

A Missiology of Hope: Reading Lesslie Newbigin in a Post-Pandemic World

Stephen Stallard

Mosaic Baptist Church in Crown Heights, Brooklyn

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a crisis of despair that must be addressed by those who present the gospel of hope. This essay is an exploration and application of select, under-examined facets of the writing and ministry of the twentieth-century missiologist Lesslie Newbigin. The goal is to excavate deep reservoirs of hope that pastors, missionaries, and missiologists can use as they minister in the emerging post-pandemic society. Preliminary suggestions are made concerning telling the cruciform story, embracing holistic mission, and learning hope from the margins. As a result of engaging with Newbigin's writings (inspired by his missional context in India) and his urban ministry (in Britain), the reader will be equipped with the initial building blocks of a post-pandemic missiology of hope.

Key Words: Coronavirus, COVID, cruciform, holistic, hope, missiology, Newbigin, pandemic

Introduction: An Epidemic of Despair

2020 was the curveball that Americans did not see coming. First, a global pandemic shattered the illusion that science could guarantee one's health. Then, the death of George Floyd and the resulting urban unrest demolished the myth that the government could keep one safe. The economic uncertainty that resulted from Coronavirus shutdowns chipped away at the American lifestyle of travel, leisure, and retirement. These events unfolded in a presidential election year, as a bitterly divided electorate prepared to select its next leader. In the background, the death toll kept rising. At the time of publication, more than 500,000 Americans have been lost, nearly 30,000 of them in New York City.

The multiple crises that have unfolded during the pandemic have affected American society in countless ways. One of the most notable is the onset of an epidemic of despair. One survey in the early Fall of 2020 discovered that 72 percent of Americans believe that the country is headed

in the “wrong direction.”¹ Given the intense polarization of American society, this polling data reveals a remarkable bipartisan consensus. People are despondent and unsure that the country will rebound.

Americans are struggling with mental health issues.² One study conducted at the beginning of the pandemic presents an interesting paradox. Although most Americans stated that they were at least somewhat hopeful about the future, they also stated that they were grappling with anxiety, insomnia, depression, and loneliness. Nearly 20 percent of respondents even acknowledged a “physical reaction” brought about by thinking about COVID-19.³ Apparently, Americans are trying to be hopeful but struggling with despair.

Public health experts are concerned that the Coronavirus will lead to a rise in suicides.⁴ These suicides could even constitute a “global psychological pandemic” since “we can anticipate the rippling effect of this virus on worldwide suicide events.”⁵ The relevant factors that could contribute to a potential spike in suicides include isolation and trauma. Notably, researchers are concerned that “uncertainty, feelings of hopelessness, and a sense of worthlessness may increase suicide rates.”⁶ The Centers for Disease Control has even linked “substance abuse” and “suicidal ideation” with COVID-19.⁷

¹ AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, “The Public Outlook Remains Gloomy,” https://apnorc.org/?post_type=project&p=2710.

² Rebecca Tan, “In an era of quarantine, crisis hotlines face growing – and urgent – demand,” https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/crisis-hotline-quarantine-coronavirus-mental-health/2020/03/23/632e2d7c-6abe-11ea-9923-57073adce27c_story.html.

³ Pew Research Center, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/03/30/people-financially-affected-by-covid-19-outbreak-are-experiencing-more-psychological-distress-than-others/ft_2020-03-30_coviddistress_01/.

⁴ Rebecca Clay, “COVID-19 and Suicide,” *Monitor on Psychology* 51.4 (2020), <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2020/06/covid-suicide>. Some experts suggest that up to 75,000 people could ultimately die from pandemic-related substance abuse and suicide (<https://wellbeingtrust.org/areas-of-focus/policy-and-advocacy/reports/projected-deaths-of-despair-during-covid-19/>).

⁵ Vikram Thakur and Anu Jain, “COVID 2019-suicides: A Global Psychological Pandemic,” *BBJ* 88 (August 2020): 952–53.

⁶ Alexandra Brewis and Amber Wutich, “New Study Highlights COVID-19 Suicide Risk,” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/diagnosis-human/2020/06/new-study-highlights-covid-19-suicide-risk>.

⁷ Mark É. Czeisler, Rashon I. Lane, Emiko Petrosky, Joshua F. Wiley, Aleta Christensen, Rashid Njai, et al., “Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic—United States, June 24–30, 2020,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 69.32 (Aug 14, 2020): 1049–57.

