

Historical Perspectives on the Missional Church Movement: Probing Lesslie Newbigin's Formative Influence

Michael W. Goheen

The word “missional” to describe “church” has become quite common. In fact, Alan Roxburgh believes that the term “missional church” has gone “from obscurity to banality in eight short years and people still don’t know what it means.”¹ Obviously this term has struck a chord with many in North America and beyond. In this article I will focus on missional church with an eye to two things. First, I will probe the deeper historical roots of the missional (or, as was more common for most of the century, “missionary”) church.² Many see missional church as a very recent phenomena, yet it is the product of a long history throughout the 20th century. Second, I will observe the crucial role that Lesslie Newbigin (1909-1998) played in this development. Indeed it could be argued that no other person has played such a formative role. And so it would be appropriate to reflect on a current phenomenon of some importance which cannot be understood apart from his crucial role.³

There are two important years in the development of a missional ecclesiology that provide a structure for our reflection – 1952 and 1998. 1952 was the year of the Willingen meeting of the International Missionary Council (IMC). It was then that the theological framework (although not the term) of the *missio Dei* was clearly articulated. An important part of this formulation was the recognition that mission was central to the church’s being. The church’s identity was to be found in the role it played in God’s mission. The next stage, theologically speaking, should have been to articulate what this missional identity looks like in the ecclesial structures of the local congregation, ecumenical church, and cross-cultural missions. Unfortunately, this next stage was blown off course by the powerful secular winds of the 1960s that can be

associated, within the church itself, with the name Johannes Hoekendijk. In 1998, the book *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* was published.⁴ Authored by a group of six leaders within the Gospel and Our Culture Network, this book sought to return to the original vision of Willingen and to get the discussion of missional church back into the mainstream of church life in North America. It was the first significant publication to employ the term “missional” to describe church instead of “missionary.”⁵ Since 1998 this terminology has exploded, and we might say today that if one wants to speak of “missional church” one must make clear what is meant in order to avoid misunderstanding.

Using these two pivotal dates I will divide this paper into four sections. First, I will briefly trace the period from 1938 to 1952 in which numerous assumptions about mission broke down which paved the way for the notion of missional church, culminating in the groundbreaking work of Willingen. Second, I will observe that the next planned stage to formulate fresh structures for a missionary congregation was eclipsed by a new understanding of mission. The advances of Willingen did not bear the ecclesial fruit that many had hoped for because of powerful anti-ecclesial forces at work in the two decades which followed. Third, I will briefly examine the attempt by the authors of *Missional Church* to return to the original Willingen vision of the missionary nature of the church. Their wish was certainly fulfilled! Books and discussion about missional church exploded as we began the 21st century. In a brief article we are unable to trace all of the various streams within that conversation. And so, fourth, I will succinctly list a number of critical issues that have resulted from the burgeoning missional church conversation.

At each point in this conversation, Lesslie Newbigin is a towering figure.⁶ He authored the Willingen statement; he was a sig-

¹Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional Leadership* (2004), 2

²In keeping with the historical development I will use “missionary” up until 1998 and “missional” thereafter. For a good discussion of the various words with the root mission, see Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 22-25.

³See Michael W. Goheen, “As the Father Has Sent Me, I am Sending You”: J. E. Lesslie Newbigin’s Missionary Ecclesiology (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2000).

⁴Darrell Guder, ed. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

⁵George Hunsberger, “*Missional*” the word and “*Missional Church*” the phrase (unpublished, 2008).

⁶One needs to acknowledge the work of many other pioneers prior to 1998, perhaps foremost Wilbert Shenk (e.g., *Write the Vision* [Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995]) and Charles Van Engen (e.g., *God’s Missionary People: Rethinking the Purpose of the Local Church* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991]).

nificant voice in opposition to the Hoekendijkian vision of the church and mission; he was the inspiration behind the 1998 publication of *Missional Church*; and he remains the recognized father and, for many, the tacit authority in much missional and emergent church literature. A fruitful question might be to ask how faithful the missional church conversation has been to Newbiggin's original vision.

1938-1952: A Changing Paradigm of Mission

The foundational assumptions about mission at the dawn of the 20th century might be characterized as follows. Mission was primarily about the geographical expansion of the Christian faith from the Christian West to the non-Christian non-West. With this understanding, mission is what takes place overseas and the church is called to play its role in this enterprise. For the church in the West that means institutional and financial support for cross-cultural missionary projects. For the church in the non-West it means functioning as a parallel institution that provides a container into which missions might place their converts. I have no desire simply to criticize the missionary enterprise of the 19th and 20th centuries; there is much that is biblical about it. Nevertheless, the reduction of mission *solely* to a cross-cultural and geographical enterprise has led to a number of serious assumptions.

- Mission and church are separated. There are two different and parallel institutional bodies – groups committed to the missionary enterprise and local congregations who support it.
- This leads to churches without mission and missionary organizations that are not churches. Churches are reduced to their pastoral role and become introverted. Mission organizations carry on their work outside of ecclesial structures.
- The world is divided into the Christian West (home base) and the non-Christian non-West (mission field).
- There is no need for mission in the West. The West is already Christian and therefore only evangelism of individuals is needed. The critical or prophetic challenge to culture is eclipsed by a Christendom mindset and ecclesiology where

- the church is seen as part of the broader Christian culture.
- There is a division between the older churches of the West and the younger churches of the non-West. These churches play different roles in the cross-cultural enterprise in which the more mature Western churches take the lead for mission in the non-West.

