

Revisiting the Homogeneous Unit Principle

The HUP Debate and its Impact on Missions: Reflections on Lausanne's 1977 Consultation

by Greg H. Parsons

Editor's Note: This article was adapted from a lecture given at the Ralph D. Winter Memorial Lectureship, March 3–5, 2022.

Pastor Rick Warren of Saddleback Church is perhaps the poster child of Church Growth in the US. He did his DMin at Fuller and read all he could by the faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary's School of World Mission (SWM).¹ He has a deep passion to see people become Christians. He has thought a lot about what first-time visitors think when they visit a church. He believes the question they are asking themselves is: *Is there anybody here like me?*²

This is an example of on-the-ground application of the Homogeneous Unit Principle (HUP), which is: *People like to become Christians with others who are like them.*

Warren is looking at that idea from the perspective of evangelism—growing churches by bringing people to faith. Others tend to look at the question of what the church will look like as new believers mature. What does, or even *should*, a local church look like as it matures and seeks to present a unified witness to a diverse world? Will the local fellowship reflect its context, if you focus on homogeneity or “others who are like them?”

It is just as crucial to try and see the perspective of the person who is not yet a follower of Christ as it is to understand what a new church might look like in its worship, fellowship, and witness. As we seek to bring people to Christ, we adjust our message to fit their understanding and context. We call this contextualization. The question here is, how should we adjust what we do in a local church anywhere in the world, while: 1) staying true to the Scriptures, 2) relating well to the specific cultural context, and yet, 3) still challenging people with truth that transforms. As the Ralph D. Winter Memorial Lectureship Steering Committee worked on this theme and invited presenters, it was our hope that we all would *grow in our understanding* of these issues and how they *related to God's purposes* in the spread of his glory to all peoples—or as Paul said it in Romans 1:5b, “to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations. . . .”

Greg H. Parsons has served with Frontier Ventures (formerly US Center for World Mission) since 1982, twenty-seven of those years while Dr. Ralph D. Winter was alive. In 2012 he completed his PhD dissertation (University of Wales Trinity Saint David) on Winter's life up to 1976—the year the USCWM was founded. Greg currently serves as Global Connections Specialist and Curator for the Ralph D. Winter Research Center.

Let me take us back a bit, to the broader cultural context when this was discussed in 1977.

The Context of the 1970s

A number of social and geopolitical issues helped shape the experiences of all those involved in the 1977 Consultation. More broadly, the decolonization of Asia and Africa had been taking place from the late 1940s to 1975. This was parallel to the rise of the Cold War, the fears of nuclear attack, and the threat of the spread of Communism to these brand-new countries. In the US, this decolonization paralleled the Vietnam War (which ended in 1973) and all the national protests that went with it along with the hippie movement, the spread of illegal drugs, and the sexual revolution.³

In the music world you had: The Beatles, Bob Dylan, and the 1967 “summer of love.” Worldwide, music festivals also occurred: Woodstock in the US, Peidra Rohain in Chile, and Aquarius in Australia. Through those and other events, a vocal minority of the youth of the world were speaking out and protesting. The world—at least the Western, non-Communist world—seemed to be listening.

Of course, in the 1960s, *racial tensions were high in the US*. Government-mandated school bussing to integrate schools began in 1971—and was also resisted in many places.

Allow me a somewhat personal illustration. My wife grew up in Dallas and started high school in 1972. The first day, a food fight broke out at lunch, and she vividly remembers a chair flying over her head as she quietly sat eating. Thankfully, she was not the target or the cause! She left her lunch and ran out of the cafeteria as a big fight started. Perhaps more vivid to her was that at the end of that first day of school, as she walked out the front door of the school, the street was blocked off and lined with helmeted police officers holding clubs!

In the Christian missions world, debates about Church Growth theory started long before 1977. McGavran's book, *Bridges of God*,⁴ was, according to Frank Price (the librarian of the highly regarded Missionary Research Library at Yale Divinity School), the “most read missionary book in 1956.”⁵ While the HUP idea was popularized in his best-known book, *Understanding Church Growth*⁶ the ideas began to form during his experiences in India in the 1930–40s with Wascom Pickett.

McGavran's work generated a number of events, some that promoted Church Growth theory, and others that questioned it. There were consultations, trainings, and seminars on the topic. The *Church Growth Bulletin* was published from

1964 to 1979.⁷ Books were published like *How Biblical is the Church Growth Movement?* by Robertson McQuilkin.⁸ In the same year, the Institute of Mennonite Studies published *The Challenge of Church Growth: A Symposium*.⁹ Many more events and publications could be listed.

