

**DONALD A.
MCGAVRAN**

ETHNIC REALITIES **and the Church**

Lessons From India



ETHNIC REALITIES

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Bridges of God

How Churches Grow

Understanding Church Growth

The Clash of Christianity and Cultures

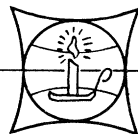
**DONALD A.
McGAURAN**

**ETHNIC
REALITIES**
and the Church

Lessons From India

William Carey Library

533 HERMOSA STREET • SOUTH PASADENA, CALIFORNIA 91030



Copyright © 1979 by Donald A. McGavran

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced
in any manner whatsoever without
written permission, except in the case of
brief quotations embodied in
critical articles and reviews.

International Standard Book Number 0-87808-168-2

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 78-11517

Published by William Carey Library
1705 N. Sierra Bonita Avenue
Pasadena, CA 91104, USA
Telephone (626)798-0819
Print On Demand Edition 2000

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

This book is dedicated to
Mary Elizabeth McGavran,
comrade and consolation
in the gathering gloom and the brightening day,
fellow missionary of the Gospel and
fellow pilgrim to Zion,
whose goodness has enfolded so many —
including me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Donald McGavran has served as a missionary to India for thirty-six years under the United Christian Missionary Society. He has taught missions in the United States since 1957 and was the founding dean of the School of World Mission and Institute of Church Growth of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. Dr. McGavran has a B.D. from Yale Divinity School and a Ph.D. from Teachers College, Columbia University. He is the father of the Church Growth Movement.

His teaching, amassing evidence from every continent, that world evangelization stands at midday, not sunset, has been influential in many circles. He insists that, since at least three billion have yet to believe, Christian Mission must continue strong and vigorous, a duty and privilege of every denomination and congregation in every land. *Bridges of God, How Churches Grow, Understanding Church Growth, The Clash of Christianity and Cultures*, and regional books on the growth of churches in the Philippines, Mexico, Jamaica, North America and other lands have widely affected missiological thinking.

Perhaps more than anyone else he has explored and stated the case for encouraging ethnic diversity within the over-arching theological unity of the Christian Church. This present volume is an extended argument that ethnic realities have always conditioned particular Churches and rightly continue to do so — provided only that the biblical and theological foundations of brotherhood are maintained intact. This means that Christians openly accept that all men are sons of Adam and hence brothers; and that all Christians are equally sinners redeemed by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and hence have equal status before the Throne.

CONTENTS

PREFACE	1
TERMINOLOGY AND REFERENCES	5
INTRODUCTION: The Church in India: Its Matrix, Denominations, Distribution, Particularities and Types	11
PART I. THE FIVE BASIC TYPES	
1. Syrian Churches	47
2. Fully Conglomerate Churches	68
3. Monoethnic Churches from Caste	93
4. Monoethnic Churches from Tribe	120
5. Modified Multiethnic Churches	142
PART II. THE FOUR SECONDARY TYPES	
6. Urban Conglomerates	157
7. Urban Monoethnics	170
8. The Great Conglomerates	186
9. The Indigenous Churches	210
CONCLUSION: The Coming Great Growth of the Church in India	225
APPENDIX A. An Ecclesiological Point of View	245
APPENDIX B. Caste and Brotherhood	250
BIBLIOGRAPHY	260

TABLE, MAPS AND CHARTS

Table — Christian Population in India, by State	30
Map 1 — South India	49
Map 2 — Madhya Pradesh	72
Fig. 1 — Rate of Religious Change in Travancore	53
Fig. 2 — People Movements from Caste	98
Fig. 3 — Urban Transfer Growth Influenced by Ethnicity	158
Fig. 4 — Comparative Strength of the Great Conglomerates, 1976	187

The normal man is not an isolated unit, but part of a whole which makes him what he is . . . Society either determines or strongly influences every aspect of what he says, thinks, and does. Consequently when we comprehend the social structure of a particular segment of the total population, we know better how churches are likely to increase and ramify through it.

