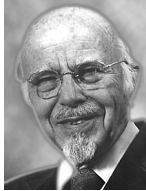


# The Bridges of God

Donald A. McGavran

It is of the utmost importance that the Church understand how peoples, not merely individuals, become Christian.



Known worldwide as perhaps the foremost missiologist, Donald A. McGavran was born in India of missionary parents and returned there as a third-generation missionary himself in 1923, serving as a director of religious education and translating the Gospels in the Chhattisgarhi dialect of Hindi. He founded the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary. McGavran died in 1990 at the age of 93. McGavran authored several influential books, including *The Bridges of God*, and *Understanding Church Growth*.

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The *Bridges of God* appeared in 1954, and it has since become known as the classic summons for missionaries to utilize the “bridges” of family and kinship ties within each people group thereby prompting “people movements” to Christ. This is contrasted with the “Mission Station Approach,” dominant in missionary strategy of the nineteenth century, whereby individual converts are gathered into “colonies” or compounds isolated from the social mainstream. McGavran claims that whereas the latter approach was necessary and useful in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “a new pattern is at hand, which, while new, is as old as the Church itself.”

## The Crucial Question in Christian Missions

Much study has been devoted to world evangelization. We know the answers to many questions about the propagation of the Gospel. But what is perhaps the most important question of all still awaits an answer. That question is: *How do peoples become Christian?*

This article asks how clans, tribes, castes, in short how *peoples* become Christian. Every nation is made up of various layers of strata of society. In many nations each stratum is clearly separated from every other. The individuals in each stratum intermarry chiefly, if not solely, with each other. Their intimate life is therefore limited to their own society, that is, to their own people. They may work with others, they may buy from and sell to the individuals of other societies, but their intimate life is wrapped up with the individuals of their own people. Individuals of another stratum, possibly close neighbors, may become Christians or Communists without the first stratum being much concerned. But when individuals of their own kind start becoming Christians, that touches their very lives. How do chain reactions in these strata of society begin? *How do peoples become Christian?*

Here is a question to which not speculation but knowledge must urgently be applied. The question is how, in a manner true to the Bible, can a Christian movement be established in some class, caste, tribe or other segment of society which will, over a period of years, so bring groups of its related families to Christian faith that the whole people is Christianized in a few decades? It is of the utmost importance that the Church should understand how peoples, and not merely individuals, become Christian.

## The Unfamiliar in People Movements

Individualistic Westerners cannot without special effort grasp how peoples become Christian. The missionary movement is largely staffed by persons from the West or by nationals trained in their ideas, and while evangelization has been carried on with correct enough views on how individuals have become Christian, there have been hazy or even erroneous views on how peoples become Christian.

### **Western individualism obscures group processes**

In the West, Christianization is an extremely individualistic process. This is due to various causes. For one thing, in Western nations there are few exclusive subsocieties. Then too, because freedom of conscience exists, one member of a family can become Christian and live as a Christian without being ostracized by the rest of the family. Furthermore, Christianity is regarded as true, even by many who do not profess it. It is considered a good thing to join the Church. A person is admired for taking a stand for Christ. There have been no serious rivals to the Church. Thus individuals are able to make decisions as individuals without severing social bonds.

Again, with the disruption of clan and family life following upon the industrial revolution, Westerners became accustomed to do what appealed to them as individuals. As larger family groupings were broken up through migration, the movement of rural folk to the cities, and repeated shifts of homes, people came to act for themselves without consulting their neighbors or families. A habit of independent decision was established. In the Christian churches this habit was further strengthened by the practice of revival meetings appealing for individual decisions to the accompaniment of great emotion. Indeed, the theological presupposition was not merely that salvation depended on an individual act of faith in Christ (which is unquestioned), but also that this act was somehow of a higher order if it were done against family opinion (which is dubious). Separate individual accessions to the Church were held by some to be not only a better, but the only valid, way of becoming a Christian.

Had the question arisen as to how peoples became Christian, the answer would have been given that it was by individual after individual becoming soundly converted.

Of the social organism which is a people, or of the desirability of preserving the culture and community life, indeed, of enhancing them through the process of conversion, there tended to be little recognition. Peoples were thought of as aggregates of individuals whose conversion was achieved one by one. The social factor in the conversion of peoples passed unnoticed because peoples were not identified as separate entities.

However, a people is not an aggregation of individuals. In a true people intermarriage and the intimate details of social intercourse take place within the society. In a true people individuals are bound together not merely by common social practices and religious beliefs but by common blood. A true people is a social organism which, by virtue of the fact that its members intermarry very largely within its own confines, becomes a separate race in their minds. Since the human family, except in the individualistic West, is largely made up of such castes, clans and peoples, the Christianization of each nation involves the prior Christianization of its various peoples as peoples.

Because of the intense battle against race prejudice, the concept of separate races of men is discredited in many circles. Missionaries often carry this antipathy to race into their work in tribes and castes who believe themselves to be separate races, marry within their people and have an intense racial consciousness. But to ignore the significance of race hinders Christianization. It makes an enemy of race consciousness, instead of an ally. It does no good to say that tribal peoples ought not to have race prejudice. They do have it and are proud of it. It can be understood and should be made an aid to Christianization.

### **What to do and what not to do**

To Christianize a whole people, the first thing not to do is snatch individuals out of it into a different society. Peoples become Christians where a Christward movement occurs *within that society*. Bishop J. W. Pickett, in his important study *Christ's Way to India's Heart*, says:



The process of extracting individuals from their setting in Hindu or Moslem communities does not build a Church. On the contrary it rouses antagonism against Christianity and builds barriers against the spread of the Gospel. Moreover, that process has produced many unfortunate, and not a few tragic results in the lives of those most deeply concerned. It has deprived the converts of the values represented by their families and friends and made them dependent for social support to the good life and restraint on evil impulses upon men and women, their colleagues in the Christian faith, with whom they have found it difficult to develop fellowship and a complete sense of community. It has sacrificed much of the convert's evangelistic potentialities by separating him from his People. It has produced anaemic Churches that know no true leadership and are held together chiefly by common dependence on the mission or the missionary.