Americans have been collectively traumatized in 2020. They have experienced a devastating pandemic, economic hardship, racial injustice, and urban unrest. Amid the epidemic of despair, Christians have an opportunity to tell the story that infuses them with hope (1 Pet 3:15).⁸ Pastors and missiologists must reflect upon present circumstances and retool their approaches so that they can more effectively present the hope of the gospel. This essay is an introductory exploration, a first step in building a missiology of hope for a post-pandemic world.⁹ In particular, this article attempts to reexamine the work of Lesslie Newbigin and to bring it into conversation with a post-pandemic United States of America.

Reintroducing Lesslie Newbigin

Lesslie Newbigin (1909–1998) was one of the most distinguished Christians of the twentieth century. While not as popular as the American icons Billy Graham and Martin Luther King Jr., Newbigin deserves to be placed alongside the leading figures of the modern Christian era. His global influence upon Christianity (especially in the field of missiology) is still felt today. Some readers might be unfamiliar with Newbigin. Before exploring how his work can infuse a post-pandemic missiology with hope, it is important to briefly reexamine his life and ministry.¹⁰

Lesslie Newbigin and his wife Helen were missionaries of the Church of Scotland. Dispatched to India, they served there for nearly four decades (although not continuously). While there, Newbigin ministered in both rural and urban settings. He engaged in administrative tasks, relief

⁸ This is not meant to imply that “spiritual” solutions are all that is needed for those suffering from mental health issues. Instead, this article is advocating for a renewed focus on hope as Christians engage the post-pandemic world. This will be an important contextual step for those who seek to minister amidst the epidemic of despair.

⁹ See also Jerry Ireland and Michelle Raven, *Practicing Hope: Missions and Global Crises* (Littleton, CO: William Carey, 2020), for an insightful (and prophetic) pre-pandemic compendium of essays on practicing hope amid global crises.

¹⁰ For biographical information on Newbigin, see Lesslie Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda: An Updated Autobiography* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009); and Geoffrey Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin: A Theological Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). For theological analyses of his ministry, see George Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit: Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Cultural Plurality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Scott Sunquist and Amos Yong, *The Gospel and Pluralism Today: Reassessing Lesslie Newbigin in the 21st Century* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015); and Michael Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018).

work, and camp ministry. Newbigin taught high school English and enthusiastically proclaimed the gospel through street preaching. Over the course of his ministry, Newbigin dialogued with his Hindu neighbors. Most notably, he shared leadership of a weekly study of John's Gospel and the Svetasvara Upanishad. His sustained missionary engagement with Hinduism eventually resulted in Newbigin's insightful commentary on the Fourth Gospel.¹¹

Newbigin participated in national efforts to unite various Protestant denominations. This resulted in the Church of South India, in which Newbigin was appointed a Bishop.¹² He would go on to take a leading role on the world scene as he served in various official capacities, first with the International Missionary Council and then with the World Council of Churches. Newbigin's impact upon missionary theology and the later missional church movement can hardly be overstated. He was a prolific speaker and writer, delivering lectures and penning essays that would chart a new course for the missionary Church.¹³

Perhaps ironically, Lesslie Newbigin is most famous (in the Western world, at least) for how he spent his “retirement.” Newbigin refused to settle down when he returned from nearly four decades of ministry in India. Upon his return, he observed his native Britain with new eyes. Newbigin became convinced that the West (which traditionally sent missionaries to other parts of the world) was itself a significant mission field. He dedicated his retirement years to fostering a fresh missionary encounter between the gospel and Western culture. This led to seminal works such as *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* and *The Gospel*

¹¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come: An Exposition of the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982).

¹² Newbigin's commitment to the unity of the Church is expressed narratively in Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 79–92, and theologically in Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (New York: Friendship Press, 1954).

¹³ Newbigin's missional perspective can be discerned through numerous works, two of which are worth noting here. In Lesslie Newbigin, *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), he set forth a series of essays on diverse topics in missions. These topics demonstrate Newbigin's breadth of understanding. He treated questions of secularization, pastoral evangelism, and urban ministry, all with a firm foundation in Scripture and with a dose of perspective gained through decades of missionary work. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), serves as Newbigin's more mature missiological meditations.

in a *Pluralist Society*.¹⁴ Newbigin's sustained missional engagement with Western culture led him into a confrontation with Enlightenment epistemology and Western idolatry.¹⁵ Over twenty years after his passing, various iterations of the Gospel and Our Culture Network have emerged throughout the Western world as missional scholars attempt to advance Newbigin's vision of a fresh missionary encounter between the gospel and Western culture.¹⁶

