Carey, established schools, orphanages, and other ministries to the suffering. During the Great Awakening and after, great evangelical leaders pursued social concerns alongside gospel proclamation. Men like Spurgeon, Wesley, Whitefield, and their contemporaries were actively involved in social ministry.⁶ It was not until the late nineteenth century and the fundamentalist/modernist controversies that division arose over the relationship between evangelism and social ministry.

Asian theologian Bong Rin Ro traced the history of the Church’s social involvement through history from the early church until the twentieth century. He found that, while levels of social involvement ebbed and flowed through the centuries, times of
great renewal and revival generally led to increased social involvement. The early church, the Protestant Reformation, and the Great Awakenings were characterized by social action and ministry. The Reformers’ renewed emphasis on Scripture pointed believers toward the needs of people around them. Wesley and Whitefield ministered to the masses and inspired men like Wilberforce to seek justice for the oppressed. Ro contended that “the contemporary theology which relates the kingdom of God to social concern and the current debate as to the priority of evangelism or social responsibility are recent developments.”

From Edinburgh to Uppsala

Arthur Johnston, John Stott, and David Bosch trace the beginnings of controversy back to the growth of the social gospel and its influence on the ecumenical missionary councils starting at Edinburgh in 1910. Formulated by Walter Rauschenbusch at the turn of the twentieth century, the Social Gospel Movement was the fruit of liberal theology and pre-World War I social optimism and Darwinism. The movement’s aims were strong: reform society, apply Christian ethics to the rapidly urbanizing American landscape, and fight poverty. Unfortunately, Social Gospel thought moved rapidly to an emphasis on the inauguration of a worldly kingdom of God in humanity.

Johnston argued that the World Missionary Conference held at Edinburgh in 1910 revealed a significant shift from a nineteenth century emphasis on personal evangelism and revivalism to one of “temporal’ salvation of man in society.” The growth of liberal theology, historical criticism of the Bible, and the Social Gospel Movement led to a new theology that undermined traditional views of gospel proclamation. The result was a gathering with an overemphasis on pluralism and biblical uncertainty. Bosch argued that millennial tendencies, which led to an optimistic view of history moving toward a perfect Christianized society, influenced the conference toward an increased prominence of social ministry over proclamation.

Johnston contended that Edinburgh instigated the division between ecumenical and evangelical missiologies. Historians often point to Timothy L. Smith’s description of this period as “the Great Reversal.” Where Christians historically had been involved in evangelism and social ministry, the growth of the Social Gospel and its implications revealed at Edinburgh led to a separation of liberal and fundamentalists on the issue. Ray Bakke contended that “the schism in the church that has pitted social and personal ministries against each other in the city, a tragic legacy of the fundamentalist-modernist early in the twentieth century, still marginalizes the church’s ministry in a rapidly urbanizing world.”

Carl F. H. Henry, in his important work The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism, agreed that the conservative reaction to theological liberalism was much to blame for decades of Christian influence on society and social problems. It is difficult to underestimate the influence of this book, published in 1947, on the contemporary social ministry debates. Henry noted that, in addition to its opposition to liberalism, the fundamentalist eschatological emphasis on the imminent return of Christ caused evangelicals to ignore social problems in favor of a total commitment to personal evangelism. “Humanitarianism,” he wrote, “has evaporated from Christianity.” The only solution was a renewed vigor of social action alongside evangelistic fervor. Henry offered a correction to such evaporation through engagement with culture and social problems with the redemptive gospel. Such a program meant “total opposition to all
moral evils, whether societal or personal” and “offers not only a higher ethical standard than any other system of thought, but provides also in Christ a dynamic to lift humanity to its highest level of moral achievement.”  

McGavran began to address the issue of the relationship between evangelism and social justice ministries in the 1960s. That is not to say, of course, that McGavran ignored the issue before that time. Most of his early ministry was intertwined with work in education, leprosy clinics, and orphanages. In The Bridges of God, McGavran pointed to growing churches as the single most effective means to social change. He wrote,

There is no force for social change which could conceivably be greater than that of a great body of Christian clergy and laity, themselves redeemed in the inner man and in close contact with social advancement elsewhere, who would at the same time be thoroughly indigenous national leaders and workers.  

McGavran’s high view of the church led to his understanding that the drive for social justice and ministry began with local congregations living according to Scripture. Good ministries were just that – ministries of the church.  