Understanding Church Growth, page 183

PREFACE

ON ALL SIX continents and in every country of the earth, ecclesiastical and theological understandings have dominated the church scene. Churches are described by their denominational character. This one is Baptist, that Roman Catholic. Or the Church is declared to be the Body of Christ, a society of the redeemed, a pilgrim congregation, or a sacramental fellowship. Such conceptions are, of course, true and express legitimate ways of thinking about the Church in any land. It certainly is all these things.

However, it also involves other elements which are most important for understanding its spread on new ground. Ethnic realities are concerned. The Church is made up of persons who are invariably part of some social order. They speak particular languages. They belong to certain races, castes, tribes, and other segments of society. They have distinctive cultures. Their part of the human race practices subsistence agriculture, slash-and-burn, or mechanized farming. When new congregations are being formed in a dominantly non-Christian

population, members have particular and often widely differing relationships with those who have not become Christian. Christians may be fiercely persecuted or effectively ostracized. Frequently converts to the Christian faith come one by one into the Church, severing their relation to the social matrix from which they have sprung. Sometimes they come maintaining their former relationships intact; perhaps they are cordially regarded as showing others a better way of life.

Sociological/anthropological situations are exceedingly important if we are to comprehend the ability of congregations and denominations to flourish on new ground, reproduce themselves, communicate the Christian faith, and influence their nation. *It is desirable therefore to understand the Church as it advances into new areas along the lines also of these sociological/anthropological characteristics.* They add a depth of comprehension which remains hidden if we employ only ecclesiastical or theological frames of reference.

This book attempts to see the Church in the light of the relation of its members, its congregations and denominations, to the social structures of the country. But, while the Church on the vast Indian subcontinent is being thus described and categorized, I hope the reader may be observing the method and applying it to Churches on his own continent and in his own land. The Church in India will be seen to exist in nine clearly discernible types. Every congregation in India belongs to one of them. Each denomination is made up of so many congregations of — say — Type 2, Type 5, and Type 9. Some are made up entirely of Type 3 congregations, others entirely of Type 1.

We shall see also that each type — depending on its relation to the unconverted segments of society, and especially to the unconverted in the particular segment from which those Christians have come — has its own growth potential, encounters its peculiar obstacles, and faces its particular opportunities. Thus we must not imagine that Type 1 congregations can grow in the same way as Type 3 and Type 4. Type 1 *can* spread the faith, but

in ways which suit it. If it attempts to follow methods suited only to other types, it will fail, no matter how ardently it tries.

Similarly, *Churches in every land may be described in terms of the socioeconomic realities in which they are immersed and of which they are parts*. For example, Assemblies of God congregations in São Paulo, Brazil, composed of northeasterners who have migrated to the south in search of work, grow enormously from the repeated waves of immigration from the northeast. But Methodist congregations made up of educated third- and fourth-generation Christians who hold good jobs are not and probably cannot be greatly increased by northeasterners flooding into southern cities. To use a different illustration, Quechua Indians in Ecuador who join Protestant congregations made up of mestizos and rapidly become, so to speak, mestizoized, are ineffective in spreading the Gospel to solidly Quechua villages. But Protestant congregations *made up wholly of Quechua Indians*, who worship and pray and read the Bible in Quechua and maintain cordial relationships with their yet unconverted fellow villagers, have high ability to communicate the Gospel. They are rooted in purely Quechua villages and spread the biblical faith there with great effectiveness. The Protestant Quechua congregations in Chimborazo Province grew from a few hundred members to over 15,000 in less than ten years.

In every land we have congregations not only of different denominations, but of different social structure and differing degrees of tolerance or ostracism — different relationships *to* and degrees of acceptance *by* the “yet to believe.” In the present volume we shall explore this new perspective in understanding the Church. I trust it may be useful to Christians both in India and in other countries of the world.

