

Revisiting the Homogeneous Unit Principle

Unpacking the Historical Development of the Homogeneous Unit Principle

by Gary L. McIntosh

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My first encounter with Donald McGavran's Homogeneous Unit Principle (HUP) came unexpectedly during my first pastorate in Oregon. After graduating from seminary, I accepted the call of a local Baptist congregation to become their pastor. Like many new seminary graduates, I was happy to find a church where I could begin to put my years of study into practice. Little did I know how much I still had to learn, particularly about the HUP.

My church was located on the west side of a major freeway, and I assumed the church would experience steady growth due to its attractive location. Yet, after engaging the ministry with enthusiasm for a while, I realized things were not moving along as I desired. My efforts at preaching, teaching, caregiving, visitation, evangelism, and outreach were not bringing the expected results. Guests came. None stayed. Efforts at evangelism bore no fruit. Innovative attempts at ministry failed. The most frustrating aspect, however, was the growth of another church located on the east side of the freeway. From my perspective at the time, our churches were similar in theology, and offered the same basic programs. I could not understand why the one church was growing and mine was not.

My growing frustration led me to further research, and I started reading some of the early church growth literature, which opened my eyes to insights not commonly taught in seminaries at that time. For example, I discovered that my church had a German heritage, while the growing church had a Norwegian heritage. The people in my church were representative of a lower socioeconomic group, while those in the other church were socioeconomically middle class. My church was blue-collar and the other church was white-collar. My church had a long history of hurtful experiences that created a congregation with low self-esteem, a sense of failure, and feelings of shame. In contrast the other church had a long history of fruitfulness, which created a congregation with high self-esteem, a sense of success, and feelings of pride.

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My investigation, of course, revealed that my church on the west side of the freeway was of an entirely different homogeneous unit than the growing church on the east side of the freeway. As I came to understand the dynamics of the HUP in my own situation, my ministry eyes (what we used to call *church growth eyes*) were opened to understand why the one church was growing and mine was not growing. Understanding the HUP helped me understand how I might more effectively engage in ministry.

Thus, you should know that I write with a positive view of the HUP. As I begin, you should also know that I come to this topic from a North American perspective. My career has focused on pastoring, church consulting, and training local church pastors for service in the US. While I have traveled and taught in several countries, my primary ministry has focused on the church in the US. As such, my understanding and discussion of the HUP focuses on the questions and concerns found within North America.

McGavran's Homogeneous Unit Principle: Setting the Stage for Further Discussion

McGavran developed several principles of effective evangelism during his thirty-one years (1923–1954) as a missionary in central India. His insights were refined through another six years (1955–1961) as a peripatetic missionary researching the growth of the church worldwide. Then, in 1961, after founding the Institute of Church Growth (ICG) in Eugene, OR, his thoughts on the growth of the church were further distilled through extended conversations with field missionaries and teaching colleagues at both the ICG (1961–1965) and the Fuller School of World Mission (SWM, founded September 1965).¹

McGavran's thoughts on effective evangelism appeared in bits and pieces in various articles published throughout his time in India. However, with the publication of *The Bridges of God* in 1955, he started sharing his ideas with a wide audience. This book was the "most read missionary book in 1956," and propelled McGavran into the center of the developing thought about evangelistic missions following World War II.² Over the years, his ideas on effective evangelism became known as Church Growth Thought, and his mature thinking appeared in *Understanding Church Growth* (1970).³

McGavran is well known for promoting several evangelistic principles (e.g., principles of receptivity, people groups, homogeneity, removing fog through research, setting bold goals, understanding social structure, etc.). Most of the criticism

of Church Growth Thought, however, centered on his Homogeneous Unit Principle (HUP). Those who expressed criticism of the HUP in the early years included missionaries, pastors, professors, and theologians such as John Yoder, Orlando Costas, Victor Hayward, Harvie Conn, René Padilla, Francis Cubose, Lesslie Newbigin, and Martin Marty.⁴

Their concerns resulted in a consultation on the Homogeneous Unit Principle held on the campus of Fuller Theological Seminary School of World Mission, which was sponsored by the Lausanne Theology and Education Group, between May 31, 1977 and June 2, 1977. A summary report of that gathering was published in 1978 as the Lausanne Occasional Paper 1.⁵

