

Introduction

A biographical sketch

Early life

James Edward Lesslie Newbigin was born in Newcastle upon Tyne on 8 December, 1909. He was the second of three children, a brother among two sisters. His father, a native Northumbrian and an able businessman, had founded his own shipping company in 1895, and became chairman of the North of England Shipowners Federation in 1922. He was widely read, politically energetic, and remained a devout and deeply thoughtful Christian – actively concerned to apply his faith to politics and business. Lesslie’s mother was of Scottish stock, and a very different kind of character. Less forthright than her husband, she was a highly accomplished pianist, and was – in Lesslie’s own words – ‘the most loving and devoted mother that one could wish for’.¹

After attending a private kindergarten and preparatory school in Newcastle, Lesslie was sent away at the age of 12 to ‘board’ at Leighton Park, a Quaker boarding school in Reading, Berkshire. His father had chosen it because of its Quaker ethos and because – being a committed pacifist – he approved of the fact that it did not have an Officer Training Corps. It took Lesslie some time to get over his sense of desolation at being left on his own far from home, but he gradually began to adapt to his surroundings and to make the most of the new opportunities they offered. He was to remember little of his formal class education, except for the influence of one particular teacher: his geography master, S.W. (‘Bill’) Brown, whom Newbigin described as a ‘man of genius’ and from whom he learned to question received knowledge and to think for himself.

He created a capacity to think, to break out of stereotypes, to explore new ideas and to question old ones. He taught us to read voraciously and to get to the heart of the argument of a big book so that we could expound and defend it in debate. He made learning a thrilling exercise. And at the end of it he made you laugh at yourself.²

¹ Newbigin 1993d: 3. (This is the updated edition of Newbigin 1985c.)

² Newbigin 1993d: 5. Newbigin remained an avid and inquisitive reader throughout his life. Even towards the end, when his eyesight was failing, he had a ‘team’ of readers who visited his home and read to him. His ability to digest and recall this material was extraordinary.

Newbigin excelled in a range of subjects at school, but though he was much involved in the school's social work projects and took part in debates on politics and ethics, he had by the end of his schooldays abandoned his parents' Christian faith. He had found his scripture lessons 'utterly boring'; had learned from his chemistry studies that life was a 'disease of matter', and had adopted a 'deterministic' view of history from his wider readings in historical geography. As a result, by the age of 18, Newbigin found that the idea of God was no longer 'a tenable hypothesis'.³ Despite this, he did read William James's 1896 essay, 'The Will to Believe', and although he was not persuaded by its arguments for Christian faith, it did at least demonstrate to him that faith was not entirely irrational.

Cambridge and conversion

Newbigin went up to Queens' College, Cambridge in the autumn of 1928. He was to read geography, but soon found that the University's academic expectations were much lower than those he had been used to at Leighton Park. So he spent most of his time in more congenial pursuits: he took part in debates at the Union, sang in chamber groups, and indulged his favourite hobby of rock-climbing – fitting in as many trips to the Lake District as he could.

Significantly, during his time at Queens' he also came across the Student Christian Movement (SCM). A small group met in college, and Newbigin began to find the company of its members 'very attractive'. He liked their readiness to ask difficult questions about Christian faith, and began to find himself being drawn unexpectedly towards the possibility of personal belief. As yet he remained unsure whether 'God' existed, but – as he wrote later – 'with William James to support me I knew that I was not being irrational in seeking the help of One of whose existence there was no proof'.⁴

Then in 1929, during his first summer vacation, Newbigin offered to help out at a Quaker centre at Maes-yr-haf in South Wales to bring relief and provide recreation for unemployed miners living in the Rhondda valley. Characteristically, Newbigin had been attracted by the Quakers' efforts to help those at the margins of society, and had agreed to go to help out for several weeks with a student friend he had known since Leighton Park days. It proved to be a life-changing experience. They were based at a recreation centre at Trealaw, and were involved in organizing games and other pastimes for the men. But Newbigin began to feel that what they really needed was something more than the odd game of table-tennis. He described it as 'some kind of faith that would fortify them for today and tomorrow against apathy and despair' and concluded that they too 'needed the Christian faith that was beginning

³ Newbigin 1993d: 5.