Hundreds of authors have described the ecclesiological and theological factors that help to produce growth. Their usefulness and power are beyond question. Since, however, growth is frequently slowed or stopped in the midst of great opportunity because of ethnicity and other sociological factors, I have thought

it important to concentrate some attention on these, in a setting where they can be both broadly and coherently examined in relation to the society and also to each other. *Ethnic Realities and The Church: Lessons From India* will, therefore consider the 16-million-member Indian Church, noting its spread in the various provinces and its relation to the tribes and castes from which it has derived, as well as to those with which it has had no connection. I hope that readers may thereby obtain a vivid sense of the social reality we call the Church, paying particular attention to the delicate and subtle relationship of new Christians to their non-Christian relatives, which is of such great importance for the spread of the faith.

As men and women from other lands and from India too read this book, they will, I trust, find their understanding of the social structures surrounding their particular congregations deepened, and will themselves discover the ways in which they really can or cannot multiply churches. No one wants to try to propagate the Gospel through means not blessed by God. We all want to use ways which God has blessed to the growth of His Church and apparently wants us to use.

Donald Anderson McGavran

*School of Missions
Pasadena, California, U.S.A.
September, 1978*

TERMINOLOGY AND REFERENCES

IN THE INTERESTS of clarity rather than in defense of any one ecclesiology, in this book I shall use the following four words to describe the flesh-and-blood companies of Christians.

Church with a capital *C*: the Church Universal, or a particular denomination, or the Church in general or in a given district.

church with a small *c*: a local congregation, or as an adjective as in “church union.”

congregation: a local church, a worshiping group of Christians.

denomination: a cluster of congregations, generally with an agreed body of doctrine, polity, or an ethnic unity. They act together and regard themselves as one branch of the Church. Denomination is a synonym for Church. The Church of North India, for example, may be called a denomination. So may the Council of Baptist Churches in North East India.

These four words are used in an attempt to treat all Churches (or denominations) fairly. In Chapter 8, “The Great Conglomerates,” I shall be speaking of eight great denominations in India. It would be highly prejudicial to call some of them “Churches” and others “denominations,” so the two words are

used interchangeably. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Andhra is both a Church and a denomination. The Mar Thoma Church may with equal propriety be called the Mar Thoma Denomination. “Ten urban churches” may also be referred to as “ten urban congregations.” The sentence, “Every Christian feels a sense of denominational loyalty,” can be equally well rendered with the term “church loyalty.”

In similar fashion I have accepted the fact that various denominations call their constituent parts by different names, not assuming that any one set of names is more correct than others. A bishop in one denomination may be called an executive secretary in another and a ruling elder in a third. A small administrative committee may be called a presbytery or the executive council. The terminology of the Syrian Orthodox is right for it, and that of the Federation of Lutheran Churches right for it. Conventions, synods, districts, assemblies, presbyteries, annual conferences — all are equally acceptable forms.

In regard to terminology, however, two qualifications must be borne in mind:

1. Biblical terms have great value for unity and universality. The Bible is not a European book. It was written mostly in western Asia, and Christians believe that it was given by God for all mankind. Its terms have value for Churches in all cultures.
2. Some current names are merely European and reflect, not the Bible, but European culture. They are an inheritance from one continent. Such names are therefore transitional. In the region we are exploring, they will in time surely be replaced by the truly Indian names which the rich cultural heritage of this continent is abundantly able to provide. Robin Boyd has written a provocative book called *India and the Latin Captivity of the Church*, in which he argues that the philosophical terms common in Hindu thought ought to be used in Christian theology. Whatever one may think of this idea, it is high time that Greek/Latin organizational words such as *synod* be replaced in North India by Sanskrit/Hindi terms such as *mahasabha*. Till such indigenization takes place, it would appear to be the part of wisdom to accept

whatever European terms are in use at present. The Indian words will gradually take their place.

Sociological terms also require some explanation. One cannot talk about society in any country without explicit mention of the sociological components of its population. In the United States, for example, out of a population of 220 million, 25 million are African Americans and an equal number Americans of Spanish name. Indeed, there are over fifty blocks of ethnic Americans, a few larger, most smaller than these. America is not a melting pot in which all metals are speedily reduced to a single comprehensive alloy. Rather, what used to be called the New World is a curry in which potatoes are still potatoes and chunks of meat are still meat. Ethnic, linguistic, economic, and occupational homogeneous units in every land are what make up the total population. India is no exception to the rule.

