The Legacy of Alan R. Tippett

Darrell L. Whiteman

Alan R. Tippett (1911-88) was a man who emerged from twenty years of missionary service with the Australian Methodist Mission in Fiji to become a significant missiologist contributing to the so-called church growth school of missiology. His passion was to enable the missionary enterprise to move more quickly from the colonial to the postcolonial era, and he came to believe that anthropological insights were indispensable in that endeavor. In this article we will consider several areas where Tippett has left his missiological legacy through his impeccable scholarship and wide range of publications.

Early Life

Alan Richard Tippett was the descendant of devout Wesleyan, lower-middle-class tin-miners who emigrated from Cornwall, England, in 1853 and settled in Victoria, Australia. Tippett frequently credited his Cornish background for his “defiant spirit which refused to admit defeat” when the going got tough, which it often did for him. The elder of two sons of a Wesleyan pastor, Tippett’s school days were filled with unpleasant experiences of being bullied by schoolmates, and on occasion being misunderstood and unappreciated by teachers. These memories haunted him all his life and often drove him to being a perfectionist in order to prove himself. Tippett was profoundly influenced by his father, who was an amateur naturalist of some renown in Victoria and passed on to his son Alan a scientific mind, a voracious curiosity about the world, and an innate ability to organize and classify data.

Tippett’s “Aldersgate experience” of faith came one evening on the way home from work in 1929, passing by an open-air evangelistic meeting in the Victoria Market in Melbourne (p. 43). Shortly afterward he knew a vocation in missions was to be his calling. “I was ready there and then to go to China or New Guinea or wherever, just as I was” (p. 44). Reluctantly taking the advice of his father, however, he pursued the full ministerial training course (1931-34), earning his L.Th. at Queens College, Melbourne University. His training, however, had no cross-cultural dimension to it and “no course in Missions, either its Theology, Theory or History” (p. 52). He resented this lack of appropriate training and years later, when he encountered formal anthropological studies, realized what a tragedy it was to have been sent to Fiji without adequate preparation.

In 1938 he was ordained in the Methodist Church and also married Edna Deckert, to whom he had been engaged for several years. In the following three years they served two rural pastorate in Victoria, had their first of three daughters, and were accepted by their mission board to serve in Fiji.

Missionary Work in Fiji

After being denied even two or three weeks of specific missionary training before departing Australia, Tippett arrived in Fiji on May 6, 1941, walking right into what he perceived to be a thoroughly colonial mission.

In this situation he realized the importance of becoming a learner and so threw himself into the task of language and culture learning with great enthusiasm, setting aside a minimum of five hours a day for this purpose (p. 121). He was obviously serious about language learning, for within eight or nine weeks of his arrival he preached (or rather read) his first short sermon in Fijian without a translator (p. 123).

It did not take him long to recognize that it would be very easy to get sidetracked and swallowed up in administrative duties, noting that, a man may become so involved with this kind of administration that it takes possession of his whole life and hinders his language learning and thereby his witness. A missionary at everyone’s beck and call, however patient and loving his service, if he never learns the language to speak the things of the Spirit, is a pathetic figure. In my missionary research the wide world over I have met this person. How sad! (P. 123)

He soon discovered the worldview of the Fijians, recognizing that “more and more I became aware of the Hebrew character of it all and . . . I discovered what I had really never discovered in all my training—the Old Testament world” (p. 128). He felt his biggest missionary challenge in Fiji was “how to interpret a New Testament message to an Old Testament people” (p. 168). Early on in Fiji, Tippett began to question the picture of mission that had been given to him by his home promotion and deputationists. He remembers,

Our promotion had been built on the idea that the island people were “child races,” that they were delightful children growing up, that some day with continuing mission, with more advanced education, they would mature and be able to stand on their own two feet and be an independent church. I began to question the whole concept of the “primitive” and the “child mind” as a concept of western conceit and supposed superiority. (P. 131)

During Tippett’s twenty years in Fiji (1941-61) he served in various capacities in five locations, but his pattern of missionary work always involved heavy itineration through Fijian villages in order to stay in close contact with the world in which Fijians lived. And he always went on these treks barefoot.

I had tried boots, shoes, sandals, and sandals, all of which damaged the feet. I found the Fijian way the best, once one had learned how to

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walk on coral. I continued with this until I left Fiji. It was the only way of crossing coconut trunk bridges in the rain. I also discovered why the good Lord had given us big toes. (P. 166)

During his first term Tippett was instrumental in helping to write a new constitution for the mission that would pave the way for the colonial mission to become an indigenous church, a goal he hoped would be accomplished within twenty years of the time the new constitution went into effect in 1946. Its manifest purpose was to bring an end to the long era of colonial paternalism that Tippett and other younger missionaries believed would never die of its own accord. "It had to be deliberately 'put to sleep,' and this is what we set out to do," he said. The major issue was where the decision making and ultimate authority lay. "We argued for the Fijian majority as over against the Board, or even the European Synod. We were convinced, that [i.e., European

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 paternalism] had to go" (p. 169). And it did, with independence coming to the church in 1964, owing in no small measure to Tippett's tireless efforts to bring it about.

