

Revisiting the Homogeneous Unit Principle

# The Homogeneous Unit Principle: Probed by the Parts, Sold by a Synonym

by *George G. Hunter III*

*Editor's Note: This article was adapted from a lecture given at the Ralph D. Winter Memorial Lectureship, March 3–5, 2022. Some of these reflections were published in an earlier, more expansive, form in chapter five of George G. Hunter III's book, GO: The Church's Main Purpose (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017).*

**W**ithin the mission community and beyond, the principle of the “Homogeneous Unit” (HU) has probably been sworn by and sworn at, cussed and discussed, more than any other idea in missiological thought. When the principle first gained wider visibility, proponents of several views were so intense that I thought the idea deserved some humor attached; so, I conceived a joke. You have to tell it on someone, so I will tell it on my friend, Alan McMahan.

When Alan was born, his birth was attended by five doctors. The first doctor said, “I don’t know what it is.” The second said, “Well, it is some sort of organism;” the third pronounced it “a humanoid organism;” the fourth said that the baby was a “male humanoid organism.” The fifth was not an MD, but a PhD—Dr. Donald McGavran, who pronounced young Alan to be “the first known member of a previously unclassified homogeneous unit!”

## *Homogeneous Unit Principle: We Have a Problem*

With the Homogeneous Unit Principle (HUP), we have endured a problem. Here is one way to identify the source of the problem. As we teach in Communication Theory 101, many words (and symbols) have denotations *and* connotations. Denotation refers to the original meaning that the speaker or writer had in mind. Connotation refers to a meaning that the message’s receivers, from their experience, might *attach* to the symbol. Typically, they assume that the meaning they attached IS what the symbol means. So, when the term “homogeneous units” penetrated the cultural prism through which many people filtered the message, they thought they saw “racism.”

Let’s recall the era in which Donald McGavran’s school of thought emerged. The Cold War was still much with us and the Civil Rights movement had momentum. I knew people who suspected a “Communist” behind every tree. Others sensed “Racism” almost everywhere; their reaction to “homogeneous unit” connoted racism; the theory, they said, excused racial segregation. Many academics did

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what academics are supposed to do—they did their homework and found out what McGavran meant by the term, its denotation. Alas, some did not; they ran with what the idea connoted to them, and their polemics carried favor with Civil Rights people.

I first discovered that the term must be vulnerable to connotation-attachment when, in classes and in field speaking, I would teach Missiology's principle of Indigenous Christianity—which is virtually the HUP's Siamese twin. Everyone seemed to understand and affirm it (at least for the moment), without ever sniffing racism.

### *A Search for a Synonym without as much Baggage*

So, I explored other fields of knowledge for a synonym. I discovered that McGavran's idea was widely perceived, usually as obvious. What other terms might be in play? Our scriptures often refer to "tribes" but that may not apply as widely today; and the Bible's "nations" does not refer to nation-states. The Diffusion of Innovations field reported that innovations spread between people who are "homophilous" that would carry similar baggage. Anthropologists spoke of macrocultures, cultures, subcultures, microcultures, and countercultures, but no one term seemed sufficient. In some fields, terms were clumsy—like "cohort populations." The denotation of "markets" was promising but carried its own connotative issues. The Intercultural Communication people spoke of "reference groups." Missiologists spoke of "people groups" and "people units"; the terms seldom leaked beyond our circles.

Then, when I read political science people referring to "affinity groups," I cheered. That term has now spread widely, and the social reality that this term (and the others) refers to is recognized as obvious and natural; indeed, people have formed into affinity groups since before recorded time.

My own understanding of this social reality has not been substantially influenced by these other fields because, at least for our purposes, the writings of McGavran, Tippett, Wagner, Winter, and others take us deeper. For years, whenever I have spoken of affinity groups, I have never been tarred and feathered. The term seems to communicate and, once explained, the idea usually resonates with what people have observed and experienced.

Dr. McGavran saw the world as a beautiful mosaic of different homogeneous units. He cogently extemporized the HU principle in contrasting ways at different times, in different settings. He is best known for this version: *People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers.*

Dr. McGavran and I had several lengthy conversions on this topic. I especially recall two exchanges. Once, I asked him if people more easily become Christians without crossing a *cultural* barrier. He agreed. He said that he sometimes included the term in his definition and that it was the theory's most obvious connection to the principle of indigenous churches.

Another time, I suggested that, unlike the other types, a racial barrier is not nearly universal; Russia, China, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa might be large-region examples. Might the term "ethnic" be preferable? Without quite concurring, he saw some sense in the suggestion, and encouraged the use of that term if I found it more useful.