People from many races and ethnic groups have poured into India: Dravidian, Aryan, Mongolian, Arab, Persian, Portuguese, English, and others. There are over three thousand ethnic units of various kinds. Each is very largely endogamous: that is, marries within itself and thus holds itself separate from all the others, or tries to. Each has a high consciousness of being itself. Narmadiya Brahmins know they are not Kankubj Brahmins, and vice versa. Nadars know they are not Nairs, Khasis never imagine that they are Jamatias.

Each major division of Hindu society — Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra, and Scheduled Castes — is in fact composed of many castes and subcastes.

The Church grows among these more than three thousand ethnic units: *jatiyan* in Hindi. But how is one to refer to these social realities? In modern India, particularly among Christians, the word *caste* for instance is distasteful. The government plays down caste, which smacks of racism and introduces various complications. In popular usage it has been largely replaced by “community.” In polite society one never asks “What is his caste?” but rather “What is his community?” — or better, “What is his background?” Caste is a dirty word.

In view of that stigma, I have at times substituted for caste such terms as “community,” “natural social grouping,” or “background.” However, speaking in the unavoidable language of anthropologists, sociologists, and census takers, I generally use the word caste, but without any pejorative meaning. It simply denotes a common reality, which in all the great languages of India (Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, and others) is openly referred to: a common cultural component of the Indian scene.

The reader will note that in this book figures are substituted for the term *billion* referring to population, because of the discrepancy between American and English usage, the United Kingdom meaning of the word being what Americans would call a *trillion*. And those familiar with my earlier writings will recognize the condensed coinage of such terms as *Eurican* and *Latfricasian*. Their meaning seems clear, and it is hoped that the reader will regard sympathetically the verbal dilemma that gave rise to them, to avoid cumbersome, sometimes repetitious locutions for which no single word exists.

Extract and other references are keyed by author, title, and date in text to the brief Bibliography following the Appendices, where the usual publishing date will be found.

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

The Church in India, its Matrix, Denominations, Distribution, Particularities, and Types

CHURCH GROWTH begins in and is required by Christian *theology*. God wants the Church to grow. He wants His lost children found. But the structures of the Church and its modes of growth are heavily conditioned by *sociology*. Sociological factors affect it. The Church always grows in a society. Its denominations and congregations, forms of worship and learning, its opportunities to grow, and the obstacles to its growth are conditioned by the innumerable soils in which it develops. Society is a vast mosaic with many languages, many races, many classes, many cultures. The Church takes on a different form, is established and matures in a different way, in each of the numerous pieces of the mosaic. The ethnicity of each piece affects the structure and spread of the Church.

This book illustrates this universal principle from India. India clearly sets forth how congregations and denominations — arising in different segments of the general population — came to

be very different organisms with different structures and growth potentials. India demonstrates the principle in many different ways. The reader from Nigeria, it may be, or Taiwan, or Roumania — the principle applies in all lands though in varying degrees — will discover in the structure and growth of churches in India clues concerning churches in his own land.

I turn to an exposition of the Church in India, trusting that readers outside and inside India will both profit. Those outside will find fruitful keys to the types and structures, growth patterns and potentials of the congregations and denominations of their own lands. Those inside India will recognize how the tremendous complexity of society in the federations of nations, languages, customs and cultures which is Great India affects the growth of the churches there.

I shall describe and discuss the Church in India — understanding the Church in India is my theme; but every now and then I shall throw in a phrase or a sentence to remind readers that I am setting forth a global principle: how ethnicity affects the structure and spread of congregations and denominations in every land.

A great Church of more than 16 million Christians in 1976, which will be at least 18 million by 1981, has grown up in India very largely during the last hundred and fifty years. Almost every Indian state now has thousands of Christians in it. Some have hundreds of thousands. Christians play a part in the government of this mighty nation. Christian ideals are openly espoused by many of its leaders, and indeed often set forth as those which India herself has stood for throughout the ages. The Constitution of India declares that country to be a secular state defending equally all its various religions and guaranteeing to each the right to profess, practise and propagate its own faith. Christianity has entered into the warp and woof of Indian thinking, regarded sometimes cordially, sometimes critically by non-Christians. This is the great Church we now seek to understand at closer range. Such understanding will help us be more effective advocates of the Gospel — no matter in what land we work.

