



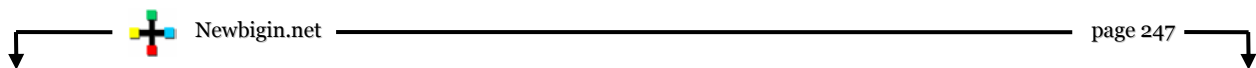
Integration – Some Personal Reflections 1981

1981

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

The International Review of Mission 70, 280 (October): 247-55.

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.



The twentieth anniversary of the integration of the IMC with the WCC is an occasion for reflection and self-examination. It is well-known that able and devoted Christians affirmed twenty years ago that integration was a mistake, and that there are those today who claim that the missionary thrust of the IMC was effectively lost in the process so that the true succession to the Edinburgh Conference of 1910 is to be found not in the WCC but in the conservative evangelical missionary movements. In what follows I am simply contributing the personal memories and reflections of one of those involved at the time.

Questions have to be asked

The integration happened, in spite of a minority who disapproved, because the great majority of the member councils of the IMC regarded it as necessary. My own personal viewpoint was that of a minister in an Indian Church. We had succeeded after long struggle in eliminating the absurd dichotomy of two parallel Christian organizations in each place – one "mission" which was not a church, and the other a church which – presumably – did not have a mission. But on the world level the dichotomy remained. If we wanted to make ecumenical contacts we had still to choose between two separated bodies one representing "mission" and the other representing "church". I well remember sitting at my desk in Madurai and trying to decide which body to write to about a matter on which we needed help. Was it "church" or "mission"? Of course it was both. The dilemma was ridiculous. This was, I think, the general feeling among the "younger churches. Practically all the IMC member councils from their areas were strongly for integration. The notable exception was the Congo Council, which was a council of foreign missionaries. As soon as the Belgians left the council became deeply involved with the WCC.

The member councils in the "sending" countries were in a different position. On the European continent the separation of foreign missions from churches was normal, and there was considerable hesitation about integration. In North America, where the "mainline" churches had taken over responsibility for foreign missions, opinion was solidly for integration. The British situation was mixed and opinions were divided.

It is enough to say, I think, that if integration had not happened the IMC would have shrunk to the dimensions of a small confederation of (some) European missionary societies which would have been increasingly ignored by the growing churches of the rest of the world. After having been the

splendid pioneer of the ecumenical movement, it would have declined into irrelevance. Perhaps that is why even Max Warren, who maintained to the end his opposition, nevertheless cast his vote at the Ghana Assembly in favour of integration.

But to say that integration was necessary is not to say that it was successful in realizing the hopes which accompanied it. It was ardently hoped that integration would bring the missionary and evangelistic concern into the heart of the WCC so that all its activities would in future be infused by that concern. Twenty years later there is no lack of critical voices affirming that this has not happened, that evangelism has a very small place in the programmes of the WCC, and that while the word "mission" is freely used, it has been robbed of its classical reference to the bringing of the Gospel to those outside the Church with a view to their conversion. The charge that the WCC has ignored the challenge to evangelize the unreached billions is made with passion, the implication being that by accepting merger with the WCC the IMC has betrayed its original mandate. I do not find it possible simply to shrug off this charge. It forces me to examine my own conscience and to ask questions which have to be both historical and theological.

Some matters of history

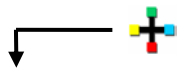
One has to recall the theological climate in which integration took place. The 60s will be remembered as the decade of the "secular interpretation of the Gospel". "Development" was the priority. Technical assistance to developing countries was the "modern" equivalent of missions. Very few of the foreign mission societies and boards were appointing missionaries for direct evangelism: they were sending "experts" who could help the churches overseas in development work. Even in meetings of mission board executives one was regarded as an oddity if one pleaded for direct evangelism. What did not manifestly contribute to development was irrelevant. "Rapid Social Change" was the code-word to designate a proliferating programme of involvement in "nation-building", and in the enthusiasm which surrounded this programme the word "evangelism" sounded like a survival from a past age. I find among my papers of that period memoranda addressed to myself which reflect the effort I had to make to sustain the conviction that "it matters supremely whether or not a person comes to know Jesus Christ", whatever their involvement in development, and that no proposed earthly utopia is a substitute for that. As late as 1965 I was pleading in an *IRM* editorial that "technical assistance" was something that developing nations would get for themselves with or without the assistance of the churches, and that we ought to be attending to "the problems which remain when all technical assistance is finished" (*IRM* Vol. 54, p.419). But the tide was flowing the other way. I remember one of my colleagues at that time telling me of the receipt of a large gift from a foreign

mission board with the condition that it was to be used exclusively for "development" and that no part of it might be used for evangelism.

The whole missionary movement, and with it the IMC, was shaped by its involvement in the colonial era. It was extremely difficult – psychologically at least – to disentangle the missionary concern from its colonial setting. Missions had been preoccupied for decades with the struggle to break out of the patterns of the colonial era and to develop adult relations with the churches which had been begotten through their witness. Integration with the WCC was a step on that road. The

"younger churches" were eager for a new relationship free from the paternalism of the past. Like the old relationships, the new ones also had large financial implications. Missions, pursuing the ideas of the self-supporting, self-governing, self-propagating church, had been trying for years to reduce their traditional financial support of their daughter-churches. But meanwhile, in the course of the 1950s, the Inter-Church Aid division of the WCC, having completed its work in the postwar reconstruction of church life in Europe, was beginning to move out into the churches of Asia and Africa. Church leaders who had been accustomed for years to declining levels of assistance from abroad, were visited by representatives of "Inter-Church Aid" with apparently unlimited budgets. I remember my astonishment when, as the bishop of a small and struggling diocese in South India, I was earnestly assured by the Director of the Division that there was effectively no limit to the amount of help I might ask. Such invitations had predictable results. Mission boards quickly discovered that the new inter-church relations were very attractive to their grown-up daughters. The resulting debates about the way in which inter-church relations should be handled tended to crowd out serious attention to matters of mission to the world outside the Church. Mission was being absorbed into inter-church aid.

In an effort to re-state the specifically missionary obligation of the churches in the new, post-colonial, ecumenical setting, the IMC published a booklet entitled *One Body, One Gospel, One World*. This rejected two ways of dealing with the situation. One was to say, "the age of missions is over and the age of ecumenism has come" – in effect, to let missions become inter-church aid. The other was to try "to recapture both the method and the mood of the 19th century, looking round the world for areas which are still so backward that the 19th century pattern can still be applied" (op. cit., pp. 10-11). Against both of these the booklet defined missions in terms of the crossing of the frontier between faith in Christ and unbelief – wherever that frontier might be (p. 29). It distinguished between "mission" which is a *dimension* of the whole life of the Church, and "missions" which are actions undertaken with the explicit *intention* of making Christ known where he is not known.



This booklet was intended as a kind of manifesto advertising the understanding with which the IMC entered the integrated Council. It was widely read in IMC circles but made little impact beyond. My impression at the time was that – in the minds of many of my colleagues in the staff – the whole concept and practice of missions was so impregnated with the infection of colonialism that even in this decontaminated form it was unacceptable.

As I reflect on the experience of the years immediately following integration. I have to confess that my own leadership as the first director of the new Division was defective. I was concerned about maintaining the continuity of relationships centred in the London and New York office of the IMC. Consequently for several years the staff of the new Division was divided and the presence in Geneva was not strong enough to make the needed impact there. Perhaps we had not given enough thought to the problems created by the very different styles of operation of the two councils. The IMC operated in a decentralized manner, had a very small staff, and made no attempt to project a public image of itself. Its very existence was unknown to most of the Christian public – and this was how men like J.H. Oldham wanted it. It saw itself as an agency to serve the national councils which made it up. The WCC after 1948 developed in a very different way. With hindsight one can perhaps say that the IMC ought to have recognized from the outset that if the WCC was to be fundamentally changed by integration a very much larger and more effective staff presence in Geneva should have been assured from the start. For failure at that point I must accept the major share of blame. It was my successor who set about remedying the defect.

But having acknowledged that not all the hopes of 1961 have been realized in the twenty years since integration, I would affirm again that it was the right and necessary action at that

juncture. If in these twenty years the transformation in the life of the WCC and of its member churches which we hoped for has not happened, yet I must affirm that it was right, and that it created the context in which a true rebirth of the missionary concern of the churches can take place. But we have to continue to work at the issues which integration bequeathed to us. Negatively, we must continue to raise

sharp questions both about an ecumenism which does not take seriously the call to bring the Gospel to those who have not heard it, and about a missionary enthusiasm which continues to evoke and to depend upon the attitudes of the colonial era, Positively we must use the fellowship that the integrated WCC gives us to pursue with vigour the questions which can only receive a right answer when the false dichotomy of church and mission has been overcome. These are essentially theological questions.

Urgency, agency, and style

I suggest three such questions that are on the agenda. They concern the urgency, the agency and the style of missions.

The urgency of the missionary calling. The charge that we in the WCC have "betrayed" the millions who have not heard the Gospel is made so often and sometimes with such stridency that we are tempted simply to refuse to listen. I do not think we can do this. We can and must point out to those who so accuse us that they are often guilty of blindness to aspects of the biblical witness which we cannot evade, and that they are often in what seems to be an unholy alliance with powers that exploit and dehumanize people. Yet we would be wrong if we simply plugged our ears against the challenge which is put to us by fellow-Christians, many of whom share the biblical insights that we cherish. The words of the "aim" of the CWME commit us to assist the Christian community in the proclamation of the Gospel "to the *whole* world, to the end that *all* may believe... and be saved".

I find myself reacting negatively to both of two frequently opposed arguments. On the one hand, I am bound to say that some of the language used in ecumenical discussions about "mission" seems to me to reflect utopian expectations about a future state of society which have no foundation in reality, contradict what we know about human nature and history, and can only lead down the well-worn track from revolutionary idealism to tyranny. They are often supported by an appeal to a small segment of the total biblical witness with no reference to the experience of post-biblical history. On the other hand I cannot accept the view so often put forward by conservative evangelicals that the urgency of evangelism is lost unless one is committed to the dogma that all who die without explicit commitment to Jesus are eternally lost. I do not think that this is a true interpretation of the Bible. In effect it places the Church rather than God at the centre of the universe.

I believe that evangelism is essentially a doxological act – an expression of gratitude to the Saviour. The life I have in Christ compels me to seek to share that life with others, not because they are otherwise lost (for I am not authorized to determine the limits of the mercy of God) but in order that he – my Saviour – may "see of the travail of his soul and be satisfied". Its

urgency, its necessity, is the urgency, the necessity of worship, of praise, of thanksgiving.

I recognize that I can only share with others the life I have in Christ if I am willing to be part of their lives, to face their issues, to share their hurts, Mere verbal proclamation is not enough and may be futile or worse, The Gospel is not good news in any intelligible sense unless it has something to say about the actual issues in the midst of which the hearer is struggling. And yet the Gospel is more than a summons to take a certain position on contemporary issues pre-selected by

the evangelist. That is the legalist trap into which missionaries have often fallen. The Gospel not only speaks to existing ethical and political issues, it also raises new issues and creates new situations. The Gospel is a mighty power in its own right, a seed which can indeed be lost in the dust of the roadside, but can also grow into a mighty tree which tears apart old structures and brings forth new and unexpected fruits.

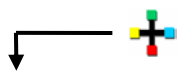
In his speech at the Ghana Assembly of the IMC (1957-8) Walter Freytag, after acknowledging that the old missionary pattern was no longer possible, sought in a few words to re-state the essential and abiding concern of missions as one element within the total mission of the Church. The following two paragraphs give, I think, the essence of what he had to say.

Their task consists in being sent to proclaim the Gospel outside the Church to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad (John 11:52). (We should not forget the centripetal conception of mission which the Old Testament has in common with the New).

That means that this service has to remind every Church that it cannot be the Church in limiting itself within its own area, that it is called to take part in the responsibility of God's outgoing into the whole world, that it has the Gospel because it is meant for the nations of the earth, and that the Church has its life towards that end, the goal of God in the coming again of Christ (*The Ghana Assembly*, p.146).

"To proclaim the Gospel outside the Church": can we, in dialogue with our conservative evangelical colleagues, penetrate behind our differences so as to grasp afresh, and be grasped by, the inner necessity of this calling, a necessity which belongs to our very being as churches because it is part of our doxology?

The missionary agency. I have spoken of the specific task of missions within the total mission of the Church. One of the strongest arguments against integration has always been that the distinctiveness of this task is lost if missions as distinct structures are simply swallowed up in the mission of the Church. Jacques Matthey, in his introduction to the Melbourne volume, suggests that the integration of mission and church has "reached the maximum point... which can be responsibly accepted from a missionary point of view", and pleads for the development of relatively independent groups which can "go out to the periphery and live with people there" (*Your*



Kingdom Come, p.10). In the manifesto mentioned earlier, the IMC made a similar plea for a point of concentration "within the life of the Church for the specific concern of missions", and suggested the relevance of missionary orders (*One Body...* pp.42 & 49). It is well known that Peter Wagner has argued that the Church needs always and everywhere to have two visible forms, the "sodality" – congregations, synods, assemblies, etc. – and the "modality" – bodies of people who have made a "second-level" decision for mission.

This is an area where much experiment is taking place and where there are problems to be teased out and careful distinctions to be made if we are to find the right relation between "missions" and the total mission of the Church without either robbing the former of their proper freedom or robbing the latter of its missionary nature. The issues are complex, but I suggest five points which may be helpful in finding the way.

(i) Against Wagner I would argue that we are not dealing with two levels of commitment. We cannot accept that Christians are divided in principle into two classes according to their level of commitment to the Gospel. I have argued this point in a recent number of *IRM* (No.271, pp.301-312).

(ii) To Matthey I would put the question: "Is it really a distinction between kenotic and non-kenotic communities? Are not all bodies of Christians under the same law – that he who would save his life must lose it?"