Equally obviously the Christianization of a people requires reborn men and women. A mere change of name accomplishes nothing. While the new convert must remain within his people, he must also experience the new birth. "If ye then be risen with Christ, set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth." The power of any People Movement to Christ depends in great measure on the number of truly converted persons in it. We wish to make this quite clear. The Christianization of peoples is not assisted by slighting or forgetting real personal conversion. There is no substitute for justification by faith in Jesus Christ or for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Thus a Christward movement within a people can be defeated either by extracting the new Christians from their society (i.e. by allowing them to be squeezed out by their non-Christian relatives) or by the non-Christians so dominating the Christians that their new life in Christ is not apparent. An incipient Christward movement can be destroyed by either danger.

### ***The group mind and group decision***

To understand the psychology of the innumerable subsocieties which make up non-Christian nations, it is essential that the leaders of the Churches and missions strive to see life from the point of view of a people, to whom

individual action is treachery. Among those who think corporately only a rebel would strike out alone, without consultation and without companions. The individual does not think of himself as a self-sufficient unit, but as part of the group. His business affairs, his children's marriages, his personal problems, or the difficulties he has with his wife are properly settled by group thinking. Peoples become Christian as this group-mind is brought into a lifegiving relationship to Jesus as Lord.

It is important to note that the group decision is not the sum of separate individual decisions. The leader makes sure that his followers will follow. The followers make sure that they are not ahead of each other. Husbands sound out wives. Sons pledge their fathers. "Will we as a group move if so-and-so does not come?" is a frequent question. As the group considers becoming Christian, tension mounts and excitement rises. Indeed, a prolonged informal vote-taking is under way. A change of religion involves a community change. Only as its members move together, does change become healthy and constructive.

Groups are usually fissured internally. This has a definite bearing on group decision. If in some town or village there are 76 families of a given people, they may be split into several sub-groups. Often such divisions are formed by rivalries between prominent men. Often they are geographical: the lower section of the village as against the upper section. Often they are economic: the landed as opposed to the landless. Often they depend on education, marriage relationships, or attitudes toward customs. Group thinking usually occurs at its best within these sub-groups. A sub-group will often come to decision before the whole. Indeed, a sub-group often furnishes enough social life for it to act alone.

A change of religion involves a community change. Only as its members move together, does change become healthy and constructive.



Peoples become Christian as a wave of decision for Christ sweeps through the group mind, involving many individual decisions but being far more than merely their sum. This may be called a chain reaction. Each decision sets off others and the sum total powerfully affects every individual. When conditions are right, not merely each sub-group, but the entire group concerned decides together.

### **Terms defined**

We call this process a "People Movement." "People" is a more universal word than "tribe", "caste" or "clan." It is more exact than "group." It fits everywhere. Therefore in this article we shall speak of People Movements to Christ.

### **The Characteristic Pattern of the Great Century**

Dr. Latourette has given the name "the Great Century" to the time between 1800 and 1914. He says: "When consideration is given to the difficulties which faced it, in the nineteenth century, Christianity made amazing progress all around the world. It came to the end of the period on a rapidly ascending curve. Its influence on culture was out of all proportions to its numerical strength. It had an outstanding role as a pioneer in new types of education, in movements of the relief and prevention of human suffering and in disseminating ideas."

How did Christianization proceed during the Great Century? This is a most important question because most of our present thinking is coloured by the missionary effort of that century. When we think of missions today, we think of those with which we are familiar, and which prevailed in China, Africa, India and other countries during the Great Century. Since this century produced a radically new and different approach, the older kind of missions which existed for 1,800 years have tended to be forgotten. The missionary and the Churches tend to think that the only kind of missions and the only kind of Christian-ization possible is that used with greater or lesser effect during the past 150 years. The Great Century created a new method to meet a new situation. Both situation and method are worthy of our closest study.

### **The new situation described: the gulf of separation**

Missions were carried on from the ruling, wealthy, literate, modern countries, which were experiencing all the benefits of political and religious freedom, an expanding production, and universal education. In the year 1500, European visitors to India and China described countries which compared favourably with their own. But by the nineteenth century the West had progressed while the East had stood still, so that there was a great gap between them. Western missionaries went to poor, illiterate, medieval and agricultural countries. The gap widened with the passage of the years, for the progress of the West continued to be greater than that of the East. While it is true that missionaries tried to identify themselves with the people, they were never able to rid themselves of the inevitable separateness which the great progress of their home lands had imposed upon them.

This gulf became very clear in the living arrangements which European and American missionaries found necessary. Their standard of living at home was many times higher than that of the average citizen on the mission fields, though it could not compare with that of the few wealthy Chinese, Japanese and Indians. Modern medicine was unknown. Health demanded big bungalows on large sites. Servants were cheap and saved much domestic labour. The people of the land generally walked, but the missionary was accustomed to a conveyance and so he used one. The colour of his skin also set him apart. He could not melt into the generality of the inhabitants of the land as Paul could. He was a white man, a member of the ruling race. To this day in the rural sections of India, seven years after independence, the white missionary is frequently addressed as *Sarkar* (Government). The missionary was an easy victim not only to malaria but to intestinal diseases. He had to be careful about what he ate. The Western style of cooking agreed with him, whereas the Eastern style did not. So in matters of food also there came to be a great gulf between him and the people of the land.

There were practically no bridges across this gulf. There was nothing even remotely similar to the Jewish bridge over which



Christianity marched into the Gentile world. Staggering numbers of people lived on the fertile plains of Asia, but not one of them had any Christian relatives! Even in the port cities there were none. *Més alliances* between white soldiery, rulers or commercial people and the women of the various lands were so resented on the one hand and despised on the other that they served as barriers rather than bridges. The normal flow of the Christian religion simply could not take place. Separated by colour, standard of living, prestige, literacy, mode of travel, place of residence, and many other factors, the missionary was, indeed, isolated from those to whom he brought the message of salvation.

