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*Pacifica* 2014 27: 206
DOI: 10.1177/1030570X14549272

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**Version of Record** - Sep 15, 2014

What is This?
The congregation in a pluralist society: Rereading Newbigin for missional churches today

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Abstract
Lesslie Newbigin sought to engage the gospel with western culture. A re-reading of Newbigin’s work offers insights for mission and communicating the gospel in the 21st-century western world, including the need to grapple with religious pluralism. For Newbigin, ‘the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it’. How plausible is the Newbigin thesis? Can congregations today believe and live the gospel, especially in a pluralistic context? This article is an appeal for attentiveness to the place and priority of the congregation, for the sake of mission in our pluralist society. It is grounded in the experience of two congregational case studies, which opens up conversation with Newbigin’s *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. Methodologically, it applies Neil Ormerod’s understanding of ecclesiology as grounded in ‘historical ecclesial communities’ to test both the groundedness and plausibility of Newbigin’s congregational hermeneutic.

Keywords
congregational renewal, contextualization, dialogue, ecclesiology, ethnography, gospel and culture, Lesslie Newbigin, missional church, mission to the West, pluralism

Lesslie Newbigin, gospel and our culture conversation starter

Lesslie Newbigin (1909–98), arguably the most influential advocate for mission to the West of the 20th century, first served as a missionary in India. He went to
Cambridge University in 1928 as an agnostic, but was converted through the witness of a Christian friend. After graduation he worked for the Student Christian Movement (SCM), trained for ministry and married Helen. Together, they went to India as missionaries in 1936. Newbigin showed his commitment to engaging culture with the gospel early in his missionary service, devoting himself to language and culture study and then village evangelism and other ministries. In 1946, as several Protestant churches merged to form the Church of South India, they asked Newbigin to serve as a Bishop. Just after the Second World War, and as colonialism was unravelling, this was a significant time for India and the church finding its own identity. Recognized as a missionary statesperson and ecumenical leader, Bishop Newbigin became General Secretary of the International Missionary Council in 1959. That body then integrated into the World Council of Churches, which Newbigin served as Associate General Secretary in Geneva until returning to India as Bishop of Madras 1965–1974, when he ‘retired’.1

Newbigin then became advocate for mission to the West. He viewed England through missionary eyes, teaching mission at Selly Oak Colleges, arguing that the late-modern western culture needed to be understood as a post-Christian pagan mission field: ‘the most challenging missionary frontier of our time’.2 It is not a secular situation, he suggested, but a pagan missionary context with several competing gods and ideologies.

Newbigin birthed the Gospel and Culture movement, arguing it was essential to study western culture and think deeply about how the gospel interacts with it. In ‘retirement’, he served as a local pastor, and urged other pastors to see themselves as missionary pastors. Moreover, he upheld the place of a local community of believers to demonstrate the potency of the gospel: ‘the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it’.3

This article explores this Newbigin thesis: the congregation in a pluralist society. How do congregations today believe and live the gospel, especially in our pluralistic context? What hermeneutic of the gospel do congregations actually portray? This move opens up an evaluation of Newbigin’s thesis by drawing on ethnographical studies of selected communities. Neil Ormerod describes a ‘major divide in ecclesiology, between those who study…an idealist Platonic form in some noetic

heaven, and those who study it more as a realist Aristotelian form, grounded in the empirical data of historical ecclesial communities. Applying Ormerod’s schema, we want to address ecclesiological questions regarding missional churches today by deploying empirical data gained through ethnographical study of existing ecclesial communities. In other words, what hermeneutic of the gospel do congregations portray when seen through the lens of lived reality?

The authors of this article are missional reflective-practitioners who want to explore the contemporary relevance of Newbigin 25 years after the publication of The Gospel in a Pluralist Society (GIPS), to test the possibilities and limits that might comprise the lived reality of a congregation’s hermeneutic. What role do congregations, at their best and ideal, have in communicating the gospel in the western world and its pluralist context?

Our reading is from ‘downunder’, in that we are both from and working in Australasia. Steve is a New Zealander leading a theological college in Adelaide, South Australia. Darren is an Australian working in Melbourne, Victoria. Both of us have experience as Baptist pastors and teach mission and congregational formation. Our writing and research interests overlap. We say we would have liked to have written each other’s books that grapple with church, gospel and culture. We have undertaken similar research into emerging churches, Steve examining Cityside Baptist Church in Auckland, New Zealand and Darren investigating four emerging missional churches in Melbourne, Australia. We followed a similar qualitative and appreciative inquiry methodology, partly because we had similar aims and partly because Darren’s project followed five years after and borrowed from Steve’s

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Finally, we consider ourselves reflective practitioner scholars, undertaking research into congregations for the sake of fostering congregational health and mission.

Both of us, in our early training, came across Newbigin’s *GIPS*. Darren was introduced to it in 1995 by Ian Hawley, Vice Principal of Bible College of Victoria, the only reading recommendation he made. It became even more significant 10 years later when Darren started working for Forge Mission Training Network. *GIPS* was seen by Forge members as a seminal text on mission to the West, and Newbigin as a foundational figure in raising the issues of gospel and culture and mission to the West. Newbigin had emphasized the need for training that fostered missional leaders; Forge was experimenting with what that meant.

Steve was first influenced by Newbigin without knowing it. Carey Baptist College, New Zealand was his choice of seminary because they had decided to focus on Mission to Western Culture, insisting all pastoral ministry students be involved in a church planting situation. This was intended to allow mission, congregation and praxis to become formational. Arriving at Carey, he took courses and began to be influenced directly by Newbigin’s words, especially *GIPS*.

