



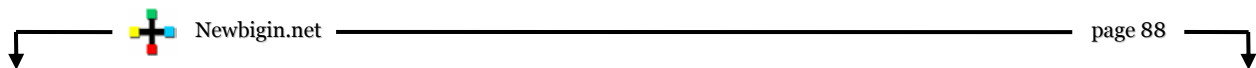
Report Of The Division Of World Mission And Evangelism To The Central Committee

1962

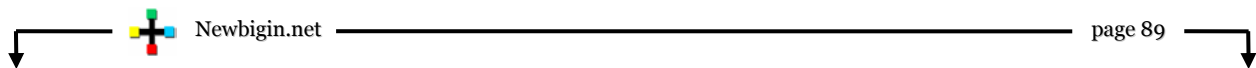
J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

*The Ecumenical Review* 15, 1 (October): 88-94.

All material is reprinted with permission from the Newbigin family, the Newbigin Estate and the publisher. All material contained on the Newbigin.Net website, or on the accompanying CD, remains the property of the original author and/or publisher. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without express written permission from the appropriate parties. The material can be used for private research purposes only.



If one were to seek a text for the work of the Division of World Mission and Evangelism, it would be the words "Go ye into all the world and 'disciple' all the nations." The Constitution of the Commission and Division begins with



the statement that the aim of its work is "To forward the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all men, to the end that they may turn to him and be saved." During the months since New Delhi, when we in the staff of the new Division have been seeking to formulate our task we have been thankful that we were given such a clear, simple, and basic directive.

But how can the World Council set forward the proclamation of Gospel to all men? No one disputes that this is the task of the church but what is the role of the World Council in the work of mission and evangelism? You will notice that I say, "the task of the World Council," and not merely "the task of this Division." What kind of action is possible and proper for the World Council of Churches in the field of world mission.

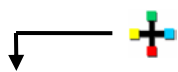
Certain elements of an answer are obvious. We have to help churches to see their missionary task in an ecumenical perspective. We have to help them to face the fact that the mission field is not in three continents but in six. We have to help to free the missionary movement of its remaining associations with the colonial period. We have to show that a true congregation of God anywhere in the world is at the same time part of God's mission the ends of the earth. I say these things are obvious, even if there are still some people who do not see them and who are surprised when one speaks of the missionary responsibility of African Christians for the unconverted pagans of Europe.

I do not stop to argue these points because it would be too easy. There are questions to be faced which are more difficult. Why is the missionary advance of the Church so slow? Why are the missionary forces of the Church apparently so immobile, so completely exhausted by the

effort to remain where they are? Why is it that the missionaries sent out by the churches which belong to the World Council of Churches are a decreasing proportion of the total missionary force? Why is it, to speak frankly, that the very word "missionary" has become a bad word in many Christian circles, so that while secular governments and other religions take it freely into use, Christians appear to be afraid of it? Why is it that among the best and most devoted young people in our churches one hears it said, "Anything, anywhere, as long as it is not as a missionary?"

Without doubt part of the answer lies in the record of missions themselves. There has been too little readiness to face the fact that the era of human history in which modern missions achieved their great triumphs had endured too much clinging to ideas and ways of working which had become irrelevant too little readiness to face the painful task of fundamental re-thinking. The result has been that the very word "missions" has come to have for many among us a faintly musty smell. Let us face that frankly.

But when that is said, the questions have not been fully answered. There is a more serious issue involved. A delegate of the New Delhi Assembly



noted in his report that while very many of the participants 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. May I say very simply that the fundamental question which this division puts to the World Council is the question: "How much do we care if men go without knowing their Saviour?" This is a searching question, because it is really a question about how much Christ means to us. A devout Muslim rightly honoured in the world of Islamic scholarship, recently baptised into the Christian faith, wrote these words as the opening paragraph of a paper prepared for our meetings here: "The most important fact of a conversion to the Christian Faith should be recognised so that it does not get obscured by other less important subjects. It is the contact of the soul with the disposition of Christ, the surrender of the soul to the exclusive worshipability of the loving, charitable, humble, suffering, serving and forgiving Lord Jesus." That sense of awe and wonder in the presence of Jesus belongs, if I may dare to put it so, at the growing edge of the Church, at the point where Christ is actually subduing men to himself, at the point where men are learning for the first time who he is, at the point, therefore, where they cannot keep silent. Concern about that growing edge is at the same time concern for the very life of the Church itself, for that hidden life of communion and adoration without which the Church cannot live, and out of which alone can spring a true, loving, humble, and inexhaustible missionary passion.