If the church was to recover its intrinsic missionary character these undergirding assumptions about mission need to break down. This is what happened in the years between 1938 and 1952 in the meetings of the International Missionary Conferences.

The third IMC meeting in Tambaram (1938) was a turning point. The conference met to consider the role of the “younger churches” in the missionary enterprise. For the first time over half of the delegates came from the non-Western churches. Thus the missionary role of the “younger” church in non-Western countries could not be avoided. Further, the delegates met in the wake of a world war and the rise of demonic totalitarian ideologies which had shattered any confidence that Europe was a Christian continent; the West too had to be considered a mission field. Again, what was the missionary role of the church in that setting? Hendrik Kraemer posed the question to the Tambaram participants that would set the tone for ecumenical thinking on mission and church for a quarter of a century: “The church and all Christians...are confronted with the question, what is the essential nature of the church, and what is its obligation to the world?”⁷ William Richey Hogg observes that the Tambaram conference “made the church its central concern, and a new sense of its reality runs through every statement produced there.” He continues: “One point they made preeminently clear: the mission is not a segment of the church’s life. On the contrary, the church exists to fulfill a divinely ordained mission....”⁸ Mission could not be separated from the church: the church must be missionary and mis-

⁷Quoted in Tom Stransky, “*Missio Dei*,” in ed. Nicholas Lossky, et al., *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 688.

⁸Alfred Richey Hogg, *Ecumenical Foundations: A History of the International Missionary Council and Its Nineteenth-Century Background* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952), 297-98.

sion must be ecclesial. Newbigin comments on the lessons to be learned from Tambaram's message:

This message had implications which it took years and decades to translate into practice. In the areas that had been regarded from a western point of view as "the mission fields," it meant that powerful mission bodies had to acknowledge the right and duty of the local church to take over the responsibility of mission. For the churches in the old Christendom it meant that they had to learn to be missions to their nations, rather than the religious dimensions of their nations...an un-missionary church and an unchurchly mission are both, from the standpoint of the gospel, absurdities.⁹

The fourth IMC meeting in Whitby, Canada (1947), met in the wake of World War II. The stress on the centrality of the church in mission in Tambaram was left intact at Whitby. Hogg remarks that the "virtually untouched 1938 findings were still relevant in 1947, and what emerged from Whitby was meant not to supplant but to supplement them in a changing world scene."¹⁰ Yet during the ten year period the non-Western church had grown significantly and respect for it had grown apace. They were now adult churches, full participants in the missionary calling, and thus were to be treated as full "partners in obedience."¹¹ The dismantling of the distinctions between younger and older churches, and between the Christian West and non-Christian non-West suffused the conference. The whole world was considered a mission field and the missionary "tasks which face the churches in all parts of the world are the same."¹²

⁹Lesslie Newbigin, "A Sermon Preached at the Thanksgiving Service for the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Tambaram Conference of the International Missionary Council," *International Review of Mission* (1988) 77, 307: 329-30. Similarly Carl Braaten writes "Because the church and mission belong together from the beginning, a church without mission or a mission without the church are both contradictions. Such things do exist, but only as pseudostructures" (*The Flaming Center: A Theology of the Christian Mission* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977], 55).

¹⁰Hogg, *Ecumenical Foundations*, 335.

¹¹Wolfgang Günther, "The History and Significance of World Missionary Conferences in the 20th Century," *International Review of Mission* 92/367: 528.

¹²Charles W. Ranson, *Renewal and Advance: Christian Witness in a Revolutionary World* (London: Edinburgh House, 1948), 174.

A consistent missionary ecclesiology did not yet emerge at this point, however, for two reasons. First, there was no theological framework in which to incorporate both the growing theological insight about church and mission, and the new experience of the world church. Second, the structures of both mission organizations and churches still embodied older colonial and Christendom views. The first of these problems would be resolved at Willingen in 1952.

The conference in Willingen gathered while still reeling from recent developments in China. The victory of Mao Tse-Tung in 1948/1949 was followed soon after by the expulsion of all foreign missionaries. The end of colonialism seemed to be in sight. Colonialism had provided the framework and channels for the missionary enterprise for decades. With one-third of the world now cut off from Christian mission, and with the end of colonialism seemingly imminent, the whole missionary enterprise appeared to be in jeopardy. What foundation could provide a new basis for mission? The task at Willingen was to draft a new theological framework to undergird the mission of the church. Three different proposals were offered from the German, Dutch, and American delegations. These competing proposals were finally drawn together in a compromise joint statement at the end of the conference, and so it was thought by many to have failed in its task. But, as Newbigin points out, "subsequent history has shown that it was in fact one of the most significant in the series of world missionary conferences."¹³

The final statement adopted by the Willingen assembly was primarily the work of Newbigin.¹⁴ It was entitled "The Missionary Calling of the Church." It begins: "The missionary movement of which we are a part has its source in the Triune God Himself."¹⁵ The most important legacy of Willingen is the concept of God's

¹³Lesslie Newbigin, "Mission to Six Continents," in *The Ecumenical Advance: A History of the Ecumenical Movement, Volume 2, 1948-1968* (ed. Harold Fey; London: SPCK, 1970), 178.