Newbigin says it is good to declare presuppositions: ‘No coherent thought is possible without presuppositions. What is required for honest thinking is that one should be as explicit as possible about what those presuppositions are’. Our bias includes being leaders and champions of the local church. We see the church as the only agency of God’s mission and an embodied channel for God to incarnate God’s purposes in the world. While aware of congregational dynamics that mean churches do not always match up to their ideal, we remain optimistic about the opportunities for local congregations to express what is good news about Jesus and God’s purposes for the world. It is for this reason that we bring our questions about congregations, with a particular Baptist hermeneutic, to Newbigin’s writing.

**Newbigin’s writing**

Newbigin was a prolific writer, especially in retirement as he grappled with gospel and culture issues from his perspective as a missionary and ecumenical leader. He was one of the seminal mission thinkers of the 20th century, arguably the most seminal writer on mission to the western world. Geoffrey Wainwright, in his...
comprehensive biography of Newbigin, described the influence, status and range of his writing as comparable to the Church Fathers.\(^{11}\) Newbigin did not write a systematic missiology like David Bosch.\(^{12}\) Rather, he responded to the pressing issues of his time, addressing issues regarding the nature of the church and its mission,\(^{13}\) the relevance of the Trinity,\(^{14}\) secularization,\(^{15}\) pastoral leadership,\(^{16}\) contextualization\(^{17}\) and the church’s witness in a post-Christendom historical era.\(^{18}\) His conviction that the gospel is not merely private but ‘public truth’ was applied to politics, economics and science.\(^{19}\) He explored the uniqueness of Christ and the gospel’s relationship with other religions. Newbigin’s analysis and conclusions regarding the need for ‘declericalised’ theology, ecumenical cooperation, studying cultures with outsider perspectives, proclaiming truth with categories that can’t be ultimately proved within modern frameworks, and the importance of churches and pastors adopting a missionary posture, remain missiologically germane.\(^{20}\)

Newbigin held a high view of the place of the church in mission. In one of his earliest works, *The Household of God*, he discussed the breakdown of Christendom in Europe, noting the unfortunate reality that both churches in the West and missionaries to other cultures often continued working with Christendom assumptions. He challenged the church not to be preoccupied with internal disputes but to engage their world, albeit pagan and changing. Asserting the priority of the community, he wrote of his vision:

It is surely a fact of inexhaustible significance that what our Lord left behind Him was not a book, nor a creed, nor a system of thought, nor a rule of life, but a visible community. He committed the entire work of salvation to that community. It was not that a community gathered round an idea, so that the idea was primary and the community secondary. It was that a community called together by the deliberate choice of the Lord Himself, and re-created in Him, gradually sought – and is seeking – to make explicit who He is and what He has done. The actual community is primary; the understanding of what it is comes second.21

He wrote this while working in the Indian context. However, it was a theme he returned to later when stressing the importance of the congregation for mission in the West. Newbigin taught that congregation and mission should not be separated, as happened in the false dichotomy of a Christendom ecclesiology that left mission as a stepchild, or worse, an orphan with no place in the church.22

The Gospel in a Pluralist Society

The specific conversation partner for this article is The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, one of Newbigin’s best known books in which he investigated in detail how the gospel engaged with a society characterized by religious pluralism and cultural relativism.23 Newbigin argued that like other western nations, pluralism was a reality in Britain at different levels. There is an obvious religious plurality with people of different cultural backgrounds and religious persuasions living in the same neighbourhoods. Then there is a cultural pluralism that welcomed different cultures as enriching to society. ‘Multiculturalism’ is the official policy of many western nations that sought to enshrine this as official policy, including Australia since 1989. Religious pluralism believed the differences between religions were not about what is true and false but how different people perceive truth such that belief is perceived as a private matter.24 Pluralism was, for Newbigin, an emerging trend in the 20th century. It has only increased in influence and impact in the 21st century.

In western countries like Newbigin’s England, or our Australia and New Zealand, the world has come to us, with all of its diverse beliefs and religious practices. The 2011 Australian Census shows 30.2 per cent of the population were born overseas, and another 18.8 per cent were second-generation immigrants. The number of Australians who identify with a religion other than Christianity has risen from 100,000 in 1971 to 1.5 million in 2011. Of 1.8 million migrants who arrived between 2001 and 2011, 514,000 were of a religion other than

23 Newbigin, GIPS.
24 Newbigin, GIPS, 14.
Christianity. As well as Catholics and Pentecostals, our neighbours are Muslims and Hindus, agnostics and do-it-yourself alternative spirituality seekers. This reality poses important questions for local ecclesial communities in western culture, for whom mission is no longer ‘over there’, but ‘next door’.

**Newbigin’s contribution to the place of the congregation**

Newbigin urged Christians to re-find their confidence in the gospel and in the congregation. He was committed to a ‘missionary encounter’ with culture. In India he was used to communicating the gospel across cultural divides to people who held presuppositions that made the gospel seem incredible to them. Returning to England he was troubled:

> [T]he response of the churches on the whole has been so timid – that there is a tendency to feel that when somebody says, ‘But I can’t believe that!’, then you hoist the white flag and say, ‘Well, of course we can’t expect you to!’ As a foreign missionary, on the other hand, one is accustomed to the situation where you know that what you’re saying runs counter to the dominant culture, but nevertheless you have to say it.

Newbigin called Christians back to a ‘proper confidence’ in the gospel, and to a commitment to seeking the person of Christ in church and mission: ‘The commitment is not to a cause, or a programme but to a person – at the heart of Christian mission must remain a commitment to serving Christ in his community.’

