



the Gospel and Our Culture

a network for encouraging the encounter in north america



San Antonio, 1989

*James Edward Leslie Newbigin
Born 8 December 1909
Died 30 January 1998*

APOSTLE OF FAITH AND WITNESS

*George R. Hunsberger
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On February 7, 1998, I was present for Leslie Newbigin's funeral service in the company of his family, his congregation and many of his other friends. The news of his death on January 30 had seemed to signal a great loss to the world church which he had mentored so much and so well. Gathered there in the Dulwich Grove United Reformed Church in the south of London, it felt as though we were a token community representing so many around the world who are in his debt.

As we worshiped God, I was filled with many fond memories of the times when I had been with Bishop Newbigin while he was alive. And how alive he was! Alive to the world and its people, alive to the deep significance of the presence of the Christian church within the world and the gospel which is its center, alive to God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—whose redeeming presence fills the earth with its true meaning. No more fitting testament to that could there have been than the moment in the service when his son John and granddaughter Eleanor read a couple of Leslie's now famous limericks,

after which John blurted out a spontaneous and tear-filled prayer: "Thank you God for this blithe spirit, for such a simple and loving man. Amen." And no more fitting elaboration could have been made of the ways Lesslie had impacted so many in the world church than the greetings brought by Bishop Azariah of the Church of South India and the tribute given by Lesslie's longtime colleague Dan Beeby. (Dan's comments follow.)

I never was around Bishop Newbigin when he was not working hard to cultivate for the church a sense of its authority to preach the gospel, and its authority to believe that it is true. In deep response to the crisis of missional nerve in the churches of the West, which had become ultimately a crisis of faith, he seemed to have been called to be pastor to us all. That pastoral quality was much in evidence from the beginning of his ministry as bishop in the Church of South India and throughout his years in India. His book of meditations shared with the clergy of the Madras Diocese during the 1960s and early 1970s, *The Good Shepherd* (1977), is a testament to his unique way of envisioning pastoral leadership for the church. In his obituary in the London Times (January 31), this very anomalous position for a lifelong Presbyterian to be in, to be a bishop, was noted. But, the *Times* reports, "the pastoral simplicity with which he interpreted the office of a bishop, of which he gave a vivid picture in 1951 in his *South India Diary*, allayed any Presbyterian suspicions of prelacy."

But no less, he pastored us in the churches of the West. He gave us ways to believe, whether under the privatizing effects of modernity or the pluralist social arrangements of postmodernity. In our progress-and-success culture, he helped us see that death finally mocks all our greatest achievements and our only hope lies in the risen Christ, not in the permanence of our accomplishments. That has pastored me more than once in moments when failure seemed to tear at the fabric of hope.

In June of 1997, this pastoral quality was one of the features Wilbert Shenk highlighted in his remarks at a dinner held in Newbigin's honor by Samford University's Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama, on what I believe was Newbigin's last visit to the USA. (Wilbert's comments are included below.) Gerry Anderson and I were also asked to make remarks about his contributions, and we both underscored that same thing. On that occasion I commented also on the fact that Lesslie had been significant because he persistently engaged the toughest missiological issues. And by doing so during the last two decades of his life in regard to the missionary challenge facing the churches of the West, he instigated a movement.

The GOCN is Newbigin's theological heir, set in motion and framed by his challenging vision. In fact, the GOCN is the fruit of his direct challenge. His death has sent me back again and again to the moment in 1987 when he posed it very pointedly. He and Dan Beeby had been invited to the USA for an Ecumenical Mission Consultation co-sponsored by the Division of Overseas Ministries of the National Council of Churches of Christ, USA and the U.S. Catholic

Mission Association. The 110 participants came together to explore "common witness" in the areas of the most pressing missional challenges. Faith in the modern world was one theme identified and Newbigin was invited to help us address it. After much interest had been expressed throughout the week, Lesslie and Dan sensed that an opportunity for action might be missed. They called six or seven of us into a room at the end of the week and asked us point blank: What are you going to do about this on this side of the Atlantic? We gulped and came up with a collective "We're not sure." But we decided to stay in touch and to begin a simple newsletter to facilitate that. That was the beginning of the Gospel and Our Culture Network in North America.

The next major step to become more than a newsletter occurred on the occasion of Newbigin's lectures at Western Theological Seminary in October of 1990 (published as *Truth to Tell*). Twenty of the couple of hundred who by then were receiving the newsletter were invited to the lectures and asked to plan to stay behind for another 24 hours to give shape to the agenda that a network could and should pursue. The activities and publications that have emerged since have flowed out of that gathering.

I am convinced that Bishop Newbigin's death will not in the least dampen the momentum of this movement of which the GOCN is a part. There is emerging some very clear evidence that in fact his vision and perspective is finding deep resonance in the soul of a newly emerging younger generation of leadership across the church because of the way he grounds faith and witness in a distinctly postmodern, pluralist world in which they have grown up and into which their calling from God is taking them. My prediction is that Lesslie's writings these last two decades will not wane in their influence but will in fact blossom in ways we have only begun to imagine. And the work of many hands taking up the challenge he left us will pursue the agenda he knew would always be by its very nature an "unfinished" one, the calling to give faithful witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ in all its challenging relevance! ■

Lesslie Newbigin

Rev Dan Beeby
Birmingham, U.K.

