

### 3. FROM A CHRISTOCENTRIC TO A TRINITARIAN MISSIONARY ECCLESIOLOGY: (1959-1998)

#### 3.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter traces the historical development of Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology from the time he became the General Secretary of the International Missionary Council in 1959 until his death in 1998. Newbigin's 1958 publication *One Body, One Gospel, One World* marked a consensus in ecumenical thinking on the church and mission that had developed from the time of the IMC meeting in Tambaram in 1938. However, this agreement was already under attack. Within three years Newbigin himself would begin to see the inadequacy of his ecclesiology. A Christocentric ecclesiology must be replaced by a Christocentric-Trinitarian ecclesiology. His first halting attempt to articulate this new ecclesiology is found in *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* (1963g). Many other publications would follow in which the details of a Trinitarian ecclesiology would be expanded.

Apart from the introduction and conclusion, this chapter examines Newbigin's shift in six sections. The first section outlines his life from the time he joined the IMC in 1959 until his death in 1998. A second section briefly describes his shift from a Christocentric to a Christocentric-Trinitarian ecclesiology. A third section examines the two primary factors that prompted this rethinking of ecclesiology—the revolutionary international context and the theological and missiological shifts within the ecumenical tradition. The remaining three sections sketch the development and application of this ecclesiology during his years in the IMC and WCC firstly, in his bishopric in Madras thereafter, and in his multifaceted ministry in Britain at the end of his life.

Newbigin did not use the terms 'Christocentric ecclesiology' or 'Trinitarian ecclesiology.' These terms are chosen to best characterize the shift that took place between 1957-1961. During the decade of the 1950s Newbigin's understanding of God's mission was focussed in the church. A lecture in Bossey in 1957 presented Newbigin with an occasion to reexamine his understanding. That lecture shows signs of a broader understanding of the work of the Triune God. However, the next year he would write *One Body, One Gospel, One World* (1958) that still remained in the older Christocentric paradigm. He moved to become general secretary of the IMC in 1959. By the New Delhi Assembly (1961) he was aware of the need to expand his understanding of God's mission to a Trinitarian perspective. His first attempt in writing to do this was *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* (1963). Newbigin worked out his understanding of the church in the context of the mission of the Triune God for the remainder of his life.

#### 3.2. OVERVIEW OF NEWBIGIN'S LIFE (1961-1998)

The last forty-seven years of Newbigin's life fall into three main sections—six years as an administrator in the IMC and WCC (1959-1965), nine years as bishop of Madras (1965-1974), and twenty-four years of “retirement” in Britain where he taught missiology, pastored an inner city church, initiated the gospel and western culture movement worldwide, and wrote numerous books and articles (1974-1998).

For the first two years of this period of Newbigin's life (1959-1961), he occupied the position of General Secretary of the International Missionary Council. In keeping with the pattern of a pastoral bishop, Newbigin spent more than eighteen of those months travelling to various parts of the world—Africa, Latin America, the Pacific, North America, and Europe. He visited the national councils that made up the membership of the IMC to understand their needs. A second duty that occupied his time during these travels was the delivery of numerous speeches, public addresses, and academic lectures. His exposure to the church throughout the world and the topics that he addressed had a shaping effect on his ecclesiology.

At the 1961 New Delhi assembly the IMC was integrated into the WCC. This meant that Newbigin's job description changed from general secretary of the IMC to director of the Division (later Commission) on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches. During this time continued exposure to the world church, involvement in many of the different programmes of the World Council of Churches, editing the *International Review of Missions*, close association with Willem A. Visser 't Hooft, general secretary of the WCC, and active participation in the theological debates rising out of the secular decade all contributed to shaping Newbigin's convictions about the church.

In 1965 Newbigin returned to India as the bishop of Madras in the Church of South India. He was responsible for the pastoral oversight of one thousand congregations and over one hundred presbyters (pastors of local congregations) in a booming urban setting of over three million. The public square of Madras forced Newbigin to find concrete expressions for his convictions about a missionary church rooted in the work of the Triune God in history. His goal to enable those churches to be vivid signs of the kingdom led him into a deepened understanding of the nature and mission of the church and especially the social calling of the Christian community. During this time his involvement in the ecumenical tradition continued unabated and that tradition, including its conflict with the evangelical tradition, continued to shape his ecclesiological development.

Newbigin returned to Britain in 1974. He immediately took up a position teaching the theology of mission and ecumenical studies at Selly Oak Colleges (1974-1979). This gave him an opportunity to think and write more systematically on mission. Six years later he took responsibility for pastoring a small inner city church in Birmingham that was about to be closed by the Birmingham District Council of the United Reformed Church. He remained at that post for the next eight years (1980-1988). Throughout the last ten years of his life, he continued to write and lecture widely. Upon returning to Britain, he soon realized that the power of the modern scientific worldview and an accompanying religious pluralism had crippled the witness of the church in the West. He tackled this new mission field which he describes as “the most difficult missionary frontier in the contemporary world” and “the one of which the Churches have been—on the whole—so little conscious” (1993h:235). In his lectures, writings, and efforts at

establishing a Gospel and Our Culture movement, he raised awareness of this “mission field” around the world. As to ecclesiology, this period is significant in that Newbigin weaves together all the various strands of his ecclesiology developed in his earlier years as an essential part of his call for a missionary engagement with western culture. A missionary understanding of the church is central to his mission in western culture project.

### 3.3. THE SHIFT TO A TRINITARIAN ECCLESIOLOGY

The integration of the IMC and WCC was finalized at the WCC assembly in New Delhi in 1961. That event was the result of a process of theological reflection that had developed since the time of IMC meeting at Tambaram in 1938. This period was church-centric, and the union of the IMC and the WCC into one body was the institutional symbol and expression of the conviction that dominated this period: church and mission could not be separated. However, it was precisely at this assembly that there was evidence that the ecumenical consensus was beginning to break down. Stimulated by revolutionary events, new winds were blowing in the WCC that would expose the inadequacy of a church-centric basis for mission. It was during these debates in New Delhi that Newbigin himself recognized that his understanding of a missionary church as expressed in *One Body, One Gospel, One World* was inadequate. As he comments years later: “It was too exclusively church-centred in its understanding of mission. Only a fully Trinitarian doctrine would be adequate...” (1993h:187; cf.1993h:144).

The challenge to a Christocentric and ecclesiocentric understanding of mission and church was already evident in Willingen. The *missio Dei* had been formulated as a theological basis for the church’s mission. However, the meaning of God’s mission was hotly contested. The critical debates centred around two closely related issues. The first was the sufficiency of a Christological basis for mission. Many American participants believed that this was too narrow a basis and that a satisfactory one could only be established on a Trinitarian theology. Closely related to this was the second concern: the place of the church in God’s mission. Many believed that mission as merely the continuation through history of the community established by Jesus was too narrow. This church-centric conception of mission did not take into account the events of world history. Was God merely at work in the church or also in the events of world history? The Willingen conference never came to complete agreement on these issues.

These reflections were driven by the concern about the church’s solidarity with the world amidst its pain and sorrow. Though this theme found expression in the official documents, it did not command wide support. The momentum began to pick up, however, and by the next decade, it dominated the agenda of mission. Willingen articulated the concern as follows: “The Church’s words and works, its whole life of mission, are to be a witness to what God has done, is doing, and will do in Christ. But this word ‘witness’ cannot possibly mean that the Church stands over against the world, detached from it and regarding it from a position of superior righteousness or security” (Goodall 1953:191). Christians do not live in an enclave separate from the world but are to be God’s people in the world (*ibid.*). Therefore, the church is to identify itself deeply

with the world's distress, perplexity and sorrow. The interim report "The Theological Basis of the Missionary Obligation," which was not formally adopted by the council but received as a basis for further study, expands this solidarity with the world to include movements outside the church. This was a harbinger of things to come. "The Church in carrying out its mission is required to identify itself with the world, not only in its constant sin and tragedy, but also in the moments when the world acts in accordance with the grace of God more effectively than the churches themselves" (Goodall 1958:243). We can discern by faith ways that God is exercising His sovereignty in personal life, in the movements of political and social life where He both shows His judgement and confronts whole societies with new opportunities, and in processes of scientific discovery where he opens up new areas of creation with the promises of hope and also possibilities of disaster (Goodall 1958:240).

Newbigin relates that he could not understand what Hans Hoekendijk, Paul Lehmann and others were driving at during these debates. However, in the context of this growing emphasis Newbigin returned to the Scriptures. On the way to Bossey to give a lecture on the mission of the church in the contemporary world (1959a), Newbigin "spent the entire night on the plane from Bombay to Rome reading right through the New Testament and noting every reference to 'the world.'" This exercise was to have significant results.

The result of this was to set my mind moving in a new direction in which it was to travel for the next ten years. My thoughts for the past decade had been centred in the Church. This fresh exposure to the word of God set me thinking about the work of God in the world outside the Church (1993h:144).

In the lecture he gave at Bossey, Newbigin advanced the thesis that "what we are witnessing [in the revolutionary events of the time] is the process by which more and more of the human race is being gathered up into that history whose centre is the Cross and whose end is the final judgement and mercy of God" (1959a:82). However, he had not yet related this to a Trinitarian understanding and so Newbigin could write his Christocentric *One Body, One Gospel, One World* the next year. Not until three years later, as he sat in the New Delhi assembly in 1961, did he recognize his Christological basis for a missionary church to be too narrow. His missionary ecclesiology had been too exclusively Christocentric and ecclesiocentric. As for its Christocentricity, his understanding of the church and its mission was based on the work of Jesus and did not take into consideration sufficiently the work of the Father and the Spirit. As for its ecclesiocentric focus, world history was mere window-dressing for the real focus of God's work—the church. Now Newbigin wanted to put the mission of Christ and the church in the context of the work of the Triune God in the whole creation.

His close association with the IMC and WCC during this time served to deepen Newbigin's convictions concerning this Christocentric-Trinitarian and world-oriented<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>This term must not be taken to mean that the church was marginalised and that the primary work of God is outside the ecclesial community. As will be elaborated later, for many the shift to a Trinitarian basis marginalised the centrality of Christ and the church. For Newbigin this did not happen. I have opted to speak of Newbigin's understanding as Christocentric-Trinitarian to indicate that there is no tension between Christocentrism and Trinitarianism. However, I have not employed any analogous compound term, like church-centric-world-oriented, to distinguish Newbigin's position from the antiecclesial position of

ecclesiology. When he returned to Madras as a bishop he looked back at his first missionary term.

The years on the WCC staff had accustomed me to thinking all the time about public issues and about the witness of the Church in the political and social order. No one could work for any length of time under the leadership of Wim Visser 't Hooft and then revert to a cosy ecclesiastical domesticity. Looking back in 1965 upon my earlier ministries in Kanchi and Madurai I felt I had been too narrowly ecclesiastical in my concerns, and I resolved that I would try to challenge the strong churches of Madras City to think less of their own growth and welfare and more of God's purpose for the whole of the vast and growing city (1993h:203).

The ecclesiology that developed over this time remained firmly in place to the end of his life. There were modifications as the contexts changed. He would later disassociate this Trinitarian basis from the secular context of the 1960s, for example. It is this understanding of the missionary church, however, that shaped his ministry in Madras and his call for a missionary encounter with western culture.

#### 3.4. CONTEXT FOR ECCLESIOLOGICAL SHIFT

This shift in Newbigin's understanding of mission and church cannot be understood apart from the global, ecumenical, theological, and missional context in which Newbigin found himself. Firsthand experience and involvement in these shifting times and in the ensuing debates that were spawned played a significant role in producing this change.

The 1960s were revolutionary times globally and this affected both missions and the ecumenical movement. During this time colonialism was collapsing and the countries of Asia and Africa gained their independence. It was a time of rapid social change and globalization, as western modernity seemed to engulf the entire globe. In the West the secular decade arrived with full force. All of these events—the collapse of colonialism, globalization, modernization, secularization—had their impact on the church, theology, missions, and the ecumenical movement. Missions, that had been based on the colonial framework, searched for a new paradigm. Secularism shaped the theology and missiology of the day. The centrality of the church was challenged and a new interest in the world replaced the church as the dominant concern. Interchurch aid responded to the urgencies of nation building and social need in the churches.

All of these events could not help but have an impact on Newbigin's concept of the church. Indeed the providential circumstances of his life put him at the centre of the turbulent times. As General Secretary of the IMC, he embarked on a worldwide jaunt to Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and Latin America, a tour that enabled him to view firsthand the impact of these revolutionary times on these areas. Located in Europe as an

ecumenical administrator and major player on the ecumenical scene, Newbigin was thrust into the midst of the theological, missiological, and ecumenical battles that would shape this stormy decade.

The paragraphs that follow briefly sketch the context for Newbigin's ecclesiological shift. The revolutionary events on the global stage will be outlined and the response of the ecumenical tradition elaborated, and Newbigin's own experience in this context will be noted.

### *3.4.1. The Worldwide Scene*

The period in which Newbigin carried out his ministry in the IMC and WCC was a time of profound change. During this time period C. E. Black wrote: "We are experiencing one of the great revolutionary transformations of mankind... The change in human affairs now taking place is of a scope and intensity that mankind has experienced on only two previous occasions, and its significance cannot be appreciated except in the context of the entire course of world history" (Black 1966:1). How can we characterize this period?

The most striking events of this decade were the decolonization of Asia and Africa. The end of the second world war saw a groundswell of national movements among the colonized countries. Declining resources left colonial powers with little will or ability to maintain colonial rule. A mighty movement of decolonization swept across the world. The first country to gain its independence was the Philippines, which acquired her freedom from the United States in 1946. Over the next eight years eight more countries in Asia, beginning with India in 1947, gained their independence from colonial rule. In 1956 France granted independence to its north African colonies, Morocco and Tunisia. The first sub-Saharan African country to declare its independence was Ghana in 1957. Over the next five years virtually every African country attained its independence from England, France, and Belgium.

But as Arend van Leeuwen, writing in 1964, reminds us, "it would be a very serious mistake therefore to suppose that the thing of primary significance about this age in which we are living is simply that the period of 'colonialism' is drawing to a close. No doubt the political emancipation of the African and Asian peoples is the most spectacular and apparently also the most dramatic aspects of the contemporary scene. What is of really crucial importance, however, is that though flying the colours of emancipation, they are joining the ever increasing ranks of those nations which follow the standard of western civilization" (van Leeuwen 1964:14). These countries entered the stream of a rapidly globalizing world—an interdependent global community achieved by the universalization of modern western culture. As no other civilization in history western civilization was imposing its institutions, technology, and spirit upon the other nations of the world. Modernization was the name given to this process of rapid social change within these non-western nations as they attempted to adjust to and master the political, economic, social, and technological developments of the westernized global community, so that they could become equal participants.

As these decolonized countries were swept into the new globalism, they found themselves at the bottom of a global hierarchy of wealth and power. At the pinnacle of this pyramid was the "First World," made up of Western European and North American

countries. The Soviet Union and the eastern European countries occupied the “Second World.” The newly decolonized countries were swept into the “Third World” made up of “less developed” and “least developed” countries. Their central goal became development and nation building. The United Nations termed the 1960s the “development decade.” Western nations (including all kinds of Christian organizations) undertook a multitude of development programs to enable Third World countries to raise their standard of living, master political, educational, and economic institutions, and develop the concomitant technology.

This whole revolutionary period had a notable effect on western culture: it launched Europe and North America into the “decade of the secular.” While two crippling world wars had temporarily undermined the faith of the western world in the modern vision, and while the “Barthian interlude” challenged the accommodation of the gospel to an optimistic modernity, these new development initiatives gave fresh impetus to these earlier optimistic convictions. A new confidence in progress based on science, technology, and social management swept western nations into a decade of resurgent secularism. The unbridled optimism that intoxicated western culture is expressed rather dramatically in the address that Emmanuel Mesthene gave to the 1966 Church and Society conference in Geneva.

We are the first... to have enough of that power actually at hand to create new possibilities almost at will. By massive physical changes deliberately induced, we can literally pry new alternatives from nature. The ancient tyranny of matter has been broken, and we know it.... We can change it [the physical world] and shape it to suit our purposes.... By creating new possibilities, we give ourselves more choices. With more choices, we have more opportunities. With more opportunities, we can have more freedom, and with more freedom we can be more human. That, I think, is what is new about our age.... We are recognizing that our technical prowess literally bursts with the promise of new freedom, enhanced human dignity, and unfettered aspiration (quoted in Bosch 1991:264f.).

The collapse of colonialism, global westernization, resurgent secularism, and a revolutionary optimism provided a volatile mix that made this time “volcanic” (Van Leeuwen 1964:13).

#### *3.4.2. Key Missiological and Ecclesiological Developments in the Ecumenical Tradition (1952-1968)*

These turbulent times could not but have a dramatic impact on the mission theology and ecclesiology of the ecumenical tradition with which Newbigin was intimately connected. A dramatic shift in mission theology emerged in Willingen (1952), came to mature expression in the WCC study on the missionary structure of the congregation (1967), and became the “received view” of the WCC at the Uppsala Assembly in 1968 (Bosch 1991:383). This understanding of mission and the church was the primary interlocutor for Newbigin throughout these years. It set the agenda that occupied Newbigin as he interacted with this growing understanding in both an appreciative and sharply critical way. Since Newbigin developed his ecclesiology in response to this emerging mission theology, it is necessary to devote some attention to it.

The new understanding of mission can be briefly described as follows. From

Tambaram until Willingen the primary focus of mission had been the work of God in the community that had its origin in and continued the work of Jesus Christ. The new period featured a shift in focus from God's work through Christ *in the church* to His providential and salvific work by His Spirit *in the world*. The laity now replaced the church as the bearer and primary agent of mission. The church was reduced to an instrumental role in God's mission as it restructured itself to enable the laity to carry out their calling in the political, social, and economic structures of the world. Thus mission was reduced to active political, social, and economic activity, while witness in the life of the church or in evangelism was minimized, if not eclipsed. The goal of mission was not a community that bore witness to the coming kingdom of God in its life but the humanization or *shalom* of society through efforts of Christians in cooperation with other social institutions that aimed at the transformation of oppressive political, social, and economic structures. The mode of mission was not proclamation of the gospel but the incarnational presence of God's people in healing ways in the midst of culture.

This understanding of mission had seeds in the IMC Willingen conference (1952) and bore its most mature fruit in the latter part of the 1960s. In papers preparing for the Willingen conference Johannes Hoekendijk and the North American study group raised objections to the Christocentric basis and ecclesiocentric agency of mission. By contrast they offered a Trinitarian basis with the world as the primary location of God's work. The North American study group believed that the direction of mission theology should move from "vigorous christ-centricity to thoroughgoing trinitarianism." The missionary obligation should be "grounded in the reconciling action of the Triune God" and mission should be "the sensitive and total response of the Church to what the Triune God was doing in the world" (NCCC 1952:6). Hoekendijk was even more sharp in his attack on the church-centric mission theology. Missionary theology was "bound to go astray because it revolv[ed] around an illegitimate centre"; the world, not the church, is the scene for the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom (Hoekendijk 1952:332f.).

The church is simply an instrument of God's redemptive action, a means in God's hands to establish *shalom* in the world (Hoekendijk 1950:170). Put differently, "the nature of the church can be sufficiently defined by its function" (Hoekendijk 1952:334). Therefore, the present "immobile, self-centred, and introverted" (Hoekendijk 1961:81; cf. Hutchison 1987:185) church structures must be overhauled and become more flexible so that they are capable of direct action in society. Hoekendijk envisaged the church as a "little group, living in a concrete situation, and serving each other and their environment by reforming the structure of a segment of society" (Hoekendijk 1950:175).

The theology of Hoekendijk and the American study group did not carry the day at Willingen. The statement "The Missionary Calling of the Church", which was largely the work of Newbigin (Willingen 1952: Minute 40, p.19; cf. Bassham 1978:331), was finally adopted by the conference. The primary focus of this statement was God's mission through the church, while the relation of God to the world was given less attention. The seeds planted by Hoekendijk and the American study group, however, would bear fruit in the following decade. The "anti-ecclesiocentric thrust" of Hoekendijk (Jongeneel 1997:90) became the orthodoxy of much of the ecumenical tradition in the 1960s and was officially adopted by the Uppsala Assembly 1968 (Bosch 1991:383). Not until the Nairobi Assembly of the World Council of Churches 1975 did

this powerful current to “debunk the church as completely irrelevant, [and] to erase every difference between the church and its agenda on the one hand and the world and its agenda on the other” begin to decline (Bosch 1991:388).

The World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) Teaching Conference at Strasbourg in 1960 proved to be the hinge that opened the door into that new decade. The original intention of some of the planners like D. T. Niles and Philippe Maury was to pass along the consensus that had been reached in the ecumenical movement in the previous twenty-five years on the missionary nature of the church.

Yet at the conference, leaders such as Niles, Newbigin, Visser 't Hooft and Karl Barth did not seem able to speak to or for the students. Hans Hoekendijk was received with more enthusiasm than any other speaker when he called for “full identification with man in the modern world,” which required the church to move out of ecclesiastical structures to open, mobile groups; to “desacralize the church; and to “dereligionize” Christianity (Bassham 1979:47; cf. Hoekendijk’s speech, Hoekendijk 1961).

Bassham goes on to spell out the implications of this conference. “Strasbourg was a harbinger of things to come. No longer would the church be in the center of the picture as the bearer of salvation. Rather the focus would be the world. This decisive change of focus helped to point the way for the emerging theology of mission which would dominate ecumenical thinking in the 1960s” (Bassham 1979:47).

This emphasis emerged first at the WCC assembly at New Delhi in 1961. Kathleen Bliss noted that one of the three distinctive things about New Delhi was “that along with an emphasis on the uniqueness of Christ there had been more sensitivity to God’s working in the world” (New Delhi 1962:40). This shift from church to world meant a renewed interest in the laity as the primary bearer of mission. In an address that “evoked an unusually wide and alert attention,” Masao Takenaka of Japan argued that “secular engagement and participation in the worldly affairs in the light of the Christian faith” is essential to Christ’s ministry and ought to be an indispensable mark of the Church. Consequently he strongly accented the role of the laity in “their ordinary secular life” and rejoiced in the “growing reaffirmation of the ministry of the laity in the world... as one of the most gratifying developments of the Church today” (:13). Klaus von Bismarck insisted “that the Church can make its rightful impact on society only as it ceases to be preoccupied with a cloistered life of its own and becomes actively concerned with people’s working lives in the world.” Unfortunately, he noted, a sacred/secular dichotomy, a lack of understanding of God’s work outside the church and the inability of the professional leadership of the church to equip the laity for their callings in society impeded this impact (:18). The function of a local church is to be a base for supplying the laity who are “soldiers in the field” argued one of the three lay speakers invited to address the assembly (:19). The report on witness called for a reshaping of the ecclesial structures of the witnessing community to assist the laity in their evangelistic task (:85-90). The most important action of this assembly for a theology of mission was to authorize the Department on Studies in Evangelism to carry out a comprehensive study on “the missionary structure of the congregation” (:189-190).

The meeting of the CWME in Mexico in 1963 continued to develop the same line, emphasizing God’s work in the world through the laity. The message affirmed that Christians must “discover a shape of Christian obedience being written for them by what God is already actively doing in the structures of the city’s life outside the

Church” (Orchard 1964:174). This new emphasis led to the debate that dominated Mexico—“the relationship between God’s action in and through the Church and everything God is doing in the world apparently independently of the Christian community” or in other words, the relationship between “God’s providential action and God’s redeeming action” (Orchard 1964:157)—a problem that would continue to plague the ecumenical tradition throughout this time period (Bassham 1979:78). The role of the laity continued to be emphasized and explored (Orchard 1964:175), as well as ecclesiastical structures as an “intractable frontier” (Orchard 1964:164). A debate between M. M. Thomas and Hendrikus Berkhof in a discussion on the witness of Christians to men in the secular world pointed to the growing differences between the older and newer understandings of mission. Thomas argued that the task of mission was to discern where Christ is present in the quest for humanization and nation-building and identify oneself with that struggle through full participation in what was truly human. Berkhof believed that taking our clue to understanding God’s will for humankind from the events of history rather than what God has done in Jesus Christ could lead to serious misunderstanding (1993h:195; cf. Loffler 1968). In any case, there was agreement that the structures of the congregation must be reformed and Mexico endorsed the study project on the missionary structure of the congregation as the means to discover “the forms of missionary obedience to which Christ is calling us” (Orchard 1964:158).

Another ecumenical gathering was significant for the development of this new view of mission. The Geneva Conference on Church and Society in 1966 “strengthened considerably the emphasis on the world as the arena for mission which had become the major thrust of ecumenical mission theology” (Bassham 1979:76) when it stated:

We start with the basic assumption that the triune God is the Lord of his world and at work within it, and that the Church’s task is to point to his acts, to respond to his demands, and to call mankind to this faith and obedience.... In this document, “mission” and “missionary” are used as shorthand for the responsibilities of the Church in the world.... (Geneva 1966:179f. quoted in Bassham *ibid.*)

The Geneva Conference analyzed more deeply the political, economic, international, and social issues that were dominating the day, directing all Christians to be involved in movements, even revolutions, for social change. Again, the life of the church and evangelism receded from view as mission was swallowed up by social activity.

This theology of mission was most fully expressed in a document published in 1967 entitled *The Church for Others and the Church for the World: A Quest for Structures for Missionary Congregations* (WCC 1967). This document was the result of the study project on “the Missionary Structure of the Congregation” authorized by the Third Assembly at New Delhi 1961. The project was intended to find patterns and structures that would best serve the missionary calling of the church. Of course, everything hinges on one’s understanding of mission and church. A sea change in the understanding of both mission and church was underway. While many, including Newbigin (1993h:156-157; 194-195), saw this as an opportunity to find new patterns of ministry and structures for institutional church life that would enable the missionary nature of the church to emerge, the whole project was swept into the powerful currents of the emerging missiology and ecclesiology inspired by Hoekendijk. A new understanding of mission refashioned the whole project and the church was eclipsed. As one reads *The Church*

for Others, the dominant shadow of Hoekendijk casts itself on almost every page.

At the foundation of this study was the notion of the *missio Dei* (WCC 1967:14, 19, 75 etc.). Two interpretations of this phrase had appeared at Willingen. The first, inspired by the North American report *Why Missions?* and found in the interim report of Willingen, interpreted this phrase to mean God's action in the world independent of the church. The other, firmly planted in the ecumenical tradition of the past 25 years that emphasized the church, pointed to God's work through the witness of the church. The latter notion was endorsed by Willingen but it was the former understanding that now influenced "The Missionary Structure of the Congregation" study (Bassham 1979:69).

This new understanding of the *missio Dei* was possible because of the fundamental theological insight that we "cannot confine the divine activity to ecclesiastical activity" but must recognize Christ's work outside the church in the world (WCC 1967:11). The world must be considered in dynamic terms as historical transformation (:12). In understanding the historical transformation of the day, the process of secularization and the coming of the kingdom initiated by Christ's work are virtually identified (:12f.). In the emancipation of blacks, humanization of industrial relations, rural development, quest for ethics in business, and urban renewal one could see God in His transforming kingdom work (:15). The calling of the church is to participate in God's mission as his partner by discerning signs of God's action in the world (:13, 15, 78). The goal of mission is *shalom*, according to the European working group (:15) and humanization, according to the North American working group (:78). Specifically the church's mission in seeking *shalom* is to proclaim what God is doing, participate in developments toward *shalom*, and pioneer in areas where secular agencies have been neglectful (:15). A traditional understanding of evangelism that called for repentance and that gathered folk into the church by means of baptism was eclipsed—in fact, this was termed objectionable "proselytism" (:75)—and mission was wholly understood in an instrumental way as participation in various social, economic, and political programs such as community development, civil rights, and urban renewal.

This emerging understanding of God's mission changed the conception of the relationship of God's redemptive activity in the world. Traditionally, God's salvific relation to the world was understood via the church. The traditional pattern or sequence God-church-world should be changed to God-world-church to reflect the insight that God's primary relationship is to the world (:16, 69f.). The church is merely a "postscript" that is "added to the world for the purpose of pointing to and celebrating both Christ's presence and God's ultimate redemption of the whole world" (:70). This means that the church must take an "ex-centric position" and turn itself inside out as "a church for the world" (:17-19).

The structures of the church, then, must be tested by the criteria of whether or not they impede or enable the church to participate in the *missio Dei*. Existing parish forms of congregational life, including the parish system, leadership, buildings, and worship, were castigated for their "morphological fundamentalism," a rigid and inflexible attitude toward traditional structures of congregational life (:19). Indeed, the report speaks of "heretical structures" (:19) and "heretical buildings" (:28). Since "the world provides the agenda" (:20, 70), flexible structures called "go-structures" (:19) were needed. These go-structures stood opposed to the "come-structures" of traditional "waiting churches" to which people were expected to come. Go-structures would enable a

congregation that was sensitive to human need around it to respond with timely help to victims of racism, oppression, injustice, poverty, and loneliness.

Although the study was to focus on structures for missionary congregations, in the end the report “had precious little to say about” this topic (Bosch 1991:382). Little in the way of a creative contribution was made. Some helpful suggestions were made, such as zonal structures that envisaged the forming of congregations in the midst of various spheres of differentiated modern culture,<sup>2</sup> but this was not worked out. Instead, a strong emphasis on the laity in their individual callings as “the bearer of mission” in the social, political, and economic realms of public life dominated (:80ff.) and eclipsed the communal and institutional dimension of the church as mission.

The ecclesiology and missiology of *The Church for Others* illustrates what Bosch has said: “it had become fashionable to disparage the churches-as-they-exist-in-history. People lost confidence in the church.” But the attacks on the church during this time “are pertinent only insofar as they express a theological ideal raised to the level of prophetic judgement.” (Bosch 1991:385). An ingrown, self-occupied, antiquated, and inflexible church forced an extreme reaction. By the mid 1970s, however, these raging currents had dried up because “Christianity completely devoid of an institutional nature cannot offer any true alternative” (Ludwig Rutti quoted in Bosch 1991:384).

The world-centred understanding of mission and church found official endorsement in the Uppsala Assembly of the WCC in 1968. The line between the church as a community and the society in which they lived was almost entirely blurred as the objective of mission was an increasingly just and free society termed “the new humanity.” The cries clearly heard at Uppsala were the cries of victims of hunger, political oppression, and racial discrimination. Fundamental to the missionary calling of the church was a social engagement that would enable humankind to “see greater achievements of justice, freedom, and dignity as part of the true humanity in Christ” (Bassham 1979:82). Mission fields were replaced by points of mission: situations where the struggle for humanization takes place. To accomplish this, Uppsala emphasized flexible ecclesial structures for mission, the laity as the primary agent of mission, co-operation with political, economic, and social movements that pursued justice and freedom, and dialogue as the way each meets and challenges the other (Bassham 1979:80, 83). Bosch comments:

By and large, the Uppsala assembly endorsed this [*Church for Others*] theology. The Hoekendijk approach had become the “received view” in WCC circles. Mission became an umbrella term for health and welfare services, youth projects, activities of political interest groups, projects for economic and social development, the constructive application of violence, etc. Mission was “the comprehensive term for all conceivable ways in which people may cooperate with God in respect of this world....

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<sup>2</sup>Newbigin struggles with this idea of “zonal structures” over against the parish structure several times in his writings (e.g., 1960n:32; 1966b:113ff).

The distinction between church and world has, for all intents and purposes, been completely dropped (Bosch 1991:383).

This was not the only voice heard at Uppsala, however (Bassham 1979:83). The growing politicization of the gospel forced a reaction from a number of evangelical advocates (Donald McGavran, John Stott, and Arthur Glasser) who stressed evangelism, conversion, church growth, and the Christian community as God's agent in mission. McGavran asked the rhetorical question: "Will Uppsala betray the two billion" people who have never heard the gospel? (McGavran 1968:1 ). Glasser noted that evangelicals opposed the Uppsala Assembly because it "appalled them with its secularized gospel and reduction of the mission of the church to social and political activism" (Glasser 1972:33).

Newbigin attended Uppsala and found himself uncomfortably at odds with both emphases. He resisted the "deafening barrage" and "high-pressure propaganda" of the church growth advocates as well as the "shattering experience" that "reduced mission to nothing but a desperate struggle to solve insoluble problems". He closes his comments about Uppsala by saying that "the saddest thing was that we were not able seriously to listen to each other" (1993h:219). We will note later that Newbigin's ecclesiology developed partially in reaction to the evangelical and ecumenical reductionisms of this time.

It was the changes in missiology and ecclesiology of the ecumenical tradition, however, which would prove significant for the development of Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology both as he recognized the insufficiency of his own formulations and as he reacted against the extremes of the day. Many themes developed in these pages representing the ecumenical thinking at this time are found in Newbigin's writings of this period.

### 3.5. NEWBIGIN'S TENURE IN THE IMC AND WCC AND ITS IMPORTANCE FOR HIS ECCLESIOLOGY (1959-1965)

These revolutionary shifts, both on the international scene and within the missionary tradition of the ecumenical movement, had the power to shape any person's thinking about relevant issues even if that person were on the periphery of the action. In Newbigin's case he was at the centre and had firsthand experience of much that was happening. Perhaps few men were as strategically located during this period. This section examines how Newbigin's experience in the ecumenical institutions of the IMC and WCC shaped his ecclesiology. This involves a two-pronged approach. First we trace how his responsibilities and associations as an ecumenical leader demanded ecclesiological reflection. Second we identify fundamental ecclesiological themes which he developed during this time.

#### 3.5.1. *Ecumenical Leadership and Ecclesiological Development*

We can summarize how his experience in the IMC and WCC as an ecumenical leader shaped his ecclesiology in five areas. As the general secretary of the IMC and director of the CMWE of the WCC Newbigin was required to give leadership to the world

missionary enterprise, visit churches in many parts of the world, participate in numerous WCC programs and consultations, give theological and missiological leadership in a secular decade, and work closely with Wim Visser 't Hooft. All of these factors formatively influenced his developing ecclesiology.

#### 3.5.1.1. Leadership for World Mission

As General Secretary of the IMC Newbigin was expected to give leadership to missionary policy and planning. During this time, however, missions was in crisis. The colonial framework that had upheld missions for so many years was breaking down. Four facts—the reversal of tides of power, the emergence of a single world civilization, the renaissance of non-Christian world religions, and the rise of younger churches—were producing a change so profound that for many the whole missionary enterprise seemed to be an anachronism (1960j:6-7; 1994k:7-10). Compounding the problem was the fact that “mission was being absorbed into inter-church aid” (1993h:158). Projects of technical assistance from the West engulfed the former colonized countries as they pursued the task of nation building. Missions were in trouble. What was the way forward?

Newbigin struggled through the tangled issues in an attempt to bring theological and structural clarity to the issues. We will examine some of his reflection later. At this point it is important to note that this struggle had a formative effect on his ecclesiology. Giving leadership to missions during a time when it had seemed to lose direction forced Newbigin to return to “the unchanging basis” (1958b:17) or fundamental “convictions” (1993h:186) of Scripture regarding mission. What is the church? What is mission? What is the enduring task of cross-cultural missions? All of this forced deepening convictions about the missionary nature of the church. His conclusions reveal this commitment. Missions is always to be understood as one dimension of the mission of the church (1960g:60; 1960i; 1993h:185). Or in the words of another of Newbigin’s important distinctions, missionary intention must be understood in the context of the missionary dimension of the church (1993h:163, 185, 189).

#### 3.5.1.2. Exposure to the Global Church

As the General Secretary of the IMC Newbigin saw his ministry in similar terms to his calling as a bishop. As the churches needed to be visited, so did the national councils in various regions of the world. Immediately Newbigin planned long tours of the African and Latin American churches. Over the next five years Newbigin carried out an extended tour to Africa, Latin America, the Pacific, Australia, the Caribbean, parts of Asia, and much of Europe and North America. In his travels he was able to put his finger on the political, social and ecclesiastical pulse of these areas. In addition to his trips, he set himself the goal of compiling an annual survey of missionary developments around the globe. This meant reading a great quantity of material that flowed in from various parts of the world (1993h:185; 1963a; 1964e; 1965h; 1966c).

We can briefly note various impressions that his trips made on him with respect to

the church. Newbigin's trip to fifteen different countries in Africa forced reflection on the relationship of western missions to the African church and on ministerial training for missionary churches in Africa. His trip to the church in the Pacific brought him face to face with two entirely different kinds of missionary churches. While the Samoan church existed in the situation of a *corpus Christianum*, the church in New Guinea stood on the unevangelized frontiers of cannibalism. In Latin America Newbigin was confronted with the growing conflict between the ecumenical and evangelical traditions, the bitter hostility between the Roman Catholic and evangelical communions, the vital emerging Pentecostal churches, and the church's struggle with extreme poverty. His theological struggles on missions and church, church and culture, ecumenicity, social involvement (issues that will be investigated later) were deepened by his exposure to many different ecclesial and cultural contexts.

### 3.5.1.3. Involvement in the WCC Programs

Newbigin's work in the IMC and WCC confronted him with numerous projects that forced ecclesiological reflection. Two projects that were especially fruitful for his ecclesiology dealt with urban industrialization and healing. While traditional missions had operated in a rural setting, the new globalization involved the spread of western multi-national companies and the growth of factories in various cities of the third world. Local pastors trained to work in rural settings were not equipped to deal with this urban situation. A program was developed to attempt to equip the pastor in this new setting. His attempt to meet this new frontier impelled him to reflect on the nature and structures of the church (e.g., 1966b:115ff.). This reflection would continue into Madras (1974b:100-104).

The project on healing was also significant. Healing had been integral to the modern missionary movement from its inception. There were hospitals the world over that had been established by western missions. In this time of globalization, governments were building up health facilities with the help of foreign funds. Underfunded mission hospitals could not compete. If the ministry of healing was integral to the witness of the gospel then what was the next step? Newbigin was challenged by a Nigerian doctor who said that "the basic unit of healing is not the hospital, it is the Christian congregation" (1993h:192). Subsequent reflection on this "new idea" led to a conference on healing and mission that was to begin "a profound revolution in the thinking of medical missions" (1993h:193). Newbigin's contribution to the published proceedings—a document that was rapidly in demand—framed the issue in terms of the missionary calling of the local congregation (1965b, 1965f).

It was not only the various tasks of his division that required thought on the doctrine of the church; it was also involvement in other departments of the WCC. In the colonial paradigm, mission was defined primarily in terms of geography. The residue of this understanding was manifested in the fact that all the various programs, projects, and consultations that were being carried out by other divisions of the WCC in the Third World were considered to be a part of the mission of the church. Therefore, Newbigin was invited to all of these meetings and was expected to be informed about what was happening in all the various countries where western missions had been long at work. While Newbigin notes that "it was simply impossible for me to be effectively involved

in all the vast range of programmes which were being developed all over the Third World” (1993h:185), it did put him in touch with many developments that would find expression in his ecclesiology.

During this time of rapid social change throughout the third world, there were a number of programs that dealt with the social calling of the church being developed by the division of interchurch aid, the department of church and society, and the department of the co-operation of men and women. Involvement in these programs deepened Newbigin’s substantial theological reflection carried on at this time on the church’s mission in society. As director of the division responsible for missions and evangelism it also forced further reflection on the importance of church’s task of proclaiming the gospel and its relation to these social projects.

Perhaps more important for Newbigin’s ecclesiological formation was his involvement with the department on the laity. Formed in 1955, the Department on the Laity increased its influence significantly so that at the New Delhi assembly of the WCC (1961) the laity was a central issue in all three sections—witness, service, and unity. Three laypersons addressed the assembly and the upshot was the decision that the Department of Evangelism—a department for which Newbigin was responsible—should undertake a study of the missionary structure of the congregation in co-operation with the Laity Department. This close association continued to nourish Newbigin’s long-standing conviction that the primary point of a missionary encounter was in the calling of God’s people in society.

#### 3.5.1.4. Participation in the Theological and Missiological Debates During the Secular Decade

The powerful forces of secularization were producing an earthquake in the theological world. Numerous authors were attempting to rearticulate the Christian faith in terms of the secular assumptions that dominated the western world (Robinson 1963, Munby 1963, Van Buren 1963, Van Leeuwen 1964, Cox 1966). While sympathetic to many of their concerns, Newbigin believed that much of this writing was an attack on the very heart of the Christian faith. He entered the debate with the contribution of the Firth Lectures in Nottingham University which were later published as *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (1966b). Newbigin believed that a misunderstanding of the relationship between the Christian faith and the process of secularization by many of these authors affected their solutions. According to Newbigin, secularization is not to be seen as contrary to the Christian faith; rather secularization is the fruit of the permeation of western culture with the gospel. These debates prompted Newbigin to reflect anew on the nature of the church. While the church was being marginalised in the secular, industrialized city, Newbigin affirms the centrality of the church to God’s redemptive program and asks what “the parish church might be in this new concrete city” (1966b:107). We have noted how the winds of secularism also affected much of the discussion of missiology. Newbigin’s primary contribution to this debate was his monograph *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission* (1963g).

#### 3.5.1.5. Influence of Willem A. Visser ’t Hooft

During Newbigin's five years in the IMC and the WCC, Willem A. Visser 't Hooft was the General Secretary of the World Council Churches. Visser 't Hooft greatly influenced Newbigin's ecclesiology, especially at two points.

The first area of influence was the broad vision Visser 't Hooft maintained on the issue of social witness. Newbigin remarks after returning to Madras in 1965: "The years on the WCC staff had accustomed me to thinking all the time about public issues and about the witness of the church in the political and social order. No one could work for any length of time under the leadership of Wim Visser 't Hooft and then revert back to a cosy ecclesiastical domesticity" (1993h:203). Indeed an examination of Visser 't Hooft's life and work in the WCC shows his commitment to the fact that "the Christian Church should re-affirm the sovereignty of its Lord over all of life" (Visser 't Hooft 1937:10). Visser 't Hooft's comments during his opening address to the Geneva Conference on Church and Society in 1966 echo his life-long concern for social obedience.

Our conference is about the full meaning and implications of a true turning to God, about the implications of conversion, about the fruits of repentance.... It is in our day to day decisions in our social life that the reality of our turning to God is constantly tested. We will never be able to convince the modern world of the truth of the Gospel unless we offer it in its fullness; that is with its radical critique of our social attitudes and our social structures confirmed by our personal and corporate obedience (Visser 't Hooft 1966:418).

Visser 't Hooft affected Newbigin's ecclesiology, secondly, in the area of his emphasis on syncretism in the West. For Visser 't Hooft the "western churches were hopelessly compromised by syncretism. They had allowed the Gospel to be confused with European culture" (1992e:78). Two of his most important books take up the theme of syncretism (Visser 't Hooft 1937, 1963). In his earlier book *None Other Gods* (1937) Visser 't Hooft castigates the church in the United States for their syncretistic alliance with democracy and the European church for their partnership with nationalism. Speaking to a western missionary society in the early years of the second world war he argued that missionaries must be liberated from the syncretism endemic to the national churches of Europe. This syncretism had led missionaries to be agents of western culture rather than witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ (1992e:79). An analysis of western culture reveals the fusion of Christianity, scientific rationalism, and neo-pagan vitalism (Visser 't Hooft 1977:355). While European Christianity was compromised by scientific rationalism throughout much of its life, in these latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century neo-pagan vitalism appeared to emerge as a leading cultural force. This syncretism could be corrected only on the basis of dialogue with other local theologies under the absolute supremacy of the Bible as norm by which all forms of Christianity and theologies could be tested. This emphasis on syncretism would play an important role in shaping Newbigin's thinking about the mission of the church in the West in the later decades.

### *3.5.2. Development of Ecclesiological Themes During Ecumenical Leadership*

In addition to a Trinitarian theology, Newbigin developed a number of themes that are central to his missionary ecclesiology. While all of these issues are treated in later

chapters of this book in a more systematic way, it is important to draw attention at this point to the way in which the historical context demanded further reflection. Eleven of these ecclesiological issues are briefly surveyed here.

### 3.5.2.1. Biblical Authority and the Church's Missionary Calling

The developments during this time were dramatic and radical. How would Newbigin chart a course through all these changes? Newbigin was convinced that the only way to chart a course for mission through the turbulent waters of the time was by the compass of Scripture. Indeed he believed this theological and exegetical work “to be absolutely central to any kind of leadership in world mission” (1993h:188).

Newbigin expressed commitment to the authority of Scripture for mission in the context of attacks that undermined the Biblical Theology movement—a tradition that shaped both the ecumenical movement since the second world war (Cartwright 1991:454) and Newbigin himself (1982i:7). Blauw expressed a general consensus that had developed since the second world war about the Biblical foundation for mission (Blauw 1962). Under the attack of the Biblical scholars James Barr (Barr 1961, 1963, 1966, cf. 1973), Ernst Kasemann (1964) and others (cf. Childs 1970:61-87), and under the pressure of the secularizing decade, the Biblical theology that had provided a foundation for mission crumbled. The new winds blowing brought down the “Biblical Theology” structure like a house of cards (Childs 1970:71f.).

In the context of weakened Biblical authority, where would Newbigin end up? Already in 1957 when Newbigin began to sense the new currents of a “secular interpretation of the gospel,” he turned anew to Scripture. Asked to give a lecture in Bossey on the mission of the church in the contemporary world, he spent the entire night on the plane reading through the New Testament noting every reference to ‘the world.’ It was this “fresh exposure to the word of God” that challenged his thinking about the church (1993h:144).

As he struggled with an issue that was to occupy much of his attention during this period, that of the place of missions, he articulated a fundamental conviction that would characterize his approach to these changing times. “If missions were to recover a sense of direction, if in the circumstances of integration we were to discern the distinctive missionary focus within the total life of the worldwide Church, then the only way was to open ourselves afresh to the biblical perspectives” (1993h:163). Scripture, not the changing times, would set the agenda. But, of course, this was a study of Scripture with a deep awareness of the context. He states:

If the Church is going to meet and master the forces which are shaping the secular world of our time, she needs to put a far greater proportion of her strength behind the work of the theologians; she needs a theology which is not the mere product of changing moods and fashions but deeply based on Scripture, stated in terms in which the world lives, relevant to the forces which are actually shaping the lives of men. It is not sufficient for the Church to attend to tactics: she must attend first to truth (1960c:129).

Elsewhere Newbigin uses a marine analogy in another place to make the same point.

We are not intended to be conformed to the world but to be transformed by the

renewing of our minds. God uses the changes and chances of history to shake His people from time to time out of their conformity with the world; but when that happens our job surely is not just to push over the tiller and sail before the winds of change, but to look afresh to our chart and compass and to ask how we now use the new winds and the new tides to carry out our sailing orders. Every new situation is a summons to bring all our traditions afresh “under the Word of God” (1962a:2).

In these changing times Newbigin consistently and resolutely proceeded from this starting point in Scripture. In speech after speech he makes the comment that Scripture must form our starting point (e.g., 1962b:22). He exegetes a text and struggles with the current situation in its light (e.g., 1960b). In his trips to Africa (1993h:167), the Pacific (1993h:172), and Latin America (1993h:175) his normal pattern was “to do Bible study together and to reflect upon the local situations in the light of this study” (1993h:175). Newbigin’s commitment to the primacy of Scripture in interpreting the church’s mission was deepened during these years.

### 3.5.2.2. Salvation History and World History

Underlying many of the debates during this secular decade was the foundational theological issue of the relationship between salvation history and world history. The Bible narrates a salvation history that is in the form of universal history with the church as the bearer of a cosmic salvation. Modern western culture was in the grip of another interpretation of universal history in which the bearer of cosmic salvation was the global march of western science, technology, and institutions. The dominant missionary theology of the 1950s placed its emphasis on salvation history. The community formed by Jesus as the bearer of salvation was placed firmly in the centre. However, the relationship of that community to world history was not sufficiently probed. According to Goodall, the leading question arising out of the Willingen meeting of the IMC (1952) was: “What is the relation between ‘history’ and ‘salvation history’, between God’s activity in creation and His grace in redemption?” (Goodall 1953:20).

It was precisely this question that the New Delhi Assembly of the WCC (1961) found it hardest to find agreement (1963g:23). As the decade of the 1960s progressed the emphasis gradually shifted to world history where God was providentially and redemptively at work. It was the task of the church to go out and find where He was at work and cooperate with Him. This relationship of salvation and world history was central to the debates at the CWME meeting at Mexico (1963).

Debate returned again and again to the relationship between God’s action in and through the Church and everything God is doing in the world apparently independently of the Christian community. Can a distinction be drawn between God’s providential action and God’s redeeming action? If the restoration and reconciliation of human life is being achieved by the action of God through secular agencies, what is the place and significance of faith? If the Church is to be wholly involved in the world and its history, what is the true nature of its separateness (Orchard 1964:157; Latham 1964:49f.)?

An outstanding contribution to this debate was the book *Christianity in World History* by Arend van Leeuwen (1964). The inspiration for this book came from the

speech Newbigin delivered at Bossey (1993h:144; Van Leeuwen 1964:17).<sup>3</sup> Van Leeuwen interpreted world history in terms of the dynamic produced in ontocratic societies when the gospel is introduced. The movement of secularization in the 1960s was the contemporary expression of this process. In van Leeuwen's interpretation, salvation history and world history are merged. "The technological revolution is the evident and inescapable form in which the whole world is now confronted with the most recent phase of Christian history. In and through this form Christian history becomes world history" (van Leeuwen 1964:408).

One of Newbigin's more creative contributions during this period arose in response to this theological struggle. Newbigin attempted to understand what God is doing in these revolutionary times through the interpretive lens of Mark 13. God is drawing the whole world into the current of a single world history. This single world history looks toward the goal of sharing all the benefits of a common scientific and technical civilization. The origin of this conception is the West. As more and more cultures of the world are drawn into this current, they face rapid social change as they attempt to build their nations on the western patterns. When western colonial powers withdraw, these newly independent nations strive to integrate the modern worldview into their older way of life. The clue to understanding this world historical process is a right eschatology. The force that has been drawing all nations into a single history is a secularized Christian eschatology. The linear pattern of history that has been revealed in Scripture has shaped western culture and from there has been disseminated throughout the world. Once nations have been shaped by this linear pattern, a return to their former cyclical pattern of viewing the world is impossible. They are forced to make choices about ultimate issues: Who or what will enable western society to move toward this common human destiny? All nations are brought to the point of accepting Jesus as Lord or rejecting him. The church is set in the world among the nations to witness to what He is doing and to Who will bring history to its consummation (1960o:21-24; 1960j:12f.; 1962i:3-5; )

It is at this point that Newbigin draws on his exegesis of Mark 13 (e.g., 1960j:10-12; 1963g:38-51). The teaching of Jesus summons us to understand the events of world history in the light of his mission. Newbigin points to five characteristics. First, in this time between the times people expect and get messiahs. They are presented with an end to history and are forced to seek the means to achieve that end. Second, the sign of these times is tumult and suffering for the world. These sufferings are the birth pangs of the kingdom. Third, the church is called to witness in the midst of suffering. The end of

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<sup>3</sup>This is a clear example of Newbigin's ability to stimulate others to do the scholarly work that his own schedule prohibited him from doing. He planted seed-ideas that were brought to scholarly maturity by academics who devoted themselves to the research and documentation of these suggestions.

history has been “delayed in order that all men may have the opportunity to recognize Him, and to accept in Him their own true destiny” (1960j:10). Fourth, this witness is primarily the witness of the Holy Spirit and only secondarily a witness of the church. Fifth, this history will move through suffering and witness to the ultimate issue. False messiahs and saviours will be exposed and the true Saviour and Messiah will come in power. History is not a continuous, gradual ascent toward a perfect human future but a story of conflict in which the final issues are more sharply defined.

This interpretation is full of significance for an understanding of the missionary church that Newbigin developed at this time. The task of witness to the world is set within the context of world history. World history is not mere background for the development of the church. Rather the church is to witness to the true end of history and its life is to be a clue to that fulfillment (1960j:12). The life of the church is woven into the fabric of world history as a witness to the end to which that world history is moving.

### 3.5.2.3. Evangelism and Social Concern

Willingen adopted a comprehensive understanding of mission, written by Newbigin, that emphasized evangelism and social action as equally important elements of the witness of a missionary church. However, the political, economic, and social changes taking place all over the world were already making many at Willingen acutely aware of new dimensions of the social task of the church. Thus the adopted report states that the church is to “identify itself with the world, not only in its perplexity and distress, its guilt and its sorrow, but also in its real acts of love and justice” (Goodall 1953:191). This emphasis on the social task that was evident in the previous IMC conferences from Jerusalem on took on an added urgency in light of the rapid social change. The social task of the church became one of the dominant issues on the agendas of the WCC and CWME from Willingen on. The growing confidence in science, technology, and western institutions embodied in numerous aid programs from the West captured the churches of the ecumenical tradition.

This led to three fundamental problems. First, social programs and technical assistance eclipsed the evangelistic task of the church. Second, the optimism of the development decade moved the church to a triumphalist understanding of social action. Third, this overemphasis of the social calling of the church led to a reaction on the part of the evangelical tradition; the evangelical tradition emphasized evangelism over against social involvement. Against these three distortions Newbigin threw his weight seeking to bring the light of Scripture to the mission of the church.

Newbigin comments a number of times that in the ecumenical tradition “there was much less enthusiasm for the direct preaching of the Gospel and the building up of the Church than for technical assistance and political action” (1993h:194).

To feed the hungry and clothe the naked, to give help to the victims of disaster and technical assistance to those who need it—all this is an essential part of our discipleship, and it is of God's goodness that the churches are learning to do it together. But there is a need to beware lest the churches give the impression that they are not equally concerned to share the supreme riches of the grace of God in Jesus Christ (1963a:7).

Or as he puts it in another place: “... while very many of the participants [of the New

Delhi Assembly] visiting India for the first time were moved by the sight of so many people without bread, not many were apparently moved by the sight of so many without the gospel.... Half of this world is hungry, and we are learning to share our bread.... We have now also to learn... how to share that living bread with all who will receive him” (1962j:90, 94).

He observed the irony of all of this. While secularization and modernization are sweeping the world, the fact that western science and technology are rooted in the gospel is an embarrassment (1965a:420). Unfortunately the church had followed this general pattern, believing that technical assistance was “more humble, more realistic, more relevant” than “the presumption of trying to convert other people to one’s own religion” (1965a:419). It is the duty of a faithful church, Newbigin believed, to “denounce sharply” this tendency (1965a:418). He tenaciously clung to his deep conviction that the “preaching of the Gospel and the services of men’s needs are equally authentic and essential parts of the Church’s responsibility” (1965a:422). He recorded six convictions that he jotted down in 1962 when his commitment was being challenged. These convictions would “keep him on course during this difficult period” (1993h:186). The first conviction was: “That it matters supremely to bring more people to know Jesus as Saviour.” The second: “That our responsibility in the political order arises out of the love command” (1993h:186). These are both aspects of the church’s mission and neither can be substituted for the other. No amount of service can substitute for explicit testimony to Christ and “no human deed can of itself take the place of the one deed by which the world is redeemed and to which we must direct men’s eyes” (1965a:422). But equally, an escapist preaching of Christ, which refuses social involvement and which was characteristic of the evangelical tradition, is empty and no true witness to the kingdom. The church is both a reporter and a sign of the resurrection.

These “difficult times” drove Newbigin to a more nuanced discussion of these two aspects of the church’s mission which examined the integral relation of word and deed and which opposed a triumphalist notion of the church’s social task.

#### 3.5.2.4. Pilgrim, Alien and Servant Images of the Church

In response to the growing emphasis on the social task of the church two images begin to appear in Newbigin’s writings to depict the church. The church is an alien or pilgrim community, and it is a servant community (1960b:104; 1960e:5; 1963d:1; 1963hL11; 1966b:100ff.). Both of these images are meant to affirm the responsibility of the church to serve her society and culture selflessly. At the same time, they both are meant to oppose the triumphalist notion of social involvement.

#### 3.5.2.5. The Mission of the Laity in Society

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a growing interest in the laity. At New Delhi the laity became a central issue in all three sections. The assembly decided to mandate the Department on Evangelism to carry out a study on the missionary structure of the congregation that would suggest ways in which the laity could carry out their calling. As the report put it: “If this penetration of the world by the lay witness is an essential part of God’s plan for his Church, we must examine the conventional structures of our churches in order to see whether they assist or hinder the work of evangelism.” It went on to draw a conclusion that would challenge traditional ecclesiology:

We must not think of the 'Church' as primarily a building or as an enterprise run by ministers to which people come or are scolded for not coming. We must ask whether we do not too easily fall into the habit of thinking of the Church as the Sunday congregation rather than as the laity scattered abroad in every department of life (New Delhi 1962:88-89).

With the growing emphasis on God's work in the world during the radical secularization of the 1960s, the calling of believers in society moved to centre stage as the bearer of mission (Hoekendijk 1966:85-90; New Delhi 1962:87; WCC 1967:80).

Newbigin was deeply involved in the ecumenical tradition during this time. He attended and participated in all the WCC and CWME meetings as this theme developed. The Department of Evangelism for which Newbigin was responsible, co-operated with the Department of the Laity in organizing the study on the missionary structure of the congregation. And so references to the laity and to ecumenical studies carried out in this area became increasingly commonplace in Newbigin's writings during this time (1963b:371; 1963f:95; 1965b:42). These new pressures of secularization and the response of the ecumenical tradition led Newbigin to his most detailed and sophisticated reflection on the place of the laity during this period of his life.

### 3.5.2.6. Missions

The emphasis on the social task of the church not only threatened evangelism, it also threatened a missionary advance into unevangelized areas. Missions was being absorbed into many kinds of development projects. Newbigin articulates his struggle during this time as follows:

The dilemma with which I constantly wrestled was how to achieve a permeation of all the activities of the Council with a missionary concern, and at the same time to preserve and sharpen a specific concern for missions as enterprises explicitly intended to cross the frontier between faith and no-faith (1993h:189).

It was this dilemma that forced Newbigin to make more careful distinctions between *mission* and *missions* that would inform his ecclesiology.

### 3.5.2.7. Emphasis on the Local Congregation

It was not until the New Delhi Assembly of the WCC (1961) that formulations of unity focussed on the local congregation as the basic unit of the church (Hoedemaker 1991:626). Likewise discussions of the missionary church were not focussed on the local congregation until the early 1960s. The New Delhi report stated: "Every Christian congregation is part of that mission, with a responsibility to bear witness to Christ in its own neighbourhood and to share in the bearing of that witness to the ends of the earth" (New Delhi 1962:249). This revealed a growing interest in the local congregation in the ecumenical tradition. Newbigin comments on this trend.

Talk about the Church as a missionary community has become rather common. But most of it has left untouched the centre of the Church's life. It is only within very recent years that the light of a missionary doctrine of the Church has been turned steadily upon the local congregation (1966b:105).

As was often the case in the relationship between Newbigin and the ecumenical

tradition, he both shaped and was shaped by the currents within the WCC. The statement on unity adopted at New Delhi that emphasized the local congregation was the fruit of the work of Newbigin. The emphasis on the local congregation in the CWME report stated above was also the work of Newbigin. His missionary experience in India had led him to a growing appreciation of the importance of the local congregation. However, the growing momentum within the WCC also led Newbigin to emphasize this aspect of church life more frequently during this period.

#### 3.5.2.8. Congregational Structures

The church-centric missiology of the 1950s that stressed the missionary nature of the church inevitably raised questions about the structural forms of church life. If one took seriously the statement that the church is mission, then it became painfully obvious that existing congregations were not structured for mission. The emphasis on the local congregation contributed to this growing dissatisfaction with congregational structures that reflected the assumptions of the Christendom era. Hoekendijk's challenge to overhaul these obsolete structures (Hoekendijk 1950:175) gained momentum throughout the 1950s. The question of the missionary structure of congregations was officially formulated at the end of the 1950s and was probed in a number of studies and articles throughout the 1960s. At New Delhi, the Report of the Department of Evangelism stated: "The Committee is convinced that one of the main hindrances in the pursuit of the evangelistic calling of the Church lies in the traditional structure of the local congregation" (New Delhi 1962:189). Newbigin's own question echoed this concern: "Does the very structure of our congregations contradict the missionary calling of the church?" (1963a:9). This question occupied Newbigin during his time in London and Geneva. The revolutionary times and new winds blowing in the WCC led many to conclude that the church was irrelevant to modern secular life. With this judgement Newbigin agreed; the structures of the established churches did not mobilize the Christian community for mission.

Newbigin believed that bold experiments in forms of congregational life were urgent, if churches were to be directed more to mission than to mere maintenance (1960o:30-33; 1993h:194). While Newbigin made some suggestive and stimulating contributions to this discussion (these are elaborated in later sections) his proposals remained only brief hints. He had hoped that the study of the Evangelism Department of the WCC entitled "The Missionary Structure of the Congregation" would make a thorough investigation of the matter. This was not to be, however; the study and report were swept up in the tides of secularism and the church was pushed aside as an institution of peripheral interest. Newbigin considered the failure of this project to be one of the major disappointments of his life (1993h:194).

#### 3.5.2.9. Ministerial Leadership

The rise of the secular decade meant that "the world provides the agenda" (WCC 1968:20) and so for many Christians "both Church and ministry were irrelevancies" (1993h:195). The belief of many was that clericalism was best overcome by rejecting altogether the ordained ministry and downplaying its role in the church (Bosch 1991:474). During this time Newbigin records that "one of the most frustrating assignments" he received was a section on ministry at the Montreal Faith and Order Conference in 1963. This task was frustrating "because the reigning ideology which

located God (if anywhere) firmly outside the walls of the Church made it almost impossible to discuss the role of the ordained ministry at all” (1993h:197). Newbigin’s long-held conviction that “nothing is more important in the long run for the life of the church than the quality of its ministry” (1962h:5) led him to grapple with this issue several times throughout his time in Europe.

“The question that has to be asked—and repeatedly asked—is whether the traditional forms of ministry which have been inherited from the ‘Christendom’ period are fully compatible with the faith that the Church is called to be a missionary community” (1963a:8). He believed that the answer to this question was negative and so he stressed that forms of ministry must be one of the four bold experiments that were urgent at this time (1960o:30-33).

### 3.5.2.10. Unity

Newbigin’s deep convictions about the unity of the missionary church that had developed during his student days and deepened during his early missionary years found a new context in the secular decade. There were two new issues that required further reflection on the unity of the church.

First, modernization, westernization, and globalization brought about a new concern that occupied the ecumenical movement—the unity of humankind. John Deschner notes that the phrase “‘the unity of humankind’ appears to have become an explicit theme in ecumenical discussions in the early 1960s” (Deschner 1991:1046). Prodded by Vatican II’s description of the church as a sacrament or sign of the unity of mankind, the Uppsala Assembly gave expression to the conviction that ecclesial unity is rightly considered in the context of a concern for the unity of humankind. The question at issue was how divisions in the global human community are problems for church unity and how, conversely, the church could be a sign of unity for the world. The context for discussions of unity before this period was denominational division. Hereafter the discussion took on the added dimension of the unity of humankind. This discussion would gain momentum until in 1971 Faith and Order launched a study on “The Unity of the Church and the Unity of Mankind” with a mandate “to view our historic theme of church unity in a new context, specifically in the context of human not simply denominational divisions” (Deschner 1991:1046).

Newbigin entered this debate early. In 1954 in a lecture at the University of Chicago he argues that the unity of humankind can only be found around Jesus Christ and the historical community he established and not in a Hindu syncretism (1955). Three years later he delivered the William Belden Noble Lectures at Harvard University. In these lectures, later published as *A Faith for This One World?* (1961c), he challenged Harvard’s William Ernest Hocking who had offered a Hinduized version of Christianity as the foundation for a world civilization in his *The Coming World Civilization* (Hocking 1958).

This new context led to fresh ecclesiological insight as he demonstrated the centrality of the church in world history (1955:6). During this revolutionary age in which humanity was being gathered together into one stream, one of Newbigin’s primary concerns was to interpret this process of world history in the light of the gospel and to place the mission of the church in that context. He elaborates afresh his burning passion for unity and its close relation to the mission of the church (1960j; 1961c; 1961e). This new angle of vision arising from a new context would bring fresh insight to the issue of unity and its underlying ecclesiology.

A second issue arose that provided opportunity for fresh reflection on the unity of the church. The discussions of the nature of unity in the WCC from Toronto (1950) to New Delhi (1961) led to a description of this unity as a fully committed fellowship in each place that was also recognizable as one body throughout the world and throughout the centuries. This notion of organic unity was sidelined, however, by developments in the Roman Catholic Church. In preparation for the meetings of Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church invited observers from the various world alliances and federations that were formed by confessional traditions—Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, and so forth. During subsequent years bilateral theological conversations developed between the RCC and these confessional bodies, attracting increasing public attention. Organic unity of “all in each place” receded from view. A notion of unity that provided for the amicable co-existence and co-operation of various churches, who maintained their distinct identity, replaced the organic model formulated at New Delhi. This new development was also fed by an increasing concern for pluralism from the broader society. This model of unity provided for the maintenance of the various traditions. Newbigin believed this kind of unity removed the cost and repentance that was necessary for true ecclesial unity. His struggle to defend the organic model led to continued reflection on ecclesiology that he believed was at the basis of any understanding of unity.

#### 3.5.2.11. Prayer and Worship at the Centre of Congregational Life

The secular trends of the time threatened the worshipping, fellowshiping, praying life of the church in two ways. First, the powerful voice of Hoekendijk had caused many to question the legitimacy of the institutional church and thus of its communal prayer life. Second, the equally powerful voice of J. A. T. Robinson had placed a large question mark over the devotional life of the Christian community—prayer, in particular. It is significant to note, that at a time when prayer and the gathered church was in retreat in theology, Newbigin increased his affirmation of the importance of a church gathered in worship and prayer (1960b:119f.; 1960e:1,5; 1962a:8f.; 1962j:90f.; 1963a:14; 1963e:22; 1963f:85). A vigorous missionary encounter cannot be sustained without a healthy spirituality and prayer life.

The emphasis during this secular decade on the social calling of the church and the importance of the laity in their various capacities in society were the context of Newbigin’s reflection on the praying, worshipping, nourishing, fellowshiping congregation. The challenge of Hoekendijk and Robinson motivated Newbigin to new reflection in this area that would inform his missionary ecclesiology.

#### 3.5.2.12. The Church’s Relationship to Its Context

A missionary setting in India had led to fruitful reflection on the relationship of the church to its environment. During this period of Newbigin’s life a new context brought further understanding. This change in context was made up of at least three factors. First, a shift in focus from church to world as the sphere of God’s activity brought a deepening awareness of the religio-cultural environment that constitutes the world. Second, the growing sense of the fact that mission is the responsibility of every church in all six continents prompted analysis of the various cultural contexts in which the church finds itself. Third, the modernization and globalization sweeping the world was bringing about a renaissance of religions. Newbigin’s first-hand experience of the

church throughout the world caused him to recognize these factors as urgent issues for the missionary church.

The secular worldview was the most obvious cultural context of the church's mission. However, that secularism was not merely a religiously neutral context. Newbigin's wrestlings with church and cultural context indicate an initial awareness of the fact that western culture is also pagan and idolatrous. Although his attitude toward secularism is ambiguous, his struggles on this topic would help him shape an understanding of a missionary church in western culture. The reflection of this time becomes the foundation for more profound analysis after his retirement to Britain.

While Newbigin recognized the renaissance of the world religions in the non-western cultures (1960j:4) and believed that bold experiments in the church's relation to them were urgent (1960o:30-33), he gave no sustained analysis of these cultural contexts dominated by the great non-Christian religions. This would become the centre of his thinking in a later period of his life when the reality of pluralism was more ascendent in his mind.

The secularization of a rapidly globalizing modern culture was urgent at this point in Newbigin's writings. This religio-cultural environment formed the background and context for the mission church in his writings throughout this time. It was his analysis of Denys Munby's book *The Idea of a Secular Society* that had the most enduring effect on Newbigin's thought about the missionary church in a secular context (1966b:126-133).

### 3.5.2.13. Summary

The mission paradigm in the ecumenical tradition shifted radically during Newbigin's Geneva years. The emphasis was on participating in what God was doing in the world. Thus the social and political dimensions of the church's task took centre stage. The laity was the primary agent of mission and the church must be restructured to equip the laity for its task. With much of this Newbigin was sympathetic. The church had become a self-centred institution concerned primarily with maintenance and badly in need of reform. Thus Newbigin affirmed the image of the church as a servant that selflessly involved itself in the social and political life of the world. Since the laity was central to the missionary task of the church, there was an urgent need for a structural reformation of the institutional church that would equip the laity for their missionary encounter in society. There was a burning necessity to tackle issues of unity in an emerging global society. And so these elements of the changing ecumenical paradigm—the social task of the church, the mission of the laity, the need for flexible missionary structures, and the unity of the church in a global world—found an important place in Newbigin's ecclesiological discussion.

The reigning paradigm also threatened many dimensions of the church's mission that Newbigin believed were foundational. The gospel, and not the world, set the agenda for Newbigin's reflection on mission. When this new paradigm threatened Biblical elements of a missionary church, Newbigin opposed these currents. The growing emphasis on the social task of the church threatened evangelism and missions; Newbigin affirmed the centrality of both in a missionary church. The new insight of God's work in the world eclipsed the importance of the church as a community; Newbigin continued to affirm the church as a community where the powers of the coming age were primarily at work. Thus ministerial leadership, ecclesial unity, and the prayer and worship life of the congregation must not be minimized.

Newbiggin's Trinitarian ecclesiology developed in a revolutionary global context and in critical dialogue with a changing paradigm of mission in the ecumenical tradition. The result was a missionary ecclesiology that continued to affirm the emphases of an earlier period, but placed these ecclesiological formulations in a wider context—the context of a Triune missionary God.

### 3.6. NEWBIGGIN'S ECCLESIOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT DURING HIS MADRAS BISHOPRIC (1965-1974)

On 1 October 1965 Newbiggin left his post as director of the CMWE and returned to India as bishop of Madras in the Church of South India. Newbiggin's ecclesiological development during this time stands in deep continuity with the preceding six years. The context described earlier—the collapse of colonialism, global westernization, resurgent secularism, a Trinitarian context, the world as location of mission, witness as social involvement, the importance of the laity and new ecclesial structures for missionary engagement with the world, and a functional ecclesiology—still remained the dominant background for Newbiggin's work. Many of the concerns and emphases of his writings in the early 1960s continue to appear throughout this time. In a sense, we can interpret this era of Newbiggin's life as an attempt to put into practice what he had learned in his years with the IMC and WCC. And the Madras diocese provided an opportunity for such an endeavour. Tracing Newbiggin's ecclesiological development, therefore, will require us to examine the Madras setting in which Newbiggin worked as bishop. However, there is another setting that is important if we are to understand the issues which shaped Newbiggin's ecclesiology during this time. That setting is the polemically charged atmosphere in the global missionary community between the evangelical and ecumenical approaches to mission. Specifically three aspects of this context will be treated: the divide that appeared between the evangelical and ecumenical traditions, the new emphases on salvation and conversion, and the arrival of the Church Growth school on the missiological scene. The following two sections will treat the ecumenical and Indian contexts.

#### 3.6.1. *The Diocese of Madras*

Madras was a rapidly growing urban area that bore all the marks of a developing and modernizing third world city—burgeoning population, industry, slums, and state policies shaped by commitment to nation building. At this time Madras was a city of three million people, adding 100,000 to its population every year (1993h:207; 1974b:9). About half of this annual increase came from the villages around the city, mostly young people who attained an elementary education in their village and now came to the urban sprawl in search of work. Most of them became part of the great company of slum dwellers who lived in impermanent dwellings without sanitation, electricity, or water. These immigrants were drawn into the exploding industry in Madras that accounted for a substantial part of India's total industrial output. A great belt of factories surrounded Madras extending to a radius of twenty-five miles. The new spirits in control of this developing urban life were material progress and a chauvinistic nationalism (1993h:204).

The Madras diocese was a much bigger, more established and powerful diocese than what Newbiggin had known in Madurai. There were about one thousand congregations

and over a hundred full-time ministers. The churches in Madras were part of a long and well developed tradition, several churches dating back one hundred and fifty years. Madras had had an Anglican bishop since 1835 who played a role in public affairs. Many members of the CSI held leading positions in business, politics, industry, and professional life.

In summary, the social, political, and economic needs of Madras were great and the CSI, if it could take a missionary posture, was positioned to play a significant role in addressing those needs. Newbigin's sermon at his installation service, preached in Tamil and fully covered by the press, proclaimed that "Christ is not just the Lord of Christians; he is Lord of all, absolutely and without qualification." The "Church is the Church *for* the nation" and must play its part in the social, economic, political, and cultural development of the city as a sign and instrument. "The entire membership of the Church in their secular occupations are called to be signs of Christ's lordship in every area of public life" and as their bishop he would help them to carry out this responsibility. He comments: "I was to spend much of my time in the next nine years helping them to shoulder these responsibilities" (1993h:203).

### *3.6.2. The Global Missionary Context*

During his time in India Newbigin remained deeply involved in the ecumenical movement. At least three new dimensions entered his ecclesiology at this time as a result of this continuing connection with the WCC. First, the developments within the ecumenical tradition produced an evangelical reaction. A growing divide between the ecumenical and evangelical traditions became increasingly evident during his time in India. Newbigin's attempt to find a Biblical solution to this scandalous division affected his ecclesiological writing. Second, a number of themes emerging in the WCC discussion made their way into Newbigin's writing during this time. Newbigin's discussion of these themes—salvation and conversion—had ecclesiological implications. Third, the Church Growth school became a dominant voice in missiology. From this point on the writings of this school became an important interlocutor for Newbigin.

#### *3.6.2.1. The Ecumenical-Evangelical Divide*

Newbigin's tenure as bishop in Madras coincided with the time that the "ecumenical-evangelical relations hardened into something like a confrontation" (Stott 1975:65). However, the roots of this confrontation go back to the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the split between revivalism and the social gospel. The evangelical unity of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was shattered. Richard Lovelace comments: "The broad river of classical evangelicalism divided into a delta, with shallower streams emphasizing ecumenism and social renewal on the left and confessional orthodoxy and evangelism on the right" (Lovelace 1981:298). Gerald Anderson has analyzed the shift that took place in the ecumenical tradition in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. By 1915 four new emphases were evident: the world's major religions were valued more highly; mission was more transformational activity and less evangelism; salvation was this-worldly in manifestation and source; and society was emphasized more than the individual (Anderson 1988:104). Timothy Smith describes the development in the evangelical tradition over this same time period as the "great reversal" (Moberg 1972:11, 28-45). Motivated by a growing premillennialism, an individualistic interpretation of sin and

salvation, and a reaction to the excesses of the ecumenical tradition, evangelical mission theology became narrow, reductionistic, and imbalanced.

While mutual suspicion and hostility grew apace during this time, open conflict did not erupt until the 1960s. Bosch describes the period between 1966 and 1973 as a “period of confrontation” (Bosch 1988:462). There were two reasons that this open clash took place at this time. First, the evangelical community was connected to the broader global Christian community through the IMC. However, with the entry of the IMC into the WCC these links were severed. Twenty years after New Delhi, Newbigin confided that he had feared all along that the necessary joining of the IMC and WCC would alienate evangelicals (1981a).

The second reason that conflict flared up at this time was the shift in mission taking place within the ecumenical tradition. Within the World Council of Churches trends such as a growing secularization, the world setting the agenda for the church, mission absorbed into socio-political involvement, mission as presence and dialogue, a religionless Christianity, and the presence of God in other religions prompted many evangelicals to regard the WCC as apostate.

Criticisms of the horizontalism and politicization of the gospel in the WCC spawned the 1966 Wheaton Congress on Worldwide Mission sponsored by the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association and the International Foreign Missions Association. Attending the Wheaton Congress as an ecumenical observer, Eugene Smith commented that “the distrust of the ecumenical movement within this group has to be experienced to be believed” (Smith 1966:480). He detailed the items that produced this overwhelming distrust. “The most frequent charges against us were theological liberalism, loss of evangelical conviction, universalism in theology, substitution of social action for evangelism, and the search for unity at the expense of biblical truth” (Smith 1966:481). Six months after Wheaton, a World Congress on Evangelism sponsored by the Billy Graham Association and the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* was held in Berlin. While the tone was more constructive than Wheaton, “a militant and self-conscious evangelicalism” permeated the published reports (Bosch 1988:463).

The fourth assembly of the WCC in Uppsala in 1968 served to exacerbate the growing tensions. The growing horizontalism of mission drew criticism from Donald McGavran, John Stott, Peter Beyerhaus, and Arthur Glasser. This assembly “heralds the beginning of the era of serious encounter of evangelicals with the WCC in the assembly halls of the latter” (Bosch 1988:463). Newbigin pointed to a “futile polarisation in which one side was unable to hear the other” (1973f:49). The second meeting of the CMWE at Bangkok in 1973 did little to dissolve the battle lines. The preparatory documents on the theme “Salvation Today” led Beyerhaus to denounce the “pan-religious and humanistic-ideological interpretation of salvation” (quoted in Bosch 1988:463). Arthur Glasser, at the invitation of the WCC, delivered an irenic yet strongly critical speech of the ecumenical understanding of salvation (Glasser 1973:103-108).

The confrontation between these two traditions touched on almost every area of mission theology. Even a brief sketch of all the issues cannot be attempted here. However, there were at least four themes that Newbigin addressed over this time period. First, the ecumenical tradition stressed social involvement to the point where many in their own ranks decried the loss of evangelism. In response, evangelicals committed themselves to the primacy of evangelism and tended to downplay social involvement. Second, much ecumenical discussion of salvation stressed the social, present, and this-worldly dimensions. Over against this evangelicals stressed an individual, future, and

otherworldly salvation. Third, on the topic of conversion, evangelicals emphasized a highly personal crisis experience in contrast to the social and gradualistic emphases they perceived in the WCC. Fourth, if the encounter between the gospel involves the two poles of the gospel and the cultural context, then the ecumenical tradition highlighted context—a sympathetic concern with the struggles of people—with the danger of absorption, while the evangelical tradition underscored faithfulness to the gospel, with the threat of swerving toward sectarian withdrawal. It was at these four points that Newbigin entered the debates between the traditions.

### 3.6.2.2. Emerging Themes in the Ecumenical Tradition

There is a deep continuity in the development of ecumenical ecclesiology and missiology from New Delhi 1961 until Bangkok 1973. It would not be until the Nairobi Assembly of the WCC in 1975 that a world-oriented mission theology would run its course. Many of the issues and concerns of the preceding period of Newbigin's life find continued expression during his tenure in Madras. He continued to interact with the Hoekendijkian instrumentalist ecclesiology describing the church as a sign, firstfruits, and instrument of the kingdom. In fact, this formulation is employed with increasing frequency during this time. The preoccupation with ecclesial structures that would equip the laity for mission in the world continues to find frequent expression in Newbigin's writings. Interaction with the missiological strategy of presence and missiological goal of humanization continue to be a backdrop against which Newbigin formulates his own understanding. In short, the same issues we have encountered in the previous section continue to be important for Newbigin's ecclesiology during this period.

There are at least two further closely related ecumenical developments that need to be noted if we are to put Newbigin's ecclesiological reflections in context. These two new themes become prominent in ecumenical discussions at this time and challenge Newbigin's thinking on missionary ecclesiology. Those themes are conversion and salvation.

The topic of conversion emerged in the WCC as a central point of discussion during the latter part of the 1960s. Conversion had been an important theme in Protestant mission and upon the integration of the IMC and WCC the topic was placed on the agenda. A growing number of publications on conversion both reflected and fostered interest in the subject. In an influential address entitled *Conversion and Social Transformation* Emilio Castro elaborated the societal implications of conversion (Castro 1966:348-366). A number of concerns lay behind the emerging interest. The pietistic and evangelical traditions emphasized the conversion of individuals to God. The ecumenical tradition was concerned with the social dimensions of conversion. Conversion meant the changing of social structures in alignment with the will of God. The Eastern Orthodox tradition found both of these unacceptable because individual and societal conversion eclipsed the church. In response to these questions, the WCC proposed a study of conversion that was carried out and published in preparation for the Uppsala assembly in 1968. The *Ecumenical Review* devoted a whole issue (July 1967) to the topic as contributors from diverse traditions attempted to gain consensus. However, the split between evangelicals and ecumenicals could not be avoided. The debate in Uppsala fostered a growing estrangement (Loffler 1991:230). Newbigin's contribution to the debate was significant. Indeed, Loffler quotes Newbigin's definition as one that moves beyond conversion as individual decision, entry into the church, or social transformation by rooting conversion in the kingdom of God (Loffler 1991:229).

Since one of the components of his understanding of conversion was the importance of a visible community, his discussion of this topic is important for the subject of ecclesiology.

The latter half of the 1960s also saw a renewed interest in the topic of salvation. Again it was the growing interest in God's action in the world that raised awareness of new dimensions of salvation. A traditional understanding of salvation was primarily individualistic, exclusively future, and otherworldly. The sea change in the ecumenical movement challenged this notion of salvation, emphasizing the social, present, and this-worldly dimensions of salvation. At the Geneva Conference of Church and Society in 1966 two competing views of salvation—secularist and liberationist—were advocated, both building on Hoekendijk's concern to focus on this world as the main area of God's salvific work (Bosch 1991:396). Both defined salvation in social and this-worldly terms: salvation by technological development or salvation as liberation from oppressive structures. Uppsala failed to reconcile these two positions and so the topic "Salvation Today" was chosen for the CWME meeting in Bangkok in 1973. Salvation at this conference continued to be defined exclusively in "this-worldly" terms. Salvation can be seen at four points: in economic justice against exploitation; in human dignity against political oppression; in solidarity against alienation; in hope against despair in personal life (Bangkok 1973:89). Again the ecumenical-evangelical tension can be observed on this topic. As the ecumenical tradition increasingly defined salvation in social, present, and this-worldly terms, the evangelical tradition emphasized the individual, future, and otherworldly dimensions. Newbigin's attempts to bridge these differences during this time had clear implications for his ecclesiology.

Newbigin addressed each of these themes a number of times throughout this period. However, it was a debate with M. M. Thomas that emerged out of discussions on salvation and conversion that bore the most ecclesiological fruit.<sup>4</sup> The exchange was the fruit of conversations that each had carried on separately (Hunsberger 1998:176). At Mexico in 1963 M. M. Thomas and Hendrikus Berkhof had begun a debate on the nature of salvation in a secular world. At the prompting of Loffler, they had carried forward this discussion in print (Loffler 1968). Newbigin responded to this exchange in an article published in a *Festschrift* for Bengt Sundkler (1969a). Thomas entered the debate with a discussion of salvation. Newbigin's entry into the debate came as a result of a discussion of conversion in which he critiqued Kaj Baago (Baago 1966). Thomas published a book in 1971 entitled *Salvation and Humanisation* in which he took issue with Newbigin's critique at a number of points. Newbigin reviewed his book critically and through a published exchange of letters the debate was carried forward (Hunsberger 1998:177).

Two issues were discussed which are important for the topic of this book. First, Thomas and Newbigin disagreed on the relationship of evangelism to humanization. Thomas followed the Uppsala Assembly in speaking of 'points of mission' where the gospel is relevant for that time. For Thomas the struggle for humanization was that point of mission where the gospel "comes alive." Thomas emphasized context over the content of the gospel and stood in danger of allowing the gospel and evangelism to be swallowed up by efforts of humanization. Newbigin responded with a critique which highlighted the content and universal validity of the gospel. Newbigin was not prepared to allow evangelism to be swept away (Loffler 1968:14-33; 1969a:260f.).

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<sup>4</sup>For an extended discussion on this debate see Hunsberger 1998 pp.176-189. The bibliographic materials of this debate are found on pp. 280-282 of the same book.

The second point of disagreement between Thomas and Newbigin is the extent of the new humanity. Are the boundaries of the church and the new humanity co-extensive? If not, how can that new humanity be seen outside the boundaries of the church? Thomas enlarged the notion of the new humanity to such an extent that the importance of the church as a visible institution was threatened. While Newbigin agreed that God's salvific work spilled over beyond the bounds of the church, he was not willing to diminish the importance of that body as a visible community. The debates within the ecumenical tradition around salvation and conversion led to discussions between Thomas and Newbigin that sharpened the latter's thinking on the issue of the church and its evangelistic task (1971c:72ff.).

### 3.6.2.3. The Church Growth Tradition

During the latter part of the 1960s and the 1970s the Church Growth school became an influential movement in missiology. While it arose out of the evangelical tradition and has influenced primarily groups associated with that tradition, Church Growth has made an impact on the whole church (Bassham 1979:189). The reports of Uppsala and Bangkok reflect the emphases of Church Growth advocates. As many proponents of Church Growth confronted the WCC, their views became well-known to Newbigin. Donald McGavran and the Church Growth school became one of the primary interlocutors of Newbigin throughout the remainder of his life (see, for example, 1978e:121-159). For this reason it is important to note the leading elements of their thought.

In his book *The Bridges of God* (1955) McGavran rejected the mission station approach of cross-cultural missions that had been practiced for one hundred and fifty years. In its place he advocated a people movements strategy "in which groups of people become Christians and form indigenous churches and are then encouraged to use their natural cultural links to bring other responsive people to Christ" (Bassham 1979:189). As a result of his experience in India, McGavran observed that some churches were growing while many remained stagnant. The lack of growth in the majority of the churches was the direct result of a faulty methodology—the mission station approach. Converts were detached from their natural communal contexts and brought under the umbrella of a western missionary compound. Separated from their natural ties, converts could not evangelize their neighbours. Missionaries spent enormous resources on bringing converts into the compound and into conformity with western cultural standards. The people movement strategy preserves the cultural, linguistic, and social contexts and utilizes them for evangelistic purposes because "people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers" (McGavran 1970:163). Churches that were growing in India took this approach.

McGavran was deeply concerned for the evangelization of the world. Recognizing that large numbers of people had never heard the gospel, he was concerned to facilitate this evangelistic encounter. He believed that proper methods would lead to enormous growth of the church worldwide.

Thus church growth was the primary goal of his missionary strategy. McGavran's dominating concern with growth led to a number of conclusions. First, evangelism is the main task of the church. McGavran distinguished between discipling and perfecting. The discipling stage is marked by the transition from a non-Christian way to a Christian way of life. The perfecting stage which follows, aims at "an increasing achievement of

a thoroughly Christian way of life for the community as a whole” (McGavran 1955:13-16). Missionary work, according to McGavran, must focus on discipling as its primary goal. Second, the responsive and winnable people of the world must be identified and the majority of missionary resources deployed to reach those peoples. Third, social scientific research is an indispensable tool for locating these winnable peoples and in understanding the “natural cultural links” that will facilitate further church growth. Fourth, the cultures of the peoples must be accepted and utilized for winning more people. Churches that are adapted to the cultural, racial, linguistic, and class contexts in which people live will be most successful in transmitting the gospel. This is the so-called ‘homogenous unit principle.’

While Newbigin shared a number of common concerns with McGavran, he was led to criticize the Church Growth school for their exclusive focus on church growth, their uncritical acceptance of culture, and their reductionistic view of conversion.

### *3.6.3. Ecclesiological Emphases in Madras*

Newbigin’s ministry as a bishop in Madras and his continuing involvement in the ecumenical tradition led to continued ecclesiological reflection. While there is continuity between his time in Geneva and Madras, it is important to highlight the themes that received new attention during this time. Fresh opportunities to put into practice the ecclesiology that developed in Europe, as well as new debates and discussions, combined to lead to fresh ecclesiological thought.

#### *3.6.3.1. The Social Witness of the Church*

No other issue appears more often in both Newbigin’s ministry and his writings during this time than the topic of the social responsibility of the church. There are a number of reasons for this. The social task of the church was the burning issue of the day (1971h:264). The global climate—the collapse of colonialism, the spread of nationalism, the obvious economic discrepancies between first and third world countries—forced the issue on the growing ecumenical church. Newbigin found himself in an urban church in India in which the social problems of the day acquired a measure of urgency. This context impelled theological reflection on the social mission of the church. A growing rift between the evangelical and ecumenical traditions of the church on the issue of social responsibility and evangelism dominated the missiological discussions of the day. While Newbigin had been committed to the social task of the church from the beginning, this time period forced him to reflect more deeply on issues of justice and mercy. After relating a particularly discouraging episode in his life in which he was confronted by the injustice of the slums, he notes that “it caused me to think very hard about the Christian approach to social justice” (1993h:211). This statement may be seen as an inscription over Newbigin’s ministry during this period.

Newbigin’s extensive reflection on the social task of the church is deeply rooted in his missionary praxis. During a time of rapid development and growing nationalism, the needs of Madras were great. The church carried a degree of power and influence. In this setting, Newbigin sought to enable the strong Madras church to take responsibility in the social realm. Slums appeared as the result of the migration of one hundred thousand people to the city each year in search of a better life (1974b:9). The government was unable to provide water, sanitation, lighting, roads, schools, health services and transportation to this many people on an overtaxed budget. Newbigin’s response to this

growing problem was multi-pronged. First, the six hundred slums were divided equally among the two hundred Christian congregations in Madras. A letter was sent to each congregation, signed by Bishop Newbigin and the Roman Catholic Archbishop, challenging each congregation to take responsibility for the slums designated. This was followed up by training programs for church members to work in the slums, but especially to act promptly and effectively in times of emergencies such as floods and fires (1971b:257; 1993h:208).<sup>5</sup> Thirdly, Newbigin chaired the New Residents Welfare Trust which was created to work with the government's Slum Clearance Board. This group mobilized folk to help during times of disaster (1973a:544), formulated and carried out longer term programs such as the provision of modern sanitation units (1974b: 10), helped move slum dwellers to more suitable, permanent housing (1974b:9; 199eh:208f.), and recruited and deployed highly trained community workers as resident welfare officers in all the new housing projects (1994k:35). Finally, a massive long-term program of community health care and education, carried out by young people under the expert guidance of community health workers, was launched (1994k:36). At all of these points the Community Service Centre, an association created by a group of churches, was deeply involved (1994k:36; 1974b:11).

One of the most destitute groups of residents in the squalid slums was the lepers. Newbigin sympathized, visited, and prayed with and for them. He struggled to find a solution to their problem and eventually found one that he later realized was somewhat paternalistic (1993h:211). The whole colony was transported to an area of wild jungle and equipment was provided for them to start a farm colony.

On another more unhappy occasion Newbigin faced a mob led by a American who sought to arouse anger, create conflict, and coerce the ruling authorities into acceding to their demands (1993h:210f.). Newbigin was confronted by this group who threatened to expose corruption in the church unless their demands were met. This event helped Newbigin see the paternalism in his approach to social justice and that coercion by the populace on governmental and ecclesiastical authorities could play a constructive role. However, it lacked a concern for reconciliation on the other side of successful coercion, which was essential to an understanding of social justice shaped by the gospel. The whole episode caused Newbigin to deepen his reflection on a Christian approach to the relationship between social justice, paternalism, and coercion (1993h:211).

Another rapidly growing segment of Madras was industry. Madras boasted a great belt of factories that accounted for a large part of India's industrial output (1974b:9). Based on the Great Commission of Matthew 28, Newbigin believed that the gospel addresses not only individuals but also corporate entities. The life of a whole community is moulded and held together by a body of customs, behaviours, and laws,

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and it is this that must be addressed by the gospel (1974b:100-105). Industry was the formation of a great new “nation” that needed to be disciplined. The standard model for industrial mission was London’s Sheffield Mission of Bishop Wickham. This approach treated industry as an unevangelized mission field into which the missionary must enter with a relevant message. Newbiggin believed that this model was not the correct one for Madras, however, because an estimated 10% of the managers and workers in industry were already Christians. The problem was that these workers had “misunderstood their baptism.” They had thought that their Christian life “had nothing to do with their work on the shop floor or in the office, that it was a personal matter concerning their personal and private salvation and not a commitment to be part of God’s mission to industry” (1974b:102). The task Newbiggin set for himself and other church leaders was to help them understand “that they *are* the industrial mission” (*ibid.*). This was carried out by arranging frontier meetings in which workers and managers could discuss the problems of bearing witness to Christ in the public realm. The Community Service Centre also arranged day conferences in which people from various callings in industry met together to gain insight into the inner workings of industry in the light of the gospel and struggle with the ethical dilemmas of their daily work (1993h:214).

This brief overview gives an idea of Newbiggin’s deep involvement in the social issues of his time and his struggle to equip the church for her social calling. It was out of this experience that Newbiggin reflected on the nature of Christian social activity. His discussion of this topic during this time is both more extensive and much deeper than previous periods in his life.

### 3.6.3.2. The Calling of the Laity in Society

One of the primary ways the church carries out its social task is through the witness of the various members in their daily lives in public arena. Since the church in Madras had many members in “leading positions in government, the professions and the business world” (1993h:202) Newbiggin’s conviction that this is the primary witness of the church only strengthened during this time (1972a:127).

As a bishop, Newbiggin’s task in addressing this issue was threefold. First, a Community Service Centre that operated on behalf of all the churches in Madras was established to provide both “training for service to society and an opportunity for men and women in many sectors of public life to equip themselves for Christian witness and service in the common life” (1974b:11). More specifically, day-long conferences were arranged for people who were engaged in the same calling to struggle together, sometimes through role-play, with issues that faced them in the work place (1993h:214). There were also conferences that dealt with the big public issues facing the nation (1993h:215). The second way in which Newbiggin tackled this problem was by exhorting pastors to give high priority to training people in their congregations for their callings. Newbiggin met monthly with the ministers of the Madras churches for breakfast and communion. He would give a brief sermon to open up some issue in the ministry. Those sermons have been collected in *The Good Shepherd: Meditations on Christian Ministry in Today’s World* (1974b). We find in these sermons frequent reference to the calling of the minister to train the members of their churches for their tasks in the world. Thirdly, Newbiggin suggested different structures, both within the local congregation and more ecumenically, whereby the laity can be equipped for their witness in society.

### 3.6.3.3. Evangelism

The issue of social justice dominated the ecumenical agenda during this period. This resulted in the diminishment of evangelism in the church's ministry. While Newbigin's commitment to social justice was central during his ministry in Madras, it was without minimizing evangelism (1968f:4; 1994k:34). He writes:

I was also eager to find effective ways of evangelism for this bustling city, but it seemed to me essential that the Church which preached the Gospel should be recognizable as a body which cared for its neighbours (1993h:209).

Newbigin identified three large areas within the diocese in which there was no Christian presence. He mobilized funds and workers to go to these areas. The result was flourishing congregations in each area (1993h:213).

We find renewed assertions of the indispensability of evangelism in the church's mission in at least three contexts. First, evangelism must not be eclipsed by works of justice and mercy. Second, mission as presence is not sufficient if it minimizes evangelism. Third, the goal of humanization in mission may not eclipse the essential task of evangelism.

#### 3.6.3.4. The Local Congregation

In Newbigin's reflection on the social task of the church another issue emerges that would become increasingly important in his writings about social action. This social concern must be seen to flow from the local congregation. The danger during the 1960s was that numerous organizations, both ecclesiastical and political, were formed to care for social needs. This had the potential of creating at least two problems for the mission of the church. First, the local congregation loses its self-understanding as a missionary body and reverts to being an introverted community concerned only with its own members. After all, our offerings go to finance organizations created to show mercy and pursue justice on our behalf. Second, to the unbeliever who is the beneficiary of the mercy and justice of this organization, it is not clear that these acts flow from a local community that embodies the new reality of the kingdom of God.

Both in his addresses and in his ministry in Madras Newbigin sought to address this situation and uphold the local congregation as the primary centre for mission. We have noted the plan that Newbigin had for dealing with the problem of the slums—a plan that remained paradigmatic for Newbigin throughout the rest of his life. When he divided the six hundred or more slums among the two hundred local congregations, and exhorted them to take responsibility for the allocated slum, he did not centralize the project, which might have been more efficient both in terms of finances and expertise. His fundamental concern was that “a Christian congregation must be seen as a community which cares for its neighbours” (1993h:208).

#### 3.6.3.5. Ecclesial Structures

Ecclesial structures continued to be a dominant item on the ecumenical agenda. It was noted in the previous section that Newbigin anticipated the study of the structure of the missionary congregation to suggest new structures that would be more appropriate to the missionary calling of the church. Deeply disappointed in the outcome of this study, he took up the task himself and addressed the issue numerous times.

One of the issues that motivated him to consider the reformation of ecclesial structures as one of utmost urgency was the seeming obsolescence of the church. For many, especially the young, the church seemed to be irrelevant to God's mission, precisely because of the church's dated, self-centred structures. Newbigin believed that "so long as the existing congregations are clubs for the self-centred enjoyment of the benefits of the Christian religion, it will be natural for many ardent spirits to conclude that the real business of God's mission is to be done outside of them." This must be challenged, he believed: "For all who are concerned for God's mission, the highest priority must be given to bringing about those changes in the structures of the church... which are necessary to make it recognisable as a missionary body" (1969a:263).

Newbigin noted a number of different structures that needed to be reformed in his diocese if the church was to be missionary: parochial and diocesan organization, deployment of men and money, patterns of ministry, including deacons and lay leadership, and forms of assembly (*ibid*). His most extensive reflection is found in a paper he delivered to an ecumenical group in Madras (1973c). However, the theme is strewn throughout his writing during this time.

#### 3.6.3.6. Ministerial Leadership

During Newbigin's Madras bishopric a number of factors brought the issue of ministerial leadership to the centre of his attention. First, Newbigin believed that one of his fundamental tasks as a bishop was to sustain the ministers and other leaders through Bible study and prayer (1993h:215). Over fifty presbyters would meet in Madras for a monthly meeting during which time Newbigin would speak on some subject of ministerial leadership. Some of these sermons have been collected and published as *The Good Shepherd: Meditations on Ministry in Today's World* (1974b). Reading these talks opens a window into Newbigin's heartfelt concern that these men be leaders of missionary congregations. Second, Newbigin was appointed to be convenor of the Synod Ministerial Committee. One of the primary responsibilities of this committee was to launch a new seminary at Arasaradi. The committee involved the churches in the planning of the curriculum and structure of the seminary. The result was "a kind of ministerial training which was more truly appropriate to a missionary Church than anything I have known before or since" (1993h:216). Third, Newbigin believed that the patterns of ministerial leadership were the primary structures that needed to be reformed. The patterns that had developed in the West were built on three axioms—the ministry is a paid full-time profession, ministers are highly educated, ministers should be supported by the gifts and donations of people—none of which were derived from the New Testament (1994k:24). There was a need for lay leaders and for a rethinking of the role of the deacon. All of this urged Newbigin to reflection and action.

All three of these factors led Newbigin to continue his reflection on the nature, role, and structure of ministerial leadership in the missionary congregation.

#### 3.6.3.7. Unity

Newbigin's involvement in discussions on unity and reunion continued during this period. He participated in the discussions about reunion between the CSI and the Lutheran church in India (1993h:217; 1969b); he convened the NCC's Committee on Faith and Order in India that arranged discussions between the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Mar Thoma, and Protestant churches and culminated in a conference in 1972

(1993h:218); he commented on the proposed scheme of union between the Methodist and Anglican churches (1968a); he authored the report on conciliarity—a scheme of unity he personally disagreed with because it would sideline the more difficult organic union—at Louvain in 1971 (1993h:220f.); he addressed the need for unity in the context of the trend of secularization and the estrangement of the evangelicals from the ecumenical tradition (1969a); he continued in the Faith and Order discussions attempting to resolve tangled problems that had arisen from the New Delhi statement about local and global unity (1969e; 1970b:73f.); he addressed the issue of the form and structure of visible unity in the light of the new trends of dissatisfaction with and sociological analysis of ecclesial structures (1973c).

In all of these discussions two issues are important for the topic of his missionary ecclesiology. First, Newbigin addressed the problem that many Christians believe a concern for visible unity to be archaic. Evangelicals were impatient because they were passionately concerned to evangelize the world; they ranked evangelism above a concern for church unity. Ecumenicals were impatient because they were passionately concerned to meet the social needs of the world; they “set social action against ‘ecclesiastical joinery’” (1972c:434). Both parties agreed that visible unity is outdated. Speaking to this issue, Newbigin argued that both evangelism and social concern must flow from a proper understanding of the church in eschatological context (1973c). Second, again and again Newbigin addressed the need for new structures that would express the visible unity of the church. This concern led him to consider the nature of the church (1969a; 1970b:73f.).

#### 3.6.3.8. The Worship Life of the Congregation

In a secular time when social activism undermined the life of prayer and worship Newbigin continued to emphasize this dimension of the church’s life. A deepened life of prayer and worship is a “necessary corollary of a secular society” (1968d:79). A second factor that forced this issue into prominence was the dramatic growth of the Pentecostal church. Folk from the CSI had left to go the Pentecostal church because they found the CSI worship dull and boring. This was the context in which he addressed the subject of worship. He was concerned for three things: liturgical renewal, worship contextualized in India, and worship connected to the mission of the church (1972i:143; 1974b:32-37).

#### 3.6.3.9. Missionary Encounter with Religio-Cultural Context

Although Newbigin had always paid careful attention to understanding the cultural context in which the church must bear witness to the good news of the kingdom, conscious reflection on that relationship in writing came only in his later years. It is during this time that we find a more nuanced treatment of this subject.

There are a couple of historical factors that made this issue more prominent. First, a church that becomes socially involved in the task of nation building will be forced to ask the question of the relationship of the life of the kingdom to the life of the nation. Newbigin addressed this issue several times. He treated the relationship between salvation, the new humanity, and cultural-communal solidarity in Bangalore Theological Forum (1973e). He struggled with the relationship between the gospel and the goals of Indian public education (1972h). He entitled his paper on the subject the apostolic-secular dilemma. By the time he wrote his earlier article the word

contextualization had emerged and he used it to express his concerns. Second, the ecumenical-evangelical divide forced further reflection on the proper understanding of contextualization which is both relevant and faithful. The evangelical tradition was concerned for faithfulness to the gospel that moved it in a sectarian direction. The ecumenical tradition was concerned for relevance that moved it in the direction of “apostasy” (1967a, III:12). In this context he treated the relationship between the gospel and culture in more detail.

### 3.6.3.10. The Finality of Christ and World Religions

Perhaps surprisingly, Newbigin never addressed the subject of the gospel and other religions in a sustained way until the Beecher Lectures at Yale in 1966, even though Newbigin ministered in India where the issue of religious syncretism is paramount. He had spent time with the Hindu monks studying their religion, he had studied all the missionary conference material beginning with Edinburgh where the issue is a frequent topic of discussion (1973f:52), he had been deeply shaped by Kraemer, and he had engaged in the task of nation building in cooperation with Hindus and Muslims. Yet it is not until this time period that we see the fruit of this in print. In an article written in 1971 he identified five reasons that brought this topic to centre stage on the ecumenical agenda. “(1) the growing intermingling of people of all races in a common secular culture; (2) wider diffusion of the comparative study of religions; (3) the idea propagated in the papal Encyclical *Suum Ecclesiam* of religions as concentric circles having the RC church at the centre and others at increasingly remote distances; (4) the acute bad conscience of western man, who wishes above all to avoid any claims to superiority.... and [fifthly, the fact that] the Hindu belief that all religions are differing roads to one reality is becoming increasingly the unchallenged axiom of modern educated people” (1971a:620).

Newbigin tackles the issue in the Beecher Lectures later published as *The Finality of Christ* (1969c). The immediate concern that led Newbigin to choose the topic of the finality of Christ for the Beecher Lectures was a “confused kind of ecumenism” that included the unity of religions as part of the ecumenical agenda. Newbigin writes: “I believed that the whole integrity of the Ecumenical Movement depended upon the acceptance of the centrality and the finality of Christ, and that to move from this was not a legitimate extension of the Ecumenical Movement but a reversal” (1993h:218).

In these lectures Newbigin struggled with the relationship of continuity and discontinuity in relating the gospel to other religions that had been framed by the Kraemer-Hogg debates at Tambaram. Arguing for the finality of Christ as the clue to world history, he was able to embrace both continuity and discontinuity. Newbigin’s consideration of the relationship of the gospel and religions would increase dramatically in the coming decades.

### 3.6.3.11. Pentecostalism: Baptism and the Spirit

During Newbigin’s time in Madras the Pentecostal church had emerged on the Indian scene in a dramatic way.<sup>6</sup> Until this time Newbigin had very little contact with the

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<sup>6</sup>Newbigin responded humorously to a rather confused article in the *Bangalore Theological Forum* by a writer who accused Newbigin of being the door by which the charismatic movement had entered India. The writer, F. J. Balasundaram, observed: “It was during Newbigin’s [sic] bishopric that the charismatic

Pentecostal tradition. In fact, he “regarded them with the distaste of a well-educated university graduate” (1993h:129). When he wrote *The Household of God* (1953) he termed the third facet of ecclesiology ‘Pentecostal.’ This usage, however, was the result of Biblical evidence and theological reflection that attempted to resolve the impasse of the twofold scheme of the Protestant and Catholic traditions. He chose the term ‘Pentecostal’, not because of the Pentecostal church, but because the feast of Pentecost is the occasion of the Spirit’s coming (1990f:62). Newbigin has commented that this would “open the doors in later years to personal friendship with some Pentecostal leaders and to the enrichment of my own life through the charismatic movement much later, and it was to have considerable consequences for future thinking about the Church” (1993h:129).

While in the service of the IMC, during the latter part of 1961, Newbigin travelled to Latin America and there observed the phenomenal growth of Pentecostalism (1993h:175). He preached in the one of the largest of their churches. He assessed Pentecostalism at that time with critical appreciation. No doubt the Holy Spirit was at work, but he queried whether or not other spirits were also at work. He concludes: “While I could not fail to recognize the dynamic character of these movements, I found them also willing to recognize the need to learn from older theological traditions” (*ibid.*).

In Madras Newbigin again encountered the “powerful witness” of the Pentecostal church. It touted tongues and the baptism of the Spirit as signs of a true spirituality, over against the dead liberalism of the CSI. Since the most sensitive members of the CSI were shaken by this barrage, Newbigin spent much time in various congregations having one-day teach-ins that examined the meaning of baptism and the work of the Holy Spirit (1993h:217). Much of the writing we have from Newbigin on baptism and the church is the result of this interaction. His reflection on the relationship of the Spirit to the church also continued because of this encounter.

### 3.6.3.12. Summary

The context of the Madras diocese gave Newbigin an opportunity to give concrete expression to his developing Trinitarian ecclesiology. The church was a servant that had to become deeply involved in the social and political life of the nation in which it is placed. In a time of nation building in India, the social and political task of the church was Newbigin’s dominant concern. He struggled with the nature of a faithful social witness both in his work as a bishop and in his ecclesiological reflection. This led him to accent the calling of the laity, the importance of flexible structures, the equipping task of ministerial leadership, and the nourishing role of worship and prayer for a socially active congregation. However, this social witness must not eclipse evangelism or become so centralized that the connection between the acts of mercy and justice and the local congregation is blurred.

Other factors stimulated further ecclesiological reflection: the ecumenical-evangelical divide, a growing religious pluralism, the growth of the Pentecostal church, continuing ecumenical involvement, and the daily tasks of a bishop that struggled to equip local congregations to be signs of the kingdom.

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movement entered India and the CSI,” to which Newbigin replied: “It was also during this period that the USA invaded Vietnam but I was in no way responsible for either” (1990f:63).

### 3.7. NEWBIGIN'S YEARS IN BRITAIN AS INSTRUCTOR, PASTOR, LECTURER, AND AUTHOR (1974-1998)

Newbigin retired from his Madras Bishopric at the age of sixty-five and returned to Britain via a long and slow trip through the Asian and European continents. He immediately took up a post lecturing on missiology and ecumenics at Selly Oak College for the next five years (1974-1979). From there he was called to pastor a small inner city congregation in Birmingham where he served for eight years (1980-1988). For the last ten years of his life Newbigin was officially retired first in Birmingham and then in London where he remained active in giving leadership to the British-based Gospel and Our Culture movement, by lecturing and writing. This was an exceedingly fruitful time. Well over half of his life's literary output was produced during these twenty-four years. He was in constant demand as a lecturer. Numerous opportunities for ecclesiastical and missional leadership at a local and global level opened up enabling him to bring his experience to bear on many issues.

As to ecclesiology, this period was similarly fruitful. On the one hand, he consolidated and gave clear articulation to the gains of a lifetime. Every ecclesiological theme that we have sketched in these historical chapters is articulated during this period. On the other hand, the new setting opened up an opportunity for new explorations. Continuous with his earlier development, the new western context provided an occasion for more nuanced reflection in a number of areas—most notably in the areas of gospel and culture, missionary encounter with western culture, religious pluralism, unity, ministerial leadership, and Biblical authority. Reflection in each of these areas had significant ecclesiological implications.

In this section we will sketch these ecclesiological developments putting them in the context of the dominant cultural and ecclesiastical setting as well as the context of Newbigin's ministry.

#### 3.7.1. *College Instructor, Inner City Pastor, Active in Gospel and Our Culture*

Following his return from India, he took a position as lecturer at Selly Oak Colleges for five years until his seventieth birthday. The next eight years of his life were spent in a tough inner city area where he pastored a small United Reformed Church (URC). During his "retirement" years he remained active in the Gospel and Our Culture movement, lecturing throughout the world, and authoring a cataract of books and articles. Newbigin died on 30 January 1998.

One primary concern shaped these years. Newbigin was first and foremost a missionary who had spent his life commending the gospel to others. When he returned to Britain he was struck by the timidity and lack of confidence in the gospel that characterized British Christianity. He writes:

As time went on I began to receive invitations to take part in conferences of ministers and lay people. I began to feel very uncomfortable with much that I heard. There seemed to be so much timidity in commending the Gospel to the unconverted people of Britain (1993h:230).

Newbigin devoted the remaining years of his life to instill in Christians the

confidence needed to dispel the prevailing timidity. Thus he laboured to equip the British church to embody and proclaim the gospel as public truth in a pluralist society.

### 3.7.1.1. Instructor at Selly Oak Colleges (1974-1979)

Newbigin joined the faculty of Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham in September of 1974. His task was to teach theology of mission and ecumenical studies to men and women who were preparing for overseas missionary service. Relieved from the punishing schedule of an Indian bishop, Newbigin had the time, occasion, and resources to read widely<sup>7</sup> and to articulate systematically the missiological reflection of almost forty years of experience. He wrote significant articles on interfaith dialogue (1976d), the relationship between Christ and cultures (1978a), and theological education (1978i). He compiled and edited the talks he had given to the CSI clergy in Madras (1974b). As to a missionary ecclesiology, the most important contribution during this period was his *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (1978e). He wrote this book because of the lack of a suitable text for his theology of mission class. When it came out, Gerald Anderson called this work Newbigin's most important book to date on mission theology. The Lutheran missiologist James Scherer commented: "*The Open Secret* sums up Newbigin's mature missiological reflections from a lifetime of preaching, teaching, episcopal administration, and life as an ecumenical journeyman" (Scherer 1980:89).

The importance of this book for our topic can be seen in Newbigin's initial motivation for writing: "I wanted... something that would help these people to understand why the Church has to be missionary" (1993h:229). Speaking to students who were preparing for overseas missions, Newbigin wanted to ground that foreign missionary enterprise in the broader missionary character of the church that confesses, in the words of the Willingen conference, "there is no participation in Christ without participation in his mission to the world" (1978e:1). His concern was to communicate the "new recognition that mission belongs to the very being of the church" and challenge notions of mission as "enterprises that belonged to the exterior of church life... carried on somewhere else" (*ibid.*). So while mission was not a new word, it was being used in a new way to describe, not simply certain enterprises carried on by the church, but the very central reason that the church exists. With this Biblical foundation the missionary task in western culture was included. Newbigin ends his brief introduction to the book with these words:

The present discussion is written in the hope of placing the debate in a broad biblical perspective and in the hope that to do so will release new energies for the contemporary mission of the church, not only in its global dimensions but also in its application to the tough new paganism of the contemporary western world (:2).

*The Open Secret* is a systematic development of an earlier booklet. In the weeks following the New Delhi assembly Newbigin had attempted to articulate his growing conviction that the mission of the church must be set in the context a fully Trinitarian doctrine (1963g). Now, seventeen years later, Newbigin was able to develop that paper into a full-length book (1993h:188).

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<sup>7</sup>The number of book reviews that Newbigin contributes to journals increases during this period.

### 3.7.1.2. Pastor of Inner City Congregation in Birmingham (1980-1988)

When, at the age of seventy, Newbiggin terminated his salaried position at Selly Oak, he received an unexpected call to a pastoral position of a small United Reformed church in the inner city of Birmingham—a position he was to hold for the next eight years. While Newbiggin presided over a meeting of the Birmingham District Council of the URC in 1979, one of the items on the docket was a recommendation to close a congregation that worshipped in a tough area of the city near Winson Green prison. Newbiggin commented on this recommendation:

I could not reconcile it with my conscience to preside over such a decision. I suggested to the Council that if the Church abandoned such areas in order to settle in the relatively easy circumstances of the suburbs it would forfeit the claim to be a missionary church (1993h:235).

High unemployment, a high proportion of single-parent families, and a rich ethnic mix characterized this area of the city. The majority of the residents were from India or the Caribbean, with a small number of Anglo-Saxons. In Britain it would be considered an area of severe deprivation. There was a famine of hope among the residents (1987b:3).

Installed as pastor early in 1980, Newbiggin quickly realized that his ministry in Winson Green was “much harder than anything I met in India. There is a cold contempt for the Gospel which is harder to face than opposition” (1993d:235). This forced him to conclude that the West was “the most difficult missionary frontier in the contemporary world.... one of which the Churches have been—on the whole—so little conscious” (*ibid.*). While he had believed in the 1960s that England was a secular society, this experience compelled the conviction that “England is a pagan society and the development of a truly missionary encounter with this very tough form of paganism is the greatest intellectual and practical task facing the Church” (1993h:236).

The eight years in Winson Green gave Newbiggin opportunity to put into practice his understanding of a missionary church. We have a window into this process in an article entitled “Evangelism in the City” (1987b). The occasion was Newbiggin’s response to a friendly review of his book *Foolishness to the Greeks* (Rodd 1986:66) by the editor who “challenged [him] to say how [he] would apply the rather abstract reasoning of the book to the concrete business of an ordinary inner-city parish” (1987b:3). Newbiggin took up the challenge.

In the British context where there was a radical contradiction between the gospel and the assumptions of western culture, the question was how the strange story of the crucified and risen God-made-flesh could become credible. Newbiggin points to six items. It would become credible where there was a worshipping community that nourished the new life in Christ, where there was a congregation challenged to be a contrast community different from their neighbours, where the congregation was deeply involved in the secular concerns of the neighbourhood, manifesting the Lordship of Christ over all, where the church engaged in selfless service, where there was a radically other-worldly hope, and where the community was involved in evangelism. Elsewhere Newbiggin pointed to another factor: the visible unity of the church. Together with the clergy of three other churches, Newbiggin met, prayed, and planned together with the clergy of three other churches in Winson Green as to how they could express their unity in that place (1985b:65).

Newbigin did not claim any success for his work in Winson Green. The little church that had eighteen members when Newbigin became pastor had twenty-seven members when he left the church in the hands of an Indian successor (Thorogood 1989:72). This concrete parish experience at the most challenging missionary frontier of our day deepened his insight into what was needed for a church to become a missionary congregation in the West.

### 3.7.1.3. Active in Gospel and Our Culture: Catalyst, Lecturer, and Author (1988-1998)

Turning over the responsibility of pastoral care of his tiny flock to a younger pastor who had joined Newbigin from the Church of North India in 1982, Newbigin “retired” for the third time in 1988. He remained in Birmingham for four years working in the Gospel and Our Culture program as an organizer, lecturer, and author. In 1992 he moved to London, where he remained until his death early in 1998. Three primary activities occupied his “retirement” years. First, he gave active leadership to the Gospel and Our Culture movement, which had been gaining momentum in Britain since 1984. He wrote the lead article in its newsletter from 1988 until the Swanwick Conference in 1992. This gave him more and more opportunity to lecture and speak around the world; this was the second activity that occupied his time. Thirdly, his literary output continued unabated. Most often his speeches were published in journals or collected in books.

### 3.7.2. *Dominant Ecclesiological Issues*

Over half of his published work appeared after 1974. Every ecclesiological theme that has been alluded to in this and the preceding chapter appeared in this time. Therefore only selected ecclesiological issues will be noted here. These divide up into three sections. First, there are four themes which Newbigin developed significantly beyond his earlier thought: gospel and culture, mission in western culture, Christianity and world religions, and Biblical authority. Second, there are several themes in which Newbigin pushed beyond his earlier formulations because of the specific context: ecclesial unity and ministerial leadership. Third, there are themes in which he returned to well-rehearsed articulations. They are included briefly because the references to these themes are so numerous and so central to his primary concern during this time period, namely to call the church to a missionary encounter with western culture. The themes are the witness of the Spirit, eschatology, ecclesial structures, mission of the laity, the relationship between evangelism and social justice, and weakness and suffering in mission.

#### 3.7.2.1. Gospel, Church, and Culture

In 1972 the term ‘contextualization’ was coined in the circles of the Theological Education Fund, replacing the terms indigenisation, adaptation, and accommodation. This terminological shift signalled a growing interest in the relationship between the gospel and the various cultures of the world. Prior to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, the gospel was associated with one culture—western culture—which was considered to be the dominant and superior culture. In the West civilization was used in the singular and all cultures were positioned on a ladder, with western culture perched at the top. The gospel was limited to its western form, and western forms of theology, confessions, liturgy, and social ethics were transported throughout the world by the missionary movement.

Missionaries were not unaware of cultural differences. There was the practice of indigenisation, accommodation, or adaptation. A western form of the gospel or liturgy was adapted or accommodated to the non-western cultures. A number of factors challenged this state of affairs in the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the unravelling of colonialism, the acute guilty conscience of the West, non-western resentment, the devastating effects of science and technology, the moral demise of the West, a growing recognition of subjective factors in knowing, and especially the growth of the third world church. The combination of these influences shattered western ethnocentrism and opened the way for fresh study of the relationship of the gospel to the various cultures of the world. Perhaps Nairobi (1975) was the first WCC assembly in which cultural diversity was manifestly evident. Nairobi affirmed that “no culture is closer to Jesus Christ than any other culture. Jesus Christ restores what is truly human in any culture and frees us to be open to other cultures.” Therefore, “the Church is called to relate itself to any culture, critically, creatively, redemptively” (Paton 1976:79). The burning questions that continue to exercise the most able Christian minds are: How can we be *faithful* to the gospel and *relevant* to the various cultures of the world? How can we be faithful to *one* gospel (without falling into ethnocentrism) and yet embrace *plural* expressions (without falling into relativism)? This has continued to be one of the most pressing items on the agenda of the world church for the past three decades.

While this theme had appeared in earlier writings, it was not until 1977 that Newbigin treated this theme systematically. In a paper presented to the Conference of the Society for the Study of Theology in that year, drawing on his extensive missionary experience to address the burning issues of the day, he offered a profound treatment of the relationship between gospel and culture (1978a). This paper formed the foundation for frequent, continuing reflection on the topic. However, his most pressing concern was to deal with a specific case of contextualization—the gospel and western culture.

### 3.7.2.2. Missionary Encounter with Western Culture

As noted earlier, Newbigin found British Christians timid about the gospel. He points to two sources for this anxiety.

One was the feeling that ‘the modern scientific world-view’ had made it impossible to believe much of the traditional Christian teaching. One had therefore to tailor the Gospel to the alleged requirements of ‘modern thought.’ This was, of course, an old problem, but it seemed to be much more pervasive than before. The other and newer aspect of the problem was the result of the presence of substantial numbers of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims in big cities.... Sensitive Christians felt deeply... that respect for these minority communities precluded any kind of evangelism (1993h:230f.).

These two mission frontiers—the modern scientific worldview and religious pluralism—were the primary subjects that occupied Newbigin’s attention for the remaining years of his life.

It was through the eyes of two Christians from outside the West that Newbigin began to see the scope of the syncretism of the gospel with western culture. While visiting Selly Oak Colleges, the Latin American Orlando Costas asked why capitalism wasn’t included along with Marxism as an ideology in the new syllabus for the public schools of Birmingham. The answer given was that capitalism was not an ideology. To this Costas responded in contemptuous laughter. The next year a Nicaraguan Jesuit economist named Xavier Gorostiaga gave a lecture at Selly Oak that indicted the British

churches for failure to bring the gospel to bear on the economic, social, and political life of their nation.

For the next few years a troublesome question continued to haunt Newbigin: ‘How can one find a perspective on one’s own culture?’ (1993h:250). The reading of Paul Hazard’s *The European Mind: 1680 to 1715* (1953) enabled Newbigin to see that European society had gone through a collective conversion at the time of the Enlightenment (1985f:7). Further reading on this Enlightenment period provided the contours of a Christian critique of western culture.

Newbigin’s thinking continued to develop along these lines with his participation in the British Council of Churches. In 1982 the general secretary of the BCC, Philip Morgan, convened a gathering to brainstorm about the problem of the gospel and public life. Newbigin was the catalyst in setting into motion a process that would have international effects. Following the example of the J. H. Oldham he proposed a three-step program. First, a pamphlet was written raising the fundamental issues for discussion. Second, a three-year period was devoted to studying these issues. Third, a large conference would be convened to discuss the substance of the three-year study. Newbigin was appointed to write the initial pamphlet which was published as *The Other Side of 1984: Questions to the Churches*.

The study process gave birth to the ‘The Gospel and Our Culture’ (GOC) movement that would culminate in a 1992 conference in Swanwick. Newbigin’s book—that sold 20,000 copies very quickly—and the GOC newsletters rapidly drew international attention. Numerous invitations to speak about the topic were extended from around the world. Invitations to Princeton to give the Warfield Lectures (1986e), to the Divinity Faculty in Glasgow University to teach a course on the gospel and western culture (1989e), and to Western Theological Seminary to deliver the Oosterhaven Lectures (1991h) resulted in three books that continued to carry the conversation forward—*Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel in Western Culture* (1986e), *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (1989e), and *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (1991h).

There were two correlative goals in Newbigin’s gospel and western culture project. The first was to examine and analyze the underlying religious assumptions of western culture through the lens of the gospel. The western church has been co-opted by these assumptions, making it timid in proclaiming the gospel as truth. It is also these assumptions that shape the different sectors of public life in which Christians must bear witness. A faithful missionary church demands that these foundational beliefs be exposed to critical examination. The second prong is the need to clarify the nature of the authority of the gospel. The nature of Scriptural authority is a central concern as is a proper confidence in the gospel. One way of expressing both of these concerns is to spell out the implications of affirming the truth of the gospel.

To rightly understand this GOC movement it is necessary to gain the proper standpoint. In response to a misunderstanding that perceived GOC as primarily a cultural critique, Newbigin articulates the driving motive of the whole movement.

GOC has never understood itself as primarily a critique of our culture, but as an effort to clarify the issues involved in communicating the Gospel to this particular culture.... GOC... is only in a secondary sense a critique of contemporary culture. It is about the truth of the Gospel, about trying to unmask the illusions which obscure that truth, about helping churches to be more articulate and credible witnesses to the Gospel (1992d:6, 9).

Newbigin analyzed and critiqued the underlying assumptions of western culture in order to unmask foundational cultural beliefs that cripple the church's witness to the truth of the gospel. He did not move from missionary to cultural critic or apologist. A faithful missionary church remained central to his endeavours. This can be seen by observing that *The Other Side of 1984*, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, and *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* all climax in an articulation of the implications for the church. *The Other Side of 1984* poses three questions to the churches. *Foolishness to the Greeks* closes with the chapter 'What Must We Be? The Call to the Church.' *The Gospel and a Pluralist Society* book closes with chapters on the 'The Congregation as a Hermeneutic of the Gospel'—the chapter to which reviewers most frequently make reference—and 'Ministerial Leadership for a Missionary Congregation.' To miss this missionary perspective is to skew Newbigin's purpose in entering this discussion.

### 3.7.2.3. Religious Pluralism and Mission

We have noted that Newbigin identified the two primary mission frontiers in western culture as the modern scientific worldview and religious pluralism. The issue of religious pluralism has dominated the agenda of the world church for decades. In 1960 Hendrik Kraemer's Stone Lectures were published under the title *World Cultures and World Religions: The Coming Dialogue*, a title that captures the two dominant items on the agenda of the world church (the relationship of the gospel to cultural and religious pluralism) and the prevailing missiological strategy that would be employed in the future encounter (dialogue). Of religious pluralism David Bosch has said:

It would probably be correct to say that we have reached the point where there can be little doubt that the two largest unsolved problems for the Christian church are its relationship (1) to worldviews which offer this-worldly salvation, and (2) to other faiths (Bosch 1991:476f.).

A combination of factors have made religious pluralism an essential topic for the world church. The collapse of colonialism leaves questions about the basis of an exclusive claim for the gospel. The resurgent vitality in all of the world's religions fostered by nationalism and, in large part, in reaction to the modern western missionary movement (Kraemer 1960:82-98) undermines confident claims for the truth of the gospel. Geographical isolation of religions is a thing of the past. The ecological and economic threats that face the human race pose a desperate need for global unity. Moreover, a "rampant radical relativism" (Anderson 1993:201) is sweeping the globe, calling into question the truth claim of the gospel. The numerical dominance of the third world church living as minorities in a religiously plural situation make the question of 'the gospel and religions' a matter of life and death.

In this growing religious and cultural pluralistic context, the concept of dialogue emerged as one of the primary ways of relating to peoples of other faiths. New Delhi encouraged dialogue as a way to witness to the gospel (New Delhi 1961:81-84). The CMWE meeting in Mexico City explored the nature of true dialogue (Mexico 1964:146f.). Dialogue was given institutional status when in 1968 Stanley Samartha was appointed as director of the "Living Faiths" study in the WCC. In 1971 a new sub-unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies was created, with Samartha as its director. From this point on, the issue of dialogue has dominated the agenda of the ecumenical movement. While most would affirm the need for dialogue, the basis and purpose of this dialogue remain debated issues.

Newbigin's experience with this issue was wide-ranging. His forty years of missionary service were spent in a country where religious pluralism is the unquestioned environment. Newbigin spent much time in dialogue with Hindu scholars. He read widely on the topic, including all the documents of the world missionary conferences, where this topic was discussed frequently. His first systematic discussion of the issue was the 1966 Beecher Lectures given at Yale Divinity School and published under the title *The Finality of Christ*. However, it is somewhat surprising that this remained his only substantial contribution until after retirement.

Upon his return to Britain, numerous experiences forced Newbigin to deal with this burning issue. The religiously plural situation of Britain had led to a timidity about commending the truth of the gospel to those of other faiths and this drew him "into further thinking and talking about the proper Christian response to the new religious pluralism of our cities" (1993h:244). Newbigin was involved in the fiftieth anniversary of Tambaram in which he saw himself fighting the same battle as Kraemer had fought. He replaced John Hick on the Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education that was appointed by the Birmingham City Council to deal with the new syllabus for religious education in the public schools. He was also a member of the committee of the URC on 'Mission and Other Faiths.' All of these settings challenged Newbigin to deal with the urgent problem of religious pluralism. He responded with a number of insightful papers that have been the subject of much study (1976d, 1977b, 1983b, 1988c, 1989j, 1990j, 1993g; cf. Thomas 1996). In 1963, speaking about the ghettoized situation in which the Asian churches found themselves in the context of religious pluralism, Newbigin had commented: "There is little temptation to go back to the kind of thinking which called for Kraemer's famous and decisive proclamation of the uniqueness and otherness of the Gospel.... The mere assertion of discontinuity, true as it is, necessary as it is in certain contexts, is not the word which is required at this moment" (1963g:28). Apparently, the new context of relativism moved Newbigin to believe that this assertion was necessary once again. He commented that he was increasingly compelled to stand with Hendrik Kraemer (1988j:82; cf. 1983b:205).

#### 3.7.2.4. Biblical Authority and Mission to Western Culture

Soon after his return to Britain Newbigin became firmly convinced that a genuine missionary encounter with western culture demanded "the recovery of a credible doctrine of biblical authority" (1993h:248; cf. 1989e:95). According to Newbigin, the Bible had functioned in three ways for western people. First, it operated as a myth or model by which the whole world was understood. Second, the Bible was the source of guidelines that determined rules for conduct. Finally, it was a source of faith to nourish the inner life. He believed that the first role—Scripture as life-shaping myth—had been taken over by the modern scientific worldview. The Bible's use to provide norms for conduct had disappeared after the days of Biblical theology. Biblical theology, in which Newbigin had been nurtured, had been shattered by James Barr and Ernst Kasemann. The Bible had been taken from the church to the academy, and critical analysis had effectively neutered its message. Newbigin observed that the BCC's attempt to address public issues contained no substantial reference to the Scriptures (1993h:248). Though Scripture still served to nourish the inner life, even this reduced role is being questioned by British Biblical scholars (1982i:6f.).

Newbigin's response to this situation was twofold. First, he sought to stir up a discussion on the issue among Biblical scholars. When he approached George Caird,

the University of Ireland's Professor of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture, Newbigin was told: "You are asking for a total revolution in the way biblical scholars see their job" (1993h:249). A list of twenty prominent younger Biblical scholars was obtained by Newbigin and a group named 'Scripture, Theology, and Society' began to meet to articulate a Biblical perspective on social issues. Newbigin commented that this project was significant because it was of "great importance that the gulf between biblical scholarship and the practical needs of the Church for guidance in its ethical and political decisions should be bridged" (*ibid.*).

Newbigin's second response to the situation was to write a number of papers himself, challenging the unrecognized faith assumptions that shaped critical Biblical scholarship (e.g., 1982i, 1984b, 1985k, 1991a). He also challenged the liberal/fundamentalist split over the authority of Scripture, arguing that this was one more manifestation of the fact/value dichotomy that plagued western culture. To counteract the higher criticism of Biblical scholars, the subjectivism of the liberal wing of the church, and the objectivism of the fundamentalist wing, Newbigin appealed to the recent studies of Hans Frei (1974) and George Lindbeck (1984) who advocated a narrative approach to Scripture.

In the following chapters we will have occasion to see how important Newbigin's understanding of Biblical authority is for his understanding of the missionary church.

#### 3.7.2.5. Ecclesial Unity

The New Delhi Assembly of the WCC (1961) affirmed organic union locally expressed and globally recognized to be the goal of the WCC. Numerous reunion schemes were pursued at the national level. Multilateral discussions were held and in fifty years sixty united churches came into existence. However, according to Newbigin, the second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic church changed the situation. When observers from the 'separated brethren' were invited to attend the council, the decision was made to invite delegates from world-wide confessional bodies. This had two implications: first, multilateral discussions at a national level were jettisoned in favour of bilateral discussions on a transnational level; second, the conciliar model of unity was seized and further elaborated as 'reconciled diversity.' Newbigin had been the original author of the conciliar model of unity at the Faith and Order meeting at Louvain in 1971. At the time he feared that this might be used to discard organic union and his fears were soon realized. At 1973 in a Faith and Order meeting at Salamanca it was affirmed that conciliar unity did not replace but further elaborated organic unity. However, the meeting of the Christian World Communions (CWCs) at Geneva in 1974 could not endorse the Salamanca statement. They developed the concept of reconciled diversity with the guiding principle that denominational and confessional diversity is valid and can make a valuable contribution to the ecumenical church. Cardinal Willebrands proposed a similar model that preserved confessional identities and types. The result of these developments was that pursuit of organic unity was abandoned and replaced by much less costly models of unity that affirmed confessional identities.

Newbigin believed that other issues were making visible unity increasingly unpopular. The Nairobi meeting of the WCC in 1975 faced four large challenges. Was unity compatible with a commitment to the pursuit of justice? Could a commitment to unity include sufficient diversity that respected cultural and racial identities? Did unity entail large institutional bodies that eclipsed personal authenticity and spiritual integrity? Could the pursuit of unity preserve the gains of the historic confessional

traditions?

In 1984 after talks for unity between the Anglican, Methodist, Reformed, and Moravian churches failed, Newbigin remarked that “that event marks the end of the movement which was launched by the famous appeal to all Christian people of the Lambeth Conference of 1920” (1984a:1). Ecumenical enthusiasm was a matter of past history and that chapter was closed. Newbigin pointed to four reasons for this collapse in ecumenical concern: the inertia of denominational traditions with the inbuilt commitment of large organizations to preserve themselves; the growth of fundamentalism that is uninterested in old ecclesiastical structures and proliferates new forms; action for justice and peace that appears to be more urgent; and a wider ecumenism that displaces ecclesial ecumenism (1984a:2-3).

By 1995 Newbigin believed that ecclesial unity was in even greater danger. The intransigence of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, the decline of the Anglican and Protestant mainline churches with their loss of confidence in the gospel, and the hostility of evangelicals, Pentecostals, and parachurch organizations to institutional and visible unity made the future of ecumenism appear bleak (1995e:8-9).

In this context Newbigin maintained his commitment to organic unity. He continued to insist that a proper understanding of unity is based on a correct ecclesiology. He also continued to assert that unity and mission are inseparable. He patiently answered the criticisms in his writings and lectures but admitted that for someone who had given the majority of his life to ecumenical endeavours the situation was worrisome (1995e:9).

#### 3.7.2.6. Ministerial Leadership

A number of diverse experiences pushed Newbigin to think more deeply about ministerial leadership in the church. First, during the period of negotiations between the URC and the Churches of Christ in the late 1970s, one of the issues that arose was the place of non-stipendiary ministers. Newbigin was the convenor of the Church’s Ministerial Training Committee. He used that position to expound and defend the idea of non-stipendiary ministry.

Second, the meeting of a bilateral dialogue between the Anglican and Reformed communions presented another occasion for further reflection on church leadership. In preparation for the meeting, he read through the entire New Testament, noting all references to the ministry. He concluded that the issues formulated in the two traditions were significantly different from the way the New Testament deals with ministerial leadership and that it would be difficult for either tradition to base their claims on Scripture. The discrepancy between the traditions and the New Testament had arisen because “the New Testament assumes a missionary situation in which the Church is a small evangelizing movement in a pagan society, while both of our traditions have been formed in the ‘Christendom’ era, in a society presumed to be Christian” (1983c:1). The paper that followed presented some of Newbigin’s most mature and detailed reflection on church leadership (1983c).

A third situation that became the occasion for an extension of his thinking on leadership was the formation of the WCC’s Program for Theological Education (PTE) in 1977. The Theological Education Fund (TEF) had been formed in Ghana in 1958 to develop quality (intellectually rigorous, spiritually sensitive), authentic (contextual), and creative (new, missional) theological education in the third world (Pobee 1991:350). The task was accomplished and by the end of the 1970s it was becoming evident that a new action was now needed. The need of the hour was a forum for the exchange of

experience among all the churches on the six continents. The initiative could no longer be the West's with its standards and expertise, but had to be shared by a worldwide church that shouldered the task together. In this context Newbigin was asked to make a contribution to the discussion. His paper opened up numerous issues of ministerial training in a missional context (1978i). Its numerous reprints demonstrates its value to ask the right questions.

All of these experiences led Newbigin to address the topic of ministerial leadership many times during this period. He probed the issue more deeply than in previous years.

### 3.7.2.7. Other Important Ecclesiological Themes

There are a number of issues important for Newbigin's ecclesiology that find frequent expression in the new missional context of western culture. The growth of the Pentecostal movement, deepening reflection on the Trinitarian context for the mission of the church, and the influence of Harry Boer's book (1961) led Newbigin to stress the work of the Spirit more forcefully than at earlier points in his life.

Faced with the privatization of the future hope in the West, Newbigin stressed a Biblical eschatology repeatedly in his writings and lectures. The theme 'Your Kingdom Come', chosen for the Melbourne meeting of the CMWE, also gave Newbigin opportunity to again express the importance of the kingdom for a missionary church (1980f).

The stress on the local congregation as the primary unit of mission also grew stronger during this period. He commented in 1989: "I confess that I have come to feel that the primary reality of which we have to take account in seeking for a Christian impact on public life is the Christian congregation" (1989e:227). This emphasis led to his frequent characterization of the church as "the congregation as hermeneutic of the gospel" (e.g., 1989e:222-241; 1990b:339).

Newbigin's emphasis on a missionary encounter with a highly differentiated western culture led him to put strong emphasis on the ministry of the laity in society. In his well-known seminal essay on mission in western culture—*Can the West Be Converted?*—he puts as the first item of importance "the declericalizing of theology," so that God's will might be done in the public sector. This continues as a fundamental pillar in his mission in western culture program.

The continuing split between ecumenical and evangelical traditions of the church over the issue of evangelism and mission on the one hand, and justice, peace, and social involvement on the other, led Newbigin to address this issue frequently.

Finally, reference to the powerlessness and weakness of the Christ and the church in mission, and to suffering as a mode of mission permeated the pages of Newbigin's writing in this latter part of his life.

### 3.7.3. Summary

The mature shape of Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology emerged clearly in the last twenty-four years of his life. Every significant theme is treated with more clarity and often with more detail than in his earlier years. A number of issues received a more comprehensive, systematic treatment in this new setting. Especially significant are his struggles with a missionary encounter with western culture and religious pluralism. These ecclesiological reflections continued to be fed by a wide and diverse experience as a university instructor, pastor of a local congregation, participation in local and

global ecumenical projects, and contact with numerous confessional and cultural traditions of Christianity.

### 3.8. CONCLUSION

Early in the 1960s a second major ecclesiological shift in Newbigin's theological development took place from a Christocentric to a Christocentric-Trinitarian ecclesiology. The missionary nature of the church that had formed his thinking prior to this time was not jettisoned. Rather the fruitful insights of this earlier period were taken up and given expression in a more comprehensive Trinitarian framework.

The setting in which this initial awareness of the Trinitarian context for a missionary church took place was the dramatic events of the 1960s and the theological and missiological developments in the World Council of Churches. In critical interaction with this context Newbigin developed his missionary ecclesiology. His position as general secretary of the IMC and director of the CWME placed him at the heart of these debates. Visser 't Hooft also had an influence Newbigin's developing ecclesiology.

Four important contexts enabled Newbigin to give expression to this Trinitarian, missionary understanding of the church. The first was his bishopric in Madras. In the context of a developing third world city, Newbigin challenged the strong Madras church to take the form of a selfless servant. Selly Oak Colleges provided the second context: the life of a professor gave Newbigin opportunity to reflect more systematically on the church and commit his theology to writing. The third context was the difficult ministry of a pastorate in the inner city of Birmingham. He became aware that the culture of the West presented the most difficult missionary frontier in the world. He struggled for eight years to put into practice what he had learned from his vast missionary experience. The final context was a global setting. Newbigin's retirement years brought numerous opportunities to travel, lecture, and interact with a worldwide audience on issues raised in his writing.

Alan Neely comments that Newbigin's role in the missionary and ecumenical developments of the twentieth century has been "scarcely paralleled" (Neely 1986:106). Indeed, very few people had such a varied, rich, and full experience of ministry as Lesslie Newbigin. It is this experience that shaped and formed his understanding about the centrality of a missionary church. Newbigin's confession about the church after these many years of life experience can be summarized in the words of the significant IMC Willingen conference in 1952—words penned by Newbigin himself: "There is no participation in Christ without participation in His mission to the world. That by which the Church receives its existence is that by which it is also given its world-mission. 'As the Father hath sent Me, even so send I you'" (Goodall 1953 :190).