

PLANTING CHURCHES IN NORTH AMERICA TODAY

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In a provocative article Leslie Newbigin asks, "Can the West be Converted?" The question seems to fly in the face of facts. North Americans — 64% of them — call themselves "religious," and 34% claim to be "born again" (Hirsley 1991:8). Evangelical churches appear to be growing.

Behind these data are other data that raise doubts. As professions of Christian faith increase, morality in the U.S., even in churches, continues to fall. The lifestyles of Christians are little different from their consumer-oriented neighbors. Only 37% want to share their beliefs with those of other religions — down from 42% in 1989 (Hirsley 1991:8). In its search for growth, has the church in the west sold its soul and become a social club?

What does it mean to be the church in the North American setting? To answer this question, we need to understand both the world in which we live, and the nature of the church as the body of Christ. We will explore the first of these issues here.

In The World

In examining our North American

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context, it is important that we do not see it as a uniform whole. We live in an increasingly diverse society. Immigrants, refugees, students and businesspeople from around the world are settling in our neighborhoods, both enriching our lives and raising deep questions for the church.

We also live in an age of transition. Modernity, with its industrialization, technological wizardry, massive institutions, and mechanistic view of reality is under attack. Some speak of the emergence of a Post Modern Era that challenges the old foundations of our societies. It is not clear whether Post Modernity will indeed unseat Modernity and usher us into a New Age of relationships, spirituality, beauty and self-realization, or whether it is a passing reaction to the powerful pull of modernity. It is very much a part of the current scene, and I will use the distinction to analyze North America.

The World of Modernity

The age of modernity began about the sixteenth century, but it has come to maturity only in the twentieth century. On the surface it is seen in the growth of the sciences, in contemporary technological advances such as airplanes and computers, and systems of organization management based on control and objectives. At a deeper level it is a worldview that has deeply affected us as Christians, and our churches.

This Worldly Orientation

As Max Weber (1930) has pointed out modernity began with a shift from a focus on other-worldly, eternal realities to this-worldly, present realities. As our attention is drawn to life here on earth, we have lost sight of heaven. Today we are mesmerized by the news, and have lost a sense of history.

This emphasis on the present world has deeply influenced the world in which we live. Early it gave birth to the sciences, technology, and business with their emphasis on improving life on this earth. Later this led to a growing secularization of western society, and to pragmatism and consumerism as a way of life (Fox and Lears 1983; Kavanaugh 1986). Underlying all of these is a mechanistic approach to life which assumes that with proper planning, and human engineering and effort, we can achieve our goals.

As Christians we oppose secularism, but it is creeping into our churches by the back doors. It is seen in our loss of sacred

symbols, and with them a sense of sacredness itself. It is seen in our move towards worship as entertainment. It is seen in the fact that many of us have sold out to consumerism with little resistance. The good life here for ourselves and for our children is one of our highest values. Sacrifice for the sake of eternity is losing its meaning.

Pragmatism, too, has become a part of our churches. We are often more interested in techniques than in consequences, in success than in outcome, in doing than in being (Ellul 1964).

The Public-Private Split

As Leslie Newbiggin notes (1986), a second characteristic of modernity is the division of life and reality into public and private spheres (table 1). Each of us experience this split in our everyday lives. At work reasoning and planning dominate our lives. We manage our feelings and become “teachers,” “secretaries,” “workers,” and “preachers.” At home we “let down our hair,” express our real feelings and are persons. At work we are part of corporations and other bureaucratic systems based on accomplishing tasks. In our private lives we organize clubs or join crowds that serve common personal interests.

Table 1
Public and Private Spheres in Modern Life

PUBLIC SPHERE	PRIVATE SPHERE
— Office	— Home
— Work	— Entertainment, recreation
— Rationalized, planned	— Emotional, spontaneous
— Managed self	— Real self
— Objective truth	— Subjective truth
— Science	— Religion
— News	— Views
— Uniformity and Grand Unifying Theories (GUTS)	— Pluralism and Tolerance
— Mechanical worldview	— Organic worldview

Most North Americans put religion in the private sphere. It goes along with sports, entertainment, music, arts and other personal preferences. Everyone must study science in school,

including those studying in Christian schools. Religion, on the other hand, is optional. It is private truth — what you choose to believe in.