Brought up an English Presbyterian, it seems I can hardly remember a time when I didn't know Lesslie as a legend but we first made contact in 1965 when our two sons conjointly had a difference of opinion with their headmaster and were not welcome in the school for a spell. Lesslie and Helen were in Geneva, my wife was in Taiwan, I was in New York and tomorrow was my doctoral oral. With visions of our erring sons loose on London streets, Lesslie and I corresponded. When I was farewelled on retirement in 1986, Lesslie read my letter. He had kept the

letter.

Where does our thanksgiving begin? Lesslie would have us begin with God and for Helen greatly loved and greatly loving. What other retiring bishop's wife would, with two suitcases and a rucksack, have taken a bus from Madras to Bromley? Need I say more?

We give thanks for a man of prayer. When he asked you how you were you knew it was a prayer backed question.

Thanks for Lesslie as Bible expositor. Why is his commentary on John so little referred to?

For Lesslie as theologian. One of his biographers sees him as one of a handful of the outstanding Christian thinkers of the twentieth century.

For Lesslie the missionary statesman who was first a missionary, the missiologist who took his missionarying into his theology, his epistemology, his political and social thinking and his limericks.

For Lesslie the brilliant, rapid writer—*The Other Side of 1984* written in just over a week.

For the world famous preacher perhaps happiest in an Indian village and Winson Green.

As Presbyterian bishop, as teacher, as raconteur - 'Did you ever hear the one about John Baillie and Karl Barth?'

As speaker to children. Not too long ago, some children in Selly Oak were helped to see the world upside down when the aged bishop stood on his head! Not a single one of his many doctorates fell out of his pockets. His episcopal dignity was intact.

As spell binding lecturer on many topics often with the same great themes but always you heard them for the first time.

As traveler fearful of wasting a minute. He wasn't often late but sometimes like Waterloo it was a damned close run thing.

As ecumenical prophet bearing the cares of all the churches on his soul.

As ecclesiastical civil servant wanting to be in a pulpit or preaching in a street.

Lesslie, once at a high table in Cambridge, sat next to the man who had been vice chancellor in the roaring sixties of student revolt. When Lesslie confessed that he was John Newbigin's father, the vice chancellor murmured, "A worthy opponent."

One of the many biographers of Lesslie should entitle their work *Lesslie in Armor* and structure it round Lesslie's numerous struggles and conflicts. They began early; many were on his mind in the last months and a yet unpublished book may yet produce more. Sometimes he persuaded, sometimes he didn't, but I cannot imagine there was any protagonist who would not say, "A worthy opponent." Like son like father.

His identification with India gave him a deep understanding of its religious faiths. This and his total commitment to Christ produced a contribution to interfaith dialogue which cannot be ignored. As on so many major issues, agree or disagree, approve or disapprove, you have to face him. There is no honest way round. We disagreed on two things:

how long it took to the railway station or airport. And we never discussed Margaret Thatcher.

Some of us are tolerant because we have so much to tolerate in ourselves: a sin-based tolerance that sometimes tolerates the intolerable. Lesslie's tolerance was cruciform giving him a sternness in his mercy. He could afford to be severe but the severity was healing.

He gave one the self-honesty to know one was the monkey on his barrel organ but yet the monkey felt a little leonine; knowing you were four feet high you felt basketball tall and inspired with a proper confidence. Treating you as an equal he would even say he was indebted and really believed it.

He couldn't say "No" to any opportunity to serve, writing numerous introductions to other people's books and covering the globe to lecture, preach, broadcast and debate. He knew everybody and talked easily with the great but easiest with the humble, poor and lost. When he dropped a name it was always the name of Jesus.

Like Barth, he could sum up his theology in 'Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.' I have often puzzled over how the knowledgeable St. Paul, could say he knew only one thing: 'Jesus Christ and him crucified' and have often thought that the Christian life is the endeavor to fathom that text. Lesslie helps me immensely. Able to write and lecture on so many subjects and always with illumination, the heart of it all was so very simple: Jesus, Lord and Savior, Jesus true, Jesus public truth, Jesus universal truth, Jesus the Truth.

To know Lesslie was to live in the light of the resurrection and to enable us today to say 'goodbye' with the full assurance that God is with him and he with God. We are allowed to be sorry for ourselves—the family for a wonderful husband, father and grandfather; some of us for a mentor, a colleague and friend; all of us for an exceptional man—but we are not allowed to be sorry for Lesslie. We know (and of course, all knowing begins with faith) that he is having the time of his new life. He basks in the light of the true Enlightenment. His mansion in his Father's house is crowded. He's probably already met Joe Oldham and Archie Craig, Robert Macky, Visser 't Hooft, Polanyi and of course, Augustine. Now, he is being measured for his light debating armor in case Descarte, Locke and Kant are there. Perhaps now is the time for us to take up arms. The agenda is still unfinished but Lesslie has written his last chapter and succeeding ones are ours to write. We have a new vocation.