The missionaries did learn the languages of the country and learned them well. They served the people with love, taught their children, visited in their homes, went with them through famines and epidemics, ate with them, bought from them and sold to them, and, more than any other group of white men in the tropics, were at one with them. Thus, it will be said, this emphasis on the separateness of the missionary is exaggerated. To the student of the growth and spread of religions, however, it is apparent that these casual contacts described above are just that—casual contacts. They are not the living contacts, the contacts of tribe and race and blood, which enable the non-Christian to say, as he hears a Christian speak: “This messenger of the Christian religion is one of my own family, my own People, one of us.” Casual contacts may win a few individuals to a new faith, but unless these individuals are able to start a living movement within their own society, it does not start at all.

The separateness we describe seemed likely to last a long time. It existed in an unchanging world, where the dominance of the West and the dependence of the East seemed to be permanent. Missionaries thought, “There will be centuries before us, and, in a 400-year relationship like that of Rome to her dependent peoples, we shall gradually bring these peoples also into the Christian faith.”

This grave separateness faced Christian missions during the Great Century. When the churches and their missionaries have no rela-

tions, no contacts and no bridges over inter-racial gulfs, what do they do? How do they carry out the command of their Lord? When there is no living approach, how do they go about the Christianization of peoples?

### ***The new method evolved: the exploratory mission-station approach***

If there is any aspect that is typical of modern missions, it is the mission station with its gathered colony. Missionaries facing the gulf of separation built mission stations and gathered colonies of Christians.

They acquired a piece of land, often with great difficulty. They built residences suitable for white men. Then they added churches, schools, quarters in which to house helpers, hospitals, leprosy homes, orphanages and printing establishments. The mission station was usually at some center of communication. From it extensive tours were made into the surrounding country-side. It was home to the missionary staff and all the activities of the mission took place around the station.

Together with building the station, the missionaries gathered converts. It was exceedingly difficult for those hearing the Good News for the first time, knowing nothing of Christians, or of Christianity save that it was the religion of the invading white men, to accept the Christian religion. Those who did so were usually forced out of their own homes by fierce ostracism. They came to live at the mission colony, where they were usually employed. Orphans were sheltered. Slaves were bought and freed. Women were rescued. Some healed patients became Christian. Many of these usually came to live at the mission station. They were taught various means of earning a livelihood and directed into various forms of service. They formed the gathered colony.

This kind of mission approach took shape out of the individualistic background typical of much Protestantism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To be a Christian was to come out and be separate. For converts to leave father and mother invested their decisions with a particular validity. To gather a compound full of Christians out of a non-Christian population seemed a good way to proceed. Frequently it was also the only pos-



sible way. The universal suspicion and often the violent hostility with which Christianity was regarded would have forced into the gathered colony pattern even those who consciously sought integration.

This, then, was the pattern which was characteristic of most beginnings in the Great Century. We call it the exploratory mission

A moderate amount of missionary assistance, at places where the churches feel their need, produces results far beyond that which those accustomed to the mission station tradition would consider possible.

station approach, but from the point of view of the resulting churches, it was the exploratory gathered colony approach.

It was excellent strategy in its day. It was a probe to ascertain which peoples were ready to become Christian. Christianity must be seen to be stable before it will be accepted as a way of salvation. Peoples are not going to commit their destinies to a faith which is here today and gone tomorrow. Men must see over a period of years what the Christian life means and what Christ does to persons and to groups. While the Good News is first being presented and the Christian life demonstrated the mission station and the gathered colony are essential. As we look back over the last hundred years it seems both necessary and desirable for there to have been this approach. With all its limitations, it was the best strategy for the era. This approach has been no mistake. It fitted the age which produced it. It was inevitable.

### ***The road branches according to response***

This beginning, adopted by practically all missions, may be considered as a road running along a flat and somewhat desolate plain and then dividing, one branch to continue along the plain, the other to climb the green fertile hills. Whether missions continued on the flat accustomed road (of the gathered church approach) or ascended the high road by means of the People Movement Approach depended on the response given to the Christian message by the population and on the missionaries' understanding of that response.

Where the number of conversions remained small decade after decade, there the mission remained the dominant partner and the Mission Station Approach continued and, indeed, was strengthened. It was strengthened because the gathered colony furnished Christian workers so that the mission could expand mission healing, mission teaching

and mission preaching. Where the number of conversions mounted steadily with every passing decade, there the church became the dominant

partner and the mission turned up the hill road. It started using the People Movement Approach. Scores of thousands became Christians.

These two roads, these two ways of carrying on mission work, are distinct and different. Clear thinking about missions must make a sharp differentiation between them. Each must be described separately. The People Movements, the hill road, will be described in the next section. The remainder of this section will be devoted to describing the widening road on the plain, the way in which the exploratory phase gradually turned into the permanent Mission Station Approach or gathered colony approach.

Small response was not expected by the early missionaries. The exploratory Mission Station Approach was not launched as an accommodation to a hardhearted and irresponsible population. It was regarded as a *first stage after which great ingathering would occur*. Even after the Basel Mission had lost eight of its first ten missionaries in nine years, the heroic Andreas Riis wrote back from the Gold Coast in Africa, "Let us press on. All Africa must be won for Christ. Though a thousand missionaries die, send more." The exploratory gathered colony approach was adopted with the expectation that the Christian faith would sweep non-Christian lands bringing them untold blessings.

But these expectations were often frustrated by meager response. In the light of the event Professor Latourette can now serenely write:



The advanced cultures and faiths of Asia and North Africa did not yield so readily as did those of the primitive folk, either to Western civilization or to Christianity. This was to be expected. It has usually been characteristic of advanced cultures and their religions that they have been much slower to disintegrate before an invading civilization.

But the meager response was not expected by the early messengers of the Church. It was disappointing.

A factor in the small response, whose importance cannot be overestimated, is that, partly because of the individualistic bias of the missionaries and partly because of the resistance of the hearers, conversions were mainly *out of the nation*. Converts felt that they were joining not merely a new religion, but an entirely foreign way of living—proclaimed by foreigners, led by foreigners and ruled by foreigners. Converts came alone. Often even their wives refused to come with them. Naturally conversions were few. A vicious circle was established: the few becoming Christian one by one set such a pattern that it was difficult for a Christward movement to be started, and by the lack of a movement converts continued to come one by one and in very small numbers. In many parts of the field it was psychologically difficult for a person to become a Christian as it would be for a white man in South Africa to join a Negro church knowing that his children would intermarry with the black children. The person not only became a Christian, but he was generally believed to have “joined another race.” When, among peoples which intermarry only amongst themselves, a man becomes a Christian, his old mother is likely to reproach him, saying, “Now whom will your sons marry? They cannot get wives from amongst us any more.”