The remainder of this essay will explore how select aspects of Newbigin's work can inform a post-pandemic missiology of hope. Three elements of Newbigin's ministry will be utilized as key building blocks in this missiological endeavor. The first two are books by Newbigin, entitled *Journey into Joy* and *The Good Shepherd: Meditations on Christian Ministry*. The third source is Newbigin's season of multicultural ministry in urban Birmingham, UK. These elements of Newbigin's lifework have been intentionally selected because they have been somewhat neglected, especially when compared to Newbigin's more prominent books and ministries. This essay will excavate vital reservoirs of hope from each of these lesser-known sources, thereby enabling present-day readers of Newbigin to construct a post-pandemic missiology of hope.¹⁷

Journey into Joy

In 1971 Lesslie Newbigin delivered a series of six lectures at the Christian Medical College in Vellore. These "talks," as Newbigin called them,

¹⁴ See Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) and Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

¹⁵ See Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); and Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996).

¹⁶ The website of the American expression of The Gospel and Our Culture Network declares, "The Gospel and Our Culture Network exists to give careful attention to the interaction between culture, gospel and church. It arises from the conviction that genuine renewal in the life and witness of the church comes only with a fresh encounter of the gospel within our culture. The network focuses its activities, therefore, on the cultural research, theological reflection and church renewal necessary for the recovery of the church's missionary identity" (www.gocn.org). The Network has sponsored two different series of books: *The Gospel and Our Culture* series and the *Missiological Engagements* series.

¹⁷ The three sources of Newbigin's life will be examined in chronological order. *Journey into Joy* was published in 1972, *The Good Shepherd* was published in 1977, and Newbigin's ministry in Birmingham unfolded during the 1980s.

were given to Christian workers in an Indian context. Coming three decades after his arrival in India, these lectures constitute Newbigin's seasoned perspective as a veteran missionary. The lectures were transcribed and became the little book *Journey into Joy*.¹⁸

In Newbigin's introductory "invitation," he described the "ferment" of that era. Newbigin narrated student protests and the specter of civil unrest in America. He described the unease experienced by many as India transitioned into a "modern" society. He referenced the 1968 Paris Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. The Scottish missionary to India had developed a keen eye for global events. He knew how uncertain were the times in which his listeners lived. They were times that were both disorienting and terrifying. So, with a deep commitment to the story of Scripture, Newbigin invited his listeners to embark upon a quest with him. He called it a journey into joy.

Newbigin structured his lectures inductively, building towards his conclusion. His goal, however, was clear from the outset. His remarks were an attempt to provide a "compass adjustment" for the Church.¹⁹ He memorably remarked, "As I grow older, I am less inclined to be dogmatic about many things. But there are a few things about which I am sure. I am sure about Jesus Christ."²⁰ Whether or not they realized it, this word of wisdom was exactly what these young, aspiring healthcare professionals needed. Newbigin centered his "talks" around several important themes, including "Jesus Christ," "New Life in the Spirit," and "Hope for the World." Readers of Newbigin's later work will note the early expression of ideas he returned to for another twenty-seven years.

For Newbigin, the journey into joy begins and ends with Jesus. It is in Jesus, he believed, that people discover hope. Because Newbigin thought that there was an unrealized purpose for existence, he maintained that "hope becomes a central part of human life and not just delusion, as so much of the world's religion has taught."²¹ The humble missionary believed that the story of Scripture answers the perennial question of purpose. He believed that it does so by redirecting our hope to the One who entered history.²²

Crucially, it was the crucifixion of Jesus that provides humanity with a reservoir of hope. Newbigin noted that "the story of the resurrection is not told in the New Testament as the story of a victory which wipes out

¹⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, *Journey into Joy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

¹⁹ Newbigin, *Journey into Joy*, 12–13.

²⁰ Newbigin, *Journey into Joy*, 13.

²¹ Newbigin, *Journey into Joy*, 35.

²² To employ a later Newbigin phrase, Christ was the clue to history. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 103–15.

the defeat of the cross ... there is great emphasis laid on the fact that the risen Lord is the crucified one."²³ Newbigin emphasized that the cross must not be viewed as a temporary obstacle on the way to an empty tomb. Instead, it was the centerpiece of redemption. He argued, "The cross, in other words, is not put before us as defeat overruled by God; on the contrary, the cross is put before us as a victory which was acknowledged and ratified by God."²⁴ This crucicentric approach will be returned to later in this essay.

In his discussion of the Third Person of the Trinity, Newbigin opined that "Life in the Spirit means hope."²⁵ He grounded his thinking in Paul's discussion of hope in Romans chapter eight. He notes that the Spirit is an *arrabōn* ("deposit" or "down payment"). For Newbigin, this means that we ought to be "both happy for what we have received and also hopeful for what is still to come."²⁶ He understood that the Holy Spirit whets the appetite for the messianic feast that awaits the Redeemed.