To the whole World Council belongs the concern to help deepen in its member churches that missionary passion. God forbid that it should be the work of a single division. Within that total concern, what is the task of our Division? At the first meeting of the Divisional Committee this week we have begun to see the direction in which we must go. We are set, if one may put it so, between two pairs of concerns. First, we are between the future and the past. We have to recognise, and help others to recognise, that the period of history in which we now are is so radically different from that which preceded it that much of the inherited apparatus and attitude of the missionary movement is simply irrelevant and yet at the same time we must not – if I am permitted to use my native vernacular – throw out the baby with the bath-water. This gesture, impressive though it can be when well done, takes inadequate account of the future. The missionary movement exists, and the World Council of Churches exists, because of the faithfulness of millions of believers who give and pray for the conversion of the world. We have to be faithful to that faithfulness even while we try to show where it needs new understanding. We have to take account both of the old and the new; if we fail to understand the new, missions will become merely the ineffective survival of the piety of a previous age; if we fail to understand the old, our plans for the future may turn out to be cheques drawn on an empty account.



Secondly, we have in this new Division to find a way between the two poles of diffusion and concentration. Missions have been concerned with every aspect of the life of the younger churches, and there is hardly any activity of any department of the World Council of Churches which is not of interest to our Division. The new relationships made possible by integration, and especially the continuing and most helpful processes of discussion among the staff, are already beginning to do much and will do much more to relate the traditional activities of mission boards to the developing complex of activities centred in the World Council of Churches. This work of knitting up, of creating new relationships is itself of great importance. But it would be sterile if we did not find for our own Division the right point of concentration, the place at which our main energies must be applied. It would be easy, but fatal, to define that point in terms of the traditional interests of mission boards in Asia, Africa and Latin America. That would be to allow the past to defeat the future. Our point of concentration must be in that which forwards the proclamation of the Gospel to *all* men in all six continents.

It must be confessed that we have hardly begun to make contact with those in the older churches responsible for evangelism and "home missions." We have been instructed by the Assembly to do so and hope that this will help to make clear the nature of our task, as well as – perhaps – providing means by which the work of evangelism in the lands of the old Christendom may be fructified by influences from the younger churches.

Having taken its bearings, so to speak, on these points, the Divisional Committee has addressed itself to the concrete questions of programme for the coming years. The details of its plans will come before the Central Committee only after the sub-committee has considered them. At this stage I present only a few major convictions to which the Committee came at the end of its sessions.

1. We have been impressed at the same time by the greatness of the opportunities for missionary advance and by the apparent inability of the churches to recognise and accept them. While Christians speak of the closing of doors, new ones are opened which they do not notice. While it is true that in some places men seem to be deaf to the message of the Gospel, in others there is an openly acknowledged hunger and – precisely among many non-Christians – a readiness to acknowledge the incomparable splendour of Jesus-Christ. We have heard of examples of bold and vigorous missionary initiatives even in circumstances of disaster, initiatives which have been fruitful beyond all expectation. And yet we have had the general impression that the churches are simply unready to accept new opportunities, unable to find the strength to face new demands.

2. The reasons for this immobility have to be sought at several different levels. Doubtless the deepest is in the very heart of the life of the Church, in

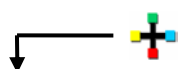


the realm of worship and communion with the living God out of which alone true Christian witness can come. At another level it is to be sought in the structures of congregational life, and here the studies of the Evangelism Department on the Missionary Structure of the Congregation are of much interest to our Division.

We have ourselves at this meeting received and commended to our affiliated Councils a paper entitled "A Tent-Making Ministry" which seeks to raise sharply the question whether we are not paralysing the Church's missionary advance by practices which – contrary to apostolic and ancient order – identify the holy ministry with a certain kind of salaried profession. At yet another level we have become convinced in our meetings here that one of the chief reasons for our immobility is the fact that we have not yet learned to accept the practical consequences of the belief, which we have often stated, that the missionary task is the common task of the whole people of God together.