¹⁴Rodger Bassham, "Seeking a Deeper Theological Basis for Mission," *International Review of Mission* (1978), 67, 331.

¹⁵Norman Goodall, ed. *Missions Under the Cross: Addresses Delivered at the Enlarged Meeting of the Committee of the International Missionary Council at Willingen, in Germany, 1952; with Statements Issued by the Meeting* (London: Edinburgh, 1953), 190.

mission found in this statement. This provided a framework for gathering and relating many theological and missiological insights that had developed over the first half of the 20th century into a consistent missional ecclesiology. Mission has its source in the love of the Father who sent His Son to reconcile all things to himself. The Son has sent the Spirit to gather his church together and empower it for mission. This church is sent by Jesus to continue his mission and this defines its very nature: “There is no participation in Christ without participation in his mission to the world. That by which the Church receives its existence is that by which it is also given its world-mission. ‘As the Father has sent Me, so send I you.’”¹⁶

We can briefly note a number of other theological assumptions in Willingen (sometimes background and sometimes more explicit), that give fuller context to the notion of God’s mission.

- Scripture: A biblical theological approach which understands the Bible to be a unified narrative of God’s saving acts in history dominated the ecumenical movement at this time.¹⁷ God’s mission manifests itself in the unfolding history of mighty redemptive acts that culminate in Jesus the Christ. The church’s mission is a part of this story.
- Eschatology: Jesus announced the gospel of the kingdom – in him the kingdom as the goal of universal history had entered history. This meant that the church must be understood in terms of its witness to the broader kingdom and mission as the meaning of the already-not yet time period of the kingdom.
- Christology: Since the mission of the church is to continue the mission of Jesus, it is his earthly ministry of justice and compassion rather than reflection on his divine and human nature that is at the forefront. But an emphasis on the earthly ministry does not take away from his cosmic authority and the universal significance of his death and resurrection wherein he accomplishes and inaugurates the kingdom.

¹⁶Goodall, *Missions Under the Cross*, 190.

¹⁷Ellen Flessemen-van Leer, *The Bible: Its Authority and Interpretation in the Ecumenical Movement*. Faith and Order Paper No. 99 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1980), 1.

- Soteriology: Salvation is restorative and as wide as creation, and thus the mission the church is to embody is to be equally comprehensive.
- Pneumatology: The Spirit is not primarily concerned with distributing salvation to individuals or working in the institutional church but must be understood in terms of eschatology and mission. He is a gift of the end times that empowers the church for its witness.

In summary, at Willingen we find a shattering of all the colonial and Christendom assumptions that captured mission in the earlier part of the century. Not only did expressing the nature of the church in terms of participation in God’s mission free it from its non-missionary nature, it also freed it from geographical limitations: the church is sent to every inhabited area of the world, mission is in the immediate neighborhood as well as to the ends of the earth, and no line can be drawn between the Christian West and the non-Christian East.

Newbigin played an important role at the Willingen conference, brokering a compromise between competing views and in so doing formulated a theological framework which would provide the context for discussion of mission in the decades that followed. His role continued in the aftermath of Willingen as he authored two significant books – *The Household of God and One Gospel, One Body, One World*.¹⁸ On the one hand, these books expressed an ecumenical consensus concerning the missionary nature of the church. Bosch comments about the latter book, a publication issued by the IMC, that it “summarized a consensus that had now been reached”:¹⁹ 1) the church is mission; 2) the home base is everywhere; 3) mission in partnership. On the other hand, these books make a creative contribution to the ongoing discussion of missional church. Newbigin relates in his autobiography that the motivation for writing *The Household of God* was

¹⁸Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM, 1953; American edition; New York: Friendship Press, 1954); *One Body, One Gospel, One World: The Christian Mission Today* (London: International Missionary Council, 1958).

¹⁹David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 370.

that he believed that the “Ecumenical Movement was not being undergirded by an adequate doctrine of the Church.”²⁰ This book sets out to provide just that. In its closing chapters Newbigin formulates an ecclesiology that he believes will move beyond the ecclesiological tensions in the ecumenical tradition by arguing that the church can only be understood in terms of its eschatological and missionary nature.

Missional Church Developments in the Decades Following Willingen

As we noted above there were two reasons a consistent missional ecclesiology did not emerge following the important changes of Tambaram and Whitby. First, there was no theological framework; but that had now been provided at Willingen. Second, the structures of missionary bodies and churches still manifested Christendom and colonial patterns. The church-centric paradigm of Willingen that stressed the missionary nature of the church inevitably raised questions about the incompatibility of current structural forms of church life with its missionary nature. Thus, the next step was to reshape those institutional structures.

The challenge to overhaul obsolete Christendom structures gained momentum throughout the 1950s. At the third assembly of the World Council of Churches held in New Delhi (1961), the report of the Department of Evangelism stated: “The Committee is convinced that one of the main hindrances in the pursuit of the evangelistic calling of the Church lies in the traditional structure of the local congregation.”²¹ Newbigin echoed this concern: “Does the very structure of our congregations contradict the missionary calling of the church?”²² The New Delhi assembly authorized a study project on the missionary structure of the congregation. The intention was to find patterns, structures, and forms of ministry to serve the missionary nature of the church.