Newbigin devoted an entire lecture to the theme of "Hope for the World."²⁷ He noted that, in Tamil, the word "hope" means "I think."²⁸ However, he argues, "Hope in the Bible is an eager and patient waiting for something which is good, and something which is sure because God has promised it."²⁹ Once again, Newbigin anchored his argumentation in the narrative arc of the Bible, turning to Abraham, Jesus, and the New Jerusalem. His words could have been written during the Coronavirus pandemic: "the world as it is, is not the ground of our hope and cannot be.... Hope is grounded in what God intends and what he has promised. And in the strength of that promise men can dare to say No to the world as it is."³⁰

Newbigin's embrace of the scriptural story meant that he could assert, in the aftermath of the tumult of the 1960s, "that death has no longer the last word."³¹ For those who doubted, Newbigin pointed to a blood-

²³ Newbigin, *Journey into Joy*, 45.

²⁴ Newbigin, *Journey into Joy*, 46.

²⁵ Newbigin, *Journey into Joy*, 77.

²⁶ Newbigin, *Journey into Joy*, 78.

²⁷ In connecting missiology, eschatology, and hope, Newbigin would have found a contemporary conversation partner in N. T. Wright. See N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008); and N. T. Wright, *History and Eschatology: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019).

²⁸ Newbigin, *Journey into Joy*, 81. Tamil was an Indian language in which Newbigin preached and wrote.

²⁹ Newbigin, *Journey into Joy*, 82.

³⁰ Newbigin, *Journey into Joy*, 83.

³¹ Newbigin, *Journey into Joy*, 88.

stained cross. In his lectures, Newbigin sought to direct his listeners upon their pilgrimage to the Holy City. It was at once a backward-looking venture (looking back to the cross) and a forward-looking quest (looking forward to the New Jerusalem). Newbigin believed that the narrative of the Bible ought to shape our affections and infuse us with purpose. This purpose can only be found as Christians live in the "the time between the times" and look ahead with hope for all that God has promised. In words fitting for present-day American society, Newbigin poignantly asserted, "The world is in pain, and we ourselves are in pain. But it is not a meaningless pain. It is the pain of childbirth. A new creation, a new world is coming to birth, a world which will be the world of God's redeemed and free children."³²

The Good Shepherd

The Good Shepherd: Meditations on Christian Ministry originated as a series of Saturday morning pastoral training sessions. Newbigin met with the clergy of the newly formed Church of South India. He celebrated communion with them, shared a meditation from Scripture, ate breakfast with his fellow pastors, and then participated in a group discussion of the issues facing leaders in the Church of South India.³³ All but one of the "meditations" transcribed in this little volume were originally delivered in the context of the regular clergy breakfast. This book by Newbigin presents a chance to explore his reflections upon what it means to be a pastor in the modern world. Although some of the material is dated, there is much that is still relevant for contemporary pastors.

It is crucial to take note of the context in which Newbigin and his colleagues ministered. Doing so will enable the reader to appreciate the emphases of *The Good Shepherd*. Newbigin's listeners at the breakfasts were clergy who ministered in Madras.³⁴ This place of three million people was a modern industrial Indian city. It was characterized by immigration and poverty. Newbigin noted that many immigrants to Madras made a home in the slums, "living in crowded clumps of unventilated huts, without water, light or sanitation—but with an unbeaten determination to come up in the world."³⁵

³² Newbigin, *Journey into Joy*, 93.

³³ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd: Meditations on Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 9.

³⁴ Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd*, 10, recalled that fifty-six ordained men and an unspecified number of women were present for these breakfasts. The pastors in attendance were responsible for at least 110 churches in Madras.

³⁵ Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd*, 9.

The clergy that Newbigin trained at these Saturday breakfasts led congregations that ministered to a wide range of the residents of Madras: “from the dwellers in the slums and on the pavements to the men and women who hold positions of highest leadership in government, business and the professions.”³⁶ Newbigin equipped clergy to minister in this challenging context. His message of hope speaks directly to those who minister in a post-pandemic American society.

