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'No Ground for Discouragement': A Critical Analysis of Lesslie Newbigin's Contribution to Discussions of Decline in the Church of England

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Abstract
The church in the Global North has seen a general decline in terms of numbers and institutional health lasting many decades. Often narratives surrounding the church offer only theologies of decline giving little hope of future resurgence. Lesslie Newbigin ministered in both a rapidly growing church in India and a declining one in the UK. This essay considers how certain areas of Newbigin's thought may offer a candid but hopeful alternative to theologies of decline, with particular reference to the Church of England.

Keywords: church growth; Lesslie Newbigin; Church of England; ecclesiology; mission

Decline and Fall?

Christianity in the Global North is contracting. The English national church provides a perfect case study, as it is no secret that the Church of England is in the grips of a sustained and quite spectacular period of decline. Surveying just the period 1980–2013, David Voas highlights the closure of roughly 1,000 parish churches, a 30 per cent decrease in stipendiary clergy, a 41 per cent drop in electoral role membership, and a 37 per cent haemorrhaging of Sunday attendance.[1] Such statistics

offer little comfort and, even if set against a general pattern of decline in public institutions (for instance, affiliation with political parties and trade unions), they will undoubtedly provide sleepless nights for bishops the land over. Indeed, only one diocese in the Church of England grew in the period 2003–2013. Though with annual growth of Easter attendance at 0.58 per cent, and with actual attendance on Easter Sunday in 2011 being only 49,000, London Diocese has little room for complacency.[2] The prize for the most precipitous collapse in attendance in the decade to 2013 was closely contested, but narrowly clinched by Worcester Diocese with annual growth of minus 2.59 per cent.[3] Grim reading indeed.

In his second retirement Lesslie Newbigin became the pastor of a struggling United Reformed Church (URC) in inner-city Birmingham. A somewhat inauspicious move for a retired bishop in the Church in South India (CSI), acclaimed author and leading ecumenist.[4] The URC knows a fair amount about decline. Between 1973 (a few years before Newbigin's arrival) and 2003, the denomination saw an annual loss of 2.9 per cent of its membership.[5] Such decline stood somewhat at odds with Newbigin's experience in the CSI, a denomination that grew from one million members at its inception in 1947 to 4.25 million members in 2015.[6] Indeed, such expansion reflects an explosion of the church in the Global South that has made Christianity into a truly global religion.[7] Newbigin is an interesting character to consider from this perspective, having ministered in both times of growth and decline in two very different ecumenical churches. To this end, this essay explores some of Newbigin's writings on the church as he held together his experiences in the

[1] David Voas, 'The Church of England', in David Goodhew (ed.), *Growth and Decline in the Anglican Communion 1980 to the Present* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), pp. 269–91 (p. 269).
[2] Voas, 'Church', pp. 283–84. Easter attendance is reckoned to be a reasonable representation of the number of active Anglicans. Though this point is debatable, the trends demonstrated in such figures are nonetheless useful.
[3] Voas, 'Church', p. 284.
[4] Geoffrey Wainwright, 'Lesslie J. E. Newbigin', in Timothy Larsen (ed.), *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals* (Leicester: IVP, 2014), pp. 472–75. For a full account see Geoffrey Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin: A Theological Life* (Oxford: OUP, 2000).
[5] Martin Camroux, 'Ecumenical Church Renewal: The Example of the United Reformed Church' (PhD thesis, Anglia Ruskin University, 2014), p. 121.
[6] Anderson Jeremiah, 'The Church of South India', in *Growth and Decline in the Anglican Communion*, ed. David Goodhew (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), pp. 147–58 (p. 148).
[7] See David Goodhew (ed.), *Growth and Decline in the Anglican Communion 1980 to the Present* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

Global South and Global North, and sought to reflect upon the church's nature and calling. As the title of the essay suggests, in Newbigin one finds a realistic yet counterintuitive optimism shining through the gloomy fog of church decline.