In 1965, McGavran organized a group of scholars to compile Church Growth and Christian Mission. In his conclusion to the book, McGavran addressed his growing concern for the meaning of evangelism: “Further confusion arises in the attachment of new meanings to old words,” he began. Referring to what he understood to be the traditional definition of the term, “proclaiming Christ and persuading men to become His disciples and responsible members of His Church,” McGavran continued,

But today we read about “industrial evangelism” and “inner city evangelism,” whose primary aim seems to be neither to win men to Christian discipleship nor to multiply self-propagating churches, but rather to have existing Christians “enter into dialogue on important ethical and moral issues with the leaders of industrial society.” The Church becomes a means for achieving (it is hoped) a greater degree of justice, brotherhood, and decency.  

In an early edition of Church Growth Bulletin, McGavran discussed criticism he had received regarding that statement. He pointed out that the problem with industrial or inner city evangelism was that they did not seek conversion to Christ. One missionary from Mexico wrote to correct McGavran’s understanding of industrial evangelism, but McGavran replied that while it is always important for Christians to have influence through their daily work, believers must focus on the propagation of the gospel and the multiplication of churches.  

McGavran expanded on his argument for clarity of definition in an article for World Vision in June 1965. He declared, “It is time to recognize that calling all kinds of good actions evangelism simply confuses the issue.” McGavran distinguished between unreached societies and cultures with existing churches and numerous believers. He argued that, in the latter, the church could be a potent force for justice. In areas yet unreached with the gospel, however, missions must remain focused on gospel proclamation. “The unevangelized billions of the earth,” he concluded, “still call for mission considered as church planting.”  

The World Congress on Evangelism held in Berlin in 1966 was a critical
predecessor to the larger and better-known 1974 Lausanne Congress on World
Evangelization. Convened by Billy Graham and Christianity Today magazine editor
Carl F. H. Henry, the Berlin conference sought to emphasize the importance of gospel
proclamation. In his opening remarks, Graham noted, “Our purpose is important because
we hold the conviction that evangelism -- the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ -- is
the only revolutionary force that can change our world.” Johnston called the Berlin
conference “one of the most remarkable evangelical events in modern Christian
history.” McGavran reported on the conference, writing.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this colorful world gathering is its
insistence, in session after session, by speaker after speaker, from communion after
communion, that evangelism in its clear biblical sense be taken with life and death
seriousness. Dr. Graham said, “Some new definitions of evangelism leave out
entirely the winning of men to Jesus Christ . . . . We cannot accept these definitions.
Evangelism has social implications, but its primary thrust is winning men to a
personal relationship with Christ.”

The Berlin conference was a precursor to the 1974 Lausanne Congress on World
Evangelization in which McGavran would play a more significant role, especially in the
area of evangelism and social action.

Uppsala 1968 and Humanization

The World Council of Churches gathering at Uppsala in 1968 and the
International Congress on World Evangelization at Lausanne in 1974 stand as pivotal
events in the development of a missionary theology of evangelism and social ministry.
At Uppsala, ecumenical theologies of missions and evangelism moved farther away from
historical and biblical views. At Lausanne, evangelicals adopted a more balanced (but
still controversial) approach.

The key term at Uppsala was humanization. Johnston identified several ways
this idea was expressed in the conference. In general, the conference focused on
evangelism as the horizontal relationship between men rather than the vertical
relationship between man and God. Conversion, noted Johnston, “involved, for
Uppsala, a turning to one’s fellow man in a new way.” The majority of delegates
viewed dialogue as taking precedent over proclamation and defined missions as the
struggle for social justice. The first priorities of missions became advocacy for the
powerless and revolutionary movements.

The reaction to Uppsala was swift. McGavran edited a collection of essays
reflecting both sides of the theological argument titled, Eye of the Storm: The Great
Debate in Mission. J. C. Hoekendijk, one of the influential WCC voices at Uppsala,
opened the book with his essay on “The Call to Evangelism.” He rejected the notion that
evangelism was about expanding or growing the church or about church planting. Nor
was evangelism mainly proclamation. Rather, the goal of evangelism was the
establishment of God’s shalom on earth. Christians accomplished that goal through three
things: kerygma, koinonia, and diakonia. Hoekendijk interpreted kerygma as the
preaching of good news, though not necessarily in the sense of contemporary personal
evangelism. He believed the Church must proclaim the truth that Jesus has come to
erenew the creation. For Hoekendijk, lostness, repentance, and salvation, were not
necessarily a part of this proclamation.\textsuperscript{31}