Newbigin was convinced that in order to understand and articulate the gospel in a pluralist society, we need the congregation to be ‘the only hermeneutic of the gospel…a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it’. This suggests an unfinished task, a new hermeneutic and a humble confidence.

**An unfinished task**

Newbigin’s congregational hermeneutical assumes that the gospel task is unfinished. Mission needs to remain on the agenda of the West, with the congregation

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26 Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 242–244.
29 Newbigin, *GIPS*, 227; previously in Taylor, ‘Contributions of Newbigin’.
a primary vehicle. This involves rethinking how to express the gospel in a pluralist society, in addressing the unfinished task of forming and cultivating congregations that understand and live out the gospel. Newbigin explains election in terms of great responsibility rather than special privilege. The people of God are called to demonstrate the gospel as a community: ‘neither truth nor love can be communicated except as they are embodied in a community which reasons and loves’.30 The church’s task, begun but not complete, is to indwell the Bible and witness to its truth, so that the plausibility structure of the gospel is not just a collection of ideas but is embodied in actual community.31

A new hermeneutic

Newbigin’s congregational hermeneutical foregrounds the church as the interpretive performer in the task of western re-missionalization. This opens a space for mission to be driven not by the essential pragmatism of declining numbers, nor the potentially dehumanizing practices of church growth, but from a vision of the gospel as human, communal and incarnational. A congregational hermeneutic offers knowledge as occurring amid the participation of human lives in the becoming of God’s mission future. This refuses a privatized faith and offers a public place to stand, based not on the epistemology of the Enlightenment project, but upon the embodied gospel. Or in the words of Paul Fiddes:

> The Christian strategy is not to imagine that we have a point of vantage above or beyond culture, from which to survey other stories. It is rather…the persuasive power of our story that will judge other stories. And it is not just telling; we are to out-perform others by living by a better story.32

It offers a hermeneutic in which the gospel is embodied as the concrete hands and feet and ears of the Body of Christ. We look to the congregation as offering a performance hermeneutic, in which scripture, tradition, reason and experience find cultural expression.

A humble confidence

A congregational hermeneutic suggests a public, visible missionality. This theme is evident throughout Newbigin’s work. He wrote tirelessly of the place of theology in the public arena, ceaselessly calling the church to the kingdoms that are economic and educational and artistic. Newbigin refused to accept modernist binary opposites of private and public, sacred and secular, subjective experience and detached

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30 Newbigin, GIPS, 85.
31 Newbigin, GIPS, 97–99.
observation. Instead, his high view of the congregation offered to the church a confidence. While the reputation of the church in western society might be in decline, Newbigin encouraged congregations to a calling as ‘sign, instrument, and foretaste of God’s redeeming grace for the whole life of society’.33

**Methodology**

This article is a fresh reading of Newbigin’s *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, in conversation with ethnographic study of the lived reality of local congregations. Data generated from our doctoral study has been reread in light of Newbigin’s perspectives on congregations and mission. The questions we are asking include, ‘How do congregations today believe and live the gospel, especially in our pluralistic context?’ and ‘What hermeneutic of the gospel do they portray?’ We want to probe the Newbigin dream by using the Newbigin method, to examine the potential for congregations to be a hermeneutic of the gospel by examining the lived reality in local and particular present-day congregational contexts.

Using Neil Ormerod’s categories, it can be argued that Newbigin presented a supra-cultural or idealist ecclesiology of the church in mission in the western world, claiming a congregational hermeneutic, yet turning to a public theology in the areas of high culture. In contrast, we want to explore the Newbigin dream by applying it as method, drawing on empirical research of local congregations in articulating a historical or realist ecclesiology.34 This offers a conversation between the Newbigin ‘congregational project’ and ‘the empirical data of historical ecclesial communities’.35 Like our previous research into emerging churches, this article is a conversation with Newbigin that deals, in the words of John Milbank’s recommendation for ecclesiology, ‘with the actual genesis of real historical churches, not simply with the imagination of an ecclesial ideal’.36 Thus, this project is grounded in attentiveness to the local contexts of two of our case studies in order to complement and corroborate our reading of Newbigin.

Our ethnographic research involved a case study approach to local congregations. Qualitative methods of data collection: participant-observation, document analysis, interviews and focus groups, and some quantitative surveys, were used. Our aim was to develop in-depth phenomenological case studies in order to analyse the experience of emerging churches, not just as a global phenomenon or in the teaching of experts but in their local expression. We worked inductively, starting

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with the experience of our selected local churches. Steve elected Cityside and explored its ‘alternative worship’ as a lens to understand the wider cultural context. Darren selected a linked set of four case studies from different denominations, and instead of majoring on cultural analysis concluded with strategic leadership implications. To aid comparison, this article brings Newbigin into conversation with the experience of Cityside and one of Darren’s case studies, the Pentecostal church Urban Life.

The remainder of the article discusses four key themes of Newbigin’s convictions about congregations and mission, in conversation with the ‘lived reality’ of our two case studies.

The congregation in a pluralist society

Newbigin developed in *GIPS* the place of the congregation, and what congregations need to be for us to be confident in them. He argued congregations are local in mission, holistic in mission, affirm the whole people of God in mission, and engage in dialogue for mission.