The church has struggled with its identity in this split world. Main line denominations tend to see themselves in the public sphere. They speak out on world events and try to influence governments. Evangelicals and Charismatics, for the most part, have been content to be in the private sphere, defining spirituality in terms of personal behavior, and emotions.

This split raises difficult questions for the church. Should we be content to see Christianity as an answer to our personal problems, but not to the problems of our society and the world? Should we define evangelism only in terms of individual witness? As Anabaptists, we have been uncertain about our relationship to either of these spheres. We want to have a wholistic view of the Christian life rooted in the community of the church, but we live in a fragmented society.

Individualism

A third characteristic of modernity is individualism (Bellah 1985). In everyday life we value individual freedom, personal choice and self-fulfillment higher than social coercion, group demands and corporate good. In society we value democracy and capitalism as principles of organization. On the basis of these we organize clubs and corporations.

Individualism is valued in North American churches. We choose the churches we attend for personal reasons. We feel we have a right to leave if we don't like the preacher. We hesitate to exercise discipline on those who stray. In many ways we increasingly operate like a religious club rather than a family. The former is made up of people of like mind. Its unity is based on homogeneity. In the latter every family member is different, and valued. We must live with these differences, or leave the family altogether.

Urbanism

One of the products of modernity is the city. The 1990 U.S. census shows that more than half of the people in the U.S. live in 39 cities over one million people. Canadians, too, are gathering in a few large urban areas.

The city is more than a gathering of people. It is a way of

life and a worldview. It is made possible by macro social systems related to such services as utilities, communications, transportation, banking, business, government, universities and politics. It is characterized by mobility, transiency, pragmatism, and specialization. The city nurtures a view of the world that values human engineering of nature and society, achievement and profit, competition and success, and diversity and tolerance.

The city poses a new challenge to the church, not only because so many people live there, but because it is a different way of life. The church in North America, for the most part, has been shaped in rural communities characterized by enduring relationships, stability, continuity over time, and a rhythmic cycle of days and seasons. It assumed a homogeneous congregation that participated in all of the church activities, and one basic style of worship and ministry.

Rural ways, however, do not often work in cities. They work in urban ethnic communities and among rural immigrants. In two or three generations, however, the offspring are assimilated into urban life (Hiebert and Hertig 1991). Churches built on the foundations of ethnicity grow so long as immigration continues. The children and grandchildren of the immigrants, however, do not want to be identified with their ethnic roots. Many reject their ethnic church, and with it Christianity, in their attempt to become "Americans." In three or four generations the ethnic church dies out if it does not open its doors to the world around it.

We as Mennonite Brethren struggle with the same transition. We are second, third and fourth generation immigrants in Canada and the U.S. seeking to assimilate into North American societies. We are also rural peoples moving into the cities, but using rural ways of organizing our churches and worship services, and of evangelizing our neighbors.

The World of Post-Modernity

A number of scholars argue that we are moving out of the age of modernity into the age of post-modernity (Naisbitt 1982). What are its chief characteristics, and how do these affect our being the church and planting the church in North America?

Post-modernity is a rebellion against modernity's emphasis on uniformity, materialism and mechanistic determinism.

Deconstructionism

In the first place, post-modernity is a reaction to modernity's stress on uniformity. The big factory, the large department store, and the multinational corporation are the latter's hallmarks. Science and technology its guide. Standardization its goal.

Socially, North America has always be pluralistic. Immigrants from many countries have settled here. Until the 1980s, however, the effects of this pluralism were tempered. The vast majority of immigrants came from Europe and shared a basic worldview dominated by Christian values and Enlightenment rationalism. Furthermore, at least in the U.S. there has been the conviction that this diversity will blend into one dominant American culture. In the end, everyone should speak English and live by western concepts of law. Christians have the right, therefore, to seek to convert other people to faith in Christ.

In contrast to this, post-modernity glorys in diversity. Small specialty shops, a variety of food stalls, and home offices are its trademarks. Diversity, not uniformity, and decentralization, not centralization are valued. Relationships take priority over efficiency.