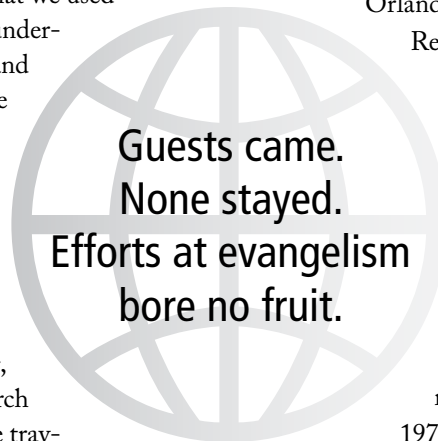
Since that time, criticisms and misunderstanding have continued to be expressed from time to time by new leaders including Mark DeYmaz and Soong-Chan Rah.⁶ So, now, nearly a half-century after that original consultation, we gather to discuss the HUP again. My role at this conference is to set the stage for further discussion. To do so, this presentation is divided into five questions: How did the HUP develop in McGavran's mind? What did McGavran say? What did McGavran mean? Why was the HUP misunderstood? And what is the reality?

How Did the HUP Develop in McGavran's Mind? The HUP's Mass Movements Roots

McGavran's awareness of the HUP began in 1933 and continued to mature for the next fifty years. His introduction to the importance of homogeneity for evangelism started when he read *Christian Mass Movements in India*.⁷ Reflecting back on this time period, McGavran recalled:

As I read Waskom Pickett's *Christian Mass Movements in India*, my eyes were opened. I suddenly saw that where people become Christians one by one and are seen as outcasts by their own people, as traitors who have joined another community, the church grows very, very slowly. The one by one "out of my ancestral community into a new low community" was a sure recipe for slow growth. Conversely, where men and women could become followers of the Lord Jesus Christ while remaining in their own segment of society, there the gospel was sometimes accepted with great pleasure by great numbers.⁸

The studies Pickett had conducted demonstrated conclusively that winning people to Christ one by one was an ineffective



manner to proceed. Since all societies are made up more or less of homogeneous units,

It is only when a series of individual decisions generate enough heat to lead a whole group to act as a unit and when enough group decisions have been taken to set the caste or tribe alight that the church really grows.⁹

McGavran's personal experience among the Satnamis of central India, and his further research, confirmed his belief that evangelism that resulted in strong local churches, happened best within homogeneous units comprised of families, clans, and tribes, and could only be accomplished by focusing on receptive homogeneous units of the vast human mosaic. He explained the roots of the HUP to David Wasdale of St. Mat-thia Vicarage in London, England,

The homogeneous unit principle has been formulated first overseas in tightly structured tribal or caste populations, where there is no "non-tribal" or "non-caste" society. In such populations either the Church does multiply congregations within each HU [homogeneous unit], or does not multiply congregations at all.¹⁰

He further summed up his understanding in a letter to Donald Hoke, treasurer of the Lausanne committee:

God wants His lost children found; the complexities of the situation must not divert churches and Christians from mission; the world was never more winnable than it is today; the mosaic of mankind has in it at present thousands of responsive homogeneous units; the social sciences can be and must be harnessed to the propagation of the Gospel; the theological and biblical defenses cast up by beleaguered missionaries facing hostile populations are not needed by ministers and missionaries facing responsive multitudes, and it is normal and healthy for churches to grow. Slow growth is often a disease, fortunately usually curable.¹¹

What Did McGavran Say? An Elastic Concept

McGavran explained the homogeneous unit as "simply a section of society in which all the members have some characteristic in common."¹² This definition of the homogeneous unit (HU) is very broad, and makes no direct reference to race or ethnicity, although it can be applied to each one in certain contexts. According to McGavran's understanding, a HU is present whenever members of society gather in groups where clear characteristics are observable, and where the characteristics form a sort of glue that binds the group together. In fact, as is often missed, the common characteristic of a HU may be a worldview, perspective, or attitude. Thus, the glue that binds people together might be a particular political perspective, or a theological viewpoint, or a passionate commitment. For instance, it is common to list churches as evangelistic churches or teaching churches or social action churches. Classifying churches in this manner uses the common passion that binds the people together (i.e., evangelism, teaching, or social action) as a description of their HU. Thus, when churches are formed around a common passion of demonstrating

the oneness of people from different ethnic groups, economic groups, or social strata, they are still homogeneous. Churches that are multiethnic are homogeneous! Multi-ethnicity becomes their homogeneity. McGavran understood "the homogeneous unit is an elastic concept, its meaning depending on the context in which it is used." "It might be a political unit or sub unit," "a section of society in which all the members have some characteristic in common," a language, a family or clan, or a host of other units defined by geography, lineage, dialect, or a number of other characteristics.¹³ With this basic understanding of a HU in place, McGavran articulated the HUP: "People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers."¹⁴

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What Did McGavran Mean? Can People Follow Christ without Traitorously Leaving Their Kindred?