Although Tippett was thrust into positions of leadership in the mission's educational centers, he says, "I had not seen myself as an institutional man. It was in my itinerations, my preaching, evangelism and pastoral counselling that I found my most satisfying experiences. What spiritual gift God had given me seemed almost tailor-made for Tippett. He says, "Surely I could never have found a more suitable field for testing out the theoretical base of church growth missiology" (p. 300). It was an important turning point for McGavran and Tippett came in 1963 with a consultation on church growth called by the Department of World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches to examine the two men's viewpoint, discuss the problems it raised, and make a statement for the world church. Out of this consultation came a good statement on church growth that McGavran and Tippett used widely in subsequent years. Moreover, Tippett met Victor Hayward, who later invited him to participate in the "Churches in Mission" project, which sent him to the Solomon Islands in 1964. Tippett's research there led to what is probably his best-known book, Solomon Islands Christianity (1967).

The Solomon Islands research project (August-December 1964), in which he compared Methodist and Anglican mission work, seemed almost tailor-made for Tippett. He says, "Surely I could never have found a more suitable field for testing out the theoretical base of church growth missiology" (p. 300). It was an important "rite of passage" from the role of a missionary to Fiji to becoming a missiologist to the world. He summed up the experience, noting that

We . . . shared convictions from our missionary experiences. We sought to modify colonial, paternalist mission strategy. We were aware of the fact that anthropological research had something important to say to Christian mission. We were aware that there were cases of growth and non-growth that called for scientific study. We all believed that in the world we faced days of unprecedented opportunity for Christian expansion. We were all drawn to Donald McGavran as the man who had most articulated these convictions, and was disposed to gather men together to study them. (P. 277)

Tippett had gone to Eugene expecting to earn an M.A. during his study, but neither the Institute of Church Growth nor Northwest Christian College could give one. He thus felt "hoodwinked" into doing a Ph.D. in anthropology at the University of Oregon, located across the street from Northwest Christian College in Eugene.

At the University of Oregon, Tippett's mentor was Homer Barnett, the leading applied anthropologist at the time. The two hit it off, as Barnett was pleased to have a mature student with such a rich resource of twenty years of "fieldwork" in Fiji, and Tippett was thrilled with Barnett's theories and models of culture change, which he found to be so illuminating for missiology. Of Barnett's book Innovation: The Basis of Cultural Change (1953), Tippett wrote, "Barnett's work on Innovation was the most influential book on my life, with the exception of the Bible . . . . It was the most exciting thing I ever found in academia" (p. 288).

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after my term with McGavran I could look more critically at a situation with what he called "church growth eyes." After my tutelage under Homer Barnett I saw situations pulsating with innovation, natural
and directed culture change, and I found a new world of models and demonstrated anthropological principles. My terms of reference had been to look at everything critically, but helpfully. I thought I could see a whole area of application of anthropology for the sake of the Gospel . . . . I felt now I could face my fellow anthropologists and McGavran himself as a peer. I was raring to go. (P. 316)

In 1965 McGavran was invited by Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, to found a new School of World Mission. Tippett notes that “McGavran was not interested, unless they would consider taking over the whole project of the Institute of Church Growth, including both himself and myself” (p. 317). Although Tippett spent only twelve years of his life at Fuller (1965-77), it is within this relatively short time span that he made his mark on the wider missiological world.

The Legacies of Alan Tippett

Let us move now from the chronological development of his thought to the substantive areas where he has left a legacy. Beyond the legacy of being instrumental in ushering in the transition from colonial mission to indigenous church in Fiji, Tippett has contributed to missionary strategy, missiological theory, teaching, scholarship, and publications.

Contribution to missionary strategy. Although Tippett was not as prominent on the lecture circuit as his colleague Donald McGavran, there is no doubt that through his careful research, strong anthropological underpinnings, and theological soundness Tippett gave much-needed credence to the emerging church growth movement. Tippett, more than his colleague, saw the necessity of using multiple models, methodologies, and approaches to the study of church growth. For example, he required his doctoral students to write their dissertations using as-yet unexplored anthropological models or ethnohistorical methods applied to missiology, and no two students ever used the same models and theories under Tippett. This approach gave a richness and depth to church growth studies that was much needed. He was always open to employing new methods of critique and never shied away from self-examination.

To McGavran’s church growth concepts of discipling (quantitative growth) and perfecting (qualitative growth), Tippett stressed the importance of organic growth. He summarized it thus:

Those of us who have studied intensively the planting and growth of churches on the mission field have found that the churches that grow best and vibrate with indigenous life have paid attention to three things—a concern for winning large numbers of people from the world, a concern for effective nurture within the fellowship, and a concern for the development of functional roles and opportunities for service. Each of these stimulates a form of church growth, which we may call quantitative, qualitative and organic.