The second aspect of evangelism, for Hoekendijk, was \textit{koinonia}. Through community, the Church manifested God’s peace. \textit{Shalom} is lived, not just proclaimed. Finally, evangelism revealed God’s peace through service. Hoekendijk argued that all three of these elements made up a biblical theology of evangelism and mission.\textsuperscript{32}

McGavran reserved most of his reaction to Hoekendijk’s essay for the latter’s opposition to church planting evangelism. He did not necessarily reject Hoekendijk’s three-fold view of evangelism, but rather argued that it was too complicated. “K.K.D.,” McGavran contended, referring to \textit{kerygma}, \textit{koinonia}, and \textit{diakonia}, “is one good description of the normal Christian life.”\textsuperscript{33} Such a life, however, is not evangelism. McGavran continued, “We must communicate the gospel while doing the good deeds which the Christian sees needed both within and without the church.”\textsuperscript{34} He did not reject social ministry as a part of the life of the church, but argued that such action was a result of conversion rather than a form of gospel proclamation. For McGavran, social ministry commends the gospel, but is not proclamation of the gospel.

Central to the Uppsala debate was a document referred to as Section Two, which became “Renewal in Mission,” the gathering’s official statement on evangelism. The document affirmed the concept of humanization, arguing that the foundation for mission is the humanity of Christ (the “new man”). The Christian’s role in evangelism was to bring others to a place of choosing to come “face to face with his fellow men in a new way.” The goal of evangelism was a new life, the fruit of which “freed men for community, enabling them to break through the racial, national, religious, and other barriers that divide the unity of mankind.”\textsuperscript{35}

McGavran responded to Section Two by asking, “will Uppsala betray the two billion?” By \textit{betray}, he clarified, “I mean any course of action which substitutes ashes for bread, fixes the attention of Christians on temporal palliatives instead of eternal remedies, and deceives God’s children with the flesh when they long for the spirit.” McGavran feared that Uppsala was abandoning the traditional definition of mission for church renewal. The document traded the biblical understanding of evangelism for “the church being the church.”\textsuperscript{36}

The final documents from Uppsala included a section on priorities for missions. Among several suggestions, the framers included “rapid urbanization and industrialization.” The statement read,

All over the world men are on the move from tribal village to township, from rural area to urban sprawl. The migrant worker, the sufferer from racial prejudice in housing, the child in a crowded school, the lonely student in his crowded dormitory, the watchers of the T..V. screens, the inmates, nurses and medical specialists of the hospital wards – all these make the emerging urban centres a locality for mission.\textsuperscript{37}

McGavran’s great frustration with Uppsala was the absence of the concept of spiritual lostness in statements such as this one. He asked, “How could the honorable Christians who drafted ‘the program,’ so thoroughly concerned with men’s horizontal relationships, have failed to stress the tremendous need of sinful men through faith in Jesus Christ to be born again?”\textsuperscript{38}

McGavran’s work revealed the theological weaknesses of the Uppsala documents. At the same time, he showed his own belief that evangelism is proclamation.
and that social ministry is a separate work of the Church. The dichotomy that had begun in Edinburgh grew stronger through Uppsala. It would remain for evangelicals to meet separately, at Lausanne, for the separation of evangelism and social ministry to diminish.

Between the Uppsala gathering and the Lausanne Congress, McGavran continued to participate in the heated discussion over the relationship between social action and missions. In a 1969 article in *Church Growth Bulletin*, McGavran questioned the intentions of Mennonite missionary leader Peter Dyck, who had written an article on poverty relief and ministry. Dyck responded that he believed that, while Christian missionaries should minister to the needs of the poor and suffering, they should never do so as a means to evangelism. His concern was that aid be used as bait for non-believers. McGavran replied with a lengthy letter in which he objected strongly to Dyck’s characterization:

We are talking about a good deed. We are talking about giving powdered milk to a woman whose baby is dying for lack of protein. We are asking whether the Christian is justified to give it, saying nothing at the time, expecting that later when – and if – rapport has been established, he will speak to the woman about the Bread of Life, hoping she will accept Christ.

Clearly, McGavran saw the importance of ministry to those in need, but also of sharing the gospel.

Leading up to the Lausanne Congress, McGavran stepped up his writing and correspondence related to the issue of social ministry and justice. In the May 1971 *Church Growth Bulletin*, he criticized a WCC conference held in Africa for equating humane action with evangelism. McGavran encouraged his readers to contact their own denominational leadership on the issue and, in extreme circumstances, “to withhold dollars from those organizations which disguise their real intent by subtly redefining terms till ‘to preach the gospel’ is ‘to fight behind Che Guevara.’” Paul Hopkins, a leader of Presbyterian missions in Africa, corrected McGavran, pointing out that the meeting was, in fact, developed and sponsored by African churches concerned with racism and revolution.