McGavran clarified and defended the HUP repeatedly. When he introduced the HUP, he was answering the question of whether a person can become a Christian without changing his or her family of origin, ethnic identity, or clan. He had faced this challenge directly while a missionary in India for thirty-one years. For most of the history of missions in India, missionaries had essentially asked that people accept Christ *and* become British or American or Danish, etc. Unknown to many missionaries in that era, they carried with them a gospel of salvation that included the unbiblical requirement that converts change their ethnic or community or family allegiance. This led to converts coming slowly to Christ, since most people saw Christianity as a Western religion that required them to abandon their own social network.

It is the same issue that confronted the disciples in Acts 15. There the question was "Can a Gentile become a Christian without having to become a Jew?" As the church spread among the Gentiles (Acts 11: 20) the "Word of the Lord continued to grow and be multiplied" (Acts 12:24). Paul and Barnabas were sent forth on their first missionary journey and ended up turning primarily to the Gentiles (see Acts 13:46). After they returned to Antioch, they reported, "all things that God had

done with them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27). Almost immediately, some began to preach and teach that the Gentiles had to abandon their own culture (or homogeneous unit) and become Jews (a different homogeneous unit). The question raised so much concern that it was decided to go to Jerusalem to discuss the issue with the apostles and elders there. After arriving and entering into a debate, it was finally decided, “we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles” (Acts 15:19). In other words, it was determined that Gentiles could remain Gentiles (i.e., remain in their own HU) and did not need to become Jews in order to be saved.

As McGavran later wrote,

It may be taken as axiomatic that whenever becoming a Christian is considered a racial rather than a religious decision, there the growth of the Church will be exceedingly slow.¹⁵

So today, we might ask, can a Nigerian become a Christian and still be Nigerian? Or can a Korean become a Christian and still be Korean? Or can an Egyptian become a Christian and still remain an Egyptian? McGavran put it this way,

As the Church faces the evangelization of the world, perhaps her main problem is how to present Christ so that men can truly follow Him without traitorously leaving their kindred.¹⁶

McGavran explained what he meant by using the HUP in a letter to historian Martin Marty:

The HU principle arose facing the three billion who have yet to believe. Tremendous numbers of people are not becoming Christian because of unnecessary barriers (of language, culture, wealth, education, sophistication, imperialistic stance) erected by the advocates. . . . Do, I beg of you, think of it primarily as a missionary and an evangelistic principle.¹⁷

Why Was McGavran Misunderstood? A Perplexing Hostility

Like many of you, I have wondered why McGavran’s HUP was so misunderstood. When one reads McGavran’s articles and books, it is obvious that he was solely interested in how more and more people might be brought to salvation in Jesus Christ. Over the years, I have come to the conclusion that the HUP was misunderstood for several reasons.

First, it is my observation that some people reacted to popular rumor without engaging in proper research. In every field of endeavor, there are good critics and bad critics. Good critics investigate questions thoroughly before reaching a conclusion, while bad critics react to what they hear without doing

the necessary study to reach an informed decision. This likely occurred with the HUP, as pastors, professors, and other church leaders responded to ongoing hearsay.