⁴ Newbigin 1993d: 10.

to draw me'.⁵ Towards the end of his time he accompanied around 60 of the men as they set out to spend some nights under canvas near the coast. One evening some of them had managed to smuggle large quantities of alcohol into the camp, and before long not only were they completely drunk, but they had started to fight with each other. Newbigin gradually felt more and more out of his depth, acutely aware of his own inability to resolve the situation; although things eventually quietened down, he went to bed 'with the feeling of total defeat'. But then, while lying awake on his bed, he experienced something of a spiritual awakening. It was a vivid vision of the cross of Christ 'spanning the space between heaven and earth, between ideals and present realities, and with arms that embraced the whole world'.

I was sure that night in a way that I had never been before, that this was the clue that I must follow if I were to make any kind of sense of the world. From that moment I would always know how to begin again when I had come to the end of all my own resources of understanding or courage.⁶

Newbigin returned to Cambridge in the autumn of 1929 as a committed Christian, and he immediately threw himself into the activities of the SCM with great energy and enthusiasm. He went to many of its meetings, and heard a rich variety of speakers from around the world, including such eminent leaders as John R. Mott, William Temple and John Mackay.⁷ It is no surprise, therefore, that from such early experiences Newbigin's faith was to grow in ways that were both sensitive to social questions and profoundly ecumenical in dimension. He was of course to make a major contribution to the ecumenical movement, but he also remained passionate about social issues, and his later work – both in church leadership and in the writing that came out of it – is consistently marked by a desire to apply his Christian faith to the social and political questions of the time.

During the summer of 1930, at the end of his second year at Cambridge, Newbigin was to reach another significant turning point in his life. He had turned down an opportunity to go climbing with friends in the Alps so that he could attend the annual SCM conference at Swanwick in Derbyshire. Up to this time, he had naturally assumed that after graduating he would go into

⁵ Newbigin 1993d: 11.

⁶ Newbigin 1993d: 11–12. In an unpublished 1962 lecture, Newbigin probably had this experience in mind when he referred to the idea of faith as something which is 'born at the point of ultimate despair', and as a commitment made 'when all other commitments end in a precipice' (Newbigin 1962c).

⁷ John Mott (an American Methodist) had presided at the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910. He was awarded the Nobel Peace prize in 1946. William Temple became Archbishop of York in 1929, having been previously Bishop of Manchester. He became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1942, but died in 1944. John Mackay was a leader of the growing ecumenical movement. A former missionary in South America, he became President of Princeton Seminary in 1936, where he served for 23 years not only as President, but as Professor of Ecumenics – the first such post in an American seminary.

his father's shipping business. (With this in mind, he had at the time become something of an ardent advocate for the view that Christians ought to pursue callings in secular professions rather than seeing ordination as the only real option.)

The Swanwick conference was to change how Newbigin viewed his future. An annual event since 1909, the conference brought together over 600 students from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences, providing a rich and stimulating environment for devotion, discussion and debate. In Newbigin's words, it 'opened up a new world'. Alongside the more formal lectures and discussions, there were also times set aside for quiet reflection and prayer, as well as opportunities for creativity and recreation. But it was the plenary addresses in the specially erected marquee that contributed most to what Newbigin was later to describe as 'a kind of transfiguration experience' in which he felt 'lifted up into the heights'.⁸ Two significant things happened for Newbigin during the week. To begin with, while praying alone in a tent set aside for private reflection, he felt the distinct call to ordination. He found it difficult to describe in words, but later wrote:

I suddenly knew that I had been told that I must offer for ordination. I had not been thinking about this. But I knew that I had been ordered and that it was settled and that I could not escape.⁹

Shortly after this, he was approached by Willie Tindal (the study-secretary of SCM) about the possibility of working full-time on the SCM staff.

Newbigin's life was taking significant new directions. He returned for his final year at Cambridge (for which he decided to change from geography to economics), and it was during that year that discussions were held as to where he might be employed as an SCM secretary. The suggestion was made that he might become men's inter-collegiate secretary in Glasgow, and it was at an interview for this post that he met Helen Henderson, who was a women's inter-collegiate secretary for Scotland. Newbigin later wrote: 'I fell in love with her there and then and made up my mind that whether or not the whole committee decided to take me on, I would try and ensure that she did.'¹⁰ They became colleagues for three years in the work in Glasgow, and were married in 1936.