²⁰Lesslie Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda: An Autobiography* (rev. and exp. ed.; Edinburgh: Saint Andrews Press, 1993), 128.

²¹*The New Delhi Report: The Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches, 1961* (New York: Association Press, 1962), 189.

²²Lesslie Newbigin, “Developments During 1962: An Editorial Survey,” *International Review of Mission* 52, 9.

The report appeared in 1967 and was entitled, *The Church for Others and the Church for the World: A Quest for Structures for the Missionary Congregation*. Alas, as Bosch laments, the report “had precious little to say about the ‘missionary structure of the congregation.’”²³ Between Willingen and the release of this report fifteen years later, the mission of the church had been swept into the tides of secularism and the congregation had been pushed aside. A new vision of mission now prevailed in ecumenical circles powerfully promoted and championed by Johannes Hoekendijk.

This new view of mission was already present in Willingen in the reports of the American and Dutch delegations as well as in the interim report that was not adopted. However, that view did not win the day. Hoekendijk and others believed that the reigning ecumenical view of mission was too Christocentric and needed to be Trinitarian, and was too church-centric and needed to find its center in the world instead. The contrast can be made in this way: the traditional paradigm of mission that developed from Tambaram to Willingen found its primary focus in the ecclesial community that had its origin in the work of Jesus Christ and continued his mission in the world; the new paradigm featured a shift in missional focus from God’s work through Christ in the church to His providential and salvific work by His Spirit in the world. The traditional paradigm is Christocentric and ecclesiocentric; the new paradigm is pneumocentric and cosmocentric. The laity now becomes the primary bearer and agent of mission. The congregation plays to an instrumental role in God’s mission as it restructures itself to enable the laity to carry out their calling in political, social, and economic activity to relieve victims of hunger, political oppression, and racial discrimination. The communal witness of the congregation as well as evangelism are minimized, if not entirely eclipsed. The goal of mission becomes the humanization or *shalom* of society through the efforts of Christians in cooperation with other social institutions aimed at the transformation of oppressive political, social, and economic structures. The church attends to where the Spirit is at work – in the emancipation of blacks, the humanization of industrial relations, in urban renewal, and so on – and joins the Spirit’s mission. Thus,

²³Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 382.

the church takes its cue for mission from “the signs of the times,” what God is doing in the world rather than from what God has done in Jesus Christ.²⁴ The church structures of the traditional paradigm were immobile, self-centred, and introverted and needed to be overhauled so that they might become more flexible to enable the direct action of its members in society. We might diagram the differing views this way:

Traditional ecumenical paradigm
[God→Christ→Spirit]→Church→World

Emerging paradigm
[God→Christ→Spirit]→World→Church

Newbigin championed the traditional understanding of mission and became a vigorous opponent of the new paradigm. Yet he saw many important emphases in this new vision for mission. It is good to stop and see what insights this movement had and why it was so attractive, not just then, but today, and not just among more liberal traditions but among emerging church folk. We can observe three insights that were important. First, this new paradigm lives from a frustration with the introversion of the church and the rigidity of its structures—a “morphological fundamentalism” as it was called in the 1967 report. Hoekendijk’s book *The Church Inside Out* breathes a longing to see a church for the world and vigorously resists an ingrown, self-preoccupied, antiquated, and inflexible church. It is not hard to see the pull of this argument! Second, there is a new and correct emphasis on the work of the Spirit beyond the boundaries of the church. Finally, the renewed stress on the mission of the laity in their various callings in culture along with congregational structures that nourish and support that mission was a breath of fresh air. All of these

²⁴This was the heart of the debate between M. M. Thomas and Hendrikus Berkhof at the first meeting of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches in Mexico in 1963. Thomas argued that the task of mission was to discern where God is at work in the quest for humanization and to join that struggle. Berkhof believed that to take our cue from the events of history rather than from what God has done in Jesus Christ was dangerous. Cf. Paul Löffler, ed. *Secular Man and Christian Mission* (London: SCM Press, 1968).

things were affirmed by Newbigin, and as he sat in the New Delhi assembly he realized that his understanding of the missionary church expressed in *One Body, One Gospel, One World* was inadequate: “It was too exclusively church-centred in its understanding of mission. Only a fully Trinitarian doctrine would be adequate....”²⁵

Nevertheless, he was sharply critical of the new trend. I will only note two of those criticisms in relation to the missional church. First, while the new paradigm of mission claimed to be Trinitarian over against a Christocentrism, Newbigin vigorously denied that such an opposition should be made. “A Trinitarian perspective can only be an enlargement and development of a Christocentric one,” he argued, “and not an alternative set over against it, for the doctrine of the Trinity is the theological articulation of what it means to say that Jesus is the unique Word of God incarnate in world history.”²⁶ In fact, both views were Trinitarian (as we can see with the use of square brackets in the diagram above); what was new was a fresh emphasis on the work of the Spirit beyond the borders of the church. While that insight recovered something of Scripture’s teaching, its exclusive emphasis diminished the centrality of Christ in Scripture as well as missed the primary role of the Spirit according to Scripture, which is to testify to Christ. In fact, by admitting the work of the Spirit beyond the church, the traditional paradigm of mission is more thoroughly Trinitarian! Second, Hoekendijk had reduced the church to its *instrumental* role in God’s mission. Newbigin wanted to highlight the fact that the church was a sign and foretaste of the kingdom as well as an instrument. The church does not only work for the kingdom, but is itself a provisional embodiment of it now. It is not only an agent of God’s saving work but is its locus.