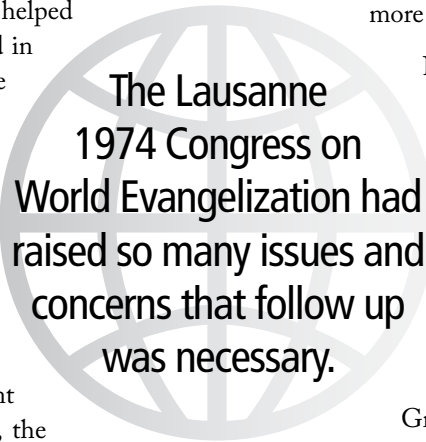
Naturally, the faculty of the SWM were teaching around the country and the world. The numerous locations where they were invited to teach were noted in the faculty minutes from the 1960s into the early 70s. They held a regular Church Growth lecture series with visiting scholars on the Fuller campus. SWM faculty members Donald McGavran, Ralph Winter, C. Peter Wagner, and others did Church Growth seminars on other campuses around the US, such as Biola and Nyack.

On the global evangelical stage, the Lausanne 1974 Congress had significant input from the SWM. There was no other faculty of similar size and breadth of experience in US seminaries. Most schools had just one or two professors who had served cross-culturally, if any. Billy Graham, who had called for the Lausanne meeting, had deep connections with Fuller Seminary, and liked what he saw in the SWM. At his request, Donald McGavran helped Graham shape his opening message since it was not a typical “evangelistic sermon.” In addition, Graham wanted McGavran's help to focus the Congress. Along with McGavran and Ralph Winter, other Fuller faculty led seminars or workshops at the Congress, including Alan Tippett and Fuller Seminary's president, David Hubbard.¹⁰

The 1977 Consultation

The Lausanne 1974 Congress on World Evangelization raised so many issues and concerns that follow up was necessary, and the faculty of the School of World Mission took it on. The fact that John R. W. Stott was the moderator gave the meeting credibility. Stott and Bishop Jack Dane were the two main players helping to shape the 1974 Congress, and Stott was the main architect of the Lausanne Covenant, and later wrote up that process in a book on the event.¹¹

Two of the key factors that seemed to motivate the SWM faculty were: *first*, their exposure to what appeared to be the significant work of the Holy Spirit in other cultures around the world; and *second*, more than ten years of interaction and study with field-experienced students—specifically about church growth.¹² They had begun to see more clearly where the church was growing and where it was not. For that reason, in 1977, the SWM sponsored a consultation on the Lausanne Congress' most controversial idea, the Homogeneous Unit Principle.



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The Key SWM Speakers

Donald McGavran had crisscrossed India, and in 1954, when he began to travel extensively outside of India, he hitchhiked some 5,780 km or almost 3,600 miles across Africa. In all, throughout his life, he visited more than eighty countries—specifically to see what was happening in the growth of the church in different situations.¹³

Chuck Kraft had completed a PhD in anthropology and linguistics, growing out of his deep commitment to understanding and respecting other people's cultures. Originally from a Brethren background, he and his family had gone to Nigeria where he planned on doing translation work with the Karmwe, but local needs led him to work with church leaders and nurture a people movement among them.¹⁴

Ralph D. Winter had worked with established churches in the rural highlands of Guatemala. By initiating Theological Education by Extension (TEE) with his colleagues Jim Emery and Ross Kinsler, and by starting seventeen businesses, Winter had helped Mayan young men become bi-vocational, self-supporting pastors. He had also traveled extensively in Central and South America, as well as South and East Asia, promoting and training church leaders in TEE.¹⁵

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Arthur Glasser worked in China for six years, under the China Inland Mission (now OMF). He and his wife Alice served in a tribe in the Yunnan Province on the Southwest frontier. Many people from this group had come to Christ in a significant people movement, and that continued. The Glassers would have stayed in China, but in 1949, the Communists took over, and by 1953 all missionaries had been expelled. He taught for one year at Columbia Bible College and then became Candidate Secretary and later Home Secretary (US Director) for OMF-US in Philadelphia for fifteen years. During that time, he also taught at Westminster Seminary.¹⁶

C. Peter Wagner served in Bolivia, initially going there to work in agriculture, but quickly ended up training local pastors, and still later, helped establish new churches, taught at a seminary, and was involved in mission leadership.¹⁷

Once back in the West, these SWM professors easily saw that the vibrancy of non-Western churches was not present in the West. Many of the denominations they were part of were declining in attendance and sending fewer missionaries.

Yet around the globe, the growth of the church was staggering in places like Latin America, Africa, and parts of Asia—such as Korea. In 1977, no one outside China (and perhaps inside) knew what was happening in the Chinese House Church movement. It was not until January 1979 when the first issue of *China and the Church Today*¹⁸ was published that Jonathan Chao of the Chinese Church Research Center in Hong Kong began to share his breakthrough research.¹⁹ At first, no one believed him.²⁰ Finally, in the 1980s the world heard the literally “unbelievable news” of what God had done since 1949 in the largest known sustained expansion of the gospel.²¹

The Key Responding Speakers

Those who were asked to respond to the five SWM presentations had their own shaping experiences—some with cross-cultural experience or exposure.