*Congregations are local in mission*

Newbigin had a high view of the congregation being engaged deeply in the concerns of its neighbourhood. In the New Testament, *ekklesia* is both ‘the Church of God’ or ‘of Christ’ and the church of a particular place. The church is expressed locally as a congregation. It is an embassy of God and, as such, needs to remember its relationship with God and to its neighbourhood. Says Newbigin: ‘It will be the church for the specific place where it lives, not the church for those who wish to be members of it – or, rather, it will be for them insofar as they are willing to be for the wider community.’

As Baptist pastors, when we think of congregation or even church we focus on its local expression. We understand this is not the first semantic category used by everyone – others think first of the church universal, or their whole denomination or perhaps diocese. Nevertheless we consider that we are reading in a manner congruent with Newbigin’s ecclesiology. Newbigin was inspired, in part, by J. H. Oldham’s conviction that ‘modern’ western society was the greatest contemporary missionary challenge. But while Oldham spoke of the hope of the ‘Church’ as the broader invisible body more than the ‘ordinary parson-led congregation’, Newbigin respectfully contrasted himself with Oldham, arguing the primary way Christianity will impact public life is through congregations. When Newbigin

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38 Newbigin, *GIPS*, 229.
referred to congregation he was beginning, as per our Baptististic lens, with the local expression of a church or congregation in a particular place.

A further category question is whether ‘congregation’ for Newbigin meant the gathered congregation on Sunday at 10 am, or the scattered people of God throughout the week. Because of the extent of Newbigin’s discussion about the mission of the whole people of God and the gospel as public truth, we assume he was referring to the congregation as both gathered and sent.

If the mission of congregational life is ideally expressed locally, as Newbigin taught, how is that expressed in our case studies, in ‘the empirical data of historical ecclesial communities’?\(^{40}\)

Urban Life reinvented itself largely motivated by a desire to be local in mission. Previously called ‘Christian Life Centre’ (CLC), their large church building was on several acres in the tree-lined outskirts of Ringwood, a Melbourne suburb. The church had been a centre of charismatic renewal in the 1970s and 1980s, but it seemed few local people knew. They wanted their experience of the Holy Spirit to lead to mission, that where they worshipped might engage with their community. The sense of local disconnection led them to move from their ‘country club’ location into the centre of Ringwood. They rented and renovated an old nightclub, transforming it into a café, kids play area and community centre that they also used for Sunday worship. It was a much smaller space than their old 600-person capacity church building, but more locally focused. Opening as Urban Life in 2005, on their first Sunday they had to clean vomit off the front doorstep and knew they were then ministering in a local context that better fitted where Jesus wanted to build his church. New senior leader Anthea Smits taught that Jesus wanted to build the church in the midst of local struggles and difficulties: ‘I’m going to build my church in the midst of everything that’s ugly in this world’ (Smits’ translation of Matthew 16:16–18).\(^{41}\) The main local community engagement was not through their Sunday service, but through ministries like a soup kitchen and high school ministry, counselling service, supporting local service agencies, and meeting people through their new café and community space that hosted playgroups, craft and exercise groups. Smits joined one of the new playgroups with her son, and regularly served in the café, and said she met more local people and engaged in more faith conversations over the first eight months of Urban Life than the previous eight years of CLC. The relocation of the church and the fresh priority on community engagement reflects an incarnational commitment to local mission.\(^{42}\)

At Cityside three different visual artifacts give expression to the commitment of the congregation to local mission. First, on the rear wall of the worshipping space is a hand drawn street map of the local community, a constant reminder of the local in mission. Second, on another wall are white banners about 50 centimetres in height, dated by year and covered by personal signatures. These are a visual

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record of those individual members who have committed themselves to Cityside for a year of seeking ‘to follow Jesus Christ... to service and ministry under the vision and mission shared by the community’. It is part of an annual commitment service, held on Palm Sunday, in which people walk the area around Cityside, reflecting on their inner city location and signing the banner, which remains visual throughout the year. So commitment to this community is embodied through local expression. Third, since Easter of 1997 Cityside has been offering ‘Stations of the Cross’ as a public expression of faith.

However, two key ‘hermeneutical’ events in the life of these two congregations give different expression to this meaning of local. These raise a question regarding Newbigin’s application of congregation especially in contexts becoming networked and globalized.

The Urban Life café serves the local Ringwood community – literally with food and drinks, through their community groups and making the space available for other groups. Participants say that simply the different architecture and location reminds them that church is not for them, but for their community where they now feel embedded. Rather than a building used a few hours per week, the church is proud to invest their assets to engage their neighbours. For a church that used to attract people for charismatic meetings from all over Melbourne, they have adopted a more geographically local interest, embodied by the café and community centre. Leaders assert the café is not the essence of their reinvention, but an important symbol of adopting and serving their local area: ‘This [building] is not our destination but merely a reflection of the things God has been doing in us as a group of people.’

A key feature of Cityside’s life was ‘Stations of the Cross’, in which artists within the congregation give contemporary expression to the ancient pattern of artistic representation of Christ carrying the cross to Golgotha. The minister described the flavour and style of Cityside as ‘creative, contemporary, relevant, relational and drawing heavily on the arts’. The Stations were local, first, in that all those who contributed were artists from the congregation and, second, in that it gave expression to contemporary life in Auckland. In using a historic practice of the church, it could be understood to be ekklesia both as ‘the Church of God’ and the church of a particular place. However, while Stations gave unique expression to this local congregational life, it attracted people from all over Auckland, including nationwide publicity. This is evidence of a different form of local, not embodied geographically but in a more networked expression of contemporary life. Thus in examining the lived reality of two congregations, we see diversity in the outworking of Newbigin’s

43 Mail by Mark Pierson to Cityside congregants, 2002.
45 Mark Pierson, ‘Developing a vision for Cityside Baptist Church and City Mission’, Discussion paper (21 April 1994), Box 865, New Zealand Baptist Archive.
local-in-mission. The empirical data of these two ecclesial communities allows us to reconsider notions of local in Newbigin’s ‘congregational project’.