***The exploratory approach becomes permanent: terms defined***

Where meager response continued, there gathered colony missions gradually accommodated themselves to carrying on mission work among populations which would not obey the call of God. Once this occurred we may say that the mission, which had started its road-building on the plain, with the intention of reaching high fertile land as soon as possible, settled down to road-building on

the barren plain as its God-given duty. It found plenty of good work to do. It never admitted, even to itself, that it had really given up hope of reaching the hills; but that is what had actually happened.

***The churches born of the mission station approach***

The first aim of missions is the establishment of churches. So, as we start to examine the results of the Mission Station Approach we turn to an inspection of the kind of churches which mission stations have fathered. These we shall call Mission Station churches or gathered colony churches.

They have some favorable characteristics. They are composed of greatly transformed individuals. The membership is literate. They come to church with hymn books. They can read their Bibles. Many among them are specially trained beyond the ordinary school. In some stations there are many high school and college graduates on the church rolls. The membership contains a goodly proportion of day laborers and artisans, household helps and casual labourers, as well as teachers, preachers, medical workers, clerks, and other white-collar workers. In some places factory and railway employees form a considerable part of the membership. On the whole the Mission Station Churches are made up of people who are soundly Christian. There is not much superstition among them and not much temptation to revert to the old non-Christian faiths. The membership is proud of being Christian, and feels that it has gained tremendously by belonging to the Christian fellowship. There are, of course, many nominal Christians and some whose conduct brings shame on the church. But even these are likely to send their children to Sunday School and church!

They are organized into strong congregations. They have good permanent church buildings on land indubitably theirs. The pastors and ministers are usually qualified people. The services or worship are held regularly. The elders, deacons and other elected members form church councils and govern the church. The giving would probably compare favorably in regard to percentage of income with that in the Western churches, though often most of it is provided



by those in mission employ. In some churches the giving is exemplary and there are many tithers. All told, the impression is that of small, tight, well-knit communities, buttressed by intermarriage and considering themselves to be a part of world Christianity.

On the debit side, these mission station churches are lacking in the qualities needed for growth and multiplication. They are, in truth, gathered churches, made up of individual converts, or “brands snatched from the burning,” or famine orphans, or a mixture of all three. The individual converts and rescued persons have usually been disowned by their non-Christian relatives. The famine orphans have no close connection with loving brothers and sisters and uncles and aunts. Furthermore, the lives of these Christians have been so changed, and they find such satisfaction in the fellowship of their own sort (i.e. other mission station Christians) that they feel immeasurably superior to their own unconverted relatives. This is particularly true when they come from the oppressed classes. The second generation of Christians is even farther removed from their non-Christian relatives than the first, while in the third generation, in the very land where they live, the gathered church members know as a rule no non-Christian relatives at all. The precious linkages which each original member had as he came from non-Christian society and which are so needed for reproduction are all gone. A *new people* has been established which intermarries only within itself and thinks of itself as a separate community.

The Christians of the gathered colony approach have a vivid realization of the power of education. It has been education, they feel, that has lifted them out of the depths. They are keen for their children to receive as much education as possible. They skimp and scrape that their boys and girls may go on to school and proceed as far as possible on the road to a B.A. or an M.A. But they do not always have a vivid experience of the power of God. Many would grant that it was Christian education which had lifted them—an education given to them in the name of Jesus Christ. But on such experiences as the power of the Spirit, the forgiveness of sins and the blessedness of faith, many mission station Christians are likely to

have a weak witness. “Become Christians and educate your children,” they are likely to say. “It won’t do you much good but it will be wonderful for your sons and daughters.”

Gathered colony churches usually have a vivid consciousness of the mission as their parent. The churches tend to feel that it is the business of the missionary to head up a wealthy social service agency, designed to serve the Christian community. It sometimes happens that the members of a mission station church, sensing the obvious fact that there is only limited employment in a mission station, look on new converts as a labor union would on immigrants. They draw the easy conclusion that if more people become Christians, the resources of the mission will be spread thinner and there will be less for each of the existing Christians. Cases have occurred where they have actually discouraged possible converts from becoming Christian.

Gathered colony churches are often overstaffed. They are too richly served by foreign missions. Their members acquire a vested interest in the *status quo*. In one typical mission station church of 700 souls we find a missionary in charge of two primary schools and one middle school for day pupils, another in charge of a middle boarding school for girls, a missionary doctor and his nurse wife who run a hospital, and an evangelistic missionary who gives half his time to the Christian community. Then there is a national minister who is a high school graduate with theological training, five high school graduates who teach the older boys and seven high school graduates who teach the older girls, four evangelists, five Bible women and a primary school staff of six. Missionaries, who, with less than half these resources, are shepherding large numbers of Christians who have come to Christ in some People Movement, may gasp with unbelief that such heavy occupation could occur. Yet both the national and the missionary leaders of such mission station churches consider that they really are managing with a minimum degree of foreign aid!

***But—the era is drawing to a close***

However, as Latourette points out, the era is passing. The days in which the mission stations can exert a major influence on the af-





fairs of Eastern nations are drawing to a close. The sleeping nations are now awake. At the headquarters of the provincial and national governments are whole departments, amply provided with millions of money raised by taxes, whose chief duty it is to plan for the future of the nations. The tens of thousands of students who journey to the West for education, the flood of publications in all the major languages of the land, the advent of the movie, the loudspeaker and programs of social education, the sensitiveness to foreign criticism, the intense desire to prove their own nation the equal of any on earth, and the resentment felt at foreign leadership—all these presage the end of an era in which mission stations in the urban centers exerted an influence out of all proportion to their numbers.