Harvey M. Conn (responder to McGavran) taught leaders of growing churches in Korea for ten years and later taught at Westminster Theological Seminary for twenty-five years. He was a highly regarded theologian and missiologist.²²

Robert L. Ramseyer (responder to Kraft) was affiliated with the General Conference Mennonite Church and served in Japan. After his PhD in Cultural Anthropology, he split his time between Japan and teaching missions at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries.²³

Victor E. W. Hayward (responder to Ralph Winter) was with the British Missionary Society (BMS). He served in China including time as the British Secretary of the National Christian Council of China. He led the BMS for eight years, and ultimately worked at the World Council of Churches in missions studies and later as Associate General Secretary serving national and regional Christian councils.²⁴

C. René Padilla (responder to Glasser) also presented at Lausanne. He was born in Ecuador and grew up in Columbia. He earned a PhD in New Testament (NT) under F. F. Bruce at the University of Manchester. He served with the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES) working with university students throughout Latin America and other ministries globally. He argued that the HUP strategy did not grow out of the NT model of what the church is to be.²⁵

John H. Yoder, responding to Wagner on ethical issues with HUP, was the premier theologian and ethicist of the Mennonite tradition.²⁶ He argued that if a church was not reflective of the cultures around it from the beginning, there would be no basis of authority to help it to move that direction as it matured.²⁷

In addition, there were twenty-seven participant consultants who also attended the event.²⁸

The Discussion

Location Matters

There are about fifteen hours of audio recordings of the discussions that took place at the 1977 Consultation.²⁹ Apparently, the presenters did not read their papers, which had been circulated ahead of time, but instead referred to them, drawing out points they wanted to emphasize and for which they wanted input during the discussion.³⁰ A number of instances and examples from each "side," sought to illustrate what the HUP meant, and what its impact was—for good or ill. One discussion contrasted what a church of "suburbanites" in the US might be like versus a church of prostitutes. One participant³¹ shared about his ministry to prostitutes in a city in Latin America.

In one exchange, early in the recording, John R. W. Stott argued that a local church should reflect its local community.³² Here is his exchange with Donald McGavran:

Stott: But can I immediately respond to that, because—does it not depend on the nature of the community within which the local church is situated? If the local community is itself homogeneous, that is, if it is a suburban American, upper class, highly educated community—the whole of the community—I cannot myself see how anybody would object to the local church reflecting that. But I would go further and say that there would be no point in some kind of ecclesiastical busing arrangements, by which (in order to make ourselves heterogeneous), we were to bus in a lot of people who've not had our education, and who earn less than a five-figure salary.

McGavran: You're taking a very controversial position.

Stott: Well, I don't know. I mean, what I'm trying to throw into the debate, is that it depends. There is a relative element here because, it seems to me, the local church ought to be a local church—it ought to be a local, a geographically local, outcrop of the church universal. And therefore, it must reflect the situation of the local community.

Various Perspectives

A foundational element, with both sides of the debate presented, was the area of Bible and theology. Conn, Wagner, Glasser, and Padilla presented on HUP from a biblical perspective. Additional topics connecting HUP to anthropology, history, and ethics, were also presented, each of which included biblical references. It is nevertheless still difficult to summarize, since the Scriptures lend themselves to a range of perspectives and interpretation. This is especially true as you approach them as a grand story, that somehow, amazingly, we all fit into.

The Impact of the HUP on Missions

A Contemporary Asian Movement to Christ

It may be helpful to share a case study from one who has tried to apply this in a cross-cultural setting. This is from a western brother who has been in Asia for twenty-nine years, observing and serving a *very* large movement to Christ there. He has come alongside and works very closely with about fifteen local leaders, whom he calls "apostle-like catalysts." Almost no non-Asians are involved in this movement.

The believers in this movement span seventy-eight people groups in seventeen countries, include 500,000 individuals, all in small groups with recognized leaders and are traced to seventeen generations.

The believers in this movement span seventy-eight different people groups in seventeen different countries and include almost 500,000 individuals,³³ all in small groups with recognized leaders and are traced to seventeen generations or more in some parts. This is all tracked by the local leaders, with careful detail. They only count new believers from a Muslim heritage—though nominal Christians have also gotten involved in these groups.

In this quote, from his perspective, you'll see how he observes what happened in the Book of Acts, how the gospel is unleashed from Jewish culture and language, and how that might apply today. You can also note how he applies this in his setting and to the idea of HUP in general. (emphases and brackets in the quotations below are mine)

In the Bible we see segmentation of populations as important to understand its influence on the spread of the gospel. By Acts 6 there were at least 20,000 Jewish believers (Acts 4:4). Two HUs, one the Aramaic-speaking Jews and one the Greek-speaking Jews, came into conflict along ethnic/language segment lines. When they chose the seven, they chose seven men with *Greek names* for their second layer of leadership, [which the] volume [of] growth demanded, so that the segment that felt underserved would be well represented. *I don't see anyone pushing for more religious diversification or less; they needed to accommodate the natural barriers as they observed God bringing growth and adjusting to it.*

When there was a great persecution forcing many out of Jerusalem, it was only the Aramaic segment that could stay. That seems to have crystalized a more Pharisaic

segment of believers in Jerusalem, judging from the issue in Acts 15, and from the issue in Acts 21, but they kept growing. Commentators estimate 30,000 believers in Acts 21, even though many of the first 20,000 had fled. The *bilingual, bicultural Hellenistic Jews* were the people God used to spread the gospel to the *diaspora Jews first, and then to God-fearers, then to non-Jews*. The bilingual biculturalists were the bridging agents that carried the gospel across barriers into new population segments.

Then he applied this to his movement

... we find marriages of two different cultures are, quite often, able to bridge cultures with the gospel. We have [main culture/language] who understand our principles move to [similar culture/language] communities [nearby], who [in turn] are bilingual, also knowing the languages of local UPGs. About two years after they move, the gospel has moved into the bilingual [main culture/language], and then moved through them to the population segments that are more "defined/discrete."

According to him, the gospel moved from one culture and language to a nearby similar culture and similar language and then from there went on to spread to seventy-eight different people groups, (as defined by JoshuaProject.net). He then shared his assessment about HUP itself:

In the NT, I don't think we have a pushing of anybody to religiously diversify—or not. But rather a recognition of *what God is doing, and how God is using certain kinds of bilinguals to bridge into each new people segment*. These "bridging agents" role can be better understood by studying Social Network Analysis. . . .³⁴ (emphasis mine)

He suggests we no longer use the phrase Homogeneous Unit, and instead use something like "people segmentation." My initial thought is that we could use a broad, "cultural segmentation" or "distinction." This seems to be reflected in Revelation 5:9 and 7:9, and perhaps in Revelation 21:22–27 where the "kings of the earth bring their glory to it." It seems that the glory is being embedded in the cultures of the earth, since it doesn't seem like it could be the greatness of the kings who have ruled in the Bible at least!

Experiences of the SWM Faculty and Graduates

This example, and others from distinct cultures globally, demonstrate the influence of the SWM ideas, among others of course. That can also be seen in the theses and dissertations produced there during those years.³⁵ There was also the immediate impact of those early SWM graduates, most of whom had served six to eight years before studying there. I've read or heard testimonies of workers around the world who had almost given up and come home, only to be energized by the ideas they "hashed out," and the relationships they developed, while thinking and studying together at the SWM, or the US Center for World Mission.

Here is one example in a January 1970 letter, written by a field missionary in Honduras. It was forwarded to McGavran by Rufus Jones, the General Director of the Conservative Baptist Foreign Mission Society:

There is a spirit of tremendous expectancy among the workers here now. We are putting into practice much of the principles of the church growth people, especially that of *communicating the gospel along family and clan relationships lines*. It is a very difficult principle for an American to grasp, but I am beginning to discover how it works. And it does work! There is a definite pattern of family ties and interrelationships along which the gospel can easily be communicated—if we are looking for it—which does not exist in our American society. Unfortunately, it requires a radical change in our method of approach in any village; and change does not come easy for these poorly educated workers. But Lord willing, it will be done!

[Signed:] George [No last name was included.]

Olanchito, Honduras³⁶

I realize that the nature of our current, multicultural America (and other places) was not the situation in the 1970s. The HUP idea was just one of the ideas that came out of the SWM and other mission thinkers or trainers in those years. But I think it helps us understand how they were processing these ideas, as we now look at what happened in the years after the 1970s.

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The time the SWM faculty spent teaching and interacting with each other and the students allowed them to see what was missing on the global scene. Ralph Winter used to say that they didn't have any students coming to study who had been sent to where no missionaries were! He was talking about the blocs of Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist Unreached People Groups. These are cultures that are radically different from where there was a culturally relevant church. And that remains true for many today.³⁷

At the time of the 1977 Consultation, Winter had already moved from his tenured position at the SWM, to start the US Center for World Mission (USCWM) with his wife Roberta—

really with his whole family. Looking at the charts published in the version of his Lausanne presentation,³⁸ you can see how he understands the “task remaining”—especially where there was no indigenous church. When he gave his Lausanne '74 talk, he included an illustration from Pakistan—there the church was established in the non-Muslim minority (former Dalits who had become Christians) and there was almost no interaction between the Muslims and the Christians at the time.

Personally, I remember seeing those simply-made and jaw-dropping charts late one evening, just one month before the USCWM was founded in October 1976. That evening moved me to a new level of action.

For his part, C. Peter Wagner focused his interest in helping to promote Church Growth theories wherever the church already existed. Some used to say that Wagner was focused on seeing the church *grow where it was*, and Winter was focused on helping the church *go where it wasn't*. Still, Wagner published *On the Crest of the Wave* which detailed breakthroughs around the world. Winter worked hard to get that book out as an encouragement to the church. Before that, many saw the UPGs as a massive task, like lifting an iceberg out of the sea.

The Shift from Countries to People Groups

More broadly, a significant impact of all of this was that the mobilization call to missions shifted from a focus on countries to people groups. The rhetorical argument went, “How can you only say you are going to reach Nigerians, for example, when there are 400 different cultures and languages there, most of whom do not have a Bible translation?”

The approach to the Bible also shifted, including how it was used to motivate people for service. In the first five lessons of the *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* course, the biblical theme of God's purposes throughout the earth is traced through the Scriptures. God is seeking to extend his name among the ethné or people groups. John Stott's first Urbana 1976 morning Bible message, “The Living God is a Missionary God,” which makes this point, is still the first chapter in the reader *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*.

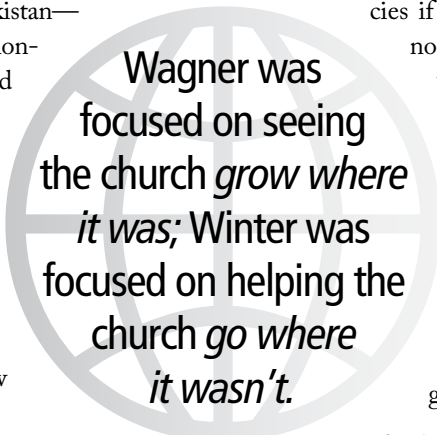
You can find a more complete evaluation of what was happening as part of a recent issue of the *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (EMQ) dedicated to the theme: “Rethinking People Group Missiology.”³⁹ I wrote an article for that issue entitled, “Run with the Vision: The Impact of the Unreached People Groups Concept on Students, Churches and Sending Agencies.”⁴⁰

When you move from teachers, writers, and strategists to young people being called into missions, you begin to see the impact of their service, both positive and negative. In the 1980s, young people started asking sending agencies if they worked with the “unreached.” (I am not suggesting that no one worked with the unreached before.) When they got to the field, with purpose and clear direction (perhaps a higher value in the West?), they seemed to want to narrow their focus to a specific unreached group needing gospel witness. Their rationale might be summed up as follows: if there is an established church in the majority people, we will instead focus on the groups that don't have the gospel.

Such a strategy was probably the best in many areas. There were a number of places where long-established churches in one culture were near an unreached culture. One classic example is the ancient churches of the Middle East. I recall the story Bob Blincoe shared, when he was trying to reach Muslim Kurds in Northern Iraq. Christians in the area, from church traditions dating back 500 to 1000 years or so, told him they knew the solution to the “problem of the Kurds”: Get rid of the Kurds! And it didn't sound very Christian!

That is an example of one of the hardest ideas to communicate related to reaching to the unreached: most of the groups of the world, who do not now have a church, are *not* isolated nor clearly and completely distinct from the peoples around them. Back then, in the early 80s, when I shared the vision of the USCWM while raising support to serve here, people didn't easily understand the UPG concept. I needed to say that other than most Tribal Peoples, we were NOT talking about groups that are “hermetically sealed off” from the rest of the world—like the typical group Wycliffe was trying to do a translation for. India's complex caste system was always a striking illustration—yet the most difficult for Westerners to fully grasp. McGavran would talk about how in one village in India, people look the same, speak the same language, but are hermetically sealed off like overlapping “pancakes.” Sometimes when people with the UPG strategy would hit the ground in multiethnic communities; something was missing. From his experience as an SIM field worker in West Africa, Ken Baker wrote an article in the *EMQ* about the potential misunderstanding of the HUP issue.

Since the UPG/UUPG system assumes the validity of the Homogeneous Unit Principle (HUP) too exclusively as an organizational formula, it often fails to take into account God's intent to reconcile people, and peoples, to each other.



Wagner was focused on seeing the church grow where it was; Winter was focused on helping the church go where it wasn't.

HUP-based approaches concentrate solely upon the expansion narrative (“make disciples of all nations”) of kingdom mission while neglecting the integration narrative of Christ’s kingdom mission (“that all of them may be one”). Gospel intent always envisions boundary-crossing and engaging otherness.⁴¹

He noticed this strategy could influence the mentality of new international workers, because “the people group approach creates a presumptive mentality which pre-shapes church planting endeavors, creating arbitrary fences in the ministry context.”⁴²

Then, he illustrated this:

A few years ago, while church planting (or, as I prefer, “gospel planting”) in an African desert country, I encountered a young missionary couple who were entirely focused on a people group that made up less than five percent of the local population. Gifted in language, they were deeply integrated, but exclusively in relationships with this people.