It was together that they decided that God was calling them to missionary service in India, where Helen's parents had been missionaries. Accordingly, they offered themselves to the Foreign Mission Committee of the Church of Scotland, and Newbigin applied to train for ordination at Westminster College, Cambridge, where John Oman (an old family friend) was principal. Newbigin took up residence in autumn 1933 for a three-year course, while

⁸ Newbigin 1993d: 15.

⁹ Newbigin 1993d: 15.

¹⁰ Newbigin 1993d: 17.

Helen went to Moray House, Edinburgh for a statutory year of training, followed by teaching at her old school and a period of language study.

In his own words, Newbigin's three years back in Cambridge 'profoundly changed and deepened' his understanding of the Christian faith.¹¹ He was due to study for the theological tripos, but managed to find an ancient regulation that exempted him from this obligation; and so – apart from the requirement to take the college exams for ordination in the Presbyterian Church – he was able to embark upon a course of wider reading and study of his own choosing, which he felt would be a much better preparation for what lay ahead. He decided to study Paul's Epistle to the Romans, as it seemed to him to be 'probably the most complete and condensed statement of the gospel' he could find. He duly spent the following months 'wrestling with the Greek text' of the letter with the help of a number of commentaries. He described the effect of these studies as follows:

I began the study as a typical liberal. I ended it with a strong conviction about the 'finished work of Christ', about the centrality and objectivity of the atonement accomplished on Calvary. The decisive agent in this shift was James Denney. His commentary on Romans carried the day as far as I was concerned. Barth I found incomprehensible. C. H. Dodd seemed to have made the Epistle palatable by removing its toughest parts – the parts where I found strong meat. His 'demythologizing' of the wrath of God seemed to me effectively to remove the love of God, for if 'wrath' was only an anthropomorphic way of describing the consequences of sin, then 'love' would have to be explained along the same lines. At the end of the exercise I was much more of an evangelical than a liberal.¹²

Marriage and India

Newbigin's offer of service to the Foreign Mission Committee of the Church of Scotland was accepted in late 1935, and he and Helen were assigned to the Madras Mission. He graduated in the summer of 1936, and in July was commissioned for service as a foreign missionary by the Edinburgh Presbytery. A month later, he and Helen were married in Edinburgh, and on 26 September 1936, the Newbigins departed from Liverpool docks on the *City of Cairo*, bound for Madras.

They arrived in India nearly four weeks later, Lesslie having spent much of the voyage finishing his first book, an SCM study guide entitled *Christian Freedom in the Modern World*.¹³ Then, on arrival in India, the Newbigins immediately found themselves transported into a completely new world. Lesslie wrote in his diary:

¹¹ Newbigin 1993d: 28.

¹² Newbigin 1993d: 29.

¹³ Newbigin 1937.

I couldn't help being horrified by the sort of relation that seems to exist between the missionaries and the people. It seems so utterly remote from the New Testament. [. . .] We drive up like lords in a car, soaking everybody else with mud on the way, and then carry on a sort of inspection, finding all the faults we can, putting everyone through their paces. They all sort of stand at attention and say 'Sir'. It's *aufjil*. [. . .] But one thing is as sure as death: surely they won't stand this sort of thing from the white man much longer.¹⁴

During the following nine months, the Newbigins spent a large part of each day trying to master the complexities of the Tamil language,¹⁵ but early progress was hampered by a serious bus accident in which Lesslie badly smashed his left leg. A series of operations in Madras failed to resolve the problem, and so they were reluctantly compelled to sail back to the UK for further surgery in Edinburgh. It was feared at one point that Lesslie's leg would have to be amputated, but miraculously, after much prayer, healing at last began to set in, and within a few months he was back on his feet again – albeit on crutches. In June 1939, the Newbigins' first child (Margaret) was born, and in September they once more set sail for India – this time for Kanchipuram, where they were to be stationed for the next seven years.

