

The Ralph D. Winter Lectureship 2022: Revisiting the HUP

This special, double issue of the Journal explores the Homogeneous Unit Principle (HUP), one of the most controversial of Donald McGavran's missiological principles. This principle, which first emerged in *The Bridges of God* (1955) and then was unpacked more fully in *Understanding Church Growth* (1970), was the major focus of the spring 2022 Ralph D. Winter Memorial Lectureship, "Homogeneity and Hybridity: Revisiting HUP." The articles that make up this issue are based on the presentations of a number of diverse practitioner-scholars who added valuable reflections on this topic.

McGavran first defined Homogeneous Units (HU) using descriptive terminology to draw attention to the ways that people in all societies across the world naturally group together around some common traits, or beliefs, or lifestyles that then give them identity and purpose. This bonding to a common set of characteristics—be it ethnicity, language, musical preference, level of education, socioeconomic bracket, or simply a way of thinking—serves as a kind of social glue that holds people together in a kind of belonging that gives meaning.

But McGavran went beyond using HU as a way of *describing* how cultures and societies adhere, to *prescribing* it as the way missionaries could reach more people with the gospel. Stating the evangelistic principle simply, the HUP recognized that *people are more likely to come to Christ without crossing cultural, linguistic, or ethnic barriers*. Respect the natural social glue and people are more receptive to the gospel. For McGavran, this principle was based on how societies work and therefore it was strategic for missionary practice. However, some didn't agree with McGavran's focus on homogeneity and a controversy emerged that has shadowed this teaching throughout the last seventy years.

To understand the *history and development* of the HUP we begin with three scholars who contribute to the origin story. **Gary McIntosh**, author of the most recent and comprehensive biography of Donald McGavran, describes how McGavran explained the HUP, how he was misunderstood, and how McGavran perceived the reality he tried to communicate. **Greg Parson's** article further outlines the HUP debate that began to unfold at Lausanne's special 1977 Consultation on the subject. His historical study is based on written records and archived audio recordings that identify the way these proponents and opponents wrestled with the concepts and applications of the HUP. Interesting first-hand observations from both homogeneous and heterogeneous ministries are offered by **R. W. Lewis**, whose father, Ralph Winter, was one of the 1977 Consultation presenters. Recounting rich, personal missions experience earned by living and serving in five continents over a 40-year period, Lewis offers unique perspectives on how the HUP operated in diverse tribal and also urban contexts.

Editorial continued on p. 4

The views expressed in **IJFM** are those of the various authors and not necessarily those of the journal's editors, the International Society for Frontier Missiology, or the society's executive committee.

Editor

Brad Gill

Guest Editor

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Managerial Assistant

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Frontier Mission Fellowship

2023 ISFM Executive Committee

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Web Site

www.ijfm.org

Editorial Correspondence

PO Box 41450

Pasadena, CA 91114-8450

(734) 765-0368, brad.gill@ijfm.org

Subscriptions (Pay by check or online)

USA & Canada (first class)

1 year (4 issues) \$25

2 years (8 issues) \$48

3 years (12 issues) \$69

All other countries (airmail)

1 year: \$50; 2 years: \$96; 3 years: \$138

Single copies: US & Canada \$7, All others \$14

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IJFM (ISSN #2161-3354) was established in 1984 by the International Student Leaders Coalition for Frontier Missions, an outgrowth of the student-level meeting of Edinburgh '80.

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PRINTED in the USA

Other *passions and perspectives* generated further complexity to this topic. **Ruth Padilla DeBorst**, another child of a prominent contributor to the 1974 and 1977 Lausanne gatherings, described how her father, Rene Padilla, warned with deep conviction that the HUP was captive to an American culture driven by technology and racism. She implores the church to move beyond their homogeneities and embrace cultural differences in expressing unity under the Lordship of Christ. Adding to our understanding of how the HUP functions in people movements in Ethiopia, **Marcos Zemed**, a medical doctor, describes both the benefits and the dangers. The HUP is a key that unlocks the door for the movements of the gospel, but the same key can lock the door behind them—good advice to remember. Despite the fact that **George Hunter III** slips in a joke at my expense, his article brings a clarity to the HUP conversation by distinguishing the denotations and connotations of key terms. He suggests some fresh synonyms that avoid some of the negative associations assigned to the HUP.