The strategy of church growth owes much to Alan Tippett, although the name of Donald McGavran is most often associated with this movement.

Contribution to missiological theory. Tippett saw missiology as an interdisciplinary field of study and brought to that field competencies in anthropology, history, and theology. He was driven by the conviction that missiology must be holistic and interdisciplinary, always striving for synthesis out of analysis, and that one area of its development must not occur at the expense of another’s neglect.

In addition to the anthropological contributions Tippett made to missiological theory, he also helped shape a number of key concepts that became popular in missiological discourse. Among these included the concepts of functional substitutes, power encounter, people movements, and indigenous church. Tippett also demonstrated over and over again in his research that missionaries might be the advocates of change, but it is the receptors who are the real innovators and bring change to their lives and culture. There are many more we could highlight, and of course they are not all original with him, for he borrowed many from anthropology, but he gave them prominence because of his careful research and insightful missiological application. I believe he was enthralled with anthropology because it opened up to him a whole new world of understanding mission, and he came to see it as indispensable for missionary training. It was this very dimension that he regretted so much having missed in his own preparation for missionary service in Fiji. “Anthropology does not bring individuals to Christ,” he said, “but it shows missionaries how they may be more effective and less of a hindrance in doing so.” In his efforts to create a postcolonial missiology, he saw anthropology as fundamental, noting that “in the area of Christian education for mission, the inclusion of courses in anthropology is essential, and that for the post-colonial era of mission it is inconceivable that missionaries should be sent out without exposure to this discipline” (p. 339). His enthusiasm for anthropology in the service of mission was contagious, noting once that “I never found any aspect of social or cultural anthropology which did not speak somehow to mission” (p. 333).

Contribution to missiological teaching and scholarship. Tippett’s strengths in teaching were evidenced more in the one-on-one mentoring mode than as a classroom lecturer. For those students who wanted to mine the depths of his insight and share from his reservoir of mission experience, any time spent with him, whether in class or out, was always worthwhile. I have vivid memories of meeting with him in his office surrounded by his marvelous library. He would throw himself into the conversation, asking me if I had read this book or that one, or if I was familiar with this author’s perspective or that anthropological concept. And then he would pull from his shelves book after book to illustrate his points. It was all deliciously scintillating for an eager doctoral student.

He alerted students to the diachronic and historical dimension of mission by bringing to bear ethnohistorical methods on church growth studies. And he always insisted that events be interpreted in their proper context, not from the perspective of another time or place. He could get “picky,” much to the annoyance of his colleagues, as for example, when he held up for six years the publication of People Movements in Southern Polynesia until he could check the accuracy of a single paragraph to make
sure he had interpreted it according to its proper context. And he was mighty glad he did!

Finally, we cannot conclude this section without acknowledging Alan Tippett’s role as founding editor (1973-75) of the journal *Missiology*. In 1972 the American Society of Missiology was founded, and plans were laid for its journal *Missiology* to continue *Practical Anthropology*, which was being terminated by its sponsor, the American Bible Society. Tippett, who was absent at the organizing meeting, felt pushed into the editor’s role, which he neither sought nor wanted. Nevertheless, he was ideally suited for this role because of his anthropological background and breadth of missiological acumen. He notes,

In that three years we covered most of the aspects of missiology, published material from every Continent, by missionaries and nationals. I tried to maintain a balance. If an article was at one extreme I sought another to balance it. It was a middle of the road publication between Evangelical and Conciliar emphases, though we were specific about standing on the Great Commission and Scripture. (P. 444)

**Conclusion**

We have witnessed how through teaching, publishing, and editing Alan Tippett made so many important contributions to the field of missiology. Reflecting in his unpublished autobiography he surmised,

If I have made any worthwhile contributions to missiology for the post-colonial era, it has probably been in the area of the theoretical base, the development of research methodology, the application of anthropological principles positively to church growth, and the exploration of research models for pin-pointing matters for concentration of evangelistic thrust and pastoral care. (P. 446)

Alan Tippett was a remarkable and complex man, and only a fraction of his story has been told here. The missionary world is much richer today because of the legacies he has left us. He was that rare breed who combined the careful, meticulous eye of the scholar with the passion of a fiery evangelist. Few missiologists have blended so well the two worlds of ministry and scholarship. Perhaps it will be fitting to close with his own thoughts on how his scholarly pursuits were motivated by the drive for practical results. He says, “I have aimed at bringing anthropology as a science, the Bible as a record of God and humanity in relationship, and Christian mission as its medium for demonstration until the end of the age, together in a missiology adequate for the post-colonial era” (p. 447).

**Notes**

1. Alan R. Tippett, “No Continuing City” (unpublished autobiography, 1988), p. 32. Subsequent page citations in the text refer to this manuscript.
6. Ibid., p. 34.
13. Today this library of more than 16,000 books and documents is the Tippett Collection of St. Mark’s Library in Canberra, Australia.

**Bibliography**

**Selected Works by Alan R. Tippett**


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