The Hermeneutic of the Gospel

> How can the strange story of God made flesh, of a crucified Saviour, of resurrection and new creation become credible for those whose entire mental training has conditioned them to believe that the real world is the world which can be satisfactorily explained and managed without the hypothesis of God? I know of only one clue to answering that question, only one real hermeneutic of the gospel: a congregation which believes it.[8]

In this, one of Newbigin's best known statements, he brings together two of his overriding concerns: the dual priorities of church and mission. The local church is the central point of mission because that is where the Holy Spirit is active. Drawing on the key verse, 'where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them' (Matt. 18.20, NIV), Newbigin assured: 'God's presence is promised and granted in the midst of the believing, worshipping, celebrating, caring congregation.'[9] So, it is when the evidence of the Holy Spirit at work in the lives of ordinary people is manifest, that the Gospel will become plausible to those outside the church. The use of Matt. 18.20 in this way demonstrates a quite straightforwardly reformed understanding of the church. God's presence is not seen primarily in the individual believer or the magisterium, but in the gathered worship of the church. Likewise, the assumption is made that the church will have a missional identity and be expectant that people will weigh the content of the gospel as they look in on the worshipping community. The church, then, is outward facing in its worship, so must 'renounce an introverted concern for their own life, and recognise that they exist for the sake of those who are not members, as sign, instrument, and foretaste of God's redeeming grace for the whole life of society.'[10]

[8] Lesslie Newbigin, 'The Pastor's Opportunities: VI. Evangelism in the City', *Expository Times* 98.12 (1987) 355–58 (p. 356).
[9] Newbigin, 'Opportunities', p. 356.
[10] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), p. 233.

Sent into the World

Understanding Matt. 18.20 as a foundational aspect of Newbigin's ecclesiology, the following is an expansion upon what is means for the church to be the hermeneutic of the gospel. A second key verse for Newbigin's understanding of the church is John 20.19–23 and 20.21 in particular: 'Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."' For Newbigin this means, 'the Church is a movement launched into the world in the same sense in which Jesus is sent into the world by the Father.'[11] It is possible to see three ways in which Newbigin further expounded and applied these verses: in the church's missionary calling; in its sacrificial witness; and in a concern for place.

Missionary Calling

That the church has a missionary calling is not necessarily intuitive, and indeed Newbigin himself took some time to join the dots.[12] Embarking on his missionary endeavour to South India in 1936, Newbigin was shaped largely by the nineteenth century understanding of the Global North as a Christianised culture which instinctively looked out over the seas when it thought of mission. Broadly speaking the church was located in the Global North and engaged in mission in the Global South. In the early twentieth century there was little sense that a two-way process might occur. In the Global North, though some individuals needed to be evangelised, the 'Christian' nature of its societies meant that the mission that would shape and confront the culture itself was unnecessary. The Global South was conceived of as pagan and required both the conversion of individuals and a sharp confrontation with the prevailing culture. Thus, 'missions were conceived of as the extension of the frontiers of Christendom and the conveyance of the blessings of Christian civilisation to those who had hitherto been without them.'[13]

[11] Lesslie Newbigin, 'On Being the Church for the World', in *Lesslie Newbigin: Missionary Theologian: A Reader*, ed. Paul Weston (London: SPCK, 1988), pp. 130–42 (p. 134).

[12] For analysis of the shifts in Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology see, Michael W. Goheen, '"As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You": Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology', *International Review of Mission* 91 (2002), pp. 354–69.

However, as the twentieth century rumbled on, Newbigin, along with many of his contemporaries, felt the tectonic movements beneath his feet as the global balance of faith shifted.[14] Rapid secularisation and a fading Christian culture pervaded the Global North, whilst decolonisation and the rapid expansion of Christianity occurred in the Global South. Newbigin saw this first-hand in the CSI and through involvement in the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the International Missionary Council (IMC). By 1952 it became clear that the assumptions of the previous century had been stretched to breaking point. It was at this time that Newbigin addressed a gathering of the IMC at Willingen. Goheen summarises the consensus reached: 'the church is sent to every inhabited area of the world, mission is in the immediate neighbourhood as well as to the ends of the earth, and no line can be drawn between the Christian West and the non-Christian East.'[15] From Newbigin's perspective there had to be a fundamental reorganisation in both the Global North and South. He reflects on this some years later:

> In the areas that had been regarded from a western point of view as 'the mission fields,' […] powerful mission bodies had to acknowledge the right and duty of the local church to take over the responsibility of mission […] churches in the old Christendom […] had to learn to be missions to their nations, rather than the religious dimensions of their nations. [16]

The particular importance of this for the churches in the Global North was that they had to recapture an understanding of mission as basic to their identity: 'an un-missionary church and an unchurchly mission are both, from the point of view of the Gospel, absurdities.'[17] By the end of the twentieth-century the need for this vision

[13] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1953), p. 12.
[14] Newbigin was far from alone in his shifting understanding of the missionary nature of the church. See David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis, 1991).
[15] Michael W. Goheen, 'Historical Perspectives on the Missional Church Movement: Probing Lesslie Newbigin's Formative Influence', *Trinity Journal for Theology and Ministry* 4 (2010) 62–84 (p. 69).
[16] Lesslie Newbigin, 'A Sermon Preached at the Thanksgiving Service for the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Tambaram Conference of the International Missionary Council', *International Review of Mission* 77 (1988) 325–31 (pp. 329–30).
[17] Ibid., p. 330.

had become quite evident, as the churches in the Global South looked upon the societies of the Global North, as the ones in need of missionary assistance.

Marked by the Scars of the Passion

A second implication of the church being sent into the world as Christ was, is that there could be no room for triumphalism. Newbigin recalled the time in India when his congregation did not have a building and services were conducted in the open air:

> My picture of the Church formed in those years is deeply etched in my mind, the picture of a group of people sitting on the ground and a larger crowd of Hindus and Muslims and others standing around listening, watching, discussing; and, thank God, when one came back a few months later some of those would be in the group in the front. So you get the sense of the Church not as something drawn of the world into a building, but the church sent out into the world.[18]

This is a powerful picture of the church as the hermeneutic of the Gospel, perhaps all the more so as it evokes the Galilean ministry of Jesus. Yet, it is a picture with a sharp edge, for Newbigin knew that those who moved from the crowd to the congregation would have to make, 'a radical break with the non-Christian culture' and its dominant religious and social norms.[19]

Among other things, it was the costliness of this break that informed Newbigin's preference for Jesus' commission in John over the one found in Matthew (28.16–20). For Newbigin, too much missiological thought started with the Matthean commission and with that came a sort of triumphalism that was out of keeping. By contrast, the Johannine commission alluded much more clearly to the cross: 'the Church will be recognisable as the bearer of this mission on which the Father sent the Son and on which the Son sent the Church, in so far as the scars of the passion are recognisable in its body.'[20] Drawing on 2 Cor. 4.10 and Gal. 6.17, Newbigin linked Paul's articulation of the Apostolic calling to the ongoing ministry of the

[18] Newbigin, 'On Being', p. 135.
[19] Newbigin, 'Household', p. 15.
[20] Newbigin, 'On Being', p. 136.

church, in that it 'bears in its body the reconciling power of the atonement, in so far as it is marked by the scars of the Passion, and it is therefore the bearer of the risen life.'[21]

Shaped by this outlook, Newbigin came to have a particular distaste for the Church Growth Movement (CGM). As he saw it, they prized the triumph of conversion over and above all else. Newbigin did not take issue with conversion per se, but rather that the movement placed far too much emphasis on numbers and reduced mission to statistical outcomes. Such was his distaste for the CGM that he likened it to a cancer, where one finds, 'the multiplication of cells unrelated to the purpose of the body.'[22] This seeking of an infinite regress of converts could not be an end in itself. The purpose of the church was to remain faithful in its worship:

> The church is in God's keeping. We do not have the right to be anxious about it. We have our Lord's word that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. The nub of the matter is that we have been chosen to be the bearers of good news for the whole world, and the question is simply whether we are faithful in communicating it.[23]

This insistence links back to Matt. 18.20. Conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit and, though evangelism — the writing of books like those Newbigin penned — and other forms of outreach were vital functions of the church, methods did not make people Christians. The church should not then make numbers a measure of success but rather make fidelity in worship their main concern.