**Congregations are holistic in mission**

Newbigin describes mission as ‘word, deed, and new being’. The gospels show Jesus ministering in this holistic sense and then commissioning: ‘As the Father sent me, so I send you’ (John 20:19). Newbigin describes: ‘The Church is nothing other than that movement launched into the public life of the world by its sovereign Lord to continue that which he came to do until it is finished in his return in glory.’

So, at its best, the congregation will foster the Kingdom of God by preaching the gospel and advocating for peace and justice. Neither of these elements of mission are superior. Both are necessary:

> It is clear that to set word and deed, preaching and action, against each other is absurd. The central reality is neither word nor act, but the total life of a community enabled by the Spirit to live in Christ, sharing his passion and the power of his resurrection. Both the words and the acts of that community may at any time provide the occasion through which the living Christ challenges the ruling powers. Sometimes it is a word that pierces through layers of custom and opens up a new vision. Sometimes it is a deed which shakes the whole traditional plausibility structure. They mutually reinforce and interpret one another. The words explain the deeds, and the deeds validate the words. Not that every deed must have a word attached to explain it, but that the total life of the community whose members have different gifts and are involved in the secular life of the society in which they share, will provide these occasions of challenge.

So in ‘word, deed and new being’ a congregation expresses mission. The way a church community lives and communicates the gospel – as a new community, as well as with its words and deeds – is intrinsic to the gospel itself.

Urban Life describes mission as ‘being found about our heavenly Father’s business’. Smits teaches this *missio Dei* perspective and describes how it invites them to cooperate with God: ‘finding God’s heart for a situation and being that, in partnership with God’. As a reflection of God’s holistic concern for people, she is clear to explain that they hold a holistic philosophy of mission that practices proclamation, social justice and mercy. Urban Life participants often express their desire to see people become Christians through verbal witness, yet they also display a growing commitment to demonstrating the gospel in service and advocacy.

Urban Life’s convictions about holistic mission have led to a variety of mission initiatives, globally and locally. They have had generous involvement overseas with

47 Newbigin, *GIPS*, 221.
48 Newbigin, *GIPS*, 137.
church and community development projects in Cuba, Vietnam and Cambodia, and they say they have learned a lot from their partners in those countries. They also have a growing commitment to local holistic mission, especially over the last decade since their transition to Urban Life and relocation to the centre of Ringwood. Once a year the church closes its ‘worship service’ and joins the community in ‘Clean up Australia Day’. They have joined Habitat for Humanity house building projects, developed a ‘Pay it Forward’ program with the local council, offered mentoring and breakfasts at a local high school, cleaned the local methadone clinic and served in a local soup kitchen. Smits said she knew they were successfully transitioning in more holistic mission-focused directions when the worship coordinator commented that they were having trouble filling the rosters because more people were now volunteering for community ministries! ‘Kylie’ withdrew from the leadership team so she could have more time for neighbourhood relationships and involvement in the Soup Kitchen, where she said she most felt at home ‘This is what I’m made for. I feel that I’m doing what Jesus did.’ Smits is proud of this kind of transition to a more holistic expression of faith and service in congregation members, and in the congregations as a whole, commenting: ‘Christianity is often about populating heaven, where it needs to be about transforming earth.’

At Cityside, conversations with participants suggested the word ‘mission’ was problematic. The word was often linked with previous church experiences which were resented as word-centric. However, in a survey of participants, 65 per cent ‘agreed’ and ‘strongly agreed’ that, as a result of being at Cityside, they were willing to express in actions their Christian faith. A further 67 per cent of Citysiders ‘agreed’ and ‘strongly agreed’ that, as a result of being at Cityside, they were willing to express in words their Christian faith. This was linked to a growth in Christian maturity. One participant commented:

My personal evangelism, which to me means talking about spiritual stuff with people, with my friends, has just gone through the roof in the time I’ve been at Cityside. Because all of a sudden I’m not ashamed of God because it used to be the last thing I wanted my friends to do would be to become a Christian because it would just ruin their life. And now I feel like it is a positive thing if they have something to do with God. But it’s like nowhere near the sort of outreach, formal mission thing. It’s just that I like God and it’s a natural thing now.

The Stations of the Cross, mentioned earlier, was an example of how this community expressed mission holistically, especially if art is understood as a visual articulation of faith, as an imaginative deed.

49 Cf. Newbigin, GIPS, 152, 197.
51 Cityside, Wednesday Focus Group.
In both of these historical ecclesial communities, there is movement toward holistic mission. Urban Life is making intentional moves toward faith expressed in deeds, Cityside is exploring a faith expressed visually. Perhaps this is due to a loss of confidence in words at Cityside? More likely it is a move that is both contextual and chastened, emerging out of a growing awareness of the priority placed on visual communication in contemporary society and a desire to find a more humble expression of their faith. Whatever the answer, there is evidence of a ‘hermeneutic of the gospel’ that is visual. This is a possibility not evident in GIPS. It suggests a further critical question regarding the reality of the Newbigin ‘congregational project’.