Discussions within the Missiology community reached something like this consensual explanation:

HU refers to any group of people with one or more characteristics in common that influence their sense of identity, and their communication, choices, lives, worldview, and how they live. The theme of *identity* is essential in understanding the HU theory. By that criterion, we can understand why Meru people in Kenya, deaf people in Chicago, and drug addicts in Hong Kong connect in conscious affinity groups; people with red hair, Purdue graduates, and Buick drivers do not.

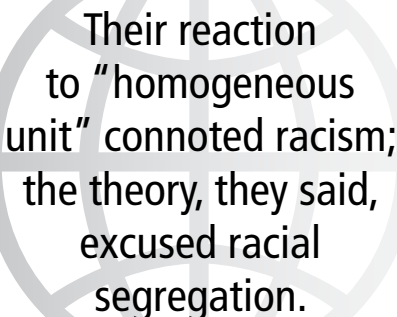
### *Unpacking Identity in Affinity Groups*

Let me propose a way to explain this social reality that might inform our mission in many places, beginning with a revised definition. *People are more likely to become Christ-followers when they do not have to cross language, culture, ethnic, class, or other affinity barriers.* We can best explain the theory one part at a time.

#### Language

Let's begin with *language*. No one with cross-cultural experience ever disputes the daunting reality of *language barriers*. Missionaries typically have to learn the host language. Few people join a church that does not speak their language. Many countries have a national language that most people learn well enough to conduct ordinary business but, in a church which does not speak their first language (which they still use at home, in which they dream), they may not recognize that the faith in the church is really for people like them.

Fifty or more language populations now live in many large cities. Some churches ignore the people's early receptive years until the national language has become effortless. A few churches offer a service that is translated to minority attendees through headphones. More churches feature several language congregations in the same church.



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These churches are impressive, but with limited reach. If a church in San Diego managed five language congregations, it would still leave over 100 other language populations untouched. The case for affinity-based congregations and churches based on language is compelling. Now pioneered in some cities (such as Singapore), one day it will become contagious. Most cities will feature a constellation of ethnic-language churches *and* many churches with a half-dozen or more language congregations.

Admittedly, this is currently a hard sell with monolingual church leaders with no serious cross-cultural experience. As Roman Catholics once expected all people to worship in Latin, many American churches now welcome everyone—who will, of course, want to celebrate in English.

“Linguistic blindness” is not an American monopoly. It can take at least two different forms. Spain offers an example of one form. Since Vatican II, Roman Catholic churches in Basque regions offer masses in Basque; in those same regions, virtually all Protestant churches are Spanish only.

England offers a second, under-recognized, form. Many Anglican churches expect that, of course, the common people will resonate with “Oxbridge” English. A language barrier, in one form or another, blocks many seekers’ quests nearly everywhere.

A language is a segment of its culture, so let’s continue with *culture*. Geert Hofstede characterized culture as “the software of the mind.” A culture is the pattern of learned assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, values, and customs that are socialized into the people’s consciousness. So, when the Christian movement meets a population that has experienced a different socialization, they will be a people of a contrasting culture, with a contrasting worldview.

Earlier than Hofstede, Edward T. Hall characterized culture as “the silent language.” He declared, “Culture is communication!” He taught that, in addition to their languages, cultures have other “primary message systems,” such as their orientation to space and time. For example: An Englishman thinks that 100 miles is a long way, whereas an American thinks 100 years is a long time! He observed other communication systems, such as how a people subsists, learns, and plays.

His list (of ten) was not exhaustive. A people’s aesthetics and their body language are obvious conduits of communication. Hall stressed one towering difference between a culture’s language and its other primary message systems: Messages communicated through language engage us or miss us quite consciously, but messages communicated through other message systems engage us less consciously, often unconsciously.

Of course, many Christian mission leaders have understood, from intuition or experience, that their mission needed to communicate the gospel in indigenous ways long before cultural anthropologists came along. Effective missions and churches engage people by removing as much culture barrier as they can, and they minister in the style, language, aesthetics, and music of the host population.

## Ethnicity

In many lands, pre-Christian populations experience an *ethnic* barrier. I am suggesting that *race* might be a subset of *ethnicity*. It may be the most obvious subset in places like the US and South Africa and, where it is necessary, it should indeed be explicit in the HU definition that guides us. But McGavran’s field-analytic powers focused more on ethnic barriers than racial barriers. His book *Ethnic Realities and the Church* is a premier example of his thought. His world was a beautiful mosaic of ethno-linguistic peoples.

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The evangelization of sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, has taken place tribe by tribe, with people reluctant to join a church of another tribe; the barrier is not race, but ethnicity. In Miami, when thousands of Haitians emigrated to South Florida, African American churches recognized that most Haitians would need their own churches; the barrier was not race, but ethnicity and language. Later, when Latinos emigrated to Miami from several nations in South America, most of the Cuban-American churches failed to engage them; same race, language, and macroculture, but serious ethnic differences.