McGavran responded quickly that Hopkins’ correction was merely technical. The two found common ground, however, on their condemnation of racism. Still, McGavran wrote,

My position you know. I am strongly for social action. For twenty years I was known at “The Chamar Padri.” I have been a member of an all-black church for many years (though not now). I would have marched at Selma had it been possible. My forbears were abolitionists – when social action cost – and prohibitionists – and I am proud of them. But I am totally against social action (humanization) being substituted for evangelism – as it was at Uppsala and is being in the dominant policy currently promoted by WCC.

McGavran sent Hopkins a copy of his *World Vision* article, “Social Justice and Evangelism,” and concluded,

Let us work at a more and more effective social action – but one which does not
masquerade as evangelism and does not redefine evangelism and mission so that they mean humanization. The Church is able to carry on vigorous programs of social action and of evangelism. The social actionists do not have to highjack the plane of missions and take it to Havana.\textsuperscript{45}

In the growing debate, McGavran found a fellow soldier in German theologian Peter Beyerhaus. Beyerhaus was a principle architect of the “Frankfurt Declaration,” which was a European response to the Uppsala debates.\textsuperscript{46} In 1971, Beyerhaus published \textit{Missions: Which Way?}\textsuperscript{47} McGavran wrote a foreword for the work, saying that “everyone who prays for and gives to missions should read this book.”\textsuperscript{48} The following year, Beyerhaus dedicated his \textit{Shaken Foundations: Theological Foundations for Mission} to McGavran.\textsuperscript{49} Beyerhaus provided a theological base for McGavran’s understanding of missions and evangelism. Just before the Lausanne Congress, McGavran distributed a copy of Beyerhaus’s article condemning a World Council of Churches gathering at Bangkok, a meeting which had continued the understanding of missions promoted at Uppsala.\textsuperscript{50}

**The Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization**

In July 1974, four thousand Christians from over 150 countries gathered at Lausanne, Switzerland, for the International Congress on World Evangelization. Following a series of follow-up consultations to Berlin, Billy Graham and a group of global evangelical leaders began planning for Lausanne in 1971. Their desire was to affirm the emphasis on evangelism begun at Berlin and to clarify further the biblical foundations of missions.

McGavran was more heavily involved in the Lausanne Congress than in previous meetings, both as a keynote speaker and in behind-the-scenes leadership. In a letter to McGavran, Graham asked for help: “Any suggestions or ideas that you may have concerning the forthcoming Lausanne Congress, that you could give me privately and confidentially, I would appreciate.”\textsuperscript{51} McGavran responded with a lengthy letter outlining several ideas.

First, McGavran wrote, “It is imperative that this Congress focus on evangelism, rather than the ‘whole duty of the Church’ or ‘everything God wants Christians to do.’”\textsuperscript{52} McGavran suggested that Graham send a letter to speakers immediately encouraging them to keep the focus on evangelism. McGavran also included a short paper titled, “Ten Dimensions in World Evangelism.”\textsuperscript{53}

Graham responded positively to McGavran’s suggestions. Even more significantly, Graham asked McGavran to contribute to his opening address. “Since this address will be of such strategic importance,” Graham wrote,

> I am wondering if I could confidentially ask you to help me to prepare it. I would almost like to use some of the material that you have in your paper. There are certain parts of your paper that express far better than I what should be said on that opening evening.\textsuperscript{54}

McGavran offered any help he could give, suggesting again his dimensions paper.\textsuperscript{55} Graham’s final letter asked again, “I am wondering if I would be asking too much of you to prepare a rough address for me, that you think I should give on that opening day in
Lausanne.”

Immediately before the Congress, McGavran penned a letter to Harold Lindsell, editor of Christianity Today. Lindsell was scheduled to speak to the Congress immediately following McGavran’s plenary address. McGavran expressed his fear that an emphasis on social action would overshadow the importance of evangelism. “There is real danger,” McGavran wrote, “that at Lausanne social action may muscle in and displace evangelism.” He warned Lindsell that Orlando Costas, Rene Padilla, and Samuel Escobar, all speakers at the Congress, would push hard for a social emphasis and encouraged him to speak firmly for the priority of evangelism. “Me-tooism is in style,” McGavran continued.