Congregations affirm the whole people of God in mission

Newbigin suggested that public pronouncements on issues made by church leaders need to be backed up by Christians grappling with solutions in their public life. The church is a priesthood of all believers, with participants sent into their everyday world with a missionary identity, empowered to act responsibly as believers in their capacity as citizens. Mission is outworked in the marketplace:

This priesthood has to be exercised in the life of the world. It is the ordinary secular business of the world that the sacrifices of love and obedience are to be offered to God. It is in the context of secular affairs that the mighty power released into the world through the work of Christ is to be manifested. The Church gathers every Sunday, the day of resurrection and Pentecost, to renew its participation in Christ’s priesthood. But the exercise of this priesthood is not within the walls of the Church but in the daily business of the world.

Clericalism – the elevating and relying on a hired holy class of leaders – is a vestige of Christendom that does not help the mission of the church. English theologian Colin Gunton bemoans the preoccupation of the western church with discussing clergy issues: ‘ecclesiological discussion in our time nearly always centres on, or degenerates into, disputes about clergy and bishops, the result being that the question of the nature or being of the Church is rarely allowed to come into view’. The dominance of clergy in church life, and the imbalance of discussion, detracts from the weightier matters of the mission of the whole people of God.

Equally, Newbigin also warned that anti-clericalism was not helpful either. Leaders are ordained to ministry not to take responsibility for mission from the people of God, but to enable them for mission. The church needs ‘a ministerial

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52 Newbigin, GIPS, 139, 230.
53 Newbigin, GIPS, 230.
priesthood which serves, nourishes, sustains, and guides this priestly work’. This calls for a particularly empowering approach to ministerial leadership, which fits Paul’s ideal of leaders called ‘to equip the saints for the work of ministry’ (Ephesians 4:11–12). It also calls for leadership that focuses not solely on pastoral care but on coaching people for their mission in the world. Theological education, says Newbigin, has to take into account the church’s missional purpose:

Ministerial training as currently conceived is still far too much training for the pastoral care of the existing congregation, and far too little oriented toward the missionary calling to claim the whole of public life for Christ and his kingdom.

Leadership formation needs to be both congregational and missional in its praxis. We need to continue cultivating ways for denominational systems and seminaries to serve local congregational narratives and the mission God invites congregations to participate in.

Newbigin was a missionary by background who later worked as a pastor, and he brought his mission frameworks to his pastoring. His clarion call for the church was to see the West needing the same pioneering mission work as mission frontiers overseas. This called for innovation from a place in the tradition and from the gospel story in which the church dwells. Churches and leaders need to understand and be equipped for the missional, as well as pastoral challenges of church ministry.

A dominant theme at Cityside was an understanding of mission as an integrated life. Participants spoke of ‘mission in [our] daily lives’. It was ‘integrated at church’. ‘[T]he Sunday stuff is highly relevant to the actions, the issues, the thinking and the culture of the Monday to Friday world.’ Citysiders appreciated that people talked about their regular life jobs and how they expressed faith in the workplace, including advocating for human rights and environmental awareness. It is instructive to realize that participants in these interviews were not clergy but lay people, the ‘whole people’ of God in mission. They demonstrated an awareness that integration in life, as evidenced and affirmed when the community gathered, was instrumental in encouraging an integration in life when the community was sent.

Urban Life has sought to champion the dreams and mission of all their members. They closed down a number of programmes, and started new programmes that reflected the passion of their people and fostered local mission. They have given permission and empower people to pursue their own local mission. The 2006

55 Newbigin, GIPS, 235.
56 Newbigin, GIPS, 231.
57 Newbigin, GIPS, 47, 51.
58 Focus group Sunday 2.
59 Focus group Thursday.
60 Focus group email 1.
National Church Life Survey showed that 55 per cent of attenders were in leadership, ministry or administrative roles at Urban Life, which is slightly above the 53 per cent Protestant average. But Urban Life leaders stress the bigger challenge is to empower people to have big dreams and serve God in mission in everyday life. For example, ‘Roslyn’ was interested in meeting alternative spirituality seekers, and so Smits encouraged her to attend and witness at Mind–Body–Spirit festivals. ‘Oliver’ wanted to use the café as a role-playing game (RPG) venue, and she encouraged him to make the most of influencing this network as a Christian witness. ‘Sharon’ has been similarly encouraged to develop a MySpace website exploring issues and struggles of faith, and connecting online with people who rarely come to, or refuse to attend, church. Other members have started an exercise group, book club, meditation classes and social group for older people. When members have ideas or inspiration for mission, Smits says she wants to function like Dorothy from *Wizard of Oz* to encourage people in their journey and build on their strengths as local missionaries.

As referred to above, readers may ask whether Newbigin’s reference to the congregation and its mission is about what the gathered congregation does in mission, and/or what mission programmes the congregation facilitates collectively, and/or how the church encourages its members to live out the mission of God in everyday life. Certainly Newbigin argued that the mandate of the church was to confidently proclaim gospel as public truth. This is evident in his theological writing and his challenge for congregations and leaders to help Christians engage the world beyond the congregation. For Newbigin, it is the role of congregations to empower the whole people of God for mission, including but by no means limited to when the church is gathered or cooperating together.

