

# A Church in Every People: Plain Talk About a Difficult Subject<sup>1</sup>

by Dr. Donald A. McGavran

Preface by Robby Butler, disciple of McGavran and Winter<sup>2</sup>



## McGavran's Legacy

McGavran stirred the mission world by shifting the question from: “How does an *individual* become Christian?” to: “How does a *people* become Christian?”

McGavran devoted much of his life to this latter question, publishing in 1954 his landmark book:

*Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions.*

In the mid-'60s, McGavran founded the “School of World Mission” (SWM) at Fuller Theological Seminary. Over the next decade, with Ralph Winter and others, McGavran supervised 1,000 experienced field missionaries in studying how *peoples* are “discipled”—in the Bible, history, and these missionaries’ fields.<sup>3</sup>

This collaborative study with experienced missionaries revealed:

- The Bible (Mt. 28, etc.) calls us to disciple peoples (*ethne*).
- Peoples are only *discipled* through indigenous movements.<sup>4</sup>
- Indigenous movements spread only within individual *peoples*.

McGavran proposed, and Winter agreed, that (emphasis mine)

We cannot say we have *evangelized* a *person* until that person can join an *indigenous movement* in *their* society.<sup>5</sup>

McGavran further observed that a people is “unreached” until its members can follow Christ without their peers feeling they have “traitorously left their own people to join another people.”<sup>6</sup>

**Alarming, McGavran observed that 90% of Western missionaries to the unreached default to methods that hinder indigenous movements, making the unreached *more* resistant.**

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<sup>2</sup> I worked as Ralph Winter’s personal assistant for eight years, then on his leadership team and institutional boards another eight. When Donald McGavran could no longer read, I had the privilege of reading to him and learning from interacting with him.

<sup>3</sup> McGavran used “discipling” to mean baptism into an indigenous movement. He referred to theological instruction beyond this as “perfecting” (2 Cor 7:1, etc.).

<sup>4</sup> Movements are how Asia was reached through Paul, and how Ireland, Europe, the Netherlands, and every other “Christian” land was reached.

<sup>5</sup> *The Analysis of a Movement* (written for GCOWE '95) and reprinted in *Frontiers in Mission*. See [library.wciu.edu/ebooks/Winter\\_Ralph/Frontiers\\_in\\_Mission.pdf](http://library.wciu.edu/ebooks/Winter_Ralph/Frontiers_in_Mission.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> McGavran in “A Giant Step in Christian Mission” (Jan 1985 Mission Frontiers)

## Historical Context

In the early 1970s, influential theologians observed the presence of “national churches” in nearly every country. Presuming that these national churches had the motivation and ability to evangelize their own countries, these theologians began calling for a *moratorium* on sending missionaries.

Winter responded at the 1974 Lausanne Congress by showing that 85% of the lost were in peoples that rejected Christianity as an invading, foreign religion, and thus could not yet be won by the normal evangelism of national churches. Winter subsequently called for *new* efforts to start *indigenous movements* among what he later called “*Hidden Peoples*.”

Edinburgh ’80 (the World Consultation on Frontier Missions) was a direct response to Winter’s extension of McGavran’s insights. The delegates there distilled the understanding that every people needs its own indigenous movement to the watchword “A Church for Every People by the Year 2000.”<sup>7</sup> Through AD 2000, this became a global rallying cry for discipling all nations.

However McGavran quickly became concerned that widespread misreading of this watchword would undermine the very goal of an *indigenous movement* in every people. In 1981 he detailed his concerns in the article below.<sup>8</sup>

## Today’s Reality

Much good was accomplished through the “AD2000 Movement”:

- A number of indigenous movements were started.
- Today nearly 600 movements are on the radar of mission researchers,<sup>9</sup> most having developed just in this century. Many of these movements are growing faster and stronger than anything Winter or McGavran saw in their study of past movements.

Yet in retrospect, McGavran’s concerns appears prophetic—and as relevant today as when he first wrote them:

- In 1985, McGavran estimated that 50% of the world lived among unreached peoples—2.5 billion people.<sup>10</sup>
- Today IMB researchers estimate that 57% of the world lives among unreached peoples—4.3 billion.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> [MissionFrontiers.org/issue/article/edinburgh-80-the-roots-of-a-movement](http://MissionFrontiers.org/issue/article/edinburgh-80-the-roots-of-a-movement)

<sup>8</sup> written for *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*

<sup>9</sup> A May, 2017 a “think tank of mission practitioners” identified nearly 600 movements unfolding around the world today, most having started since the year 2000.