As a dogma, deconstructionism affirms that at the very foundations social, cultural and religious diversity is good, that all expressions of these are equally valid, and, therefore, none should seek to convert the others to its point of view. Christopher Duraisingh writes (Newbigin 1989:vii),

The witness of the church has always taken place within a pluralistic milieu. During recent years, however, new perceptions of this milieu have emerged, and pluralism is fast assuming the character of an ideology.

In such a context, it is the height of arrogance to seek to convert others. Missionaries have always faced this relativism as they went into the world to minister. Today, however, that world has moved next to our churches, and our local church members are facing the corrosive appeal of "live and let live."

Reason, too, is under attack because it is seen as the foundation for modernity. Incongruity and logical inconsistencies are seen not as signs of weakness, but of strength. Hutcheon writes (1980:xiii),

Willfully contradictory, then, post modern culture uses

and abuses the conventions of discourse. It knows it cannot escape the implications of the economic (late capitalist) and ideological (liberal humanist) domains of its time. There is no outside. All it can do is question from within.

Deconstructionism has begun to affect the church. Reginald Bibby (1987), in a study of Canadians, found that most no longer have a single theological system by which they critique reality. Rather, they have a disjointed mix of theological ideas that serve different pragmatic purposes.

Spirituality

Post modernity is also a reaction to the materialism of modernity. Identity is not sought in rational meaning, but in transcendent experiences and emotional highs. Mysticism and ecstasy (both of which center in the self, in contrast to awe and mystery which focus on the Other), are dominant themes.

Identity is also sought in health and wholeness. We are moving into a therapeutic age in which the concepts of evil and sin are replaced by ignorance and desire. The answer to the present human dilemma, so it is said, is not salvation, but healing.

With decentralization comes the question of organization — how do things get done? The post-modern answer is strong leaders who are not bureaucratic administrators, but charismatic (in the sociological sense) gurus. It is they who can lead us forward.

But Not of the World

How can we be the church and plant new churches in this world of social and cultural pluralism, and of modern and post-modern worldviews?

Pluralism

It is clear that we as a church must deal with the growing pluralism in North America. Our response must be two-fold.

Pluralism as a Fact

We must first deal with the fact that pluralism is here to stay. The question is, how do we deal with this in the church. On the one hand, we can continue the colonialism of the past

and try to remake others into our own church image in terms of language, worship forms, organization and lifestyles. On the other, we can pursue an anti-colonial course of action by starting homogeneous churches in each ethnic community and affirming its differences. Neither of these is biblical. Neither of these works in the long run. The homogenization of North American churches is clearly impossible. On the other hand, denominations that started ethnic churches now face the question of integration at the denominational and congregational levels.

We must plant ethnic churches to reach the different groups in our societies. But we must also build relationships of fellowship and partnership that demonstrate to the world the Gospel of reconciliation and love. We must find ways of celebrating diversity, even as we affirm our common unity in Christ. We need to move beyond the paternalism that characterized past inter-ethnic and inter-class relationships. We need to move beyond the isolationism of homogeneous churches.

Pluralism as an ideology

At a deeper level, we face the challenge of pluralism as an ideology. This is an acid corroding the foundations of our churches. It kills our evangelistic fervor and missionary outreach. It destroys Truth and the Gospel.

Our response to the relativism born of pluralism cannot be a return to the dogmatic equation of the Gospel with our own cultural understandings of it. We need to recognize that the Gospel speaks prophetically to our own Christianity just as does to all human religions and cultures. Here, I believe our Anabaptist understanding of the nature of theology helps us greatly.

On the other hand, we must return to a strong affirmation of the uniqueness of Christ and the Gospel as divine revelation, not human creation. Only revelation from without can free us from our cultural subjectivisms.

Critical Contextualization

We face a second question, how can we as the older Anglo church recover our vital Christian faith, a faith that keeps us from becoming part of the world, and that motivates us to live in and minister to that world? I agree with Newbigin that we have too often sold out to the world and its ways. We have

contextualized the Gospel uncritically, to the point that we stand under the judgment God gave of Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-22). We need a spiritual revival that turns us around to being first God's people, and then God's people in this world.

With revival we need to return to a process of critical contextualization in which we examine our ways in the light of biblical teaching. We need to hear the Word of God afresh in our cultural and social contexts, and to build the church as a transcultural body of faith, fellowship and biblical interpretation. Without this, our churches become religious clubs, crowds or corporations.

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