Sent Somewhere

For Newbigin, the third implication of John 20.21 was that it meant the church had been sent to a particular place and should therefore express deep concern for that neighbourhood. Newbigin advocated a parish form of church organisation. The congregations that he oversaw in India were largely associational, that is to say

[21] Newbigin, 'On Being', p. 136.
[22] Ibid., p. 137. For more sustained interaction with the Church Growth Movement see Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to Mission* (London: SPCK, 1995), pp. 121–59.
[23] Newbigin, 'Opportunities', p. 356.

gathered from across various localities. This was problematic because 'they were not congregations who felt that, intrinsically, they were responsible for that bit of the city'.[24]

Newbigin bases this assertion on the New Testament word ἐκκλησία. The early Christians had other words at their disposal like συναγωγή used by the Jews in the diaspora, however, Newbigin contends:

> The Church never defines itself in the language that was used by various religious groups that were composed of the people in quest of salvation. They used only this word – ekklesia […] which is the secular word for the assembly of all citizens, to which every citizen is summoned and expected to attend, in which the business of the city is dealt with.[25]

For Newbigin the New Testament appropriation of non-religious language is significant, demonstrating that the early church organised itself around secular realities. Ἐκκλησία can denote a gathering of Old Testament believers (Acts 7.38) or a rioting mob (Acts 19.32), but is used most commonly with reference to the church universal (Col. 1.18) or a local manifestation of it (1 Thess. 1.1). The word is never used to refer to a building, instead the churches are 'defined simply by the "place" where they meet'.[26] It is for this reason that the basic ecclesial units of parish and diocese are determined by secular realities and not by the internal needs or capacity of the church.

In Newbigin's opinion the parish could not be restricted to the domain of any single denomination. Indeed, Newbigin reserved some of his most stinging criticisms for what he deemed trenchant denominationalism.[27] The secular reality of the parish included all the Christians in that locale without prejudice. Newbigin's ecumenism was derived from his formative experience in the CSI. The CSI's model sought to 'preserve their own denominational missionary heritage in the life and ministry of the local congregations' whilst forging institutional unity: 'The primary purpose of the formation of CSI came not from strategy or fear of different brands of

[24] Newbigin, 'On Being', p. 131.
[25] Ibid., p. 132.
[26] Ibid., p. 133.
[27] Ibid., p. 140–42.

Christianity existing in South India then, but from an inner urge and conviction that it is the will of God such a union should take place.'[28] Newbigin therefore linked mission and ecumenism in a vital way, that related back to Christianity's shift to the Global South:

> The ecumenical movement has been a by-product of the missionary movement, arising out of the missionary experience of the Churches outside of the old Christendom, and enormously reinforced by the experience of Churches within Christendom which have found themselves here also in a missionary situation face to face with new paganisms.[29]

For Newbigin, the challenges of rising secularity and the decline of Christianity in the Global North required direct interaction with the surrounding culture and not a retreat into denominational safe spaces. Christians had to face this challenge together.

Yet this did not mean that links should be forged for purely pragmatic reasons; because economies of scales could be achieved, or money saved. The experience of founding the CSI taught Newbigin that unity should be pursued because of a belief that the gospel is good news of union with Christ and one another. Newbigin warned that if efforts in evangelism or ecumenical mission were 'at bottom an effort to shore up the tottering fabric of the church (and it sometimes looks like that) then it will not be heard as good news'.[30] Christians should come together in their parish as an expression of genuine catholicity, not merely to survive.

Analysis

Through examining Newbigin's use of John 20.21, this article has brought three aspects of his thought together: the church is sent out into the world, bearing the marks of the passion, to a particular place. In such a way, the church fulfils its function as the hermeneutic of the gospel and thereby a means of salvation. Newbigin issues an urgent challenge to the church in an era of decline, to rediscover its missionary calling and prophetic voice in a neo-pagan culture. This is certainly to

[28] 1. Jeremiah, 'CSI', p. 150; 2. K. M. George, *Church of South India* (New Dehli: ISPCK, 1998), p. 9.
[29] Newbigin, 'Household', p. 18.
[30] Newbigin, 'Opportunities', p. 356.

be welcomed but aspects of Newbigin's thought should be subjected to scrutiny before final conclusions are drawn.