Although “their” people group mixed well with the local population, this couple didn’t, because they didn’t want to become “distracted.” They viewed their approach as missionologically faultless. However, other people in the community viewed them as cold, unfriendly, and haughty. To me, this seemed like a classic case of missing the forest for the trees. I asked them what gospel they were modeling before “their” people, as well as the community, reminding them that we are always ambassadors of an all-inclusive gospel, even if we concentrate upon one people.⁴³

Where Are We Now?

Today, in our evangelical, and ex-evangelical world, a debate like this can be polarizing. With many US churches divided by politics and racial tensions, nuance no longer seems possible. Not to mention the “c” word: contextualization. Anthropology is no longer considered something helpful in the training of global workers, which I consider a step back in worker preparation.

Multiethnic and Multiracial Churches

At the International Society for Frontier Mission gathering in 2014, I presented a paper, “Will the Earth Hear His Voice? Is Ralph D. Winter’s Idea Still Valid?”⁴⁴ Near the end, I posed some questions to consider for those who promote starting a multiethnic church and who had written about it in *EMQ*.⁴⁵

How many of the multi-ethnic church members were Christians (of some sort) before they joined the church, or how many came from “Christianized” backgrounds, either their own family or their own “Christianized” culture in general?

Is English the common language of worship and teaching?

How many came to Christ and to this multi-ethnic church from non-Christian religious backgrounds, such as a Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist religious tradition?

My guess would be very few, if any. As great as the merging of worship, dress styles and language might be, only those familiar with or wanting to identify with these Christian forms (and the English language) are likely to feel at home in such a church. Where I live in Los Angeles, there are many different languages spoken in churches and most of those who go to services that are not in English simply cannot switch to English without a loss of understanding (connected with teaching) and relationships (connected with fellowship). These are two key aspects of what the New Testament expects in a local church.

I realize that the goal of churches like this is not necessarily to see people from unreached people groups join their church. If people are coming to Christ and growing that is great. I found it interesting, however, that *Christianity Today* sought to grapple with the issue of multiracial churches in the US in their print magazine in March of 2021. The theme was “Multiracial Reckoning: Can Multiethnic Worship Really Happen on this Side of Heaven?” Korie Little Edwards, author of the book *The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches*, also wrote the lead article in that *CT* issue, “When ‘Diversity’ Isn’t Enough.” In it she notes:

Multiracial congregations have gained a greater share of American churches over the past 20 years, but as my colleagues and I have found, they are not delivering on what they promised. Multiracial churches often celebrate being diverse for diversity’s sake. They aren’t challenging racial attitudes that reinforce systemic inequality. . . . Over time, whites end up occupying the roles in the church with the most authority.⁴⁶

Although their minority people group mixed well with the local population, this couple didn’t because they didn’t want to become “distracted.” Other people in the community viewed them as unfriendly, and haughty. (Baker)

Engaging the Public Square Today

Let me illustrate the broader contextualization point that I believe connects with both the HUP and how we shape our message depending on the audience. This is from a recent tweet from NY pastor Timothy Keller.⁴⁷ Keller first tweeted a response to a six-minute YouTube clip from The Late Show with Stephen Colbert.⁴⁸ Colbert was interviewing Dua Lipa who is from the UK, was formerly a model, and is now a

singer and songwriter. Lipa asks Colbert how his faith and his comedy overlap. Colbert gives a masterful reply—unscripted. It is fascinating to watch her face when the camera switches to her a few times, as he shares his reply. She seems clearly interested and engaged with a “religious” discussion.

The next day, Keller tweeted the clip and wrote:

This is a brilliant example of how to be a Christian in the public square. Notice the witness, but in a form the culture can handle. We should desire to have more Christians in these spaces and give them grace as they operate.

While some loved his approach, for others it created a firestorm, with ensuing comments about how he didn't share the *whole* gospel. Colbert is Catholic after all. One retweet said: “Let's not call something a witness or a gospel presentation which does not involve Christ, sin, his substitutionary atoning death, his resurrection, etc.,”⁴⁹ as if when certain truths are not included, it is not sharing the gospel. To which I ask: is not creation a witness of the gospel? Did Jesus or Paul ever include all of that in one passage or message?

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The next day, Keller replied with a seven-part Tweet:⁵⁰

The recent post I made about Stephen Colbert's partial answer about his faith and the ensuing comments has shown me American Christians still have a long way to go on understanding Col. 4:5–6, how to be “wise in the ways you act toward outsiders.”

This is called contextualization.

What is contextualization? It's adapting your message to be understandable and compelling to particular hearers without compromising the truth in any way. Why contextualize?

First, because everyone already does it. As soon as you choose a language to speak in, and vocabulary and illustrations, and arguments, you are adapting to some human hearers more than others. If you don't become conscious of how you are contextualizing—which is inevitable—you won't contextualize well.