<sup>10</sup> [MissionFrontiers.org/issue/article/a-giant-step-in-christian-mission](http://MissionFrontiers.org/issue/article/a-giant-step-in-christian-mission)

<sup>11</sup> [PeopleGroups.org](http://PeopleGroups.org)

# A Church in Every People: Plain Talk About a Difficult Subject<sup>12</sup>

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## Ralph Winter's Introduction for this article.

1. In 1995 for the Global Congress on World Evangelization.<sup>13</sup>

[This is] one of the most significant documents McGavran ever wrote. It ... distilled his misgivings at superficial attempts to barge into untouched groups with the Gospel. [His] life of insights is remarkably distilled here for all to see.

2. For a Sep/Oct 1997 reprint in *Mission Frontiers*:

In many ways this is the most remarkable article written by the most remarkable mission strategist of the Twentieth Century.

[No one] in history has tramped more places, inquired about the hard facts of the real growth of the Christian movement ... and thought it through more profoundly—than Donald A. McGavran. ... His burning, wide-ranging concerns took him everywhere [and] pushed his thinking into global prominence.

This [is] a cautioning letter to [those] coming after him, warning them against oversimplification [with] more solid understanding of the essential factors in Christian mission than most missionaries could accumulate in a lifetime.

## Introduction

In the last eighteen years of the twentieth century, the goal of Christian mission should be to preach the Gospel and, by God's grace, to plant in every unchurched segment of mankind—what shall we say—"a church" or "a cluster of growing churches"? By the phrase, "segment of mankind" I mean an urbanization, development, caste, tribe, valley, plain, or minority population. I shall explain that the steadily maintained long-range goal should never be the first, but should always be second. The goal is not one small sealed-off conglomerate congregation in every people. Rather, the long-range goal (to be held consistently in view in the years or decades when it is not yet achieved) should be *a cluster of growing congregations* in every segment.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Some wording and concepts in McGavran's original article are "dated" by changes in terminology and new insights—from the Bible and nearly 600 new movements. See my adaptation from McGavran's outline: *Indigenous Movements: How Peoples are Reached* at [theMissionNetwork.org/booklets](http://theMissionNetwork.org/booklets)

<sup>13</sup> Winter in "The Analysis of a Movement," reprinted in *Frontiers in Mission*

<sup>14</sup> This was McGavran's conception of a movement based on historical precedent.

## The One-by-One Method

As we consider the phrase italicized above, we should remember that it is usually easy to start one single congregation in a new unchurched people group. The missionary arrives. He and his family worship on Sunday. They are the first members of the congregation. He learns the language and preaches the Gospel. He lives like a Christian. He tells people about Christ and helps them in their troubles. He sells tracts or Gospels, or gives them away. Across the years, a few individual converts are won from that. Sometimes they come for very sound and spiritual reasons; sometimes from mixed motives. But here and there a woman, a man, a boy, a girl do decide to follow Jesus.<sup>15</sup> A few employees of the mission become Christian. These may be masons hired to erect the buildings, helpers in the home, rescued persons or orphans. The history of mission in Africa is replete with churches started by buying slaves, freeing them and employing such of them as could not return to their kindred. Such as chose to could accept the Lord. A hundred and fifty years ago this was a common way of starting a church. With the outlawing of slavery, of course, it ceased to be used.

One single congregation arising in the way just described is almost always a conglomerate church—made up of members of several different segments of society. Some old, some young, orphans, rescued persons, helpers and ardent seekers. All seekers are carefully screened to make sure they really intend to receive Christ. In due time a church building is erected and, lo, “a church in that people.” It is a conglomerate church. It is sealed off from all the people groups of that region.

No segment of the population says, “That group of worshipers is us.” They are quite right. It is not. It is ethnically quite a different social unit.<sup>16</sup>

*I want to emphasize that perhaps 90 out of every 100 missionaries who intend church planting get only conglomerate congregations.*

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<sup>15</sup> Such one-by-one evangelism is sometimes referred to as “extraction evangelism.”