'I will draw all people to myself'

To be sure, the church is sent out into the world, but this does not exhaust the Bible's imagery of the nature and calling of the church. Indeed, it can be argued that Newbigin placed so much emphasis on the centrifugal aspects of the church's mission, that he failed to give due weight to the centripetal aspects. For instance, it is interesting that the application Newbigin drew from his illustration of the CSI congregation without a building related to the sent nature of the church. It might equally strongly illustrate the drawing power of the church's worship. Newbigin did recognise the 'drawing' motif in scripture. He pointed to John 12.32 to demonstrate that the cross is 'the one place where our self-centred human wills can be *drawn together*'.[31] Yet, as Sarinsky notes, the major chord was always centrifugal so that 'the centripetal aspects of mission are all too underdeveloped'.[32] Sarinsky highlights that in *The Open Secret* the story of Jonah received substantial treatment whilst texts speaking of nations coming to Israel received relatively little attention.[33] This said, it would seem that the key New Testament passages concerning mission do place the greatest emphasis on sending.

We may argue, as Sarinsky does, that Newbigin could have paid the minority report of 'drawing' passages greater attention, in order to articulate a more fully formed vision of the church's mission. Yet Newbigin's central image of the church as the hermeneutic of the gospel holds the centrifugal and centripetal aspects of mission together in a highly nuanced manner. For in this image Newbigin is surely contending that the church is missional insofar as it takes its own interior life seriously. The idea of the church as a hermeneutic assumes an engaged observation from outside the church, which in turn leads those observers to become participants. So we return to the fledgling CSI meeting in the open as the crowds looked on: the

[31] Lesslie Newbigin, 'Religious Pluralism: A Missiological Approach', in *Theology of Religions: Christianity and Other Religions* (Roma: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1993), pp. 227–44 (p. 235).
[32] Darren Sarinsky, 'The Meaning of the Missio Dei: Reflections on Lesslie Newbigin's Proposal That Mission Is of the Essence of the Church', *Missiology: An International Review* 42 (2014) pp.257–70 (pp. 225–26).
[33] Ibid., pp. 225–26.

church both sent out into the world and drawing it in. Whether there is a lack of the sort of balancing of biblical texts that some may desire, can be weighed against the ingenuity of Newbigin's central ecclesiological imagery.

If in his rhetoric Newbigin did not dwell long enough on the centripetal aspects of mission it is quite understandable, given his context in India and the UK. In the CSI and the URC, Newbigin was outside of the dominant establishment framework. His missionary instinct, perhaps, taught him that each activity of the church involved an outward movement. But an established church rooted deeply in the history and culture of a nation has a certain cache that belies short term trends. Though somewhat diminished in stature, the Church of England remains present in mission through parish schools, occasional offices, and weekly services. These aspects of 'being' are so woven into the fabric of English life and law that they are not easily lost. Many churches who have no capacity for centrifugal movement (and perhaps little desire for it) have a centripetal force by virtue of their long-standing position in a community. It would seem whilst theologically Newbigin was strong on the activity of the Holy Spirit in assembling the church, he did not allow this to be born out enough practically in an establishment context. Though an established church in decline cannot draw upon occasional offices and the like in perpetuity, a full account of mission should recognise the historical centripetal force expended. On the whole Newbigin's emphasis on sending is surely right and it should be noted that many of the aspects of the Church of England that are now considered to be centripetal exist only because they were once established in sweeping centrifugal movements. Newbigin's emphasis in this sense 'helpfully counters the church's tendency toward complacency and an excessive inward focus'.[34]

There are wider questions of whether Newbigin's concept is too inherently congregational to be of any Anglican use. After all, Anglican clergy are called to a parish and not to a congregation. Though this ecclesiastical question requires some more detailed consideration than this article can give, it need not detract from the vital point at hand. For the centre of Anglican ecclesiology is its worshipping life and though the establishment trappings of the Church of England may confuse the issue somewhat, its congregational life remains the beating heart of that worship.