Evidences of this shift toward a new understanding of mission appeared in the World Student Christian Federation Teaching Conference in 1960 where Newbigin, Karl Barth, Daniel Niles, and Wim Visser ’t Hooft – all ecumenical figures who were leading advocates of the traditional understanding of mission – were unable to speak to the students while Hoekendijk was re-

²⁵Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 187.

²⁶Lesslie Newbigin, “Ecumenical Amnesia,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 18/1, 2.

ceived with enthusiasm.²⁷ By the fourth assembly of the World Council of Churches held in Uppsala (1968) it had become the “received view” in ecumenical circles.²⁸ But it did not go uncontested. In that assembly it was sharply criticized by evangelical delegates like John Stott, Arthur Glasser, and Donald McGavran. As Newbigin sat in that assembly he resisted the “deafening barrage” and “high-pressure propaganda” of the church growth advocates who could not see the insights of this new vision and seemed to reduce mission to evangelism, but he also felt the “shattering experience” that “reduced mission to nothing but a desperate struggle to solve insoluble problems.” He says that the “saddest thing was that we were not able to seriously listen to one another.”²⁹

While the precise approach of Hoekendijk has diminished with the passing of the secular decades his vision has lived on in the World Council of Churches. A literary skirmish carried on in the pages of the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* in 1994 between Newbigin and Konrad Raiser, general secretary of the WCC from 1992-2004, highlights the continuity.³⁰ In fact, Newbigin and Raiser offer two competing approaches to mission and the local congregation that arise from these different visions of mission present in the 1950s and 1960s. Raiser refers to the older ecumenical vision of mission as the “Christocentric-universalist” paradigm. It is characterized by four things: 1) Christocentrism; 2) concentration on the church as different and as the vehicle of God’s mission; 3) a universal perspective that claims that the gospel is universally true and valid, and that the church is the harbinger of the new creation; 4) salvation history and eschatology as the central category of thought that brings Christ, the church, and the universal claim of the gospel together. In its place he wants to substitute the following four characteristics: 1) Trinitarianism where the work of the Spirit is prominent; 2) a rejection

²⁷Rodger Bassham, *Mission Theology: 1948-1975 Years of Worldwide Creative Tension Ecumenical, Evangelical, and Roman Catholic* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1979), 47.

²⁸Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 383.

²⁹Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 219.

³⁰For an extended analysis of this debate see Michael W. Goheen, “The Future of Mission in the World Council of Churches: The Dialogue Between Lesslie Newbigin and Konrad Raiser,” *Mission Studies*, 21/1 (2004), 97-111.

of the distinction between church and world; 3) an embrace of pluralism that rejects the universal claim of the gospel and assigns the church the task of service to the appalling problems of our world; 4) *oikomene* or the household of life as the central image that brings all of these together. And so the vision of Hoekendijk lives on in the WCC. What is perhaps more disturbing is the way some more evangelically-oriented emergent folk, who are likewise tired of an introverted and rigid church, are uncritically embracing this vision.

The Gospel and Our Culture Network and the Publication of *Missional Church*

The notion of the missionary church had a solid theological foundation but conversation about its structural embodiment was submerged by the secular waves of the 1960s. The discussion of a missionary (now retermed “missional”) church was resumed in earnest with the establishment of the Gospel and Our Culture Network in North America (GOCN) and the publication of the book *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* in 1998, co-authored by six leaders in that movement. However, the Network marked not simply a return to the Willingen period but a contextual and geographical updating of missional church for the North America context in the late 20th century. Following the publication of this book the notion of a “missional church” captured the imagination of Christians in many traditions. The market has been inundated by a steady flow of books on the topic with only a few reaching the quality of the original GOCN publication. Further, the emergent, emerging, total, and deep church offerings also stand in this tradition, albeit with different language, to distinguish new emphases it believes others have missed.

“With the term *missional*,” the authors say, “we emphasize the essential nature and vocation of the church as God’s called and sent people” and then offer five characteristics of a faithful missionary ecclesiology.³¹ These characteristics exhibit the full range of a robust ecclesiology, and one only wishes the books that came in its wake would have followed suit. Those five characteristics are

³¹Guder, *Missional Church*, 11-12.

as follows: A missional ecclesiology is *biblical*. The church will acknowledge the authority of Scripture and be based on what it teaches. A missional ecclesiology is *historical*. The church must understand its historical development and learn from various eras of history and from various cultural expressions. A missional ecclesiology is *contextual*. The church will be incarnate itself faithfully within a specific concrete setting. A missional ecclesiology is *eschatological*. The church is on a journey toward the consummation and thus will constantly be challenged by new biblical insights, cultural contexts, and historical challenges. A missional ecclesiology will be translated into *practice*. Theology and ecclesiology will equip the church for its calling to be a faithful witness in a particular place.