Kanchipuram is one of the seven most sacred Hindu cities in India, and Lesslie was soon pitched into a busy schedule as a district missionary. Alongside continuing language study there were villagers' problems to sort out, and many varied opportunities for street preaching and other evangelistic ministry. During this time, an experience of far-reaching significance for Newbigins' future development arose out of Kanchipuram's reputation as a Hindu centre of learning. Each week, Hindu scholars would gather at the Ashram of the Ramakrishna Mission for study and reflection. Newbigins was invited to share the leadership of this group with the head of the community, and each would take turns to read and lead discussions on the Svetasvatara Upanishad and St John's Gospel. Newbigins' weekly visits were to have a profound impact upon his thinking. On the one hand they made him deeply conscious of the rationality of Hindu belief; but they also made him aware of the lack of any idea of redemption within its world view. Moreover, he found that the religious mindset of Hinduism did not provide any real point of contact with the good news of Jesus Christ. In fact it erected a barrier to it. If there were to be a point of contact, he concluded, it would be in the secular experience of human life rather than in the realm of 'religion'.¹⁶

Newbigins was also involved in a wider village ministry in the area around Kanchipuram, spending time in the surrounding settlements where 'untouchable' Indians lived in exclusion from mainstream Hindu life. He was responsible for a number of mission agents in each village, whose task it was to teach

¹⁴ Newbigins 1993d: 39.

¹⁵ A mark of Newbigins' skill and commitment to cross-cultural work was that he later became indistinguishable from the locals in his grasp of the language.

¹⁶ Newbigins 1993d: 45–55.

and catechize new believers. He developed systematic teaching materials for use in these villages, which resulted in the annual publication of the *Village Workers' Almanack*, a booklet that provided week-by-week material for catechists who had little or no formal theological education.

Bishop in the Church of South India

Gradually, Newbigin began to take on wider responsibilities, not only at home – where the births of Alison in 1941 and Janet in 1944 were followed by that of John in 1947 – but also in the developing and expanding work of the mission. Notably, he began to be drawn into discussions about the vision for church union in South India. The original congregations brought into existence through the work of the mission of the Scottish Churches formed part of what was known as the South India United Church (SIUC), which had been set up in 1908 by a union of Congregationalists and Presbyterians, and had included a number of congregations sponsored by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission. This association – together with Anglicans and Methodists, and missionaries of the Reformed Church in America – formed part of the Madras Church Council, whose annual three-day meetings Newbigin had attended since his arrival in Kanchipuram. On the agenda of its meetings each year was the matter of the so-called South India Scheme – a vision for a united church that had first been proposed in general terms by William Carey as far back as 1810. Significant in the development of this vision was the meeting at Tranquebar in 1919 at which the movement towards formal negotiations was given impetus by local Indian leadership. However, as a result of various setbacks and tensions among the different elements within the Council, the movement for unity had reached something of an impasse by the 1940s.

In 1942, Newbigin was elected as convenor of the Union Committee of the Madras Church Council, and in the following year as convenor of the Committee of the SIUC as a whole – the same year that a dynamic new Bishop of Madras, A. D. Hollis, was consecrated. A high Anglican, he was determined to see that negotiations began again in earnest between representatives of the three denominations, although protracted debates continued over questions of episcopal and presbyteral oversight. Newbigin's role in this process was particularly significant in persuading the mission authorities back in Edinburgh to give up their control of mission property, and in encouraging Indian leadership within the South India Churches. In addition, he spent much of his 1946–7 furlough in the UK seeking to defend the proposed scheme against its critics – both in Scotland (where certain pronouncements by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel had fanned fears of 'popery'¹⁷) and also in the Church of England (where he encountered much opposition

¹⁷ The SPG refused to recognize the new United Church.

from the Anglo-Catholics). However, after much further discussion and debate, the Union of the Church of South India (CSI) was at last agreed and formally inaugurated in Madras Cathedral in September 1947. After the presiding bishop announced that the three Churches had now become the Church of South India, the great congregation ‘rose and burst into the *Te Deum*’.

It was as though all the agonizing fears and delays of [. . .] 28 years had dammed up a flood that was now bursting through. I have never heard such singing, and I think there were very many like myself who found it hard to keep back tears of joy as one remembered all that had gone before and all that might lie ahead.¹⁸

The service served to strengthen and confirm the convictions he had long held about unity in the Church, and made him ‘so utterly sure that what we are doing is not patching things together, but being led by the Holy Spirit back to the fullness and simplicity of gospel truth’.¹⁹

It was at the same service that Newbigin was consecrated as bishop in Madurai. He had allowed his name to go forward as one of a long list of candidates for possible election as one of nine newly appointed bishops, but he was confident that he would be passed over. However, he duly received a cable a short time later that simply read: ‘You are appointed bishop Church of South India Madura. We pray God’s blessing.’ As he was later to write, ‘The prayer was comforting but the news was shattering.’²⁰ He was to have episcopal responsibility for the new diocese of Madurai and Rannad. He was just 37 years old.