Second, because Paul contextualizes in his speeches. See how he presents to Bible believers in Acts 13, blue-collar pagans in Acts 14, and educated pagans in Acts 17.

Third, because the biblical writers contextualize. See John's use of Greek philosophy's “Logos” in John 1. See the use of the Hittite Sumerian treaty form in the book of Deuteronomy. See Paul's contextualization of the gospel to Greek and Jewish cultural narratives in 1 Cor. 1:22–24.

Fourth, because Paul calls us to contextualization without compromise in 1 Cor. 9:19–23.

Fifth, because the incarnation itself was a kind of contextualizing. So, we could understand—the Word made flesh.

Sixth, keep in mind you can't and shouldn't say everything every time when bearing a public witness to your faith. In Acts 17 Paul spoke of judgment but not of the cross or how to get forgiveness. So, it wasn't a full gospel presentation. It was laying a foundation for talking to people later.

Unless Christians are completely going to pull themselves out of the public square we will need to contextualize. Let's do so well.

Two days later, Keller added:

Over-contextualization makes an idol of the hearers' culture and is the mistake of liberal Christianity. Under-contextualization makes an idol of the speaker's culture and is the mistake of fundamentalist Christianity. *We all make both mistakes—but which do you do more?* (emphasis mine)

Conclusion

We are always in a process of trying to understand how to see more people come to faith, and grow. We never “get it right” all the time, but my hope is that, looking back at this 1977 event and evaluating it in today's context in this Lectureship, we might gain helpful perspectives which will help us think through what ideas we should promote or avoid. There is a beauty in the diversity God has created in the *ethné*. We have much to learn from that, as they bring glory to God. **IJFM**

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Lausanne Web Editor's Note: The positions indicated for the participants [(speakers), moderator, and consultants] remain those as of June 1977 when the consultation met.

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Endnotes

- ¹ This was changed to the School of Intercultural Studies and now is merged as the School of Mission and Theology.
- ² Rick Warren quote from the Carey Nieuwhof Podcast interview, January 3, 2022.
- ³ The US ended their involvement in 1973. The Ralph D. Winter Research Center and Archives has a letter that was circulated by an ethnically Armenian student at Fuller Seminary in 1970. He suggested Fuller Seminary should not allow a protest to the war during graduation ceremonies, in part because there were other wars around the world, including one related to Armenia.
- ⁴ McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 1955.
- ⁵ Middleton, *Donald McGavran, His Early Life and Ministry*, 125.
- ⁶ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 1970.
- ⁷ Later published in book form, Volume One covered September 1964 through July 1969 (McGavran, *Church Growth Bulletin*, 1969), Volume Two from September 1969 to July 1975 (McGavran, *Church Growth Bulletin*, 1977), and Volume Three from September 1975 to November 1979 (McGavran, Montgomery, and Wagner, *Church Growth Bulletin*, 1982).
- ⁸ McQuilkin, *How Biblical is the Church Growth Movement?*, 1973.
- ⁹ Wilbert R. Shenk, ed., *The Challenge of Church Growth. A Symposium* (1973), 107.
- ¹⁰ Douglas, *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, 1975.
- ¹¹ Stott, *The Lausanne Covenant*, 1975.
- ¹² This was the pattern of the early days of the SWM. Students, or “associates” as they called them, were required to have at least one “term” (two were preferred) of cross-cultural ministry before entering the school. There were special exceptions.
- ¹³ Email from Vern Middleton to Greg H. Parsons, Feb. 21, 2011, page 1: In addition to McGavran’s early field work in administration and his researching of people movements with Pickett in India, he was involved later in a movement among the Satnami, as detailed in McGavran, *The Satnami Story*, 1990.
- ¹⁴ Kraft, *SWM/SIS at Forty: A Participant/Observer’s View of Our History*, 2005.
- ¹⁵ Parsons, *Ralph D. Winter: Early Life and Core Missiology*, 2012.
- ¹⁶ Glasser came to Fuller’s SWM at a crucial time and helped solidify the SWM’s footing in the midst of the “Bible wars” of the 1970s, which included the inerrancy debate and Fuller Seminary’s voice in it. The SWM was trying to make sure that more conservative missions would continue to send their missionaries to the SWM, and not worry about the School of Theology. Kraft, *SWM/SIS at Forty*, 105.
- ¹⁷ Kraft, *SWM/SIS at Forty*, 101.
- ¹⁸ Chao, *China and the Church Today*, 1979–1980).
- ¹⁹ Later, in the US it was known as China Ministries International, and its US offices were based at the US Center for World Mission until 2021. It is still in operation.
- ²⁰ In the mid-1980s, Ralph Winter told the story of trying to purchase a print advertisement in *Christianity Today*, outlining this ongoing-breakthrough, and they would not print it because they did not believe the information was true.
- ²¹ Current estimates are 125,000,000.
- ²² For example, Timothy Keller has noted Conn’s influence in his life, Gornik, “The Legacy of Harvie M. Conn,” 215.
- ²³ Via email to the author from Mark Ramseyer, PhD (son of Victor), March 7, 2022.
- ²⁴ “Victor E. W. Hayward.”
- ²⁵ In René Padilla’s presentation at Lausanne, he decried the exporting of a cultural Christianity and the “American way of life” to mission fields around the world, and called for the wedding of evangelism and social action. Douglas, *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, 125–126.
- ²⁶ Yoder’s books include *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* and *The Politics of Jesus*. A well-known Anabaptist theologian, ethicist, and brilliant political theologian, in his later years he was disciplined after a four-year investigation for his long-term sexual harassment and sexual abuse of women. However, Herald Press, the publisher of many of his books and the publisher for the Mennonite Church USA and the Mennonite Church Canada, believes his writings still deserve to be studied. We include him here to have a complete record of what happened in this HUP consultation in 1977.
- ²⁷ Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya: A Biographical History of Christian Missions*, 451.
- ²⁸ See complete participants listing, as compiled by Lausanne for the Lausanne Occasional Paper #1, at the end of this paper.
- ²⁹ Alan Tippett’s archives include fifteen hours of recorded discussion during the Consultation. You can find more information at the St. Mark’s Theological Centre, Canberra, Australia, <https://stmarks.edu.au/library/special-collections/the-tippett-collection/>.
- ³⁰ It may be a surprise that the discussions were very civil and cordial. There was no shouting nor were there even harsh words.
- ³¹ The Consultants were involved in the discussion some, but did not present papers for the event. The Consultants are listed in the Lausanne Occasional Paper #1, which is a summary of this Consultation.