<sup>16</sup> In “[A Giant Step in Christian Mission](#)” (Jan 1985 Mission Frontiers), McGavran described unreached peoples as peoples:

- which “believe intensely that ‘if any of us becomes a Christian, he leaves “us” and joins “them,”” and
- in which “individuals who are Christ’s followers are perceived by their fellows to have ‘left their own people and traitorously gone off to join another people.’ Putting it positively, a people is to be considered reached when its members who become Christians are perceived by their fellows as “still our people who are pointing the way to what they believe as a good path for us all to follow.” In Guatemala in 1985, when one asks a person, ‘Are you an evangelical?’ he frequently hears the answer, ‘not yet.’ This is proof that many segments of society in that nation are now effectively ‘reached’ i.e., they believe that while linguistically or ethnically they still remain themselves (Indians or Mestizos), they probably ought to become obedient followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

## Slow to Grow

This very common way of beginning the process of evangelization is a slow way to disciple the peoples of the earth—note the plural, “the peoples of the earth.” Let us observe closely what really happens as this congregation is gathered. Each convert, as he becomes a Christian, is seen by kin as one who leaves “us” and joins “them.” He leaves “our gods” to worship “their gods.” Consequently, his own relatives force him out. Sometimes he is severely ostracized, thrown out of the house and home; his wife is threatened. Hundreds of converts have been poisoned or killed. Sometimes, the ostracism is mild and consists merely in severe disapproval. His peoples consider him a traitor. A church which results from this process looks to the peoples of the region like an assemblage of traitors. It is a conglomerate congregation. It is made up of individuals who, one by one, have come out of several different societies, castes or tribes.<sup>17</sup>

Now if anyone, in becoming a Christian, is forced out of, or comes out of a highly-structured segment of society, the Christian cause wins the individual but loses the family. The family, his people, his neighbors of that tribe are fiercely angry at him or her. They are the very men and women to whom he cannot talk. “You are not of us,” they say to him. “You have abandoned us, you like them more than you like us. You now worship their gods not our gods.” As a result, conglomerate congregations, made up of converts won in this fashion,

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<sup>17</sup> In Chapter 26 of his book *Frontiers in Mission*, Ralph Winter provided this perspective on the spiritual dynamics which make a people unreached:

Satan holds whole peoples in bondage. We can't wrestle a single soul out of his hand without challenging his authority in that particular people group. ... in groups where no real breakthrough has occurred, the contest is still a “power encounter” between the Spirit of God and the powers of darkness. This is why the front line is prayer. This is why Asian evangelists say they must first “bind the strong man” before entering a village that sits in darkness waiting for the great light. We must remember that taking the light into dark places will meet fierce resistance. In the Bible the concept of darkness is not merely the absence of light but the presence of a malignant, destroying Person. That is why the kingdoms of this world will not easily yield. ...

Satan wields his control over individuals by dominating their groups. Most people follow the lead of their own group. Very few individuals are perfectly unrestricted thinkers for themselves. Sometimes it is baffling to missionaries to know how to penetrate a group. Often the breakthrough comes through a miraculous healing or the unaccountable conversion of a key person, not through normal evangelism. Yes, normal evangelism only becomes possible after that breakthrough occurs. ...

Dr. McGavran's conviction which had influenced so many others was that we cannot say that we have evangelized a person unless that person has been given a chance to unite with an indigenous movement within his or her own society.

grow very slowly. Indeed, one might truly affirm that, where congregations grow in this fashion, the conversion of the ethnic units (people groups) from which they come is made doubly difficult. “The Christians misled one of our people,” the rest of the group will say. “We’re going to make quite sure that they do not mislead any more of us.”

## Easy For Missionaries

One by one is relatively easy to accomplish. Perhaps 90 out of 100 missionaries who intend church planting get only conglomerate congregations. I want to emphasize that. Perhaps 90 out of every 100 missionaries who intend church planting get only conglomerate congregations.<sup>18</sup> Such missionaries preach the Gospel, tell of Jesus, sell tracts and Gospels and evangelize in many other ways. They welcome inquirers, but whom do they get? They get a man here, a woman there, a boy here, a girl there, who for various reasons are willing to become Christians and patiently to endure the mild or severe disapproval of their people.

If we understand how churches grow and do not grow on new ground, in untouched and unreached peoples, we must note that the process I have just described seems unreal to most missionaries. “What,” they will exclaim, “could be a better way of entry into all the unreached peoples of that region than to win a few individuals from among them? Instead of resulting in the sealed-off church you describe, the process really gives us points of entry into every society from which a convert has come. That seems to us to be the real situation.”

Those who reason in this fashion have known church growth in a largely Christian land, where men and women who follow Christ are not ostracized, are not regarded as traitors, but rather as those who have done the right thing. In that kind of society every convert usually can become a channel through which the Christian faith flows to his relatives and friends. On that point there can be no debate. It was the point I emphasized when I titled my book, *Bridges of God*.

## Ineffective in Untouched Peoples

But in tightly-structured societies, where Christianity is looked on as an invading religion, and individuals are excluded for serious fault, there to win converts from several different segments of society, far from building bridges to each of these, erects barriers difficult to cross.

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<sup>18</sup> McGavran here gives a sober caution to any missionary working to reach a people (that perceives the gospel as an unwelcome, divisive religion).

Our efforts must aim to **avoid** both:

- winning people “away” from their natural communities, and
- injecting foreign culture into the churches formed by the new believing families.

# The People-Movement Approach

## Seven Principles

Now let us contrast the other way in which God is discipling the peoples of Planet Earth. My account is not theory but a sober recital of easily observable facts. As you look around the world you see that, while most missionaries succeed in planting only conglomerate churches by the “one by one out of the social group” method, here and there clusters of growing churches arise by the people-movement method.<sup>19</sup> They arise by tribe-wise or caste-wise movements to Christ. This is in many ways a better system. In order to use it effectively, missionaries should operate on seven principles.

### 1. Aim for a Cluster of Growing Congregations

First, they should be clear about the goal. The goal is not one single conglomerate church in city or a region. They may get only that, but that must never be their goal. That must be a cluster of growing, indigenous congregations,<sup>20</sup> every member of which remains in close contact with his kindred. This cluster grows best if it is in one people, one caste, one tribe, one segment of society. For example, If you were evangelizing the taxi drivers of Taipei, then your goal would be to win not some taxi drivers, some university professors, some farmers and some fisherman, but to establish churches made up largely of taxi drivers, their wives and children and mechanics. As you win converts of that particular community, the congregation has a natural, built-in social cohesion. Everybody feels at home. Yes, the goal must be clear.

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<sup>19</sup> McGavran’s research involved mostly congregations meeting in dedicated buildings..Later biblical scholarship, and the experience of nearly 600 recent movements, shows that **multiplying** *ekklesia* through households (without dedicated buildings) can be far more fruitful. McGavran himself is said to have later regretted focusing on church *growth* rather than church *multiplication*. *Ekklesia* meeting daily as believing households can spread far more rapidly, and with less opposition, to reach a critical mass for tipping the peoples’ attitude in favor of biblical faith. However visible churches (in dedicated buildings) *within* a given people can also play an influential role in persuading a people that the gospel is good news for *them*.

<sup>20</sup> English Bibles generally translate *ekklesia* (Greek) as “church.” Yet New Testament *ekklesia* lacked what most think of today as “church”—buildings, programs, sermons and paid staff. The biblical *ekklesia* met mostly in pre-existing households or *oikos* (Greek), told stories of Jesus and multiplied rapidly. One definition of *ekklesia* adapted from George Patterson is “Followers of Jesus who gather in His name, often daily, to lovingly obey all He commands.” By this definition, those Jesus sent out two by two—as well as Paul and his teams—modeled *ekklesia* wherever they were sent.

## **2. Concentrate on One People**

The second principle is that the national leader, or the missionary and his helpers, should concentrate on one people. If you are going to establish a cluster of growing congregations amongst, let us say, the Nair people of Kerala, which is the southwest tip of India, then you would need to place most of your missionaries and their helpers so that they can work among the Nairs. They should proclaim the Gospel to Nairs and say quite openly to them, “We are hoping that, within your caste, there soon will be thousands of followers of Jesus Christ, who will remain solidly in the Nair community.” They will, of course, not worship the old gods; but then plenty of Nairs don’t worship their old gods—plenty of Nairs are communist, and ridicule their old gods.