Newbigin was to serve as bishop of the new diocese for the following 12 years, setting in place new structures, seeking to provide a focus for unity amid the continuing tensions between the various partners in the Union, and traveling extensively around the small villages, often preaching up to ten times a day.²¹ But it was also during this period that he first began to gain an international reputation within the worldwide ecumenical movement. Partly as a result of his position within the CSI, he was invited to be a ‘consultant’ at the first assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) held in Amsterdam in 1948, and went on to chair the committee responsible for preparing the WCC’s second assembly at Evanston, Chicago, in 1954 (under the title ‘Christ the hope of the world’). Two years later he became vice-chairman of the WCC’s Commission on Faith and Order²² and was instrumental in laying out the ecumenical agenda for the third assembly in New Delhi in 1961.

¹⁸ Newbigin 1993d: 90.

¹⁹ Newbigin 1993d: 91.

²⁰ Newbigin 1993d: 85. The nine new bishops were added to the six bishops already working within the existing structures.

²¹ Newbigin’s vivid recollections of this period are recorded in Newbigin 1951.

²² Together with the movement for ‘Life and Work’, and the ‘International Missionary Council’, the ‘Faith and Order’ movement was the precursor of the WCC, providing much of the impetus of the ecumenical agenda between the Edinburgh world missionary conference of 1910 and the inaugural WCC assembly of 1948.

Throughout these and the following years, he continued to be a powerful advocate for a wider recognition of the CSI – especially within the Anglican communion. He attended the Lambeth Conferences of 1948 and 1958 (as a ‘special guest’ of Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher), but although at the 1958 conference 160 bishops received Holy Communion at a service that used the CSI liturgy, ‘full communion’ was not granted to the Union. This was a cause of deep disappointment to Newbigin to the end of his life. He felt not only that a key opportunity had been missed in the cause of Christian unity, but that the CSI represented in his own thinking a pioneering pattern for other churches in the WCC.

Ecumenical statesman and Bishop of Madras

Meanwhile, during the 1950s Newbigin became more involved in the work of the International Missionary Council (IMC). Set up in 1921, the IMC had held meetings at Jerusalem in 1928, Tambaram (India) in 1938, and Whitby (Canada) in 1947, prior to the inaugural meeting of the WCC in 1948.²³ Newbigin now took significant responsibility for the 1952 conference at Willingen in Germany (with its theme, ‘The Missionary obligation of the Church’), and was subsequently invited to consider the post of general secretary, with a view to integrating the Council into the structures of the WCC. Should this be agreed, it was hoped that the new general secretary would in turn become the director of the proposed WCC Division of World Mission and Evangelism. The idea for integration was very close to Newbigin’s heart, not least because it would bring mission and evangelism more fully into the structures of the WCC. But he was torn about taking on the role because of his continued sense of commitment to his diocesan tasks back in India. After much discussion, however, he agreed to be appointed to the IMC on condition that he would be free to return to India after a five-year posting. The CSI agreed to second him for five years from July 1959 ‘as a bishop of the Church of South India without diocesan charge, released for service with the International Missionary Council’.²⁴

Newbigin was very reluctant to leave, for he had built a precious relationship of love and trust with the people of Madurai. He described his departure in his diary:

There was a great crowd at the station. At the end they just stood in a great mass and gazed and gazed at me till I felt I would weep. We sang (a Tamil lyric) and at last the train moved off and the group became only a blob in the distance [. . .] There was a group at Kodai Road station with fruit and flowers and honey and they asked me to bless them before the train left. At Dindigul there was another big group with many presents.²⁵

²³ The WCC had been ‘in process of formation’ since 1938 when W. A. Visser’t Hoof became the first general secretary.

²⁴ Newbigin 1993d: 149.

²⁵ Newbigin 1993d: 157.

Hard though it was to leave, Newbiggin quickly became engrossed in the new challenges facing him. He set to work energetically on plans for the integration of the IMC with the WCC, believing it to be a true realization not only of the ecumenical vision characterized by the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910, but of the gospel imperative to take the good news to the whole world – with ecumenism and mission as part and parcel of the same mandate.²⁶ The integration was achieved by a formal declaration at the opening act of worship at the New Delhi assembly of the WCC in 1961, and Newbiggin thus became the first director of the newly formed WCC Division of World Mission and Evangelism, and an assistant general secretary of the World Council of Churches.