- ³² It is not clear on the first tape, where they are in the discussion. McGavran is talking at first, but it is the end of his thought. It is probable that he just finished presenting some of his ideas.
- ³³ The growth rate has been consistent from the earliest days in 2000. They had estimated that they would have hit 500,000 before COVID hit and be on their way to a million. They did lose a number of people to COVID, including group leaders.
- ³⁴ Email communication in February 2022 with the movement catalyst. For security reasons, the name and locations are withheld. "Social Network analysis is the study of structure, and how it influences health, and it is based on theoretical constructs of sociology and mathematical foundations of graph theory. Structure refers to the regularities in the patterning of relationships among individuals, groups and/or organizations. When social network analysis is undertaken, the underlying assumption is that network structure, and the properties of that structure have significant implications on the outcome of interest." <https://www.publichealth.columbia.edu/research/population-health-methods/social-network-analysis>.
- ³⁵ If you search the Fuller library online, you will find hundreds of these church growth studies from around the world. A quick search of the Fuller Seminary Library returns more than 2,600 works that contain the words "church growth" in the title.
- ³⁶ Copy of a letter from "George" to Rufus Jones, General Director, Conservative Baptist Home Mission Society, January 1, 1970. Jones forwarded a copy of this letter to Donald McGavran, with a cover letter dated January 12, 1970.
- ³⁷ See <https://www.joshuaproject.net/frontier> for definitions and listings of a large subset of Unreached People Groups, called Frontier People Groups.
- ³⁸ Ralph Winter's charts for Lausanne 1974 in Douglas, *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, 213–241.
- ³⁹ *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 56, no. 4, 2020.
- ⁴⁰ Parsons, "Run with the Vision: The Impact of the Unreached People Groups Concept on Students, Churches and Sending Agencies," 16–19.
- ⁴¹ Baker, "Beyond 'People Groups': Why the Term 'Communities' May Be Preferable," 10.
- ⁴² Baker, "Beyond 'People Groups,'" 11.
- ⁴³ Baker, "Beyond 'People Groups,'" 13.
- ⁴⁴ Parsons, "Will the Earth Hear His Voice? Is Ralph D. Winter's Idea Still Valid?" 15.
- ⁴⁵ Corwin, "Is It a Heterogeneous or a Homogeneous Unit Principle?" 262–263; and Hyatt, "From Homogeneous to Heterogeneous Unit Principle," 226–232.
- ⁴⁶ Edwards, "When 'Diversity' Isn't Enough," 39.
- ⁴⁷ Timothy Keller, @timkellernyc, posted several tweets on "Being a Christian in the Public Square" starting on February 5, 2022.
- ⁴⁸ The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, "Dua Lipa Asks Stephen How His Faith And His Comedy," February 4, 2022, YouTube video, 6:21, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUaWDqDOWPk>. Her question comes up at 3:38.
- ⁴⁹ Nate @theoioesus, retweet on February 5, 2022.
- ⁵⁰ I have merged Keller's 7 tweets together, smoothed out the flow and format in order to highlight his points clearly.

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