The centering metaphor for *Missional Church* is that of an alternative or contrast community.³² The authors saw at least three crippling problems that eclipsed the missional nature of the church in North America. First, there was an individualistic notion of mission that both diminished the importance of the ecclesial community and truncated its mission. Second, like Newbigin they believed that the North American church was in an advanced state of syncretism, dreadfully accommodated to the powers of Western culture. Third, they attributed the sad state that the church was in to its Christendom heritage wherein a “functional Christendom” still prevailed. Over against these three problems the book offers an antidote. Against individualism there is a stress on the communal dimensions of the missionary witness of the church. Against the accommodation of the gospel and the church’s life to cultural powers the critical side of the church’s relation to culture is emphasized. An anti-Christendom thrust seeks to recover the church as a distinctive community that lives out of a different story than that of the surrounding culture.

These emphases are timely even now twelve years later. Newbigin also would have affirmed each of these points. In fact, each one of these affirmations can be found throughout Newbigin’s corpus. This is not surprising since the book is clearly intended to

³²A fuller treatment of the analysis offered in the next three paragraphs can be found in Michael W. Goheen, “The Missional Church: Ecclesiological Discussion in the Gospel and Our Culture Network in North America,” *Missiology* 30/4 (October 2002), 479-490.

carry forward the work that Newbigin had begun.³³ Yet it seems that an anabaptist orientation to the book omits other aspects of a missional ecclesiology that were also present in Newbigin’s work. In fact, the theologians invited to discuss the book with the team of authors were all committed to an anabaptist ecclesiology.³⁴ David Bosch has distinguished five traditions of the relationship of the church to its cultural context: Constantinian, pietist, reformist, liberationist, and anabaptist.³⁵ According to Bosch, the anabaptist model emphasizes that “. . . the primary task of the church is simply to *be* the church, the *true* community of committed believers which, by its very existence and example, becomes a challenge to society and state.” It exists “as a kind of antibody in society, in that it lives a life of radical discipleship as an ‘alternative community.’”³⁶ This is the thrust of *Missional Church*.

This is fully in line with Newbigin as far as it goes, but it leaves important areas of his missional ecclesiology untouched. While Newbigin would have affirmed the communal dimension of the missional witness of the church, he maintained throughout his life that the “primary witness to the sovereignty of Christ must be given, and can only be given, in the ordinary secular work of lay men and women in business, in politics, in professional work, as farmer, factory worker, and so on”³⁷ because the “enormous preponderance of the Church’s witness is the witness of the thousands of its members who work in the field, home, office, mill or law court.”³⁸ While Newbigin accented the critical side of the

³³One of the six participants, Al Roxburgh writes: “Our work coalesced around the writings of Lesslie Newbigin. Each of us had been drawn into this conversation through some interaction with or connection to him.” (“What is Missional Church?”, Allelon Publishing, www.allelon.org, 2007.2).

³⁴Justo Gonzales, Douglas John Hall, Stanley Hauerwas, and John Howard Yoder; cf. Guder, *Missional Church*, 8.

³⁵David Bosch, “God’s Reign and the Rulers of this World: Missiological Reflections on Church-State Relationships,” in *The Good News of the Kingdom: Mission Theology in the Third Millennium* (eds. Charles Van Engen, Dean S. Gilliland, and Paul Pierson; Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 89-95.

³⁶Bosch, “God’s Reign,” 92.

³⁷Lesslie Newbigin, “The Work of the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Asian Churches,” in *A Decisive Hour for the Christian World Mission*, John R. Mott Memorial Lectures, 1959 (London: SCM Press, 1960), 28.

³⁸Lesslie Newbigin, *Our Task Today* (An unpublished charge given to the fourth meeting of the diocesan council, Tirumangalam, 18-20 December 1951), 6.

church's relationship to culture – so much so in fact that Stephen Bevans sees Newbigin's model of contextualization as “counter-cultural” and the Dutch philosopher Sander Griffioen believes that Newbigin minimized the positive side of cultural development³⁹ – he also believed as part of its mission to the world the church should play a participatory and positive role in the unfolding of culture.⁴⁰ While Newbigin criticized Christendom and its negative impact on the church, he also recognized the positive contribution that Christendom had made to Western culture. Christendom was the “first great attempt to translate the universal claim of Christ into political terms.”⁴¹ In the process “the gospel was wrought into the very stuff of [Western Europe's] social and personal life”⁴² and we “still live largely on the spiritual capital it generated.”⁴³

Nevertheless, *Missional Church* is a book rich with theological and ecclesial insight in its exposition of the concept of the missional church. We are indebted to the authors for picking up Newbigin's lead and returning the North American church to a conversation on the missional nature and identity of the church in our particular context and for the many insights that have stimulated an ongoing discussion.

Some Critical Issues Today in the Missional Church Conversation

The language of missional church now pervades much discussion of ecclesiology. There has been a flood of literature with various adjectives to describe church including emerging, emergent, missional, total, and deep, all of which are attempting to work out what it means to be a faithful missional church today.