It is easy to call on Evangelicals to repent of lack of social action – though they have always been strong on social action. . . . What is needed, of course, is multiplied evangelism and among new and old Christians, education concerning effective ways to improve society. Biblical churches are the most effective and potent forces for reformation of society.

When the Congress convened in July, McGavran delivered a plenary address covering the ten essentials he had sent earlier to Billy Graham. He emphasized both the divine and human dimensions of evangelism, pleading for a focus on gospel proclamation and on unreached peoples. He cast a vision for the future that included partnership with “Latfricasia” in the Great Commission task. He argued most fervently, however, for the priority of evangelism:

Because of the tremendous drive to replace evangelism with social action pressing toward righteousness, mercy and peace, Lausanne must speak clearly on social action. There is, indeed, a crying need in the world for brotherhood, righteousness, and peace. Christians are doing much to bring these about and will do more. Make no mistake about that. But horizontal reconciliation of man with man is not vertical reconciliation of man with God. Social action is good; but it must neither be called evangelism nor substituted for it. The temporal welfare of mankind demands clarity at these points. We must not deny to men, struggling to build a righteous, peaceful society, the most potent element in that struggle, namely multitudes of Christian cells (churches) where men meet around the Bible to seek the will of God and to open themselves to his righteousness and his power. The eternal welfare of men also demands clarity. We must not deceive men by giving them “the bread which perishes” in place of the Bread of Heaven.

McGavran affirmed both his conviction that evangelism must take priority over social action and his belief that the proper place for emphasis on such ministry is the local church.

In his follow-up paper on the Congress, McGavran responded to critics of his evangelistic priorities. He pointed out that many questioned whether missionaries and evangelists could, in fact, share Christ without “vigorously engaging in social action.” McGavran answered by affirming his understanding of evangelism as proclaiming Christ and persuading men and women to follow Him. “The most potent forces for social change are Bible-reading, Bible-obeying churches,” he declared. “But first, my friends,
you must have some Christians and some churches!!”

In his address, McGavran touched briefly on urbanization and the need for evangelism and church planting in cities. Apparently, many of his listeners complained that his mention of cities was not adequate. “A number of you felt that urban church growth had been slighted,” he began. “I plead guilty on that point.” McGavran advocated use of the growing fields of urban sociology and anthropology to find productive ways to engage cities. Referring to the social sciences, McGavran contended, “As redeemed men use these, they will begin to solve the horrendous problems and repel the demonic forces which blight and curse the rapidly growing cities.”

Billy Graham’s opening message to the Congress, while not following directly McGavran’s ten dimensions, certainly reflected McGavran’s suggestion to focus on evangelism and cross-cultural missions. He convened the gathering by reminding listeners of the variety of voices who had negatively influenced world evangelism during the twentieth century: politicians, economists, philosophers, and modern theologians who advocated a diminished view of Scripture and the gospel. With an emphasis on Scripture, Graham set the stage for the most important evangelical gathering of the century.

In another address explaining the background of the Congress, Graham explained several factors that led to the meeting. One of those reasons was “the error of letting social concern become our all consuming mission.” Graham argued that while all believers should be concerned with poverty and social injustice, “evangelism and the salvation of souls is the vital mission of the Church.”

Out of the Lausanne conference came a covenant affirming an evangelical understanding of evangelism and mission. The document defined evangelism in terms of proclamation and persuasion and placed social ministry as the fruit of salvation rather than as a part of evangelism. At the same time, another section strongly affirmed the importance of social action alongside evangelism:

We express penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive. Although reconciliation with man is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love for our neighbor and our obedience to Jesus Christ. The message of salvation implies also a message of judgment upon every form of alienation, oppression and discrimination, and we should not be afraid to denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist.

This statement was important for several reasons. First, it acknowledged the theological and doctrinal basis for social ministry alongside evangelism while maintaining the priority of the latter. Second, it expresses the clear rejection of the Social Gospel and earlier attempts to identify evangelism and social ministry as identical tasks. Finally, the statement, when paired with the prior definition of evangelism, affirmed very clearly the notion that social ministry is the result of salvation and, therefore, a part of the Christian life.

Plenary speakers and strategic papers debated these issues throughout the Congress. Samuel Escobar declared, “Once and for all we should get rid of the false notion that concern for the social implications of the gospel and the social dimensions of
witnessing comes from false doctrine or lack of evangelical conviction.” He continued that it is this very concern for the gospel that leads to social activism. Carl Henry outlined the theological basis for social action in response to racism, poverty, and war, declaring that “in the Church, love of God and man is the only adequate norm of human conduct, for it mirrors God’s own love.”