Lesslie never touched anything that he did not adorn, illuminate and advance. His influence before 1983 was enormous but with *The Other Side of 1984* and its successors, I believe there was something totally new, long roots but new. A new mission for a new cultural situation. A new analysis, new eyes for us to see with, an old faith renewed and a new and proper confidence born. In a faltering age with hope run low, he swung the lamp of resurrection over increasing gloom. We can no longer leave it to Lesslie; his farewell is also a call, almost a command. Our agenda, things to be done. ■

A TRIBUTE TO BISHOP NEWBIGIN

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Recently a student from Japan told me how he reads a book. His first step is to form a picture or image of what the author is communicating. He does this by reading the introduction and perhaps the conclusion and then sets the book aside—even if this takes several weeks—until he's got the image in focus. He then has the structure and message in mind when he reads the whole book. The act of reading is to fill in the details.

Reflecting on this approach to reading, I recognized that I, too, read certain authors through an image of what they represent. Lesslie Newbigin is one whose communication and writings are transmitted to me through an image. The image through which I "read" Lesslie Newbigin is multi-faceted.

(1) *PASTOR with a missionary's heart / missionary with a pastor's heart.* For our family this has personal meaning. The spring of 1990 while I was working with Bishop Newbigin and others associated with the Gospel and Our Culture Programme in Birmingham, U.K., I received word about difficult problems our college-student son was facing and I needed to return home immediately. As I was leaving, Bishop Lesslie handed me an envelop marked "to be opened in flight." In that envelop was a note saying, "I will be praying for your son and your family every day." In a later exchange of letters, Lesslie said: "From my old teacher at Cambridge, H. H. Farmer, I learned an important lesson about prayer. When praying about a particular concern, I keep watching until I see sign of change. As soon as the situation shifts, I move from PETITION to PRAISE."

This pastoral authority has served the church in a multitude of ways and on many occasions, including chairing the Committee of Twenty-five of the World Council of Churches in the early 1950s when theological titans like Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr were members and did not find it easy to work together. It was this missionary pastor from India who managed to hold the group together long enough to produce a statement on the Christian hope for submission to the Evanston Assembly in 1954.

(2) *The second facet of my image of Lesslie Newbigin is that of PROPHET.* He had the ability to see what lies ahead and articulate it. More than that, Newbigin clarified the issues and laid out an agenda. For example, he has forthrightly grasped the nettle of Christian witness in relation to other religions. He has faced the subtleties and complexities of the question without surrendering his commitment to Jesus Christ as lord and savior of all peoples.

His readiness to "color outside the lines" showed up in Newbigin's early recognition of the immense significance of the Pentecostal movement for the larger Christian movement in the twentieth century. In his seminal book, *The Household of God* (1954), he devoted a chapter to the Pentecostals, thus opening the way to constructive engagement between Pentecostals and other Christians in subsequent years.

Newbigin as prophet is most clearly expressed in the main preoccupation of his life since 1981, i.e., arousing Christians in the West to their *missionary* responsibility to their own culture. He has been instrumental in mounting a "campaign" that began with the writing of a small book, *The Other Side of 1984*, which provoked the British Council of Churches to organize The Gospel and Our Culture Programme, an effort that formally concluded in 1992 but which continues

in other forms due to Lesslie Newbigin's continual outpouring of provocative books and articles.

This movement has been "spear-headed" by one who had given a lifetime of service outside the West and who "in retirement" never stopped thinking missionary thoughts. Instead he insisted on raising the basic mission questions that had to be addressed to his own culture. It was an action he had learned in India.

(3) *The third facet is that of POET.* One could not be in the company of the good bishop for long without encountering his wonderful sense of humor and his gift as a raconteur. But to combat boredom he composed poetry. Here is a sample. The setting was a warm, drowsy afternoon during a session of the World Council of Churches Central Committee surrounded by an illustrious but sleepy company of ecumenical leaders:

Florovsky is speaking again,
His meaning is not at all plain.
While Franklin C. Fry will never
say die,
It clearly gives Earnest A. Payne.

D. T. Niles glanced over and saw what Newbigin had written, snatched it up and passed it along the row, to the merriment of all.

(4) *The fourth facet is that of PREACHER.* There is probably no role in which Lesslie Newbigin seems more at home and thus entirely himself than when he stands in the pulpit. His unabashed love of the Word and outstanding ability to exposit it shine forth.

My wife and I will always cherish the memory of Easter Sunday 1992 and the service at Weoly Hill United Reformed Church led by Bishop Newbigin. His own joy in the resurrection of Jesus Christ warmed and filled the congregation with hope. ■