



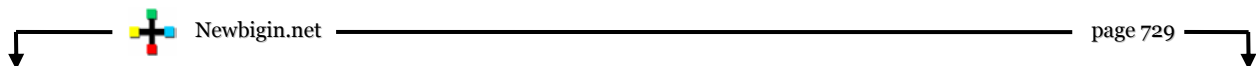
Niles, Daniel Thambyrajah

1991

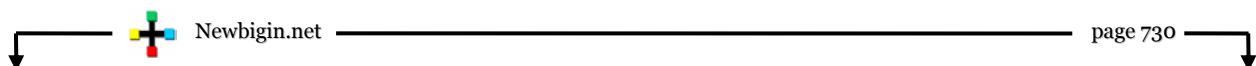
J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement (Nicholas Lossky, José Míguez Bonino, et al.; Geneva: WCC Publications): 729-31.

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Niles, Daniel Thambyrajah. B. 4.5.1908, Ceylon; d. 17.7.1970, Vellore, India. D.T. Niles (always affectionately known as "D.T.") was active in the ecumenical movement for four decades and for the last three of these was one of its best-known leaders. He was the son of a distinguished lawyer and the grandson of a much-loved pastor and poet. After school and college in his native Jaffna, he studied theology in Bangalore from 1929 to 1933. He was already much involved with the Student Christian Movement and from 1933 was its national secretary and took part in the meeting of the general committee of the World Student Christian Federation* in Sofia. During this period he also served for a time with the



WSCF staff in Geneva. In 1936 he was ordained to the ministry of the Methodist church and served for three years as district evangelist. He took a prominent part in the International Missionary Council* Tambaram conference of 1938 as a speaker and as secretary of the section on "The Authority of the Faith". Following Tambaram he went to Europe as part of a team bringing the message of Tambaram to the British churches, and then for a year (1939-40) he was in Geneva as evangelism secretary of the World's YMCA.*

Returning to Ceylon, he served from 1941 to 1945 as general secretary of the National Christian Council, the first full-time holder of that office. This introduced him to the arts of interchurch relations, in which he was to become such a master. From 1942 he organized annual theological conferences, which for the first time included Roman Catholics. He was chosen as one of the initial members of the negotiating committee for church union when it was set up in 1945. He was also involved in interfaith dialogue,* having been much influenced by his work at Tambaram with Hendrik Kraemer, "who made me see how essential it was for a Christian to think Christianly of other faiths". In his autobiographical memoir Niles speaks of "the many heart-

searching conversations" he had with a Hindu friend as he tried to work out his beliefs on the relation of the gospel to other faiths.

In 1946 Niles was appointed to his first pastoral charge, which he was to hold for five years, at Point Pedro. During this period he was again to be in Europe for the WCC assembly at Amsterdam, where, with John R. Mott, he preached at the opening service. From 1948 to 1952 he was chairman of the WCC's Youth Department and from 1953 to 1959 he was executive secretary of its Department of Evangelism. Meanwhile in 1950 the Methodist church had transferred him to the Maradana pastorate, and he was also director of the YMCA Bible Study Institute in Colombo. Niles strongly held that those involved in ecumenical work should keep firm roots in the local church,* and while he held the evangelism portfolio in Geneva, he was at the same time superintending minister of St Peter's Church and principal of Jaffna Central College. It is not surprising that even Niles refers to this as "a heavy period".

D.T. Niles (WCC photo)



From 1953 he was chairman of the WSCF and, along with Philippe Maury, planned and carried through an ambitious programme on "The Life and Mission of the Church", with the Strasbourg conference of 1960 as its centre-piece. Meanwhile from 1954 to 1964 he was also chairman of the northern district of the Methodist church while continuing to be heavily involved in the work of the WCC, including the assemblies at Evanston and New Delhi. From 1959 to 1960 he was also Henry Emerson Fosdick professor at Union Theological Seminary, New York.

Meanwhile in 1957 Niles embarked upon what was to be the major work of the last decade of his life. In that year, at Prapat in Sumatra, the decision was taken to establish an East Asia conference of churches, with Niles as its first general secretary. This, the forerunner of other regional bodies, was largely Niles's brain-child, and he was its unquestioned leader. It embodied his conviction about the local rooting of ecumenical work, with a dispersed staff all carrying responsibilities in their churches. Niles's deep commitment to local unity also caused him to be wary of powerful denominational bodies acting on a world scale. This led him, from 1961 onwards, to take an active part in the work of the World Methodist Council,* and he was responsible for the "Niles plan" for a

world committee on missionary affairs to guide the council.

In August 1968, he took over the leadership of the Methodist Church in Sri Lanka as the president of the Methodist Conference. In the same year he resigned from his position as general

secretary of the East Asia Christian Conference and was made its chairman. His report of the ten years of the EACC under his guidance entitled "Ideas and Services" coupled reporting with envisioning the future of the EACC. It later became the basis for re-organizing the work of the EACC at the Singapore assembly in 1973, when it was re-named the Christian Conference of Asia. He was again asked to preach the opening sermon at the WCC assembly, this time at the fourth assembly (Uppsala 1968). At this assembly he was also elected to the WCC presidium. In 1970 he went to the Christian Medical Hospital in Vellore, India, for treatment and later an operation for cancer, where he died.

Along with this astonishing range of public responsibilities, there was an almost ceaseless succession of journeys to all the six continents to preach, lecture and conduct university missions. The fruits of this labour were made available to others through more than a score of books, including *That They May Have Life* (London, Lutterworth, 1952), *Upon the Earth* (London, Lutterworth, 1962), and *A Testament of Faith* (London, Epworth, 1972). Perhaps the one which will be longest in use, however, is the *EACC Hymnal*, for which he wrote a large number of English verse translations of Asian hymns. He was not, and did not pretend to be, a great theologian, but he had immensely fruitful theological and personal friendships with most of the leading theological thinkers of the time, and these enriched his writing and speaking. He was a great preacher, evangelist and pastor. Above all, he was an expositor of the Bible. His friend Bishop Kulendran has said of him: "He went to the Bible not to pick up a verse but to think with the biblical writers." He was also an ecumenical statesman, a strategist whose long-term planning did much to influence ecumenical development, and also a skillful tactician who could change a situation with a brilliant and unexpected move. He could outwit his opponents, but he did not make enemies. Central to his whole life was the giving and receiving of friendship. Typical of the man are these words from one of the last sermons he preached: "When I am dead, many things will be said about me – that I held this and that position and did this and that thing. For me, all these are irrelevant. The only important thing that I can say about myself is that I, too, am one whom Jesus Christ loved and for whom he died" (Gal. 2:20). Next to his love of God was the devotion which bound him to his wife, Dulcie, whom he married in 1935. A few months after his death, she followed him.

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