This period of Newbiggin's life was especially hectic as he juggled the various demands and responsibilities of the integration process, attended further meetings of the Commission on Faith and Order, and sought also to tie up the loose ends of his diocesan responsibilities back in Madurai. On top of all this, he undertook extensive tours in connection with his role with the IMC, visiting 15 countries during a long tour of Africa in 1960, travelling around the Pacific and Latin America in 1961, and visiting the Caribbean in 1962. In addition there were also shorter trips to Thailand, Japan, North America and Africa, as well as to his mother's home at Rothbury (in Northumberland), where he and the family spent as much holiday time as possible until her death in 1962. With his appointment to the new role of director of the Division of World Mission and Evangelism, Newbiggin moved to Geneva, leaving the rest of the family in Bromley, South London, where they had lived during his initial spell with the IMC and which became home while the younger children were at school in England. The new Division had offices in Geneva, London and New York, which not only meant 'filing in triplicate', but frequent flights across the Atlantic. On top of all this, he continued to lecture and publish²⁷ and – as part of the director's role – took on the editorship of the *International Review of Missions*, which involved, among other responsibilities, writing annual editorial surveys of missionary developments around the world.²⁸

When his five-year secondment ended in 1965, Newbiggin returned to India, this time – after much consideration – to take up the appointment as

²⁶ See e.g. Newbiggin 1960a and 1962a.

²⁷ During this period he published *A Faith for this One World?* (Newbiggin 1961), a significant pamphlet entitled *The Relevance of Trinitarian Faith for Today's Mission* (Newbiggin 1963), and prepared the bulk of the material later published as *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (Newbiggin 1966), as well as several smaller pieces.

²⁸ As editor, Newbiggin insisted (despite much pressure) on keeping the 's' on the end of 'Mission' in the title of the journal in order to preserve the significance of 'missions' – as the task of making the gospel known where it is not known – in the midst of the more general and wider concept of 'mission' (see Newbiggin 1993d: 189). The journal had been started by Joe Oldham in 1912 as a follow-up to the Edinburgh Conference of 1910.

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elected Bishop in Madras. It was a welcome return to the country he loved, but the challenges of the new job were very great. In the mid-1960s Madras was already a sizeable city of nearly three million, and was reckoned to be growing at the rate of around 100,000 a year. It was much bigger than the diocese of Madurai, which Newbiggin had left six years earlier, and it had a stronger sense of tradition and prestige. There had been an Anglican bishop there since 1835 (who until 1942 had been paid out of colonial revenues), and the early bishops under the British Raj occupied a position of importance superseded only by the Governor and Chief Justice. The city itself boasted around 120 congregations (some of them numbering over a thousand members). Looking back on his earlier ministries in Kanchi and Madurai, Newbiggin felt that he had been 'too narrowly ecclesiastical' in his concerns. As a result he resolved to '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'.²⁹

Following his consecration, therefore, Newbiggin quickly became involved not only in initiatives to promote evangelism and outreach, but also in developing programmes for social welfare among those who lived in the slums around the city. In addition to these diocesan initiatives, Newbiggin continued to be involved in wider responsibilities. He was elected deputy moderator for the whole of the CSI, and continued to travel extensively either to give lectures or to contribute to ecumenical gatherings as time and diocesan responsibilities allowed. He was a prominent delegate at the WCC's general assembly at Uppsala, Sweden in 1968, at the Louvain meeting of the WCC Commission on Faith and Order in 1971, and at the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism conference at Bangkok in 1973 (with its theme of 'Salvation Today').

Retirement

Newbiggin eventually reached retirement age in 1974 – at the age of 65. The rules of the CSI allowed that extension be made for a further five years in certain circumstances, but Newbiggin felt strongly that he should make way for an Indian leader. His mode of departure was characteristically enterprising: he chose to return to the UK with Helen by land, fulfilling a long-term wish for an 'emotional shock-absorber'³⁰ between the demands of the work in Madras and whatever might lie ahead. After an emotional farewell at Madras Central Station to a large gathering of well-wishers (which included the Chief Minister), the Newbiggins set out on the two-month journey home carrying

²⁹ Newbiggin 1993d: 203.