³⁹Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (rev. and exp. ed.; Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 117ff.; Sander Griffioen, “Newbigins Cultuurfilosofie” [Newbigin's Philosophy of Culture], in *Het Evangelie in het Westen: Nederlandse Reacties op Lesslie Newbigin* (eds. Brinkman, Martien E. and Herman Noordegraaf; Kampen: Kok Publishing, 1990), 49-60.

⁴⁰See Michael W. Goheen, “Is Lesslie Newbigin's Model of Contextualization Anticultural?” *Mission Studies*, 19, 2, 38 (October 2002), 136-158.

⁴¹Lesslie Newbigin, *Sign of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 47.

⁴²Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (New York: Friendship Press, 1954), 1.

⁴³Lesslie Newbigin, *Priorities for a New Decade* (Birmingham: National Student Christian Press and Resource Centre, 1980), 6.

The acknowledged source and even authority of this ecclesiology is Lesslie Newbigin. We cannot survey that literature here but can point to a few important issues that are central to the discussion. I believe that a return to the history of the development of “missional church” in the 20th century, and especially to Newbigin's ecclesiology, would hold out a much richer and fuller understanding of mission and church than is present in much literature today.

Tim Sheridan has offered a helpful survey and analysis of the literature on missional and emergent/emerging church.⁴⁴ He concludes with six critical issues arising out of missional and emerging church discussions that need to be addressed.

- What is the *missio Dei*? He believes that there are a number who, stimulated by a frustration with an introverted and rigid church, have uncritically followed a similar path to Hoekendijk.
- The church must be understood in terms of its gathered and scattered manifestations. A number of false dichotomies – including incarnational vs. attractional, centripetal vs. centrifugal, institutional church vs. kingdom communities – as well as a growing impatience with the institutional church would be alleviated by a more robust ecclesiology that recognizes the church as both gathered and scattered.
- Studies in worldview are important today for the missional church. There are a number of issues that the various missional and emergent authors are tackling by virtue of a broader interest in the gospel that have been worked over by a worldview tradition for decades. Worldview studies would offer some deeper analyses of issues they see as important.
- The church's mission is both centripetal and centrifugal. Misunderstandings have caused these two biblical dimensions of the church's mission to be set against one another.
- Our ecclesiologies need to distinguish between the nature of the church (what it is), the activities of the church (what it does), and the organization and structures of the church

⁴⁴This is one chapter in an unpublished dissertation that is in process.

(how it organizes itself).⁴⁵ Confusion results when these distinctions are not made.

- Missional and emergent church conversations would be helped by a much deeper understanding of contextualization as it has developed in missiological discussions. These churches want to be relevant, but often a nuanced understanding of the relationship of gospel to culture as well as the place of the church in that relationship does not undergird the conversation.
- There are a number of biblical-theological issues that need to be clarified – for example, the relationship of kingdom and church, the relationship of the gospels to Paul, among others.

I believe the issues that Sheridan has identified are indeed the ones that need discussion. I also believe that many of these have been discussed fully in the middle part of the century from various angles, and also, perhaps surprisingly, that Newbigin's ecclesiology remains an untapped resource. Drawing on Sheridan's work, let me conclude briefly with four issues where Newbigin's missional ecclesiology could enrich and correct certain directions in the missional church discussion.

First, the nature of the *missio Dei* is an urgent matter. The history of the ecumenical movement on mission needs to be better understood. Many of the concerns today were present in the 1950s and 1960s in the battles between the christocentric-Trinitarian position of Newbigin and the cosmocentric-Trinitarianism of Hoekendijk. Following the debate in its earlier stages, as well as reflecting on the more contemporary position of Raiser, should give pause to anyone who accepts an understanding of the *missio Dei* that marginalizes the institutional church. Even Ludwig Rütli, who advocates a vision similar to Hoekendijk, has warned that "Christianity completely devoid of an institutional nature cannot offer any true alternative."⁴⁶ Frustration with a self-centered, im-

⁴⁵See Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000).

⁴⁶Ludwig Rütli, *Zur Theologie der Mission: Kritische Analysen und neue Orientierungen* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1972), 343; Translated by and quoted in Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 384.

mobile, and introverted church should not lead us away from Scripture where it is clear that the church is central to God's mission. Further, we need to maintain with Newbigin that the church is not only an instrument and agent in God's mission; it is also the firstfruit and foretaste of the coming kingdom of God.

Second, the Christology that underlies the current ecclesiological discussions needs to be examined. There is often an emphasis on the earthly ministry of Jesus, especially his compassion and justice which becomes the model for our mission. Clearly this is a biblical emphasis that has been eclipsed in the past by discussions of Jesus' human and divine nature. It is also central to Newbigin's missional ecclesiology. His emphasis on mission in Christ's way is well known.⁴⁷ However, there are two further aspects of Newbigin's Christology that need to be emphasized. First, the death and resurrection of Jesus have cosmic and universal significance. The cross and resurrection are the hinge of universal history: at the cross the sin and evil of the world was defeated and at the resurrection the new creation was inaugurated. The church is the community that participates in that new creation, inviting others into it. The second aspect of Newbigin's Christology important for the church that is often absent from ecclesiological discussion today is the twofold connection that church has with Christ.⁴⁸ On the one hand, the church is related to Jesus *historically*. That is, the church is rooted in the life, death, and resurrection of the historical Jesus and has received his mandate to continue his mission. On the other hand, the church is related to Christ *eschatologically* or *existentially*. The stress here is on the present connection the church has with the living ascended Lord who continues to renew the life of the church, incorporating it into his death and resurrection. Jesus is not merely the Founder of the church but also its Eternal Contemporary; Jesus does not only send the church on its mission with his life as the model but empowers the church for its mission by rooting them in his death and resurrection. This is not to be understood simply in an individualistic way. It is the community of God's people who know the presence of the living

⁴⁷Lesslie Newbigin, *Mission in Christ's Way: Bible Studies* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1987).