**Congregations engage in dialogue for mission**

Newbigin was a missionary committed to dialogue – with people in India and in ecumenical initiatives around the world, and then when he returned to England, with neighbours of diverse religious background. He counseled:

> Is it not more fitting that we adopt the attitude of a humble seeker after truth, keeping an open mind, ready to listen to all that comes from the varied religious experience of the human race? Is it not more honest as well as more humble to stop preaching and engage rather in dialogue, listening to the experience of others and offering our own,

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61 NCLS Research, ‘Church Life Profile: Urban Life, Ringwood’ (October 2006).
not to displace theirs but to enrich and be enriched by the sharing of religious experience.\textsuperscript{63}

Once again, Newbigin applied lessons from mission in India to mission in the western world. A stance of dialogue was appropriate in a pluralistic context. Asking questions, listening and sharing stories are among the most basic tools for evangelism, and fit comfortably with mission as dialogue. We can, as Newbigin suggested, affirm that Jesus is the true way through whom we come to God the Father (John 16:4).\textsuperscript{64} Yet we do not have to claim to possess all truth. While Willow Creek encourages seeker-friendly churches, Newbigin implied we need churches where God’s people are mutual ‘seekers after the truth’ alongside others with whom they are in dialogue.\textsuperscript{65}

As a human race we are on a journey and we need to know the road. It is not true that all roads lead to the top of the same mountain. There are roads which lead over the precipice. In Christ we have been shown the road. We cannot treat that knowledge as a private matter for ourselves. It concerns the whole human family. We do not presume to limit the might and the mercy of God for the ultimate salvation of all people, but the same costly act of revelation and reconciliation which gives us that assurance also requires us to share with our fellow pilgrims the vision that God has given us the route we must follow and the goal to which we must press forward.\textsuperscript{66}

This is evidence of Newbigin’s humble confidence in the gospel. He counselled avoiding timidity on the one hand and anxiety on the other.\textsuperscript{67} While Newbigin welcomed plurality of cultures, affirming that we can learn from one another, he rejected a pluralism that promoted subjectivity and relativism.\textsuperscript{68} Resonating with Newbigin and drawing on a Pauline phrase from Romans, we confess we are not ashamed of the gospel, and we are not ashamed of the congregation.

The ecclesial reality is that the congregations we studied showed little evidence of inter-faith dialogue. However, they were explicit about their commitment to a dialogical approach to their community (especially for Urban Life) and contemporary culture (a distinctive of Cityside).

One of the key dialogue partner groups for Urban Life were their neighbours, also interested in enhancing Ringwood’s neighbourhood. When they relocated into the old ‘Growling Dog’ nightclub that was part of a shopping centre, they started dialogue with the shopping centre management. The centre is due for major renovation, and the church was positioning itself to be a valuable contributor to that

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\footnote{63}{Newbigin, \textit{GIPS}, 7, also 155–183.}
\footnote{64}{Newbigin, \textit{GIPS}, 182.}
\footnote{65}{Newbigin, \textit{GIPS}, 12.}
\footnote{66}{Newbigin, \textit{GIPS}, 183.}
\footnote{67}{Newbigin, \textit{GIPS}, 243.}
\footnote{68}{Newbigin, \textit{GIPS}, 243–244.}
\end{footnotes}
planning. As they engage with youth at risk in the high school, drug users, those with mental illness, older people and others who feel marginalized, they are dialoguing with local council about appropriate services and how the church can partner in holistically helping these people. With their new contemporary-looking community space, Urban Life have regularly hosted photographic art exhibitions, usually as a fund-raiser for local or international community development projects such as projects of the not-for-profit development organisation 2H Project that Smits has co-founded. Urban Life have found that business neighbours and community contacts have been eager to support and get involved in ‘shared projects’ that seek to make the world a better place.69

Congregations in a pluralist society function at their best when they appreciate and welcome signs of grace in people who do not know Jesus and when they can even cooperate in shared projects that align in Kingdom-focused directions. Newbigin affirmed joining with others in struggles for freedom and justice. This was a kind of ‘dialogue-in-action’, a dialogue focused on real issues that affect the world rather than debates about religious belief or religious experience.70

The dialogue of Cityside is particularly with contemporary culture.71 Andy Crouch explains some churches adopt a condemnation and critique stance to culture, or else copy or consume it, but the better way is to change culture by creating and cultivating something new and beautiful.72 Cityside’s worship offers an approach of creating as it engages with local cultural events, global tragedies, television news, and popular music and films. In 10 worship services that Steve visited, he heard 20 ‘not explicitly Christian’ music songs and watched 11 videos, often with a ‘sampling’ combination of mixed cultural forms. He witnessed indigenous, children’s and other marginalized voices welcomed. Citysiders host reading groups to discuss anything from Harry Potter to theology to contemporary events.73 The pastor at the time, Mark Pierson, celebrated Cityside’s interface with culture:

[C]ontemporary culture [is] their kind of life blood in many ways. It’s the air they breathe. . . . So that we would want to engage with contemporary culture and not be frightened of it. Not wanting to be accepting of it with open arms, either . . . [but] as a

70 Newbigin, GIPS, 180–181.
community we have a commitment to engaging with, reflecting on, participating in, not seeing as evil, questioning, reframing, contemporary culture. So we would use without any apology contemporary movies, music, experiences. Reframe them, generally, in some way.74

Newbigin engaged with high culture more than mass culture. The congregations we have researched tend to engage more with mass culture, drawing on popular music and encouraging their people to enjoy and exegete movies. The invitation of dialogue from Newbigin challenges congregations in the 21st-century western world to engage with the other faiths/western culture, and have the humility to learn from movies and pop culture.

Part of reclaiming the place of mission and evangelism is developing a vocabulary that people in postmodern congregations are comfortable and confident with. It is difficult to encourage people to ‘do evangelism’ if they are uncomfortable with that ‘e-word’. But to encourage people to cultivate faith conversations using a dialogical approach and encouraging their friends in a spiritual journey, as fellow travellers, is an approach more postmodern people welcome.

