GOD – OPEN, WORLD – WIDE, AND JESUS – TRUE
Lesslie Newbigin’s Faith Pilgrimage

Martin Conway

Why don’t we British produce world-famous theologians any more?’ I was asked in July 1974 by the then Professor, formerly Bishop, Richard Hanson, in a surprisingly irascible tone, as we watched people gathering in the University of Accra, Ghana, for a meeting of the WCC Faith and Order Commission. ‘Oh, don’t we?’ I replied, ‘What about Kenneth Cragg and Lesslie Newbigin?’ ‘Well … but …’ he stuttered, ‘neither of them has ever taught in a British university.’

That story no doubt says more about the people in British universities than about Cragg or Newbigin! Twenty years on I can only all the more repeat, indeed glory in, my confident answer, with both of the theologians concerned having published a stream of books in their ‘retirement’ that greatly add to their already then much-treasured witness.

A Life in Movement – Across the World and Back Again

Lesslie Newbigin will be 85 in December 1994. His life has neatly spanned this tumultuous century; his faith is already pointing his readers into the challenges and demands of the next.

The outer chronicle of his life conveys the essential stages and contexts of his witness, but no more than a fraction of the faith, the hope and the love for which his friends and readers so deeply admire him and thank God.

Born in Northumbria, son of a Presbyterian business man in shipping and a Scottish mother, Newbigin was given the best schooling available, at the Quaker boarding school, Leighton Park, and then at Cambridge, where he read Geography and Economics. He was an active member of the Student Christian Movement, and was delighted to be invited to join its staff when he graduated. In his interview with the Scottish SCM Executive he first met Helen Henderson, who has been his life-long companion, support and fellow-pilgrim. After three years based in Glasgow, he returned to Cambridge to study for ordination in the Presbyterian Church, and was then sent to India, where Helen had been brought up, as a missionary of the Church of Scotland.

Within a year, however, he was back in Britain, having suffered a horrific accident in a country bus which nearly led to a leg having to be amputated...
(and which has been giving him trouble again fifty years later!). He spent two years, despite plaster and crutches, as Candidates' Secretary for the C of S Mission Board, and then left again for India in September 1939, just after the outbreak of World War II. Throughout the war he was based in the Hindu holy city of Kanchipuram, Madras state (now Tamil Nadu), learning Tamil, getting to know the people in both the city and the surrounding villages, and immersing himself in all the needs and opportunities of the 'younger church' in that area. The Indian SCM got him involved in wider Christian circles, and in 1943 he was elected convenor of the committee of the South Indian United Church (Congregational and Presbyterian) handling the negotiations with Anglicans and Methodists towards a united Church of South India.

Back in Britain on leave in 1946 he found discussion raging, particularly in the Church of England, about the South India union scheme, and was provoked into writing his first big book *The Reunion of the Church - A Defence of the South India Scheme* (SCM Press, 1948; revised edition with a long new Introduction, 1960). During that year he learned that he had been elected as Bishop in Madurai and Ramnad, and within days of setting foot again in India he was consecrated Bishop as part of the great service in Madras Cathedral at which the Church of South India was brought into its united being.

During the Madurai years he took part in the first Assembly of the World Council of Churches as a consultant and helped with the drafting of its Message, as well as sharing in meetings on the edge of the 1948 Lambeth Conference in the vain hope of helping the Anglican bishops to understand the Church of South India warmly enough to accept it into full communion. His drafting skills were in demand again in the preparation for the WCC Second Assembly (1954) when he found himself chairing the Advisory Commission on the Main Theme: 'Christ the Hope of the World' whose report also gave rise to intense and by no means uniting debate on the floor of the Assembly. In late 1957 a letter arrived inviting him to accept nomination to the post of General Secretary of the International Missionary Council, then in the last stages of growing into incorporation into the WCC. After much hesitation, and on condition that the CSI would second him, he accepted and moved to the IMC London office in mid-1959.

*Traveller and Strategist*

That new job led to a succession of travels around the world culminating (for the moment!) in the Third Assembly of the WCC, at New Delhi, where