In addition to accentuating the cross (as he did in *Journey into Joy*), three relevant themes emerge as Newbigin touched on the Christian message of hope. First, he addressed hope within a eucharistic setting. The clergy breakfasts commenced with communion. In that context, Newbigin shared his pastoral reflections. Oftentimes, those reflections touched on the Lord’s Table itself. For instance, he declared, “The action of the Eucharist is the most simple and profound form of testimony to what God has done for the world in Jesus Christ.”³⁷ Newbigin understood that communion, properly interpreted, gives hope. It is a reenactment of the gospel story, one which is saturated in hope. In fact, he believed that coming to The Table binds Christians to their missionary task: “What is given to us here is indeed the food and drink of eternal life. But to take it means that we are committed to being part of his body broken for the world, and to being poured out with his blood for the life of the world.”³⁸ Coming to the Lord’s Table replenishes one’s reservoir of hope, and prepares one to engage a world without hope.

Second, Newbigin addressed evangelism and social action, stating his firm commitment to each. In one reflection he described the unique feature of Christian social work: “We are out to convert people, not just to feed them.”³⁹ Later in the same sermon, he recalled a time before his conversion when he worked among unemployed miners in Wales. He noted that, “They needed more than food and games and education. They needed hope.”⁴⁰ Some might use Newbigin’s words to downplay involvement in the life of the world.

However, *The Good Shepherd* includes other meditations that address the relation of gospel proclamation and gospel demonstration. In one reflection, Newbigin noted, “If ... the Church is truly faithful, then the Church’s presence in any situation will be itself good news. The real presence of the people of God in a village, in a slum, in a situation of conflict

³⁶ Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd*, 10.

³⁷ Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd*, 31.

³⁸ Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd*, 99.

³⁹ Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd*, 93.

⁴⁰ Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd*, 94.

or of despair, will be itself good news, and a source of hope.”⁴¹ In another sermon he asserted that Christians ought to be committed “to doing the will of God for justice among men here and now.”⁴² Newbigin believed that gospel proclamation and gospel demonstration were both essential. Both provide hope, yet in different ways. As Newbigin argued, acts of Christian charity and justice provide hope in the moment and point beyond themselves to an eternal hope. Christian proclamation of the gospel makes explicit that eternal hope, anchoring it in the crucified and resurrected Lord.

Third, Newbigin (unsurprisingly) spoke on the theme of hope when he addressed the topic of Advent. In a reflection on “Future and Advent” he spoke eloquently of the Christian eschatological hope: “The task of the Church ... and the task of the leader in the Church, is to make this other world credible; to make it possible for men to believe that this world as it is, is not the last word; to keep constantly alight in men’s hearts the flame of hope and faith in the possibility of a different kind of world.”⁴³

Once again, it is apparent that Newbigin was committed to the story of Scripture, one which culminates in a Holy City on a New Earth. He understood that many would be so weighed down by the struggles of life that they would be unable to see this coming reality. He argued, “We are here to proclaim the reality and the imminence of a wholly other world, a world in which different powers rule and different standards operate. We are here to make it possible for ordinary men and women really to believe this, and therefore to live in hope and readiness.”⁴⁴ Newbigin pointed forward (as he did in *Journey into Joy*) to the eschatological kingdom of God. Newbigin understood that this vision of the Eternal City provides contemporary Christians with a deep reservoir of hope.

The Winson Green Pastorate

Thus far, this essay has examined two literary sources for hope, drawing upon two of Lesslie Newbigin’s lesser known works inspired by his Indian context. This section will add a final, biographical resource for hope by investigating an under-examined season of ministry during Newbigin’s “retirement” in Britain. It is fascinating to observe that in both of Newbigin’s missional contexts (India and Britain), he emphasized hope. Indeed, Newbigin’s multicultural ministry in urban Britain (in the twilight

⁴¹ Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd*, 62.

⁴² Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd*, 109.

⁴³ Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd*, 132.

⁴⁴ Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd*, 133.

of his career, no less) provides us with one of the deepest possible reservoirs of hope for a post-pandemic missiology.

“There is a famine of hope.”⁴⁵ With these words, Newbigin described the contextual setting for his Winson Green pastorate in urban Birmingham. He noted that the area was once bounded by the Winson Green prison, an insane asylum, a railway, and a factory. Now, the area was impoverished (at least by British standards). He declared, “The commodity in shortest supply is hope.”⁴⁶ Newbigin became the pastor of this church of about twenty members and served for eight years in an area popularly known as “Merry Hell.”⁴⁷ Newbigin insisted on leading a bicultural pastoral team (he recruited an Indian presbyter) to serve in this multicultural urban context.⁴⁸

Newbigin acknowledged that his urban pastorate was challenging and that it did not bear much visible fruit.⁴⁹ Yet, he refused to be discouraged. He asserted, “It is enough to know that Jesus reigns and shall reign, to be privileged to share this assurance with our neighbors, and to be able to do and say the small deeds and words that make it possible for others to believe.”⁵⁰ How did Newbigin minister in such a way that he maintained his own grasp on hope while simultaneously offering it to those in the grip of despair?