## Class

*Class* barriers can also influence pre-Christian populations. Eugene Nida observed that almost every society has six (vertically scaled) socioeconomic-prestige classes of people—based on factors like ancestry, wealth, education, talent, and leadership (I would add appearance). In a marvelous stroke of academic clarity, Nida named them the upper-upper, lower-upper, upper-middle, lower-middle, upper-lower, and lower-lower classes! In a given society, a given factor (like ancestry) may weigh more in one society (like India) than in another (like Uruguay). Mobility is more possible in some societies than others.

Class *may* not be as large a barrier when a local Christian movement is young and contagious. It typically enlarges as the Church becomes more settled and established. Quite often, a church will be most effective with one of the six classes, marginally effective with adjacent classes, and ineffective with more different classes.

Perhaps the most entrenched factor within the class barrier is *literacy*; it functions somewhat like the circumcision barrier of the first century. Non-literate people typically assume that becoming a confident reader is required to become a Christian. Church leaders can be shocked at this suggestion, but one finds no pre-literate people attending Baptist Bible studies and non-readers do not flood into Episcopal churches in which attendees navigate the Book of Common Prayer.

In the US, historically, Episcopalians have served a different slice of humanity than Pentecostals. The class barrier is usually experienced more from the *underside*: “We” want them, but “they” are reluctant. The exceptions may be aspirational. In an Anglican church, I interviewed a woman who was a new member; I noticed that she was dressed “down.” I asked her why her family had come to this church rather than some other. She gave several reasons including, “I would like for my pretty daughter to marry a young man from this church someday.”

So, we might revise McGavran’s cogent explanation as follows: *People are more likely to become Christ-followers when they do not have to cross language, culture, ethnic, class, or other affinity barriers.* In lands where *race* is a major barrier, we feature that as well. I have listed the types of barriers in descending order by their typical “height,” i.e., the difficulty for most pre-Christian people to cross them. Language is often the most challenging, culture is next, etc. The height of the several challenges sometimes varies by context. For instance, if two tribes have a history of warfare between them, the ethnic barrier is probably higher. Class barriers seem to loom larger in societies like England and (especially) India. Anywhere a different type of barrier is based on any kind of affinity network, mission plans should address them specifically.

### *Affinity Groups Today*

Many new affinity groups surface as the world changes; their existence may not even be widely perceived. Until February of 2022, for instance, who knew that CB radio and truck stop cafés, then personal computers and cell phones, would bond Canadian truck drivers (who would block bridges in

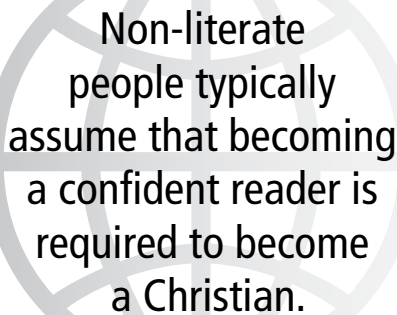
protesting pandemic mandates.) We now have many hundreds of first-generation affinity groups in our changing world. McGavran’s “mosaic” has become a “kaleidoscope!”

Other affinity groups have been with us for millennia. Let me tell you about my rediscovery of an ancient and enduring type. In the early 1970s, I spent a week with the Methodist church in the small town of “Possum” (not the town’s real name), Oklahoma, where seventy percent of the people were unchurched. As I visited non-members door-to-door, people seldom referred to the church by the denominational label; it was “the Williams church.” When I asked one man if they’d ever visited the church, he said, “No, we would have been intruding!”

I spent some time with the church’s records and interviewed longtime members. Sure enough, most of the members were descendants of “Old Man Williams” (now deceased) or they married into the clan. Eight names on the roll seemed to be exceptions. There was no record or memory that they ever sang in the choir, or taught a class, or served in any way. The several still alive were all inactive. I had discovered that a *clan* barrier stopped many people in metropolitan Possum, Oklahoma, from considering Methodist Christianity.

Gradually, I discovered what some of my colleagues already knew: many thousands of clan-bound churches dot America’s landscape. One can find variations. Some churches include a few friends and their families—similar to the “household” churches reflected in the New Testament. The clan-bound church seems to be one natural form that the Church takes in many places. It may not be my favorite type but, in the US and many countries, we need a lot more of them.

In conclusion, I have commended the term “affinity groups” as a potential term to refer to McGavran’s theory, which is perceived by other names in other academic fields. Whether or not my nomination gets a second, McGavran’s core idea is indispensable to any serious mission strategy: The barriers to becoming a Christian, he said, are usually “more social than theological.” The HUP, by whatever name, makes more manageable our analysis of the soils for planting the gospel seed. **IJFM**



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