Both Escobar and Rene Padilla expressed concern, if not condemnation, for an emphasis on numerical growth that outweighed social concern. McGavran took offense at their comments, believing that Padilla and Escobar were accusing proponents of church growth of ignoring social needs. In a letter immediately following the Congress, McGavran wrote,

Both seem to believe that our church growth emphasis is somehow against philanthropy and social justice. I was sorry that they voiced this so clearly in their plenary addresses. I want to assure them that they are barking up the wrong tree. We are all men who have put in more years in philanthropy and social action than they have. I acted as Superintendent of a Leprosy Home for eleven years, and built a hospital and a substantial agricultural demonstration center, and was principal of schools, etc, etc. If there exist churchmen or missionaries who, facing human need, really sit back and do nothing to meet it, then this whole faculty would feel they were doing wrong.

McGavran included in the letter a 1972 article from Christianity Today in which he condemned the Uppsala doctrine of humanization but upheld the importance of church-based social ministry.

The Lausanne Congress was a watershed moment in the history of world evangelization, but it was not the end of arguments over the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility. Arthur Johnston has criticized the statement on social responsibility as one of the key weaknesses of the Lausanne Covenant. David Moberg contended that the Covenant reinforced what he understood to be the false dichotomy between evangelism and social action.

After Lausanne

Part of the genius of the Lausanne movement was its continuation following the closing of the initial Congress. The discussion of evangelism and social responsibility continued at the International Consultation on the Relationship between Evangelism and Social Responsibility, held at Grand Rapids, Michigan in June 1982. The purpose of the meeting, as outlined in the official report, was to “to define more clearly what is included in ‘social responsibility,’ whose responsibility it is, and how it relates to evangelism.” In essence, the meeting affirmed that social action is a consequence of evangelism, a bridge to evangelism, and a partner with evangelism. The Grand Rapids consultation went far toward synthesizing much of the theology and practice reflected in other historical gatherings, from Edinburgh to Uppsala to Lausanne.

McGavran continued to promote the priority of evangelism over social ministry. In late 1975, he corresponded with Indian pastor George Samuel, one of his former students, regarding a meeting to be held in India. He encouraged Samuel “to refuse to redefine ‘evangelism’ to include social action” adding, “Any such redefinition
simply muddies the waters.”

In 1979, McGavran joined Peter Beyerhaus in the latter’s call for a new network of denominations committed to evangelism. He sent a copy of an urgent appeal from Beyerhaus to evangelical leaders such as Robertson McQuilkin, Harold Lindsell, Arthur Johnston, and Carl F. H. Henry. In the cover letter, McGavran wrote,

I feel strongly that the undiluted Gospel must be voiced rather than the ecumenical confusion. The time has come to say clearly that Evangelism and Social Action, and Development, and Education, and Worship, and World Friendship, and Peace are NOT equal goals in Christian Mission. The supreme and compelling purpose of Christian Mission is to proclaim Jesus Christ as God and Saviour and to persuade men to become his disciples and responsible members of His Church. Everything else is auxiliary. Many good things have been done, are being done, and will be done; but they must not be substituted for the supreme purpose.

Henry and Lindsell both responded positively while stopping short of commitment to a new organization. Henry noted that Beyerhaus’s letter “is cause for grave concern” and encouraged the editors of Christianity Today to pursue the issue. Lindsell replied that Beyerhaus “has his finger on the right spot.”

McGavran also continued to publish on the issue. In 1977, he edited an expanded version of Eye of the Storm in which he included documents related to the debate over the WCC view of missions. Momentous Decisions in Missions Today, a collection of essays and articles on missiology, dealt with the evangelism-social action problem in several chapters, as did a volume McGavran co-wrote with Arthur Glasser.

McGavran’s Theology of Missions and Social Ministry

In response to his reading of the authoritative Scriptures, Donald McGavran developed a definition of missions and evangelism that encompassed much of his church growth thinking. Missions, for McGavran, was “proclaiming Christ and persuading men to become His disciples and responsible members of His Church.” This two-fold definition, encompassing both conversion and church membership, was key to understanding McGavran’s theology of mission, which was very much in line with Hesselgrave and others who place priority on evangelism.