RELATION TO TIGHTLY
STRUCTURED ETHNIC SOCIETIES

The relation of individual Christians and the congregations they form to the society in which they live is a factor of considerable weight in the growth of the Church and the spread of the saving Gospel of God. How does the society perceive the Christian? How does the Christian perceive the society? What does it mean to “become a Christian” vis-a-vis the social structure of the general public, and especially the homogeneous unit from which men and women are being invited to join the Christian faith? Contextualization is much talked about these days, as indigenization was a few years ago. The temptation is to think about contextualization or indigenization a) in superficial exterior ways (contextualization means using drums in worship, entering the church barefoot, or dancing in the church) and b) in merely theological ways (contextualization means avoiding Greek concepts like omniscience and speaking of God in ways to which converts have long been accustomed). There is, to be sure, something in each of these ideas of contextualization; but the powerful meaning of contextualization is that which has to do with the new Christians’s relationship to his people, his tribe, his caste, his *ethnos*. *That* is his life. His society very largely formed him, and gave him the language he speaks and the value system he holds, and the customs which feel good to him.

The new Christian society — the congregation — flourishes best when it thinks of itself as still a part of the old society. The converted Christian Jews at Pentecost thought of themselves as fulfilled *Jews*: Jews who had found the Messiah, Jews who still went to the temple, Jews who still married Jews. And the non-Christian Jews still thought of them as *our people*. Paul repeatedly claimed that he was still a Jew, “a Hebrew born of Hebrews, as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless” (Phil. 3:5).

Yet, of course, in regard to certain matters, the Christian and the congregation must think of itself as a new creation, which has

repented of its sins and walks in the light. It must do this while speaking the old language, living in ancestral houses, earning its living in accustomed ways, and being thoroughly a part of its culture and its ethnic linkage. Christians must not betray and abandon their ethnic units in becoming Christian. They must not *think of themselves* as doing this, and they *must not seem to others to have done this*.

At its deepest and most powerful level, contextualization means that Christians continue to be part of their social context, while at the same time being part of the new creation. This is not impossible, but it is difficult. A tremendous amount of slow church growth is caused by the move to Christian Faith being viewed *by convert and his people alike* as a traitorous abandonment of family and people. Whether that is what it is or not is not important. If it even looks that way, the Church will grow only slowly.

The *structure* out of which conversion to Christ takes place is of enormous importance. Does the convert leave it altogether, or remain — in some measure at least — a part of it? Are Christians those who renounce their own hereditary societies? Or do they stay in their own societies and there walk the path of discipleship to the Lord? Is each society a loose, atomistic crowd like that in a Western city, or a tight organism in which everyone has a place and no one moves unless all move? Is there freedom of religion, or is the whole weight of the state arrayed against any departure from the presently existing faith, whether that be animism, Hinduism, Marxism, or Roman Catholicism?

Any understanding of the Church in India, where the caste system is still influential and all congregations and denominations must speak to a public heavily conditioned by caste, requires careful attention to *the relation of Christians to caste society*. Other factors, of course, must be taken into account; but we are here concerned to develop a typology of the Church in India which focuses on this one vital and greatly neglected aspect of the spread of the Gospel and the health of the Church.

S. Vasantha Kumar of Bangalore, in the January, 1976, issue of the *International Review of Missions*, says,

In our diocese in Bangalore we conducted a survey on the growth of the Christian community. We found out that the growth is entirely due to children born to Christian parents and to the influx of Christians coming to the city from other places. This is so in spite of the fact that the diocese is involved in evangelistic work and many voluntary organizations are committed to the spreading of the Gospel. This example should motivate us to think about where exactly we are at fault. We must reconsider the methods we use. This also means listening to people of other faiths and to unbelievers. *We need training to see the image we create in the eyes of others.* . . . [italics supplied] (p. 112)

One can only agree and point out that the relationship of the Christian to tightly structured ethnic societies is a fact of enormous importance, and that ethnic societies are found in many, if not most, lands.