Moving on to *applications and implications*, three more articles demonstrate the utility of the HUP in understanding multiethnic contexts. **Chris Clayman** offers a compelling and nuanced study of how urbanized migrants may carry various

identities within multiple homogeneous units (often centered on culture-of-origin) as they interface with the heterogeneity of New York City. In doing so, he reveals the emergent opportunities for reaching the nations in the tumbling cacophony of HU's in any city. **Warrick Farah** wrestles with the application of the HUP to church planting movements (CPM) and suggests we consider the HUP to be less of a principle and more of a paradox. He alerts us to the attendant dangers of it being either uncritically endorsed or dogmatically and categorically criticized. His point has been made in other articles, but Warrick captures the creative tension inherent in this examination.

My own article (**Alan McMahan**) suggests that, in reality, effective ministries make use of both homogeneous units (groups) as well as heterogeneous units (multiethnic or diverse populations) for different purposes when connecting with different kinds of peoples. It comes down to what we are focusing on, and how that affects our contextualization. If we zoom-in, we focus more narrowly and work to communicate the gospel in forms that effectively connect to a language or affinity group. Those communication forms are more culture specific and locally relevant. If we zoom-out, we focus more widely and include more diversity in how we communicate. Both

HU groups and heterogeneous groups are vital. The different foci need each other to be able to reach all peoples.

The debate on the HUP will probably not be resolved with the publishing of this issue of the *IJFM*. It will likely be discussed for many years to come. Our hope is that the articles found in this issue will widen our appreciation for the complexity of the HUP, and that it will help us think more critically about our efforts to make the gospel available to all people. May we all approach this conversation with a greater sense of humility and mutual respect as we engage the harvest.

In Him,



Alan McMahan, Guest Editor

The *IJFM* is pleased to welcome Alan McMahan as our Guest Editor, a man who has wrestled with the issues surrounding cultural homogeneity and hybridity as a field worker in Indonesia, a professor of missiology at Biola University, and as an editor of the *Great Commission Journal*. The *IJFM* is grateful for his investment in this issue of the journal.

Brad Gill, Senior Editor, *IJFM*

The **IJFM** is published in the name of the International Student Leaders Coalition for Frontier Missions, a fellowship of younger leaders committed to the purposes of the twin consultations of Edinburgh 1980: The World Consultation on Frontier Missions and the International Student Consultation on Frontier Missions. As an expression of the ongoing concerns of Edinburgh 1980, the **IJFM** seeks to:

- ☞ promote intergenerational dialogue between senior and junior mission leaders;
- ☞ cultivate an international fraternity of thought in the development of frontier missiology;
- ☞ highlight the need to maintain, renew, and create mission agencies as vehicles for frontier missions;
- ☞ encourage multidimensional and interdisciplinary studies;
- ☞ foster spiritual devotion as well as intellectual growth; and
- ☞ advocate "A Church for Every People."

Mission frontiers, like other frontiers, represent boundaries or barriers beyond which we must go, yet beyond which we may not be able to see clearly and boundaries which may even be disputed or denied. Their study involves the discovery and evaluation of the unknown or even the reevaluation of the known. But unlike other frontiers, mission frontiers is a subject specifically concerned to explore and exposit areas and ideas and insights related to the glorification of God in all the nations (peoples) of the world, "to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God." (Acts 26:18)

Subscribers and other readers of the **IJFM** (due to ongoing promotion) come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Mission professors, field missionaries, young adult mission mobilizers, college librarians, mission executives, and mission researchers all look to the **IJFM** for the latest thinking in frontier missiology.