Nairs whom God calls, who choose to believe in Christ, are going to love their neighbors more than they did before, and walk in the light. They will be saved and beautiful people. They will remain Nairs while, at the same time they have become Christians. To repeat, concentrate on one people group. If you have three missionaries, don’t have one evangelizing this group, another that, and a third 200 miles away evangelizing still another. That is a sure way to guarantee that any church started will be small, non-growing, one-by-one churches. The social dynamics of those sections of society will work solidly against the eruption of any great growing people movement to Christ.

## **3. Encourage Converts to Remain With Their People**

The third principle is to encourage converts to remain thoroughly one with their own people in most matters. They should continue to eat what their people eat. They should not say, “My people are vegetarians but, now that I have become a Christian, I am going to eat meat.” After they become Christians they should be more rigidly vegetarian than they were before. In the matter of clothing, they should continue to look precisely like their kinfolk. In the matter of marriage, most people are endogamous, they insist that “our people marry only our people.” They look with great disfavor on our marrying other people. And yet when Christians come in one-by-one, they cannot marry their own people. None of them have become Christian. When only a few of a given people become Christians, when it comes time for them or their children to marry, they have to take husbands or wives from other segments of the population. So their own kin look at them and say, “Yes, become a Christian and mongrelize your children. You have left us and have joined them.”

All converts should be encouraged to bear cheerfully the exclusion, the oppression, and the persecution that they are likely to encounter from their people. When anyone becomes a follower of a new way of



life, he is likely to meet with some disfavor from his loved ones. Maybe it's mild; maybe it's severe. He should bear such disfavor patiently. He should say on all occasions:

I am a better son than I was before; I am a better father than I was before; I am a better husband than I was before; and I love you more than I used to do. You can hate me, but I will not hate you. You can exclude me, but I will include you. You can force me out of our ancestral house; but I will live on its veranda. Or I will get a house just across the street. I am still one of you, I am more one of you than I ever was before.

Encourage converts to remain thoroughly one with their people in most matters.

Please note that word “most.” They cannot remain one with their people in idolatry, or drunkenness or obvious sin. If they belong to a segment of society that earns its living stealing, they must “steal no more.” But, in most matters (how they talk, how they dress, how they eat, where they go, what kind of houses they live in), they can look very much like their people, and ought to make very effort to do so.

#### **4. Encourage Group Decisions for Christ<sup>21</sup>**

The fourth principle is to try to get group decisions for Christ. If only one person decides to follow Jesus, do not baptize him immediately. Say to him, “You and I will work together to lead another five or ten or, God willing, fifty of your people to accept Jesus Christ as Savior so that when you are baptized, you are baptized with them.” Ostracism is very effective against one lone person. But ostracism is weak indeed when exercised against a group of a dozen. And when exercised against two hundred it has practically no force at all.

#### **5. Aim for a Constant Stream of New Converts**

The fifth principle is this: Aim for scores of groups of people to become Christians in an even-flowing stream across the years. One of the common mistakes made by missionaries, eastern as well as western, all around the world is that when a few become Christians—perhaps 100, 200 or even 1,000—the missionaries spend all their time teaching them. They want to make them good Christians, and they say

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<sup>21</sup> Missionaries often hinder *movements* in *collectivistic* societies by urging *individual* obedience to the scriptural, external marks of “Christian” identity—baptism and the Lord’s supper. Yet ninety percent of the salvations recorded in Acts involve groups believing together. Only on three of 32 occasions does an individual come to faith or get baptized. And despite the scriptural mandate for circumcision, Paul wrote three times that this sign of identity is meaningless; concluding the “only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (Rom 2:25–29; 1 Cor 7:19; Gal 5:6).

to themselves, "If these people become good Christians, then the Gospel will spread." So for years they concentrate on a few congregations. By the time, ten or twenty years later, that they begin evangelizing outside that group, the rest of the people no longer want to become Christian. That has happened again and again. This principle requires that, from the very beginning, the missionary keeps on reaching out to new groups. "But," you say, "is not this a sure way to get poor Christians who don't know the Bible? If we follow that principle we shall soon have a lot of 'raw' Christians. Soon we shall have a community of perhaps five thousand people who are very sketchily Christian."