LEADERS, INSTITUTIONS, AND BUILDINGS OF THE CHURCH IN INDIA

The Church in India has hundreds of executive secretaries of various regions (called bishops, district superintendents, moderators, regional evangelists, and chairmen), and more than a hundred thousand pastors, elders, village leaders, workers, catechists, and the like. If to these are added the lay leaders of the churches — elders, deacons, Sunday-school teachers, business managers, and the like — and it is realized that all leaders, lay and ordained, are educated, able men and women, it will readily be seen that the Church in India is indeed a great Church.

Largely by virtue of its founding missions, it is distinguished by a considerable body of institutions: schools, hospitals, dispensaries, colleges, medical training schools, vocational schools, leprosy homes, business offices, printing presses, magazines; organizations for preparing radio broadcasts in India for transmission to stations outside the country, whence they are

beamed back to India; theological training schools and seminaries, institutes of social and religious research, provincial and national Christian councils, and denominational headquarters of all varieties. The land and properties involved run into hundreds of millions of rupees, dollars, and pounds.

In the seventies one of the most crucial issues is the scaling down of the institutional presence to one which the Church in India itself can maintain. Should such reductions be carried out or not? Is there danger that India will ban all monies from abroad, or is this a baseless fear? Do the institutions furnish a service to India as well as to the Christian community? Is such service one of the most valuable gifts the world Church can give? Or is it essential for the Church in India to strip down rapidly to the institutional burden she can carry unassisted? However these questions may be answered, they bear testimony to a tremendous institutional presence which is part of the Church in India.

This Church is marked by its buildings. During the last hundred years (and with the Syrian and Roman Churches, for centuries before that) the Church in India has erected numerous places of worship. Some have been cathedrals; some, imposing buildings used by the British regiments stationed in India; many have been humble sanctuaries. All urban churches were constructed of brick or stone, laid in lime and intended to last for decades if not centuries. As one travels through Kerala and sees the permanent buildings of the Roman Catholic and Syrian Churches, he realizes that church buildings are an ineradicable part of India. In practically all district headquarters and cities, and many major towns, well-built churches on public thoroughfares, surrounded by spacious grounds, often walled, are a common sight.

In village India, churches are of two kinds. The first buildings erected are usually of temporary materials — mud brick or wattle with light roofs, sometimes of thatch, sometimes country tile. Second generation buildings are of brick or perhaps stone, with permanent roofs and well-made doors and windows. Those few sections of the land through which a people movement to Christ

has run have little churches in most of the villages. In by far the greater part of the country, however, once out of the towns and cities, one finds very few if any church buildings.

Added to the places of worship and their adjacent parsonages are the numerous and often impressive buildings in which Christian institutions are housed, and the bungalows in which the missionaries used to live. These are less and less occupied by missionaries and have become residences of noted leaders of the Indian Church, district headquarters, denominational offices, and the like.

The burden of keeping up the buildings and paying taxes on the land on which they stand is heavy. As a result, in places in India where the Church is small and weak, buildings are often in poor condition. Whether the Church in these areas will be able to keep them all is an open question. Quite likely some will be sold, and gradually the amount of building which the Church in a given place can keep up will be established by trial and error. How to maintain the physical presence and the base which an actively evangelizing Church needs, while the actual Church there is small and weak, is one of the perplexing questions facing the Christian enterprise in India today. The cordial cooperation between the Indian Church and the missions from abroad, which would easily make such a base possible, often meets with opposition, deriving from national aspiration which regards any dependence on foreign resources as demeaning and is apparently willing not to evangelize unless it can be done on 100 percent Indian resources.

In parts of North East and South India the Church is strong. The last thirty years have seen considerable additional building and an added number of new institutions. Much of this has been done through Indian resources. However, even in these two areas, evangelism among non-Christians is weak and sparse.

THE MATRIX — THE CASTE SYSTEM

The Church in India is rising in a thousand places in intensely caste conscious societies and is colored by caste. Yet we read that in Christ “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave