

Responding to the New West

Lesslie Newbigin's sharp critique of western culture, offered in a relatively brief but incisively penetrating publication, *The Other Side of 1984*, came as a shock to many who read it for the first time in the middle of the 1980's. He seemed to encapsulate what many had been feeling but had been unable to articulate. Part of his ability to engage his subject was the fact that he was part insider and part outsider. As a returning missionary he had left Christendom and returned to a post-Christendom context. Paul Weston develops Lesslie's contribution....

For those of us who had been living in and with such changes the extent of the shift was perhaps not as clear as it was to Newbigin. Our churches were simply preoccupied with pursuing relevance, but Newbigin saw that the fundamental challenge was the Enlightenment epistemological framework which had captured western imagination. There could be no home for the gospel within this imagination but many of us living within the west had unconsciously accepted these Enlightenment assumptions as an inevitable part of the landscape. These changes triggered a profound loss of confidence for the church and our wider culture.

Every culture goes through periods when self-criticism is general. But it is also true that cultures are born and die. The question now is whether our present self-criticism is merely the normal self-questioning of a healthy culture, or whether we are at the point where a culture is approaching death. It seems to me, and I know I am not alone, that the truth of our present situation is nearer to the second of these alternatives than to the first.[1]

Newbigin was proposing that Christians were no longer capable of either understanding or addressing this unstable, unpredictable situation. From the perspective of a further thirty years since the publication of *The Other Side of 1984* the reality of this instability is much clearer to us now than when Newbigin wrote these words about our new missionary situation. The number and levels of change that have occurred are massive and overwhelming. A brief commentary on just a few of these indicates the depth of change that has occurred. The dominant narrative and impact of individualism is one example of transformation. This has had a massively corrosive impact on institutions of every kind (including the church) raising questions about the kinds of structures that might provide our continuance as a society in the accepted sense of that term. The economic crisis, as another example of transformation, occasioned by the near collapse of the banking system in the west has caused us to ask how we might sustain systems such as healthcare and social security in forms that are at all recognizable as the accepted pattern of the post war social settlement. The changing demographics of the west is yet one more example of a shift, wherein ageing populations, low birth rates and significant levels of immigration from other parts of the world together create a new reality that most Western nation-states are finding increasingly difficult to navigate within existing institutions and structures. The established foundations of identity, narrative, social safety nets and health systems all seem up for grabs with little sense of what alternatives might be available.

Migration on an unprecedented scale, justified as a response to the needs of those escaping persecution and hunger and driven by a demand for cheap and compliant labour, is producing shock waves, both cultural and economic, that are increasingly difficult to manage. The reaction,

seen in the rise of hard right political stances, threatens some western nations with new forms of nationalism and even fascism.

Existing political parties formed by the narratives and perspectives of the 19th century no longer seem to offer those larger visions of a hopeful future that once gave them legitimacy and provided an environment for rigorous engagement. So much of what we see now are parties competing with each other around themes of competence, offering a variety of technical and tactical solutions to these crises. Increasingly, they are ceasing to sound credible to populations who vote in ever fewer numbers. Political parties have ceased to be mass movements and rely more on the manipulation of the media than on actual popular participation. The politics of rage, whether violent, as in the case of terrorism, or as cynicism towards the state and its solutions, continues to grow. This, indeed, is the absence of hope without which no society can function. There is less and less sense of what we might call a commonwealth of the people. The alternative to hope is often the use of power in forms that threaten to remove the fundamental liberties we once saw as the distinctive culture of the western world.

Writing specifically about England, Newbigin observed:

Apart from those whose lives are shaped by the Christian hope founded on the resurrection of Jesus as the pledge of a new creation, there is little sign among the citizens of this country of the sort of confidence in the future which was certainly present in the earlier years of this century. For the elderly and the middle aged there is, for the most part, only the hope of keeping reasonable comfortable amid the disintegration of so many of the familiar values.[2]

It is now thirty years since those words were published. They are more prescient now than when first penned. What of the community of those who place their hope in the resurrected Jesus? What is currently taking place that might allow that hope to take root in the west? We would propose that there are at least three movements of hope each reflected in some way in the articles in this issue of the Journal.