Newbigin balanced an involvement with the affairs of the neighborhood with the proclamation of eternal hope. He believed that “what the gospel offers is not just hope for the individual but hope for the world. Concretely I think this means that the congregation must be so deeply and intimately involved in the secular concerns of the neighborhood that it becomes clear to all that no one and nothing is outside the range of God’s love in Jesus.”⁵¹ Newbigin immersed himself in the community by engaging in children’s ministry and pastoral visitation.⁵² In response to a nearby race riot, he hosted a forum in the church between the local police

⁴⁵ Newbigin, *A Word in Season*, 41.

⁴⁶ Newbigin, *A Word in Season*, 40.

⁴⁷ Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 235.

⁴⁸ Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 243–44. According to Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin*, 59, both the community and the church were made up of Indians, West-Indians, and Anglo-Saxons.

⁴⁹ Newbigin, *A Word in Season*, 47, declared that “I certainly cannot tell any story of ‘success’ in terms of numbers. I guess that this is the experience of many working in such areas. The church remains small and vulnerable.”

⁵⁰ Newbigin, *A Word in Season*, 47.

⁵¹ Newbigin, *A Word in Season*, 43.

⁵² Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin*, 58–59.

and members of the community.⁵³ Newbigin engaged in an extensive debate about the proper method for religious education in Birmingham.

Even though Newbigin engaged in the local matters of his neighborhood, he did not naively think he could provide hope solely through his community involvement. In a poignant passage about his urban pastorate, he noted that “the hope of which the Church is called to be the bearer of in the midst of a famine of hope is a radically otherworldly hope.”⁵⁴ Once again, Newbigin’s commitment to the story of Scripture drove him to embrace a hope that is “already, but not yet.” He believed there was hope for today’s struggles, but that ultimate hope awaited the second advent.

Implications for a Missiology of Hope in a Post-Pandemic World

Thus far, this essay has engaged in a descriptive project. Two literary sources and one (primarily) biographical source from Lesslie Newbigin have been excavated with the goal of discovering reservoirs of hope. Now, it must be asked: how does this retrieval enable contemporary Christian leaders to develop a post-pandemic missiology of hope for American society? Three initial suggestions will be offered (these suggestions are by no means exhaustive). First, contemporary Christians should tell the cruciform story. Second, Christians should embrace holistic mission. Third, Christians should learn hope from the margins. In what follows, these suggestions will be briefly explored.

Tell the Cruciform Story

It has been noted repeatedly that Newbigin embraced the Story of Scripture and found in its narrative arc a basis for hope. This can be seen in his discussion of Israel and especially in his eschatological reflections on the destiny of the Redeemed. However, for Newbigin, the story had a form: it was cross-shaped. Newbigin maintained a clear focus upon the cross of Christ as the centerpiece of the narrative, one that is uniquely capable of providing humans with hope.

At the beginning of *Journey into Joy*, Newbigin recalled how he came to faith. He was serving in South Wales among unemployed miners “who had been rotting in unemployment and misery for a decade.”⁵⁵ He related what happened in the third person: “One night, overwhelmed by the sense of defeat and of the power of evil in the world, there was given to him a vision of the cross of Jesus Christ as the one and only reality great enough to span the distance between heaven and hell ... the one reality

⁵³ Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin*, 148.

⁵⁴ Newbigin, *A Word in Season*, 44.

⁵⁵ Newbigin, *Journey into Joy*, 13.

that could make sense of the human situation.”⁵⁶ This vision of the cross guided and sustained Newbigin through decades of life and ministry.

Newbigin understood the implications of the cross for the suffering Christian. He recognized that Christians must not rush past the cross to arrive at the empty tomb. The power of Easter morning lies in its relation to the darkness of Good Friday. As Newbigin noted, the resurrected Lord still carries the scars of the cross in his body. He is forever the Crucified Lord.⁵⁷

Many suffer from a loss of hope in the aftermath of the Coronavirus pandemic. This despair might be the result of bereavement, economic hardship, or the mental stress of prolonged isolation. For all those who suffer, the old, rugged cross stands as a beacon of hope. It is a central paradox of Christianity that the symbol of a violent Empire could be transformed into a source of hope. When a person looks to the cross, they see that God became human, that he paid for humanity’s sins, and that he defeated evil. The Place of the Skull becomes, ironically, a place of hope for all who suffer. The first step in constructing a post-pandemic missiology of hope is to tell the story of Scripture, emphasizing its cruciform shape.