Following the Matthean Commission, McGavran argued that the first step in missions requires that a people be discipled, which he defined as “the removal of distracting divisive sinful gods and spirits and ideas from the corporate life of the people and putting Christ at the centre on the Throne.” The second stage of Christianization was “perfecting,” which was the “bringing about of an ethical change in the discipled group, an increasing achievement of a thoroughly Christian way of life for the community as a whole.” It is at this point that the Church takes on social ministry and engagement.

Another important image of mission for McGavran was that of finding the lost. In Understanding Church Growth, he spoke of evangelism and missions in terms of reconciliation. The goal of evangelism was to bring lost men, women, and children back into relationship with God. God, wrote McGavran, “beyond question wills that lost persons be found – that is, be reconciled to himself.” The biblical image of lost sheep
and a seeking shepherd fit well with this understanding of evangelism (Matt 18:12-14). McGavran continued, “The finding God wants them found – that is, brought into a redemptive relationship to Jesus Christ where, baptized in his name, they become part of his household.” God seeks, McGavran argued, but he seeks and finds through believers. That is evangelism and leaves little room for social ministry.

As noted throughout this article, McGavran reacted strongly against efforts to call social ministry evangelism and to elevate Christian presence over proclamation of the gospel. Some ecumenical leaders viewed presence and social ministry as equals, believing that if Christians would serve, others would see that service and respond to the gospel. Early in his career, McGavran stood against that notion. “Certainly,” he wrote in a 1941 article, “the good deeds of a Christian who never mentions His Lord, do in a vague way attract men to Jesus Christ, . . . but to call these activities evangelism is an unfortunate use of the word.”

McGavran argued that Christian presence without the proclamation of the gospel was incomplete, although he recognized certain instances (such as areas of intense persecution) where presence evangelism might be necessary. “Please note,” he wrote, “that I endorse presence when the goal is that Jesus Christ according to the Scriptures be believed, loved, obeyed, and followed into the waters of baptism.” Proclamation of the gospel was a necessary component of evangelism. Worship, feeding the hungry, and caring for those in need were necessary in Christian ministry, but they were not missions or evangelism.

McGavran also tied the conflict between evangelism and social ministry to a low view of Scripture. In an address in Kansas City in 1976, he argued that “the theological source of the terrible tension is the low and high view of the Bible.” McGavran reminded his listeners of his own pilgrimage from a low to high view of Scripture. For those with a low view of Scripture, the only logical course was to work to alleviate suffering in the world. For those who followed an authoritative reading of the Bible, especially the Great Commission, the only option could be a priority on evangelism “to meet the tremendous spiritual needs of men.”

As noted throughout this article, McGavran maintained that the only biblically valid way to engage social problems was through the local church. “The Church of Jesus Christ has two main functions,” he wrote:

It calls men from death to life: it serves men and transforms those sections of society in which it has power. It evangelizes and it serves. It multiplies churches and it changes the social structure of society. And it does these two things in that order. First, it establishes congregations of the redeemed. Then it feeds them on the word of God. They become a blessing to their families, their neighborhoods, their cities, their nations, their world.

While missionaries and church planters must face the reality of social problems, McGavran was correct to argue that evangelism must remain central to the missionary task. While some modern practitioners present a more balanced (and perhaps realistic) view of the need and opportunity for social ministry as a path to evangelism, McGavran’s key point remains: social ministry is for national churches planted in context. Missionaries must avoid spending inordinate amounts of time in social ministries, especially when those ministries have political implications. Instead, we must
plant churches that will follow Christ’s command to minister to people in need.

Notes:

1Donald McGavran was arguably the most influential missiologist of the twentieth century. For a fuller treatment of McGavran’s life, see Vern Middleton, Donald McGavran: His Early Life and Ministry (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2012). See also chapters 1 and 2 of the author’s 2011 dissertation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. This article is modified from chapter 6 of that work. See Jeffrey Kirk Walters, Sr., “Effective Evangelism” in the City: Donald McGavran’s Missiology and Urban Contexts (Ph.D. Diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011).

2Donald McGavran, “Church Growth and Evangelism,” unpublished manuscript notes, 1971 (WCIU 1.1). William Carey International University and the U.S. Center for World Mission house a significant collection of McGavran’s personal correspondence. Unfortunately, the collection remains in McGavran’s original filing cabinets and has not been catalogued. References in this collection will refer to the filing cabinet and drawer. “WCIU, 8.2” refers to the McGavran Collection at WCIU, cabinet 8, drawer 2.

3Ibid.