[34] Sarinsky, 'Meaning', p. 267.

The Numbers Game

Newbigin's assault on the CGM was, for him, justified on the grounds that conversion should not be the focus of mission and therefore the church. Newbigin's criticisms were not completely without qualification, but were nonetheless withering. The warning issued above with regards to careless ecumenical marriages based on fear, applies here also. Converts are not a way of holding up tottering church structures. Yet churches in decline can become obsessed with numbers in terms of both departures and potential new recruits for this very reason. In the Church of England falling numbers mean a falling parish share, which means clergy cannot be employed and buildings cannot be kept open, and services run, and so forth. One may wish for greater emphasis upon lay leadership and non-stipendiary ministry, yet recruiting such leaders from an ageing and dwindling stock of parishioners is not straightforward. Another issue for the Church of England is lay presidency at the Eucharist, a highly controversial subject which Newbigin himself did not advocate.[35] These sorts of practical realities are important and impact upon the proper functioning of churches.

Newbigin's preference for John 20.21 over Matt. 28.16–20 was based in a fear of triumphalism. However, such triumphalism is surely more about how Matt. 28.16–20 had been interpreted and applied, rather than any inherent outlook contained in the passage. In reality, neither commission is more or less triumphalist than the other and they should be read as complementary. Newbigin's prioritisation of John 20.21 demonstrated two aspects of his outlook. First, he was (over)reacting to the obsession with counting converts in sectors of North American evangelicalism and parts of the burgeoning Global South. Newbigin saw such joy in numbers as a tawdry misrepresentation of the sending motif. His reaction then serves best as a counterbalance rather than a full account of the biblical commissions.

Secondly, Newbigin was too quick to dismiss conversion and the significance of numbers. The commission to the twelve Apostles to 'go and make disciples' (Matt. 28.19) is inherently concerned with conversion. At the point of commission there is

[35] Lesslie Newbigin, 'Lay Presidency at the Eucharist', *Theology* 99 (1996) 366–70.

no church to speak of and in order to baptise and teach, they must first convert people. The church is gathered and formed through conversion. When an expanding church sees conversions on a weekly basis, it need not pay such close attention to the phenomena. In a declining church, such as the Church of England, some congregations may never have seen someone come to faith and have been trained over a number of years to expect only the death of aging Christians and the wandering (or deconversion) of its young people. The didactic experience of such continued loss leads to a theology of decline and a pessimism for the future. Such an outlook is a long way from triumphalism and needlessly gloomy. Newbigin duly noted verses in Acts that report statistical data (2.41; 4.4; 6.1, 5, 7; 12.24), but dismissed their importance.[36] Yet the simple fact that they are reported at all is significant, and that they are reported in the biographical record of the church should afford them suitable weighting. Moreover, in Acts the statistical growth data often functions as a narrative marker. Churches in decline need to hear this message: the church has exhibited phenomenal growth from its inception and, by the grace of God, can flourish in twenty-first century Britain.[37]

Newbigin fought against triumphalism amongst those experiencing the growth of the church. Yet he held a balance between being too concerned with growth and not being concerned enough. The battle in the present within the Church of England is against theologies of decline and a lack of hope in the God 'who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine' (Eph. 3:20). The church's self-identity is not defined by conversion and growth, but that is not to say it can be free from such concerns, all the more so in an era of decline. This nuanced approach requires a kind of *via media* which holds growth tightly enough to value it but with the sort of humility that recognises its dangers, especially when growth is focussed upon the exclusion of other vital signs of life within a church.

Naïve Ecumenism?

Newbigin's experience in the CSI and with the WCC and the IMC, taught him that ecumenism was eminently possible and highly desirable. Newbigin made

[36] Newbigin, 'Open', pp. 124–25.