Practice Holistic Mission

Missionaries and pastors sometimes grapple with the relationship of evangelism and social action. Sometimes Christians wonder if they should limit their focus to gospel proclamation, or if they should also emphasize the societal dimensions of the Christian faith. As noted in this essay, Newbigin was a fervent proponent of both evangelism and social action. He engaged in direct evangelistic work throughout his career, from Madras to Birmingham. In *The Good Shepherd* he emphasized the priority of evangelism (although without expressing it in these terms). Yet, Newbigin also taught the clergy in Madras that they should be involved in social work. Therefore, it is not surprising that he led his tiny congregation in Winson Green to engage on issues of racial justice.

Newbigin saw mission holistically, as directed to the entire person. He was aware that his neighbors, whether slum-dwellers in Madras or immigrants in Winson Green, were whole people: body and soul. He understood that ministry to a human being requires a holistic approach. That is why Newbigin believed that churches should be “involved in the wider life of the community ... sharing its burdens and sorrows.”⁵⁸ Like many

⁵⁶ Newbigin, *Journey into Joy*, 13–14.

⁵⁷ Newbigin, *Journey into Joy*, 45–46.

⁵⁸ Newbigin, *A Word in Season*, 46.

before him, and many after him, Newbigin sought to articulate the relationship between evangelism and social action in the mission of the Church. Newbigin was determined to do both. His was a holistic mission.

The Coronavirus pandemic has wreaked havoc on the United States. Throughout this tumultuous season, many churches have embraced a holistic approach to mission. They might not have always articulated a theological rationale for their praxis. Yet they acted to serve their neighbors, because like Newbigin, they believed that churches must be involved in the wider life of the community, sharing its burdens and sorrows. New York City was, for a time, the global epicenter of the pandemic, and nearly 30,000 people have died there from COVID-19. In this time of crisis, churches mobilized to serve those who were medically or financially vulnerable. Southern Baptists were heavily involved in these relief efforts.⁵⁹

Uncertainty abounds about what shape the post-pandemic world will take. Many are wondering, “What will the new normal look like?” While specific answers might be elusive, general claims can be made. The post-pandemic world will probably not look like a dystopian novel. However, it could feature greater levels of poverty, sickness, distrust, and mental health disorders. Societal norms might shift for an entire generation, as people who lived through the pandemic grapple with life on the other side of a modern-day plague.

Christian leaders who operate in this emerging post-pandemic world will have a challenge before them. They must freshly contextualize the gospel for people who have been suddenly traumatized and dramatically changed by the Coronavirus. In this new normal, holistic outreach will be an invaluable approach to Christian mission. There will be opportunities to provide economic relief (ministries could participate in job creation programs), emotional relief (Christian counselors should be prepared to minister to their newly traumatized neighbors), and medical relief (churches could offer complimentary health screenings and partner with pharmacies to provide flu shots). Churches should become full participants in community rebuilding efforts that “seek the peace of the city” (Jer 29:7). Doing so will provide credibility for those who minister to a

⁵⁹ See “Pastor Patrick Thompson forms Community Coronavirus Relief Organization in New York,” <https://video.foxnews.com/v/6148915603001#sp=show-clips>; Tess Schoonhoven, “Brooklyn Grocery Ministry Meets Needs of Hurting, Minority Community,” <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/brooklyn-grocery-ministry-meets-needs-of-hurting-minority-community/>; and Brandon Elrod, “Southern Baptist Church Plants, Send Relief Persist in Outreach to New York City,” <https://www.sendrelief.org/news/southern-baptist-church-plants-send-relief-persist-in-outreach-to-new-york-city/>.

suddenly distrustful, despairing populace.

At the height of New York City's grim struggle against the virus, this writer had the surreal experience of standing on a street corner with a team of about fifteen volunteers who gave away 3,000 facemasks in less than an hour. People eagerly accepted these gifts because of the medical security that they symbolized. This moment offers clarity to those who wish to minister in the new normal. To share the gospel with others, many leaders will need to embrace a holistic approach to mission that combines proclamation and demonstration.⁶⁰

In the emergent world after COVID-19, Americans will need to learn to hope again. What better place for them to learn hope than in the community that dances to the cadence of the gospel? The Church is a band of misfits, people drawn together by their shared commitment to a cross-shaped story. When local churches embrace holistic mission, they will discover new opportunities to explain the reason for the hope that they possess (1 Pet 3:15).