Mission schools in Asia and North Africa no longer have the influence which they once had. In the beginning they were the only schools. But now they form a small percentage of the total, and are being crowded into the background. It is still true that there are a few outstanding Christian schools in most countries, mission schools, convent schools, which are known as the best in the land. Even so, they do not get one percent of the students. There was a day when they had 50 percent of the sons of the leading families. Mission educationists cannot dodge the plain fact that mission schools cannot expect to wield the influence which they did in the days when Western cultures were first arriving in Asia and Africa.

What is true of schools is also true of mission station hospitals. Up till 1945 the Central Provinces of India had not produced a single qualified doctor. Its university had no standard medical school. The only fully qualified doctors were a few immigrants from other provinces and missionary doctors from abroad. But today there are four hundred students in the medical college of its university. As this flood of physicians flows out over the cities and towns and eventually the villages of this province, the present near monopoly of the Christian hospitals is likely to be destroyed. The same sort of thing is taking place in one awakened nation after another.

Non-Christian nations are impatient with foreign tutelage. They believe it is demean-

ing to their national pride to admit to the need for guidance from any Western nation. The East, particularly India, honestly believes that, except for mechanization and industrialization, the West has little to give to the "spiritual East." The excoriations heaped upon Western nations by their own prophets, crying out against race prejudice, economic injustice and recurrent wars, are taken at their face value by the nations of the East. The West comes to be looked upon as soul-less, materialistic, unjust, money-mad, and moved by none but ulterior motives. The temper of these days in the East is not that of humbly sitting at the feet of missionary tutors.

It would be giving a distorted impression if the last few paragraphs were to imply that Christian missions have no more usefulness as cultural "hands across the sea." In the days ahead when nations are forced into closer and closer co-operation, all friendly efforts to interpret nations to each other will be of value. The continued residence of Westerners in the East will doubtless do good. But the days of great secular influence of foreign mission stations apart from great national Churches are probably about over.

They should be over for a further reason: there is now a use for mission resources which will do more for nation building, more for international peace, and more for the Church than the further penetration of non-Christian faiths and cultures from the vantage point of a mission station.

### ***Salute and farewell***

So has run the characteristic pattern of the Great Century. An age of tremendous mission expansion in terms of geography and influence; an age of heroism and devotion and self-sacrifice; an age of the meeting of two cultures separated by a wide gulf which, through the mission stations, outposts of goodwill and faith, has slowly drawn closer to the point where one world is in sight; an age when there is hardly a race or nation in which there is not found the Church.

So has run its pattern. But that age is now over. A new age is upon us. A new pattern is demanded. A new pattern is at hand, which, while new, is as old as the Church itself. It is a



God-designed pattern by which not ones but thousands will acknowledge Christ as Lord, and grow into full discipleship as people after people, clan after clan, tribe after tribe and community after community are claimed for and nurtured in the Christian faith.

### The God-given People Movements

While the typical pattern of missionary activity has been that of the Mission Station Approach, occasionally People Movements to Christ have resulted. These have not as a rule been sought by missionaries—though in Oceania, Indonesia and Africa there have been some exceptions. The movements are the outcome of the mysterious movement of the Spirit of God. Their pattern of growth is very different from that described in the last chapter. They have provided over 90 percent of the growth of the newer churches throughout the world. The great bulk of the membership and of the congregations of the younger churches consist of converts and the descendants of converts won in People Movements.

In spite of this, we maintain that People Movements were the exception and that the typical approach of the last century was the Mission Station Approach. The number of mission stations from which Christian movements have started is small compared with the number serving static churches. Mission enterprises are, for the most part, those which serve non-Christians and gathered colony churches. The leadership of many conferences on missions comes largely from those who know and are immersed in the Mission Station Approach. And, as Dr. Hendrik Kraemer writes: “Missionary thinking and planning in this revolutionary period are still overwhelmingly influenced by the Mission Station Approach.” The Mission Station Approach must then be taken as the typical outcome of the past years, and the People Movements as the exceptions.

In dividing mission work into these two varieties—that operating through the Mission Station Approach and that operating through the People Movements—it is recognized that some mission work cannot be classified under either head. For example, the translation and printing of the Scriptures. We are not attempting an exhaustive classification, but a practical

one into which more than 90 per cent of missionary activity can be placed.

### *Some people movements described*

Adoniram Judson went to Burma as a missionary to the cultured Buddhist Burmese. But he took under his wing a rough character, by name Ko Tha Byu, a Karen by race. The Karens were among the backward tribes of Burma. They were animistic peasants and were supposed by the Burmese to be stupid inferior people. “You can teach a buffalo, but not a Karen,” was the common verdict. Judson spent six months trying to teach this former criminal, now his servant, the meaning of the redemptive death of our Lord Jesus Christ, and made such little progress that he was inclined to take the common verdict as true. However, he persisted, and a few months later Ko Tha Byu became a convinced, if not a highly illuminated, Christian.

As Judson toured Burma, speaking to the Burmese of that land, Ko Tha Byu, the camp follower, spoke to the humble Karen in each vicinity. The Karens started becoming Christian. Here a band of ten families, there one or two, and yonder a jungle settlement of five families accepted the Lordship of Christ. We do not have the data to prove that those who came were interrelated, but it is highly probable that connected families were coming in. A chain reaction was occurring. We can reasonably assume that among his close relatives alone, to say nothing of cousins and second cousins, Ko Tha Byu had a host of excellent living contacts. The early converts doubtless came from among these, and their relatives.

Judson, translating the Bible into Burmese, was concerned with more important matters than a Christian movement among a backward tribe. For years he considered the Karen converts a side issue. However, the next generation of missionaries included some who were veritable Pauls, expanding the movement as far along the paths and across the rice paddies as possible. Today there is a mighty Christian Movement among the Karens and their related tribes in Burma, numbering hundreds and thousands of souls. The Christian Karens are the educated Karens and will provide the leadership for the mixed population of Karens, Kachins and



other tribes which predominate in parts of Burma. The Christward Movement among the Karens may well be the source of a church numbering millions, and exercising a decisive influence upon the history of all South-East Asia.

By contrast, the Mission Station Approach to the Buddhist Burmese has yielded its ordinary quota of small, static mission station churches with a membership of perhaps 20,000 souls for all Burma.