The willingness to dialogue with contemporary culture within the gathered community at Cityside was important in helping participants come to inhabit this more dialogical attitude toward faith sharing. Participants appreciated the use of contemporary art and music. Cityside strives to bring the forms of popular media into the worship space – both in order to help foster worship and to model the integration of everyday life and spirituality: ‘we do these things and this is part of being human and forms our spirituality’. 75

Together, these point to a dialogue that could be seen as a hermeneutical spiral. The stories of individuals are told in the gathered community. These in turn shape the understanding of mission as participants are sent.

What is intriguing is that dialogue with popular culture is not a theme in GIPS. It is, however, the domain in which much of contemporary life is lived. Does this suggest a mis-step in the Newbigin project, in which, while the congregation as hermeneutic was the dream, the method adopted by Newbigin drifted toward high culture, including the arenas of business, art and politics, rather than the contextual realities of congregational participants? In so doing, the primary popular and mass cultures of many participants in congregations is being overlooked.

**Conclusion: An unfinished agenda**

Newbigin titled his autobiography *Unfinished Agenda*.76 One unfinished agenda item, this article suggests, was the nature and place of the congregation in a

75 Focus group Sunday 2.
76 Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*. 
pluralist society. In light of Newbigin’s writing, especially *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, and as a result of conversation with our experience of congregational life, what are the primary themes that need to be addressed regarding mission to western culture?

We have sought to address this question by following Ormerod and deploying *historic ecclesial communities* to assess the Newbigin ‘congregational project’ 25 years on. The result, we would suggest, is that ecclesiological richness is clearly evident when historical ecclesial communities are examined (ethnographically) and when their lived reality is deployed in theological and missiological reflection. This seems to be completely synchronous with Newbigin’s assertion of the congregation as a hermeneutic of the gospel.

We affirm, first, that even if a context appears to contradict Christian hope, a congregation that believes and lives by the gospel will demonstrate hope and be the sign of God’s grace. This is ‘the only possible hermeneutic’.

If the gospel is to challenge the public life of our society, if Christians are to occupy the ‘high ground’ which they vacated in the noontime of ‘modernity,’ it will not be by forming a Christian political party, or by aggressive propaganda campaigns. Once again it has to be said that there can be no going back to the ‘Constantinian’ era. It will only be by movements that begin with the local congregation in which the reality of the new creation is present, known, and experienced, and from which men and women will go into every sector of public life to claim it for Christ, to unmask the illusions which have remained hidden and to expose all areas of public life to the illumination of the gospel. But that will only happen as and when local congregations renounce an introverted concern for their own life, and recognize that they exist for the sake of those who are not members, as sign, instrument, and foretaste of God’s redeeming grace for the whole life of society.

We have read and been challenged by Newbigin’s appeal for the gospel as public truth and the importance of the congregation as hermeneutic of the gospel. For mission to western culture, we need more work – in theory and practice – on local mission in and through congregations. Newbigin, for all his emphasis on the importance on the congregation, did not always explain or show what it meant in practice.

We suggest, second, the need for skills to read local narratives in light of scripture and missional texts like Newbigin’s. We need methodologies that simultaneously value a simple story, yet allow the peeling back of ever deepening layers. This will demand a refusal to privilege either the academy or the local, ethnography or ecclesiology. Albert Einstein said: ‘Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.’ We are seeking partnerships in which the congregational as hermeneutic is practically theological and theologically practical.

77 Newbigin, *GIPS*, 232.
Third, we need to find ways to articulate a ‘glocal’ theology. By this we mean that while a congregational hermeneutic rightly returns mission to the local church as a communal narrative, we need to find ways for these local narratives to be informed by conversation with ecclesial communities throughout history and around the globe. How can we cultivate congregational conversations that are both diachronic and synchronic? The awareness of the particularity of the communal narrative needs to allow a ‘knowledge with humility’ in which the community dialogues with a gospel that is holistically universal. Otherwise, we run the danger of a local theology that in fact merely continues the prevailing atomization of belief. Further, we wonder if the understanding of ‘local’ needs to be reconceived in the Newbigin project, especially in a world that is increasingly globalized and networked. This argument is strengthened when congregation is interpreted as people called and sent, gathered on Sunday but perhaps on Monday scattered, including digitally.

Fourth, we need to recognize and affirm the mission of the whole people of God. There is a potentially dangerous ecclesial-centrism in the work of Newbigin, and in our work as pastors. As pastors, we love the notion of the congregation as the primary hermeneutic. But as pastors we are also probably the only ones that think about the congregation other than on Sunday. The lives of our congregants include 50-hour working weeks, debt loading and subtle consumer pressures. A congregational hermeneutic tempts us to place ourselves at the centre of the conversation. This too easily becomes a form of church-olatory. Instead we need a congregational hermeneutic that speaks of the Kingdom. How do we mesh our pastorally centrist experiences with the exilic experience of the church in the West? How might the congregation be more than minister and church centred? How does the minister enable a congregation to be theological about their worlds? So on the one hand Newbigin’s *GIPS* is more about the gospel than church. On the other hand we are warning it can tend towards being Sunday church-centric. In so doing, it remains tempted to overlook the mission of the whole people of God, sent through the week.

Finally, Newbigin’s work seems to overlook the world of popular culture. So much contemporary cultural work is now done at the movies and through television. A re-missionalization of western culture will need to take far more seriously than did Newbigin, the role and impact of popular cultural texts like *Survivor*, *The Da Vinci Code* and *Grand Auto Theft*.

These are critical tasks for scholars and practitioners that emerge as we approach the congregation as a hermeneutic in a pluralist society today.

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