Yes, that is certainly a danger. At this point, we must lean heavily upon the New Testament, remembering the brief weeks or months of instruction Paul gave to his new churches, We must trust the Holy Spirit, and believe that God has called those people out of darkness into His wonderful light. As between two evils, giving them too little Christian teaching and allowing them to become a sealed-off community that cannot reach its own people, the latter is much the greater danger. We must not allow new converts to become sealed off. We must continue to make sure that a constant stream of new converts comes into the ever-growing cluster of congregations.

## **6. Help Converts Exemplify the Highest Hopes of Their People**

Now the sixth point is this: The converts, five or five thousand, ought to say or at least feel:

We Christians are the advance guard of our people, of our segment of society. We are showing our relatives and neighbors a better way of life. The way we are pioneering is good for us who have become Christians and will be very good for you thousands who have yet to believe. Please look on us not as traitors in any sense. We are better sons, brothers, and wives, better tribesmen and caste fellows, better members of our labor union, than we ever were before. We are showing ways in which, while remaining thoroughly of our own segment of society, we all can have a better life. Please look on us as the pioneers of our own people entering a wonderful Promised Land.

## **7. Emphasize Brotherhood**

The last principle I stress is this: Constantly emphasize brotherhood. In Christ there is no Jew, no Greek, no bond, no free, no Barbarian, no Scythian. We are all one in Christ Jesus. but, at the same time, let us

remember that Paul did not attack all imperfect social institutions. For example, he did not do away with slavery. Paul said to the slave, “Be a better slave,” He said to the slave owner, “Be a better master.”

Paul also said in that famous passage emphasizing unity, “There is no male or female.” Nevertheless Christians, in their boarding schools and orphanages, continue to sleep boys and girls in separate dormitories!! In Christ, there is no sex distinctions. Boys and girls are equally precious in God’s sight. Men from this tribe, and men from that are equally precious in God’s sight. We are all equally sinners saved by grace. These things are true but, at the same time, there are certain social niceties which Christians at this time may observe.

As we continue to stress brotherhood, let us be sure that the most effective way to achieve brotherhood is to lead ever increasing numbers of men and women from every ethnos, every tribe, every segment of society into an obedient relationship to Christ. As we multiply Christians in every segment of society, the possibility of genuine brotherhood, justice, goodness and righteousness will be enormously increased. Indeed, the best way to get justice, possibly the only way to get justice, is to have very large numbers in every segment of society become committed Christians.

## **Conclusion**

As we work for Christward movements in every people, let us not make the mistake of believing that “one-by-one out of the society into the church” is a bad way. One precious soul willing to endure severe ostracism in order to become a follower of Jesus—one precious soul coming all by himself—is a way that God has blessed and is blessing to the salvation of mankind. But it is a slow way. And it is a way which frequently seals off the convert’s own people from any further hearing of the Gospel.

Sometimes one-by-one is the only possible method. When it is, let us praise God for it, and live with its limitations. Let us urge all those wonderful Christians who come bearing persecution and oppression, to pray for their own dear ones and to work constantly that more of their own people may believe and be saved.

One-by-one is one way that God is blessing to the increase of His Church. The people movement is another way. The great advances of the Church on new ground out of non-Christian religions have always come by people movements, never one-by-one. It is equally true that one-by-one-out-of-the-people is a very common beginning way. In my book, *Bridges of God*, which God used to launch the Church Growth Movement, I have used a simile, I say there that missions start proclaiming Christ on a desert-like plain. There life is hard, the

number of Christians remains small. A large missionary presence is required. But, here and there, the missionaries or the converts find ways to break out of that arid plain and proceed up into the verdant mountains. There large numbers of people live, there real churches can be founded; there the Church grows strong; that is people-movement land.

I commend that simile to you. Let us accept what God gives. If it is one-by-one, let us accept that and lead them those who believe in Jesus to trust in Him completely. But let us always pray that, after that beginning, we may proceed to higher ground, to more verdant pasture, to more fertile lands where great groups of men and women, all of the same segment of society, become Christians and thus open the way for Christward movements in each people on earth. Our goal should be Christward movements within each segment. There the dynamics of social cohesion will advance the Gospel and lead multitudes out of darkness into His wonderful life. Let us be sure that we do it by the most effective methods.