(iii) Positively, I would want to say that, while the fulfilment of the Church's total mission will always call for a great variety of groups committed to particular aspects of it, there is a specific need for groups whose commitment is to create a Christian presence in situations where Jesus is not known and named as Saviour and Lord. This commitment I would regard as the differentia of missions. It is not a higher or deeper commitment than that of other Christians: it is just their particular calling.

(iv) It would follow that, once the witness of the mission has brought into existence a local church in and for that situation, the mission ceases to have a separate existence and is simply part of the local church – called as always to a "kenotic" existence.

(v) Since missions in this sense will always involve a departure from and therefore a questioning of the established church, there will always be a tension between the need for freedom to develop new styles of discipleship and the need for unity in confessing the one name. Perhaps this is the tension between the centrifugal and the centripetal aspects of mission. I think that our model in this matter is St. Paul whose early ministry among the Gentiles was a profoundly disturbing challenge to the established church, but whose later ministry was exercised in knitting up the bonds of mutual trust between the old and the new.

What I am offering here is only a series of headings for discussion, nothing more. I will conclude this section by saying that in my opinion the closing paragraphs of Jacques Matthéy's introduction point the right way forward to a new relation between missions and the total mission of the Church, safeguarding both the freedom and distinctiveness of the former (perhaps obscured during these first years of the integrated Council) and also that unity of both which integration was intended to express.

The style of missions. I have affirmed my belief in the validity and centrality of the call to take the Gospel to those who are outside the Church. We do need "cross-cultural missions" and our evangelical friends are right to go on saying so, even if (as I believe) the "Church Growth" school is guilty of absolutizing cultural identities and exaggerating the impenetrability of the walls between cultures. I have argued the need for specific agencies committed to this limited task. But I would also want to say, nevertheless, that the way in which the Gospel is actually communicated and people are brought to faith and conversion often seems to bear little visible relationship to organized missionary efforts. All the time, in ways that no one can fully understand, people are being brought to know and love and serve Christ. Occasionally we have glimpses of a small part of the story. It is always something mysterious – the Holy Spirit taking many small and scattered acts and words of faithful witness and using them – often over a period of many years – to bring a man or woman to conversion and baptism. Organized missionary action has a part to play. If there had never been missions there would be no churches. Yet a great part of the human agency in this mysterious work of the Spirit is provided by ordinary men and women who are not missionaries but who are faithful believers and disciples, ready to bear in their own persons the cost of being faithful to the reign of God in face of the powers that deny that reign. Such men and women become communicators of the risen life of Jesus just because they are partners in his tribulation (2 Cor. 4:10). The whole church everywhere (not just Wagner's "second-level" Christians or Matthéy's monks and other "crazy" people) is properly recognizable when it follows the way of the cross and bears the scars of Christ's conflict with the "prince of this world". Integration is, from one point of view, a gesture towards restoring this element in the integrity of the Church's witness.

In the IMC's pre-integration "manifesto" we distinguished between a missionary *intention* and a missionary *dimension*. Every part of the Church's life and work has, we argued, a missionary

dimension, but not every part has a missionary intention. "Missions are those activities which have the explicit intention of making Christ known where he is not known" (*One Body...* pp, 21 & 43). We argued that "unless there is in the life of the Church a point of concentration for the missionary intention, the missionary dimension which is proper to the whole life of the Church will be lost" (p.43). This was the thesis of my previous section. On the other hand I would want now to argue that the recognition of the potential missionary dimension of the whole day-to-day life and work of the Church must be equally safeguarded. I do believe that the whole movement of which the integration of the IMC and the WCC was a small part has helped to restore to ordinary Christians (especially in those older churches where missions had been regarded as a fringe activity for enthusiasts) a sense of that missionary dimension. I am therefore concerned that we do not follow those who would separate the locus of the missionary intention into an elite corps of "second-level" Christians. For the victories of the Spirit in convicting the world in respect of sin, of righteousness and of judgement are won through the witness of ordinary Christians who are willing to pay the cost of following Jesus on the way of the Cross.

The communication of the Good News of the reign of God does not, in the last analysis, depend upon the proportion of the budget which is labelled "evangelism" or on the place which evangelism holds in the structures of a church or a council of churches. It depends upon the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit, and the human occasion of this is the faithfulness of Christians. I have argued that we do need specialized groups of people whose specific calling is to make the name of Jesus known and honoured where it is not known and honoured. But their work in turn depends upon the integrity of the witness of the Church as a whole, upon its faithfulness, upon whether it carries – not only on its buildings and its altars but in its whole corporate life – the marks of the cross, the scars of the conflict between the reign of God and the usurped power of Satan. In that sense integration is not just a pragmatic policy decision but a theological necessity.

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.