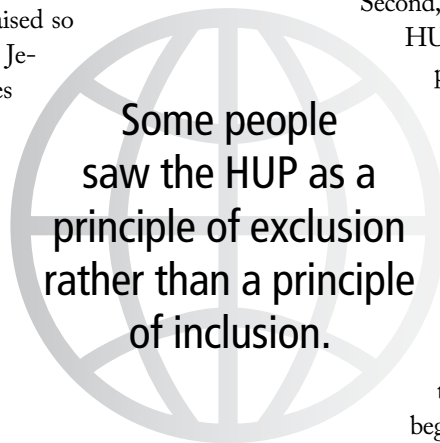
Second, it is my observation that some people saw the HUP as a principle of exclusion (i.e., how to keep people out of the church), rather than a principle of inclusion (i.e., how to get more people into the church). McGavran’s concern was always on how to get more people to believe in Christ and become responsible members of his church. He desired to remove barriers to belief so that people were free to accept or reject Christ without unnecessary hurdles. As I mentioned earlier in this article, he wrote to Martin Marty, “Do, I beg of you, think of it [HUP] primarily as a missionary and an evangelistic principle.”¹⁸

Third, it is my observation that some people thought of the HUP as a principle of discipleship rather than a principle of evangelism. McGavran believed that once a person received Christ as Lord and Savior, their subsequent spiritual growth would lead them to brotherhood and social justice. To him, the HUP offered insights on how to win people to Christ through evangelism, but it was not a principle to be used in the ongoing process of spiritual growth. The chief reason McGavran promoted the HUP was “to keep the door to salvation open to those very large blocks of humanity from which currently very, very few are becoming Christian.”¹⁹

Fourth, it is my observation that some believed the HUP was prescriptive rather than descriptive. As McGavran studied the growth and decline of churches worldwide, he described what he saw taking place. While he felt the HUP offered much insight into why people refused to believe in Christ, he stopped short of prescribing it as a principle to be used in planting churches.

Fifth, it is my observation that some people understood the HUP as just a form of niche marketing, particularly marketing to middle class, white churches. While there may be some aspects of the HUP that fit into a marketing paradigm, McGavran never conceived of marketing the church as a strategy. Nor did he see the HUP as applying only to white, middle-class churches.

Sixth, it is my observation that some people who dislike the HUP have never taken the time to read McGavran’s books or articles, or, if they have read him, they misquote or misunderstand him. As I have discussed the HUP with numerous critics, I have asked, “Have you read McGavran?” Sadly, I have found that, for many, McGavran is a forgotten man. In my experience, about ninety-five percent (I am being generous) have not read any of McGavran’s works. Their negative reactions are more tied to rumor than to actual study of this principle of growth.



Seventh, it is my observation that some people see the HUP as perpetuating racism. This is perhaps the primary criticism arising from North America. When the HUP was presented, North Americans often saw it through the lens of a history of slavery. If such a criticism is true, and I do not believe it is, it was never part of McGavran's understanding of the HUP. He felt it was wrong to use the HUP, or any other principle for that matter, as an excuse to maintain exclusive churches. As he told Wasdale, "they must not use it [HUP] to defend prideful exclusive segregated congregations." He continued by saying that the HUP "too rigorously applied, arrays itself against . . . brotherhood and 'one-ness' in Christ."²⁰

In direct opposition to this inflammatory criticism, McGavran understood the HUP to be a part of the process toward full fellowship. In his letter to Marty he wrote, "I and others using the Homogeneous Unit Principle are with you a hundred percent in your conviction that brotherhood and unity are of the essence."²¹ While brotherhood was, and is, extremely important, McGavran believed it could never be attained without the empowering work of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life. Thus, it was necessary that people first be evangelized within their own homogeneous unit, and afterward disciplined to move beyond their own group to embrace those of other groups. He was also concerned that brotherhood not become an addition to the simple gospel of salvation in Christ alone. Brotherhood, he asserted, "is a fruit of the Christian life, not a pre-condition for faith in Christ."²²

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Given the complex nature of Christian ministry, there likely are additional reasons that others have concerning the HUP, but these are ones I have observed over nearly a half-century of ministry. Former missionary, Walther A. Olsen, may have summarized the many misunderstandings of the HUP best. After noting a litany of criticisms of the HUP, he wrote, "These accusations—echoed repeatedly by the misinformed—confront us with a perplexing hostility."²³ The more the critics protest, the clearer becomes the underlying problem: a misunderstanding of the meaning and role of the homogeneous unit principle.

What Is the Reality? How Fellowships of Believers Multiply

The reality is churches continue to be built around homogeneity. Indeed, the HUP is to human socialization like gravity is to science—it is a law. Take, for instance, a description by one of the critics of the HUP of his own church.

We planted Cambridge Community Fellowship in 1996 with the support of my former church in Maryland. We began with about eight people and have steadily grown. Today we have 250 regular attenders.