Learn Hope from the Margins

Evangelicals will suddenly find themselves in the position of having to articulate a message of hope to a despairing society. Evangelicals should learn from, and build upon, the work of those Christians on the margins who have already been forced to keep hope alive. In choosing to learn from marginalized Christian communities, contemporary missiologists will be following in the footsteps of Lesslie Newbigin, who argued that Western Christians should "listen to the witness of Christians from other cultures."⁶¹

Newbigin did not live up to the caricature of the condescending twentieth-century British missionary. Instead, he was humble and always a student. He viewed the Church of South India as an equal to the Church of Scotland. When he returned to Britain and began his challenging urban pastorate, Newbigin knew that he would need help from someone who did not look like him. Newbigin recalled, "I had suggested to the Birmingham District Council of the URC that we should seek the help of the Church of North India in finding a Punjabi-speaking pastor to work with me in this ministry."⁶² The result was the recruitment of the Reverend

⁶⁰ This approach, highlighted by the slogan "Meet the need first," was already employed by the Graffiti Network of churches in New York City prior to the pandemic (<https://www.upsidedownlife.org/our-goal>).

⁶¹ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 22.

⁶² Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 244.

Hakkim Singh Rahi, who served alongside Newbigin for six years.⁶³ Newbigin embraced his new "colleague," whom he described as an ardent evangelist. As a result of Rahi's evangelistic skill, Newbigin was able to participate in a "memorable baptism in the Edgbaston Reservoir."⁶⁴

Newbigin continually engaged the conceptual frameworks of Christians who hailed from cultures other than his own. He gratefully related an anecdote of his time as a colleague of Orlando Costas.⁶⁵ Costas was a prominent Latin American theologian who would go on to emphasize missiology from "the outside."⁶⁶ Newbigin also repeatedly shared the paradigm shifting question of the Indonesian General Simatoupong: "Can the West be converted?"⁶⁷ This question, said Newbigin, "reverberated in my mind.... I am a pastor, along with an Indian colleague, of an inner-city congregation in Birmingham ... faced with a kind of paganism ... resistant to the gospel.... So the question becomes a burning one: Can the West be converted?" Because Newbigin believed that Western Christians needed to learn from the witness of non-Western Christians, he did not hesitate to glean from these Latin American and Asian Christians.

Those who seek to build a missiology of hope for a post-pandemic world should draw upon the deep reservoirs of hope that have been established by marginalized Christian communities. Perhaps American Christians can learn about hope in the face of government overreach from the many networks of underground Chinese house churches. Perhaps American Christians can learn about hope amid tragedy from Asian leaders who have weathered natural disaster and civil war. Perhaps American Christians can learn about hope from long-suffering African-American churches, whose very survival has been threatened by terrorists' bombs and the hangman's noose.⁶⁸

A post-pandemic missiology of hope for American society must draw upon the wisdom of those who have already been forced to follow Jesus into the darkness of Good Friday and to sit with him in the awful silence of Holy Saturday. These pioneers can articulate the hope of Easter in ways that will no doubt resonate with a post-pandemic American society.

⁶³ Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 244.

⁶⁴ Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 244.

⁶⁵ Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 245–46.

⁶⁶ Orlando Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1982). Costas's missiology emphasized the insights of those on the margins of Christianity.

⁶⁷ Newbigin, *A Word in Season*, 66–67.

⁶⁸ Esau McCaulley, *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2020).

Choosing to Hope in a Twilight World: A Missiological Epilogue

America is suffering from a crisis of confidence, a sudden descent into despair. One day, the threat of the Coronavirus will pass, but the malaise may not vanish so quickly. This essay has been an attempt to imagine what ministry will look like on the other side of the pandemic. Selected writings and ministry experiences of Lesslie Newbigin have been examined and used as building blocks for a post-pandemic missiology of hope. Three initial proposals have been made: post-pandemic churches should tell the cruciform story, embrace holistic mission, and learn hope from the margins.

When the world emerges from the darkness of this moment, it ought to find the Church standing ready to offer hope. As Newbigin declared, “In a twilight world where people are lost and asking their way, a few people marching together in one direction with the light of hope and expectation on their faces will surely prompt others to ask: ‘Where are you going?’”⁶⁹ In his magisterial eighth chapter of Romans, Paul addressed the central theme of Christian hope. He stated that Christians operate out of a “hope that the creation itself will also be set free” (Rom 8:20–21). Paul understood that “if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with patience” (Rom 8:25). These verses contain the kernel of a post-pandemic missiology of hope. Because of what Jesus has done, is doing, and will do, Christians are the people of hope who invite their neighbors to join them on a journey of hope.

⁶⁹ Newbigin, *Journey into Joy*, 79.