4Authors represented in this article, including McGavran, used terms like “social action” and “social ministry” at various times in their writing. Generally, the terms are interchangeable and will be considered synonymous in this article.


6John R. W. Stott, Issues Facing Christians Today: A Major Appraisal of Contemporary Social and Moral Questions (Basingstoke, UK: Marshalls, 1984), 2-4. Stott contends that the Evangelical Revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, resulting in the leadership of men like Wesley, Wilberforce, and the Clapham Sect, are examples of the evangelical passion for social concern throughout history.


15 Ibid., 11.

16 Ibid., 75.


19 Ibid.


21 John Hazelton to Donald McGavran, 9 March 1965 (WCIU 7.1); Donald McGavran to John Hazelton, 12 March 1965 (WCIU 7.1).

22

23 Donald McGavran, “Social Justice and Evangelism,” *World Vision* 9, no. 6 (June 1965), 9. McGavran had dozens of copies of this article in his personal files.

24 Ibid.


29 Ibid., 232.

30 Ibid., 233.

Ibid., 49-50.

Ibid., 63.

Ibid., 65.

Ibid., 250.

Ibid., 233. McGavran devoted several editions of Church Growth Bulletin to discussion of the Uppsala meeting. He included articles by prominent evangelical theologians and missiologists such as Ralph Winter, Alan Tippett, John Stott, and others. See “Special Uppsala Issue,” Church Growth Bulletin 4, no. 5 (May 1968); “Uppsala Issue Number Two,” Church Growth Bulletin 5, no. 1 (September 1968); “Uppsala Issue Number Three,” Church Growth Bulletin 5, no. 2 (November 1968).


Peter Dyck to Donald McGavran, 24 December 1969 (WCIU 7.1).

Donald McGavran to Peter Dyck, 22 January 1970 (WCIU 7.1). Emphasis McGavran’s.


Paul Hopkins to Donald McGavran, 2 July 1971 (WCIU 7.1).

Donald McGavran to Paul Hopkins, 9 July 1971 (WCIU 7.1).

Ibid.


Ibid., i.


Donald McGavran to “Friends,” n.d. (WCIU 4.3).

Billy Graham to Donald McGavran, 19 October 1973 (WCIU 3.1).
52 Donald McGavran to Billy Graham, 1 November 1973 (WCIU 3.1).

53 Ibid. Interestingly, McGavran noted in June 1974 on his copy of the letter, “Was not done, I think, but was still worth writing. It all helps create a climate.”

54 Billy Graham to Donald McGavran, 20 November 1973 (WCIU 4.4).


56 Billy Graham to Donald McGavran, 19 December 1973 (WCIU 4.4).

57 Donald McGavran to Harold Lindsell, 9 July 1974 (WCIU 3.1).

58 Ibid.


61 Ibid.

62 Ibid., 114.

63 Ibid.

64 Billy Graham, “Let the Earth Hear His Voice,” in Let the Earth Hear His Voice, 16.


66 Ibid., 31.

67 “The Lausanne Covenant,” in Let the Earth Hear His Voice, 4-5.

68 Samuel Escobar, “Evangelism and Man’s Search for Freedom, Justice, and Fulfillment,” in Let the Earth Hear His Voice, 310-11.


71 Donald McGavran to Paul Little, 22 August 1974 (WCIU 3.1).


73 McGavran was pleased with the results of the Lausanne gathering but remained concerned that evangelism retain priority in later meetings. Donald McGavran, “An Interview with Donald McGavran,” Global Church Growth 26 no. 3 (July-September 1989), 7-8.

74 Johnston, Battle for World Evangelism, 326-27.
75 Moberg, *Great Reversal*, 167.


77 Ibid.

78 Donald McGavran to George Samuel, 19 November 1975 (WCIU 9). See also, Donald McGavran to George Samuel, 14 June 1976 (WCIU 9). In the latter, McGavran wrote, “I am coming more and more to say that ‘the Church has only one mission – to call men from darkness to light and from death to life. The Church has in addition many ministries – relief of suffering, disease, ignorance, injustice.”

79 Peter Beyerhaus to Donald McGavran, 2 March 1979 (WCIU 8.9); Donald McGavran to Peter Beyerhaus, 8 March 1979 (WCIU 8.9).


82 Harold Lindsell to Donald McGavran, 23 March 1979 (WCIU 8.1).


88 Ibid., 15.


90 Ibid.


Ibid.; See also, McGavran, *Effective Evangelism*, 54-56.

McGavran, “Idea for Kansas City.”