³⁰ Newbiggin 1993d: 226.

only two suitcases and a rucksack. They made their way north through Delhi and Lahore, into Pakistan and across Afghanistan and Iran, then along the border between Turkey and Russia (via Mount Ararat). Their journey through Turkey then took them west to Erzurum, Kesari and on to Cappadocia. Once a great centre of Christian thought and activity, Cappadocia turned out to be the only place on the entire trip where the Newbigins had to worship on their own on Sunday, because they could find no other Christians with whom to share fellowship. This had a profound effect upon Lesslie and helped to energize his later reflections on European culture, for it brought home just how completely a once-strong Christian heritage could all but disappear. From Cappadocia they travelled on south to Tarsus, along the 'Turkish Riviera' to Antalya, then north through Ephesus, Smyrna and on to Istanbul. From here they continued their journey through Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Austria until they reached the centre of Munich in mid-May. Here they began to experience 'real culture shock'.³¹

The long trek home had indeed helped to cushion the departure from India, giving a whole new set of challenging experiences and memories to reflect on during the summer months back in their beloved Edinburgh. It was here that Newbigin also fulfilled another ambition: to read all eleven volumes of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*. He wrote later:

It was an immensely rewarding experience. Barth condensed and Barth quoted I had found totally unimpressive. But the real Barth, and especially the famous small-print notes, was enthralling. It was a needed preparation for the much more difficult missionary experience which (as I did not then realize) lay ahead.³²

'Retirement' for Newbigin initially involved taking up a teaching post at Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham in September 1974. He turned down an invitation to become an assistant bishop in the Anglican Diocese of Birmingham, and applied instead to be received as a minister in the United Reformed Church (URC), later becoming its national moderator for the year 1978–9. Then, after five years' teaching at Selly Oak Colleges, he felt it right to give up his salaried position, but found himself chairing a meeting of the Birmingham District URC at which a local vacancy was being discussed. It was to lead a small, struggling, inner-city congregation opposite Winson Green prison in Birmingham. If no one came forward, the church would have to be closed. After much thought and prayer, Newbigin decided to take the position, and in 1981 (at the age of 72) became its pastor – a post he was to hold for the following seven years.

³¹ Newbigin 1993d: 227.

³² Newbigin 1993d: 229.

Mission and the West

Meanwhile, the early 1980s saw Newbigin's ministry take a remarkable and profound new turn. He had been invited to join a small working party convened by the British Council of Churches to prepare for a major conference on 'Church and Society', which was being planned for 1984. Newbigin was unhappy about the initial proposals for the conference, feeling that it did not address the fundamentally important questions, and asked whether it might be postponed in order to allow for more thorough preparation. This was agreed, and Newbigin was asked to write a discussion document, setting out the questions that needed to be considered. As a result of this process, Newbigin wrote a small booklet, published in 1983 under the title *The Other Side of 1984*. It soon became a bestseller, and was to be the first in a series of publications by Newbigin concentrating on the missionary challenges posed by the dominance of a post-Enlightenment culture in the West. Up until the publication of *The Other Side of 1984*, the Churches' wider process of reflection had been loosely entitled the 'British Council of Churches 1984 Project', but thereafter it assumed Newbigin's suggested alternative of the 'Gospel and Our Culture' programme. It quickly gathered pace, developing into two regional conferences (at High Leigh, Hertfordshire in 1990, and Swanwick, Derbyshire in 1991) and culminating in an international conference of 400 delegates held at Swanwick in July 1992.

It was to be a characteristically busy and energetic final phase to an already full life. In addition to the hectic schedule of travel that often characterized his various ministerial and ecumenical responsibilities, Newbigin had already published some 17 books (and over 50 articles) before his retirement in 1974. Often written *en route* to meetings and engagements around the world, these had concentrated upon the broad themes of ecclesiology, ecumenism and mission that had been the focus of his life's energy and convictions. But during his post-retirement years in the UK he published a further 15 books and over 160 smaller pieces, most of them exploring the missionary challenge facing the Church in the West. Particularly significant were *The Other Side of 1984* (1983), *Foolishness to the Greeks* (1986), *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (1989), and *Proper Confidence* (1995).

His final years were spent in Herne Hill, South London, where the Newbigin family had moved in 1992 from Birmingham in order to be nearer three of their children, and it was here that he died unexpectedly on 30 January, 1998, succumbing suddenly to heart disease following a brief illness. He was 88 years old.