First, there is a movement to re-imagine the missionary nature of the church in the west. Lesslie wrote in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* of the congregation as a hermeneutic of the gospel. That somewhat enigmatic phrase has often been quoted by others and has become a provocative idea engendering a wide variety of debates, sometimes called 'the missional conversation.' It is curious that the movement suggested by Lesslie – the *Gospel and Our Culture* movement, soon ceased to reflect on the culture and became too focused on the church – ecclesiology rather than missiology. In some ways this was understandable given that Lesslie's own writing and reflection gave few clues as to what kind of hermeneutic the local congregation might incarnate. To the extent that the missional conversation became concerned with models was unfortunate. In fact such a development tended to mirror the very enlightenment culture he was critiquing. The idea that for every problem there is a solution and that the solution might be found in the technical creation of a model is a very modern, rationalist way of thinking. Newbigin's own approach was actually founded on the sense of God being ahead of us in the very culture of the west which he engaged. This is transforming for our understanding of ourselves as God's people. The imagination for what it means to be church in this new west does not come from an increased focus on ecclesiology but a missiological move

to be the church in the neighborhoods and communities where we live. The church becomes the hermeneutic of the Gospel as it risks going on a journey which it cannot control or manage, namely, joining the Incarnate one who is already ahead of us in our communities.

However when attention shifts to a deeper reflection on leadership and empowerment a more hopeful scenario is created. Curt Cordier and Cornelius Niemandt offer us insight into what such a process might look like in a setting that is simultaneously African and western in nature.

Second, is the hopeful development of church planting and, particularly, church planting by those who have come to the west as Christians from other continents. It is these new peoples in the west who are taking this risky journey of entering into the difference in local communities to ask what it means to be God's people in the local. Indeed today, in many parts of the west, the most active Christian communities are being formed by migrant groups. Some of those migrant communities are asking what it might look like to be cross-cultural missionaries to the host communities that have abandoned active Christian commitment. This movement of the Spirit in the west is often very different from the kinds of church planting that continue to be formed around homogenous groups of the like-minded. Mary Publicover's interview with Joseph Omoragbon describes the tentative steps of a Nigerian missionary seeking to connect with a largely white working class community in a deprived part of the North East of England – not too far from Newbigin's birthplace. Paul and Megan Tucker moved into a socially deprived working class neighbourhood in Birmingham, partly as an attempt to church plant and partly to help those in the neighbourhood to discover their own experiences of God. The result was very different from the plan they had in their minds before they began.

Third is a movement that underlies the first two. It is a move back into the neighbourhood where we live as well as discovering the activity of the missionary God in the communities where our church buildings are located but have become estranged from the life and witness of the church. Al Barrett's article on *Community-building as Spiritual Practice* describes an attempt to celebrate people's hopes and dreams for their neighbourhood. Their practices enabled the Christians to pursue 'home' in the neighbourhood, as compared with an attempt to persuade those in the neighbourhood that their home was in the church. Tracey Day began work with a small and traditional Church of the Nazarene congregation in North Wales. She attempted to help the congregation become a church that was genuinely serving and rooted in the community. She describes the combination of creativity and sheer hard work required to birth hope and dignity in a community where such attributes were in short supply.

These three movements represent and point to the many small, often tentative but prophetic actions that bear witness to the challenge Newbigin sought to express. Christian faith is public truth! It can't be proved through a series of abstract propositions. It is lived and demonstrated in the life of congregations embedded in the personal, complex web of relationships that make up so many neighborhoods and communities living in the midst of their own unraveling. This is where the movement of the Spirit breaks out – where God's people are seeking to make manifest the life of the missionary God, present in us and in our neighbours.

[1] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983), 3.

[2] Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984*, 1.