⁴⁸Lesslie Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church: A Defence of the South India Scheme* (London: SCM Press, 1948), 71.

Lord who gives life through channels of grace (e.g., Acts 2:42). Taking hold of this eschatological or existential dimension of Christology would prevent an ecclesiology which marginalizes the congregation.

Third, the church manifests itself as God's people in both a gathered and scattered form. An examination of Paul's use of the word *ἐκκλησία* shows that both of these elements are important, and for Newbigin both were essential. The church is a community gathered for certain activities whereby their new life in Christ is nourished. The church is not any less the church when it is then scattered throughout the world during the week. Both are important and it seems difficult to hold these together. A diminishment of the institutional nature of the church will mean a loss of the very way God has established that his people nourish and strengthen their kingdom life. A diminishment of the scattered nature of the church will lead to introverted church-centrism. It seems that a number of factors are leading to a neglect of the "gathered" form of church in emerging and missional church literature – false distinctions (centripetal and centrifugal, attractive and incarnational, institutional church and kingdom communities), a misunderstanding of the relation of the church to the kingdom, and a cosmocentric understanding of the *missio Dei*. Only as these two ecclesial dimensions are held together can a comprehensive and rich notion of mission emerge.

Fourth, a more robust understanding of contextualization is important. The emerging and missional church discussion, if nothing else, is attempting to be relevant to a postmodern culture. This is commendable and has made the conversation stimulating and important. However, the complexity of relating the gospel to culture that is evident in Newbigin's discussions of contextualization is not always present in the current conversation.⁴⁹

Newbigin speaks of the painful tension of living faithfully in any culture. This comes from the very nature of the gospel. The gospel must be embodied in a form of life that is both relevant and challenging to the culture – challenging relevance, as Newbigin called it. It must be relevant and take on current cultural forms, but this brings the danger of accommodation and syn-

cretism. The gospel brings a different vision of life and so must challenge cultural forms, but this brings the danger of isolation at the margins of culture. The desire to be relevant in the current ecclesiological discussion has not always kept in view the dangerous idols and religious spirits at work in both modernity and post-modernity. This can easily lead to captivity by those spirits.

Two further aspects of cultural analysis heighten the tension. On the one hand, at the core of culture are powerful and idolatrous religious beliefs that envision life very differently than the gospel but which shape every aspect of the human life. The Pauline terminology of the principalities and powers are one way Newbigin spoke of this. On the other hand, these religious beliefs are embodied in cultural institutions, practices, networks, patterns of life, and symbols. We are implicated in these institutions and ways of life, and cannot dissociate ourselves from them. The terminology of plausibility structures was one way Newbigin spoke of these cultural structures. The church in the full breadth of its life is necessarily part of the culture and enmeshed in these idolatrous institutions, leading to a sometimes painful tension.

Thus any understanding of gospel and culture must also take account of the relation of the church. Newbigin believed that posing the issue as "gospel and culture" implied already "an unacknowledged and disastrous dualism." He continues: "The question of gospel and culture is sometimes discussed as though it were a matter of the meeting of two quite separate things: a disembodied message and a historically conditioned pattern of social life."⁵⁰ In fact, the encounter of the gospel with culture takes place first of all within the community called church, where two stories and visions of life meet concretely in ways of life. It is as the church fashions and embodies faithful and alternative patterns of life that it then encounters its culture with the gospel. Thus the discussion of contextualization always involves three interrelated aspects that cannot be separated from each other: gospel, culture, and church.

⁴⁹See, for example, Lesslie Newbigin, "Christ and Cultures," *SJT* (1978) 31, 1-22.

⁵⁰Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 188.

Conclusion

Theologian Hendrikus Berkhof says that the church cannot rightly be understood apart from its missional or apostolic nature – its orientation to the world. He says that the “necessity of re-studying ecclesiology, in fact all of theology, from the standpoint of the relationship to the world has (only) slowly begun to take hold, mainly through the unceasing harping on it by nontheologian H. Kraemer....”⁵¹ He wrote this in the early 1970s. Today we can update that comment with two things: it has taken hold with a vengeance (at least at a popular level), and a more influential figure than even Hendrik Kraemer is his disciple Lesslie Newbigin. One hopes that the rich resources Newbigin left for the task of pursuing a missional ecclesiology will not be lost among the many voices clamoring for a missional renewal of the church in the 21st century.

Michael W. Goheen (PhD University of Utrecht) is Geneva Professor of Religious and Worldview Studies at Trinity Western University, Langley, B.C. and Teaching Fellow in Mission at Regent College, Vancouver. He has published books in the areas of worldview, mission, and biblical theology, including a work on Lesslie Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology.

⁵¹Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith* (English Translation; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 411.