3. At this point we have confessed that we have much to learn from the work of the Division of Inter-Church Aid. We have had joint conversations with the members of the Committee of that Division, and have followed these up with a frank discussion among ourselves. We have expressed gratitude for the growing help which is coming through the work of inter-church aid, and have asked ourselves whether the time has not come when we must find comparable ways of mobilising the resources of the whole Church – not only for the meeting of disasters and for the relief of need, but also for the meeting of new evangelistic opportunities. Acknowledging fully the deep differences between, for example, the action needed to help victims of an earthquake in Chile, and the action needed to bring the Gospel effectively to the growing urban populations of Africa or to the student communities in Europe or Asia, we yet believe that more can be done to see that such opportunities are the concern of the whole family of churches and not just of those who are traditionally related to the particular task or area in question.

4. Such an attempt to mobilise resources ecumenically for new missionary advance would be unrealistic if it did not begin with a very critical examination of what is already being done. It is at this point that the programme approved at New Delhi under the title "Joint Action for Mission" becomes very important. This proposes plans by which churches and related mission boards in a particular area would undertake a detailed and realistic survey of present programmes, needs and resources in the light of the missionary calling of the Church. The most ambitious attempt to move in this direction is the series of three "Situation Conferences" arranged by the East Asia Christian Conference to be held in Madras, Tokyo and Singapore early next year. At these meetings an attempt will be made to ask such questions as: What are the things we are now doing which ought to be stopped? What are the things



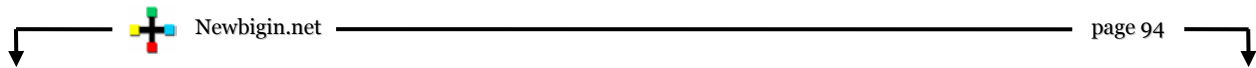
which must be held at all costs? What are the new things which we must undertake? The answers to these questions will in turn guide the later consultations which will be held in smaller geographical areas, from which it must be hoped that concrete decisions will be reached affecting the programmes and commitments of churches in many parts of the world.

5. Quite deliberately the Divisional Committee has instructed the staff to seek to identify in one or two parts of the world the situations where there is opportunity for new missionary advance, and to seek resources – which must mean primarily the lives of dedicated men and women – to follow them up. This is something new. We believe that we have been led to this point and we hope that we shall be supported. One of the great things which God has wrought in the World Council of Churches is that churches have been able to come at one another's help across the barriers of confession. We now ask: Has not God brought us to the point where we must also be ready, not just in talk but in act, to fulfill our missionary calling together? The issues involved are difficult, and they must be honestly faced. But at the same time the question has to be asked whether there is any other way of fulfilling in this day the commission which Christ has given to the Church.

6. When the plan "Joint Action for Mission" was discussed at New Delhi, the Assembly drew the attention of the Division to the fact that such a development would "call for profound changes in the thinking of the churches and their people about their missionary responsibilities." The Assembly therefore urged the Division to take up as a matter of urgency the whole task to helping the churches to educate their members to understand the nature of the missionary task in our time. The recent meeting of the Committee has given much time to this and will bring proposals before this Central Committee in the hope that the whole resources of the World Council may be used to help Christians everywhere to grasp, in the new terms relevant to our time, the nature and magnitude of the missionary calling of the Church. Such an effort of interpretation should be directed in the first instance to helping Christians everywhere to pray with understanding and with persistence not merely for the particular missionary undertakings of

their own church or society but – in the measure which is possible – for the evangelisation of the world.

The Division has many concerns which it wishes to bring before the Central Committee, including proposals for the future of the Theological Education Fund and for the first full meeting of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism composed of the representatives of the 38 National Councils affiliated to the Commission and of representatives to be appointed by this Central Committee, to be held in Mexico City in December 1963. These will come before you in due course as part of the report of the sub-committee. I have thought it right in this preliminary presentation to put to you those



convictions which I know the members of the Divisional Committee would wish to share with you, convictions of which it must be said that they were reached in a way that none of us expected when the meeting began, but with a unanimity which perhaps surprised us all. I believe I express truly the mind of the Divisional Committee if I end with the closing paragraph of a statement adopted at the end of the meeting.

Half of this world is hungry, and we are learning to share our bread, not just with our neighbours but across the world. There is a hunger from which no part of the world is free, and there is no bread that can satisfy that hunger except Jesus Christ. We have now also to learn – as one family – how to share that living bread with all who will receive him.

All material is reprinted with permission from the Newbigin family, the Newbigin Estate and the publisher. All material contained on the Newbigin.Net website, or on the accompanying CD, remains the property of the original author and/or publisher. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without express written permission from the appropriate parties. The material can be used for private research purposes only.