The Karen Christians are good Christians. In a hundred sections of Burma there are communities of Christian Karens with their own church building, their own pastor, their own tradition of regular worship, their own Sunday school, and a Christian tribal life which augurs well for the permanence of the Christian Churches of Burma. The Karens, disciplined through a People Movement, and now in the process of perfecting, are not under the delusion that a nominal Christianity is worth anything to God. The thousands of churches scattered across the country contain a normal proportion of earnest Spirit-filled Christians. They are "reborn Baptists" who will compare favorably with the reborn Baptists of any land.

We stress this because it is a mistake to assume that People Movement Christians, merely because they have come to the Christian faith in chains of families, must inevita-

There is so much that is mysterious and beyond anything we can ask or think, and so much evident working of divine Power, that we must confess that People Movements are gifts of God.

bly be nominal Christians. Such an assumption is usually based on prejudice, not fact. All Churches face the problem of how to avoid creating nominal Christians. Even Western Churches, made up of only those individual converts who testify to regeneration, soon come to have a second and third generation who easily grow up to be nominal Christians. The policies of the churches vary in their ability to produce Christians vividly

conscious of their own salvation. People Movements in themselves do not encourage the production of nominal Christians.

Up in the north of Pakistan there was a lowly people called Churas. They were the agricultural laborers in a mixed Muslim and Hindu civilization. They formed about 7 per cent of the total population, and were Untouchables. They were oppressed. They skinned dead cattle, cured the skins, collected the bones and sold them. They had been largely overlooked by the missionaries preaching Christ to the respectable members of the Hindu and Muslim communities, and organizing their few hard-won converts into mission station churches. Then a man named Ditt from among the Churas turned to Christ, continued to live among his people, despite their attempts at ostracism, and gradually brought his relatives to the Christian faith. The missionaries were at first dubious about admitting to the Christian fellowship these lowest of the low, lest the upper castes and the Muslims take offense and come to think of the Christian enterprise as an "untouchable" affair. But those who became Christians were pastored and taught and organized into churches. Because the converts came as groups without social dislocation the efforts of the pastors and the missionaries could be given largely to teaching and preaching. Attention did not have to be diverted to providing jobs and wives, houses and land for individual converts. The Mission to whom God had entrusted this Movement was made up of devout men and women and they gave themselves to the task. The outcome was at the end of about eighty years there are no more Churas in that section of India. *They have all become Christians.*

Whereas the Church in mission station areas often numbers no more than one-tenth of 1 per cent of the total population, in the Chura area *the Church numbers 7 per cent of the population.* There are congregations in many of the villages and a Christian witness is maintained, not by foreign missionaries, but by the citizens of Pakistan.

In Indonesia there is a large mission work. In addition to static gathered colonies there have been also a comparatively large number of God-given People Movements. In the



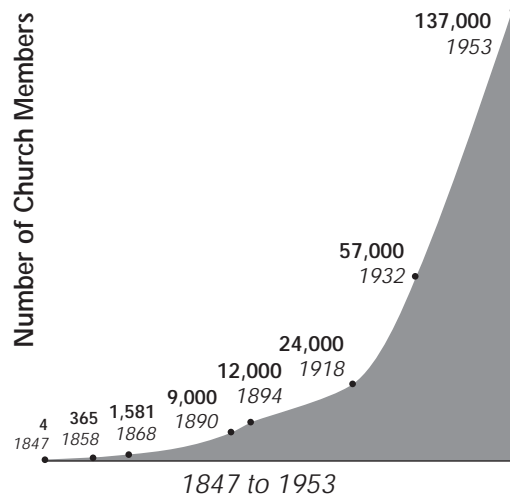
north of Sumatra there is a flourishing Batak People Movement, numbering hundreds of thousands. In 1937, on the island of Nias, off the north-west coast of Sumatra, there were 102,000 Christians: in 1916 there were none. In the northern parts of the Celebes the Minahasa tribes were by 1940 fairly solidly Christian and in the center the growth of People Movements was rapid. There were tribal movements toward Christ in the Moluccas, the Sangi and the Talaud Islands. Around the year 1930 between eight and ten thousand a year were being baptized in Dutch New Guinea. By 1936 the number of Protestant Christians was reported to be 1,610,533. The Roman Church also has increased by numerous People Movements. In 1937 there were 570,974 members of the Roman Catholic Church. After 1950 new large People Movements in Sumatra and after 1960 in Irian and Kalimantan have taken place.

The only instance in the entire world of a hundred thousand Muslims being won to Christ occurs in Indonesia, in the midst of these numerous People Movements. It is also interesting that in Indonesia there is apparently a bridge between the natives and the Chinese immigrants, a bridge over which Christianity can cross. If this were strengthened it might well happen that more Chinese would become Christian indirectly *via* the People Movements of Indonesia than have been won in China itself.

In Africa there have been a large number of People Movements. The day is not far off when most of Africa south of the Sahara will have been disciplined.

There is an instructive case of People Movements in the Gold Coast. These have grown into a great Presbyterian Church. For 19 years (1828-47) the Basel Mission of Switzerland battled to establish a foothold in the Gold Coast. Of the 16 missionaries sent out ten died shortly after arrival. The daring expedient had to be adopted of bringing in eight West Indian families to demonstrate that black men could read the white man's Book, and to provide missionaries less susceptible to the ravages of the climate. During this time there had not been a single baptism. The first four baptisms were in 1847 among the Akim

Abuakwa tribe. The following table shows how the Church grew.



Till about 1870 the records show evidence of the exploratory Mission Station Approach. Slaves were purchased, freed, and employed at the mission stations for instruction. Run-away slaves were given shelter. Laborers on mission buildings were settled on mission land. In 1868 there was one missionary for each thirty Christians. The Basel Mission had a gathered colony at each of its nine mission stations. But in the decade 1870 to 1880 outlying chains of families started becoming Christian, and several stations among the Tsui-speaking tribes began to be surrounded by small Christian groups in scattered villages. Schools were established in each and the groups gradually became churches. An important feature of this movement, like many other African People Movements, was that pagan parents frequently sent their children to Christian schools, desiring them to become Christians. The school thus had enormous influence.