Located off Massachusetts Avenue, between Harvard and MIT, we are two subway stops away from Tufts University and a couple of bus stops from Boston University. Many of our attenders come from these four colleges. Another contingent comes from Wellesley College (about 20 miles away), a handful from Northeastern University, and then the rest is our post-college population, people who work in the Boston area year-round.

Because we draw so many thoughtful college students, who are bent on inquiry, it's hard to be superficial at our church. We have to dig deeply into issues and think through things carefully.

Ministering to a congregation so intellectually driven keeps a pastor on his toes.²⁴

While the writer's church was located near a low-income housing project, and it likely included a mix of people from various ethnic and socioeconomic groups, its primary homogeneous unit was educated, college and post-college individuals. The homogeneity is obvious to anyone with a clear understanding of the HUP and church growth eyes.

In Conclusion: The Affinity that Holds a Church Together

I submit that every church is a homogeneous church. The primary glue that holds churches together, of course, is our common belief in Jesus Christ. However, there is always a secondary contextual glue, which we often call *affinity*. When we label a church a teaching church or a social action church or a soul-winning church, we are in many respects explaining its homogeneity. When churches are formed around a common passion of demonstrating the oneness of people from different ethnic groups, economic groups, or social strata, they are still homogeneous. Churches that are multiethnic are homogeneous! Multiethnicity becomes their homogeneity.

Even if the HUP might have been better presented, and even if the HUP has been exploited by some, the HUP critics are guilty of grossly misjudging and misinterpreting this concept. It deserves better.²⁵

Perhaps our gathering is a beginning to a better understanding of what McGavran rightfully taught and believed. **IJFM**

Endnotes

- ¹ For the full story of McGavran's missionary career see, Gary L. McIntosh, *Donald A. McGavran: A Biography of the Twentieth Century's Premier Missiologist*, (Boca Raton, FL: Church Leader Insights, 2015).
- ² Vernon James Middleton, "The Development of a Missiologist: The Life and Thought of Donald Anderson McGavran, 1897–1965" (PhD diss., Pasadena, CA: Fuller Theological Seminary, School of World Mission, 1990), 126.
- ³ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 1970.
- ⁴ See the "References" for Yoder, "Church Growth Issues," 1973; Yoder, "The Homogeneous Unit Concept in Ethical Perspective," 1977; Costas, *The Church and its Mission: A Shattering Critique from the Third World*, 1974; Hayward and McGavran, "Without Crossing Barriers? One in Christ vs. Discipling Diverse Cultures" 1974; Hayward, "The Homogeneous Unit Principle and the Record Worldwide Missionary Expansion," 1977; Conn, "The Praxis of a Covenant Ethos," 1977; Conn, "Looking for a Method," 1983; Padilla, "The Unity of the Church and the Homogeneous Unit Principle," 1977; Dubose, *How Churches Grow in an Urban World*, 1978; Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 1978; and Marty, *The Public Church*, 1981.
- ⁵ "Lausanne Occasional Paper 1," The Pasadena Consultation: Homogeneous Unit Principle, Pasadena, CA 1978, <https://lausanne.org/content/lop/lop-1>.
- ⁶ DeYmaz, *Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church*, 2007; and Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity*, 2009.
- ⁷ Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India*, 1933.
- ⁸ McGavran, "My Pilgrimage in Mission," 56.
- ⁹ McGavran, "How Great Races are Christianized," 43.
- ¹⁰ Personal communication from Donald McGavran to David Wasdale, October 30, 1979.
- ¹¹ Donald McGavran in a letter to Donald Hoke, April 29, 1974.
- ¹² McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 85.
- ¹³ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 85–86.
- ¹⁴ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 198.
- ¹⁵ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 190.
- ¹⁶ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 190.
- ¹⁷ Donald McGavran in a letter to Martin Marty, April 24, 1978.
- ¹⁸ McGavran to Marty, 1978.
- ¹⁹ McGavran to Wasdale, 1979.
- ²⁰ McGavran to Wasdale, 1979.
- ²¹ McGavran to Marty, 1978.
- ²² McGavran to Wasdale, 1979.
- ²³ Olson, "The Homogeneous Unit Principle Revisited," 1.
- ²⁴ Rah, "Navigating Cultural Currents," 38–40.
- ²⁵ Olson, "The Homogeneous Unit Principle Revisited," 4.

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