[37] For discussion see David Goodhew (ed.), *Towards a Theology of Church Growth* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).

ecumenism a keynote of his ministry and writing, preferring to join the ecumenical URC over accepting a suffragan bishop position in the Anglican Diocese of Birmingham.[38] Part of this may have been based in Newbigin's long standing perceived frustration with the Anglican church, as intransigently vested in its own interests.[39] The initial experience of the CSI was both partial and achieved on the Indian subcontinent alone. It was then a unique occurrence, since which churches have 'sought to embrace less costly forms of union or alternatively of federation'.[40] Having been part of such a monumental achievement as the CSI, Newbigin's expectations of what could be achieved ecumenically were perhaps set too high.

Though the Church of England continues discussions with the Methodist church, movement is slow. There seems little interest in wider discussions of institutional unity and the high-water mark of ecumenism seems to have been reached some decades ago. Indeed, there have always been questions over the desirability of the institutional forms of unity which Newbigin sought to achieve.[41] Both the ecumenical churches Newbigin belonged to have had their problems. The URC remains in terminal decline and the CSI beset by 'corruption, nepotism, and failed leadership'.[42] In India and Britain alike, the major growth of the church is to be found in Pentecostal forms of Christianity. Such churches are far less institutional than their historic counterparts and display a marked adaptability. Pentecostalism has so radically altered the landscape of global Christianity in the twentieth century that efforts to forge institutional unity appear dated and hopelessly naïve. It is unsurprising, then, that most churches now set the bar at affiliation or federation when such diverse forms of church now exist.[43]

Acknowledging the shifting nature of global Christianity and the relativisation of the significance of denominations does not negate Newbigin's

[38] Paul Weston, *Lesslie Newbigin: Missionary Theologian: A Reader* (London: SPCK, 2006), p. 12.
[39] Mark Laing, 'The International Impact of the Formation of the Church of South India: Bishop Newbigin Versus the Anglican Fathers', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 33 (2009) 18–24 (p. 22).
[40] Ibid., p. 22.
[41] Lesslie Newbigin, *Reunion of the Church: A Defence of the South Indian Scheme*, (Eugene: Wipf, 1960).
[42] Jeremiah, 'CSI', p. 156.
[43] For an illustration of this see Colin Marchant, 'New Churches in Newham' in, *The Desecularisation of the City: London's Churches, 1980 to the Present*, ed. David Goodhew and Anthony-Paul Cooper (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), pp. 103–33.

insistence upon meaningful ecumenical partnering and working. Indeed, rather than ecumenism being a fit of twentieth-century hubris, it remains a vital aspect of mission to local neighbourhoods. The Church of England should not see its legal status as an entitlement to a parish monopoly. Decline in the Church of England whilst other areas of the church experience growth provides an opportunity to serve and partner with other churches sacrificially rather than compete with them. This may not live up to Newbigin's grand vision but it would be a fine legacy nonetheless.

Conclusion

There is very much a sense that Newbigin's is an unfinished agenda.[44] His articulation of the nature and calling of the church is not as fully formed as may be desired. Instead, it reflects the occasional and on-the-job nature of much of his writing. Newbigin was a missionary theologian who reacted to those around him and, for this reason, did not always display the requisite balance that a professional academic might. Newbigin's value for a church in decline is however self-evident. He brought a perspective of ministry in the burgeoning Global South and helped re-articulate the Catholic church's missionary calling. Newbigin treasured the church and its local manifestation was at the centre of his theology of mission. In an effort to defend against triumphalism, Newbigin did not perhaps offer enough hope of change to discouraged churches. Yet what he did unquestionably offer in his theology was a sense of eternal perspective. For if, in spite of a church's best efforts in mission, it remained small and vulnerable, Newbigin contended:

> I do not find in this grounds for discouragement. The kingdom is not ours. The times and seasons are not in our management. It is enough to know that Jesus reigns and shall reign, and to be privileged to share this assurance with our neighbours and to be able to do and say small deeds and words that make it possible for others to believe.[45]

[44] Lesslie Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda: An Updated Autobiography* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009).
[45] Newbigin, 'Opportunities', p. 358.