Early growth was tribe-wise. Teacher-preachers, the slightly educated first generation Christian workers on whom so much of the discipling of the tribes of Africa has depended, were usually recruited from each tribe in which a Christian movement started. They were then trained and sent back to that tribe to teach others, shepherd the Christians and win others to Christ. Later, as Christian movements arose in practically all the tribes,



they became a uniting factor in the life of the nation, and workers were appointed more or less regardless of tribal relationships.

### ***The churches born of people movements***

The most obvious result of Christian missions which have been fathering and furthering Christward movements is a tremendous host of Christian churches. It has been calculated that there are well over a hundred thousand congregations of Christians brought to a knowledge of God through recent Christian People Movements. These exist in most of the non-Christian countries.

Let us consider the unexpectedly large number of People Movements. The islands of the Pacific have been largely discipled by People Movements. India has its extensive list of movements from the Malas and Madigas, the Nagas and Garas, the Mahars and Bhils, and many others. Indonesia and Burma total well over a score of People Movements of some power. Africa has numerous tribes in which the churches are growing in tribe-wise fashion. Two new People Movements are being reported in 1980: One in Mindanao and one in Mexico. Our list might be made much larger. Each of these hundreds of People Movements is multiplying Christian congregations as it grows.

These scores of thousands of congregations have many features in common. Many members of the churches are illiterate. In some lands the percentage of illiteracy in the People Movement churches is over 80. The pastors of the churches are usually men with about seven years of schooling plus some seminary training. The church buildings are often temporary adobe or wattle buildings, though there are many well-built churches among the older congregations. In new People Movements, the missionary usually plays an important role—starting, funding, and developing them. The pastoring of the congregations is almost entirely in the hands of the nationals however. In older, larger People Movements to-day national ministers head the Church, while missionaries work as assistants directed by the church council. The services to Christians, so marked in the Mission Station Approach, are very much curtailed. The numbers of children are so great that, aside from small

unsatisfactory primary schools, few children get a chance at education. In the mission station churches it is common practice for every child to be sent, largely at mission expense, through school as far as his intelligence will allow him to go. But in the People Movement churches the bulk of the Christian population has available to it only such educational advantages as the average non-Christian shares. This makes for an illiterate and ignorant church membership.

In some African countries, the school picture is totally different. Government does its education through missions. In such lands the children of the People Movements have excellent educational opportunities and the membership of the churches is growing up largely literate.

Scattered as the congregations are it is difficult to reach them with medical aid. Cholera and small-pox epidemics, sudden death from cerebral malaria, infant maladies which carry off children like flies, and health conditions which are a scandal to the human race, are characteristic of these myriad rural churches.

Yet People Movement Churches are remarkably stable. There are reversions, especially in the early days, but on the whole, once a *people* has become Christian, it stays Christian even in the face of vigorous persecution. In addition to the faith of each individual and the courage which comes from world-wide fellowship, the very bonds of relationship and social cohesion keep weak individuals from denying the faith.

### ***Unvalued pearls***

One of the curious facts about People Movements is that they have seldom been sought or desired. Pickett records, in Christian Mass Movements in India, that most People Movements have actually been resisted by the leaders of the church and mission where they started. These leaders often had grave doubts whether it was right to take in groups of individuals, many of whom seemed to have little ascertainable personal faith. Nevertheless, despite a certain degree of repression, movements did occur. One wonders what would have happened had missions from the beginning of the "Great Century" been actively searching and praying for the coming of



Christward marches by the various peoples making up the population of the world.

Those People Movements which did occur were seldom really understood. The way of corporate decision was obscured by the Western preference for individual decision. The processes of perfecting the churches were confused with the process by which a people turns from idols to serve the living God. Even where there has been great growth, as in parts of Africa, faulty understanding of People Movements has resulted in much less than maximum growth and has caused needless damage to tribal life.

Christward movements of peoples are the supreme goal of missionary effort. Many who read this book will not agree with this, and, indeed, it has never been generally accepted. Yet we not only affirm it, but go further and claim that the vast stirrings of the Spirit which occur in People Movements are God-given. We dare not think of People Movements to Christ as merely social phenomena. True, we can account for some of the contributing factors which have brought them about; but there is so much that is mysterious and beyond anything we can ask or think, so much that is a product of religious faith, and so much evident working of divine Power, that we must confess that People Movements are gifts of God. It is as if in the fullness of time God gives to His servants the priceless beginning of a People Movement. If that succeeds, the church is firmly planted. If it fails, the missionary forces are back to the preliminary stages of exploration. Yet the essential recognition that the People Movements to Christ is the supreme goal is not often made by Christian leaders. Gifts of God come and go unrecognized; while man-directed mission work is carried faithfully, doggedly forward.

It is time to recognize that when revival really begins in China, Japan, Africa, the Muslim world, and India, it will probably appear in the form of People Movements to Christ. This is the way in which Evangelical Christianity spread in Roman Catholic Europe at the time of the Reformation. It is the best way for it to spread in any land.

### Five Great Advantages

People Movements have five considerable advantages. *First, they have provided the Christian movement with permanent churches rooted in the soil of hundreds of thousands of villages.* For their continued economic life they are quite independent of Western missions. They are accustomed (unfortunately too accustomed) to a low degree of education. Yet their devotion has frequently been tested in the fires of persecution and found to be pure gold. They are here to stay. They are permanent comrades on the pilgrim way.

*They have the advantage of being naturally indigenous.* In the Mission Station Approach the convert is brought in as an individual to a pattern dominated by the foreigner. The foreigner has set the pace and the style, often to his own dismay. But such denationalization is a very minor affair in true People Movements. In them the new Christians seldom see the missionary. They are immersed in their own cultures. Their style of clothing, of eating and of speaking continues almost unchanged. Their churches are necessarily built like their houses—and are as indigenous as anyone could wish. They cannot sing or learn foreign tunes readily, so local tunes are often used. Thus an indigenous quality, highly sought and rarely found by leaders of the Mission Station Approach churches, is obtained without effort by the People Movement churches. Church headquarters, however, need to make special efforts to keep thoroughly indigenous their training of People Movement youth and leadership.

*People Movements have a third major advantage. With them “the spontaneous expansion of the Church” is natural.* The phrase “spontaneous expansion” sums up the valuable contribution to missionary thinking made by Roland Allen and World Dominion. It requires that new converts be formed into churches which from the beginning are fully equipped with all spiritual authority to multiply themselves without any necessary reference to the foreign missionaries. These might be helpful as advisers or assistants but should never be necessary to the completeness of the Church or to its power of unlimited expansion. Spontaneous expansion involves a full trust in the Holy Spirit and a



recognition that the ecclesiastical traditions of the older churches are not necessarily useful to the younger churches arising out of the missions from the West. New groups of converts are expected to multiply themselves in the same way as did the new groups of converts

In order to be called a bridge, a connection must be large enough to provide for the baptism of enough groups in a short enough time and a small enough area to create a People Movement in the other community.

who were the early churches. Advocates of spontaneous expansion point out that foreign directed movements will in the end lead to sterility and antagonism to their sponsors, and that therefore the methods now being pursued, here called the Mission Station Approach, will never bring us within measurable distance of the evangelization of the world.

Desirable as spontaneous expansion is, it is a difficult ideal for the Mission Station churches to achieve. They might be freed from all bonds to the Western churches, they might be convinced that they had all the spiritual authority needed to multiply themselves, they might be filled with the Holy Spirit and abound in desire to win others to Christ, and yet—just because they form a separate people and have no organic linkages with any other neighboring people—they would find it extremely difficult to form new churches. In People Movement churches, on the contrary, spontaneous expansion is natural. Both the desire to win their “own fold” and the opportunity to bear witness in unaffected intimate conversation are present to a high degree. There is abundant contact through which conviction can transmit itself. True, in People Movements this natural growth can be and, alas, sometimes has been, slowed down by the atmosphere and tech-

niques of the all-pervading gathered colony approach. But once these are recognized and renounced by the leaders of the People Movement churches, it becomes comparatively easy for spontaneous expansion to occur. Missions can then, like Paul, deliberately attempt to use the relatively unplanned expansion of a Christward People Movement to achieve still greater and more significant enlargement. Thus we come to the most marked advantage of these movements.

*These movements have enormous possibilities of growth.* That these possibilities are to-day largely ignored and unrecognized even by the leader of the churches does not diminish either the truth or the importance of this fact.

The group movements are fringed with exterior growing points among their own peoples. As Paul discovered, the Palestinian movement had growing points in many places outside that country. Just so, every Christward movement has many possibilities of growth on its fringes. For example, the Madigas have become Christians in large numbers. They are the laborers of South India. They have migrated to many places in India and even abroad. One cannot help wondering whether a fervent proclamation by a modern Madiga St. Paul carrying the news that “We Madigas are becoming Christian by tens of thousands each year: we have found the Savior and have as a people come into possession of the unsearchable riches of Christ,” might not start Madiga Movements in many parts of the world.

People Movements also have internal growing points; that is, the unconverted pockets left by any such sweeping movement. Here the leaders of the Christian forces must be alert to see to it that strategic doorways are entered while they are open. Doorways remain open for about one generation. Then they close to the ready flow of the Christian religion. Until the discipling of the entire people, there will be both internal and external growing points. Both will yield large returns if cultivated.

Of rarer occurrence are the bridges to other communities, such as that over which St. Paul launched his Gentile movements. In order to be called a bridge, the connection must be large enough to provide not merely for the



baptism of individuals, but for the baptism of enough groups in a short enough time and a small enough area to create a People Movement in the other community. More of these bridges would be found if they were assiduously sought. More would be used for the expansion of the Christian faith if leaders could be led to understand them and become skilled in their use.

The possibilities for growth in People Movements are not by any means confined to developing new movements. Leaders of People Movement churches find that after the church has attained power and size the normal process of growth, including the baptism of individual seekers on the fringes of the congregations, often produce more quiet regular in-gatherings year after year than was the case during the period of the greatest exuberance of the movement. One might conclude that once a People Movement church has gained a hundred thousand converts, and has become indigenous to the land and forms a noticeable proportion of the population, it is likely to keep on growing. A moderate amount of missionary assistance, at places where the churches feel their need, produces results far beyond that which those accustomed to the mission station tradition would consider possible.

*The fifth advantage is that these movements provide a sound pattern of becoming Christian. Being a Christian is seen to mean not change in standard of living made possible by foreign funds, but change in inner character made possible by the power of God. In well-nurtured People Movement churches, it is seen to mean the regular worship of God, the regular hearing of the Bible, the giving to the church, the discipline of the congregation, the spiritual care exercised by the pastor, habits of prayer and personal devotion and the eradication of un-Christian types of behavior. This life, centering in the village church, often built by the Christians themselves, is seen to be the main feature of the Christian religion. There are no impressive institutions to divert attention from the central fact. Christians become “people with churches, who worship God” rather than “people with hospitals who know medicine,” or “people with schools who get good jobs.” The health of the Christian movement requires that the normal pattern be well known, not merely to the non-Christian peoples, but to the leaders of church and mission and to the rank and file of members. The People Movement supplies the pattern which can be indefinitely reproduced. It is the pattern which with minor variations has obtained throughout history.*

## Study Questions

1. Briefly define the term “the bridges of God” and explain the significance of these bridges for mission strategy.
2. Are group decisions valid? Why or why not? Explain the strategic importance of encouraging “multi-individual” decisions.
3. At the time McGavran wrote *The Bridges of God*, the term “unreached people group” had not yet been used. What is the significance of the idea of “people movements” for the ministry among “unreached peoples?”





See more of The Bridge Of God Gospel Ministries on Facebook. Log In. or. Create New Account. See more of The Bridge Of God Gospel Ministries on Facebook. Log In. Forgotten account? It's Spiritual maturity to know that we don't give to "buildings" where we gather for fellowships but, to the graces of God that minister to our lives as ordained by God. That means giving must continue. Maturity!!! I've seen people mock servants of God that they're hungry for tithes and offerings yet the same people work daily for an end month salary. True set apart servants of God are mandated by God to live on what is given in the houses of God. That's scripture and whether we're mocked or not, the word of God stands forever.