

Planting Churches in North America Today

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PLANTING CHURCHES IN NORTH AMERICA TODAY
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In a powerful article Leslie Newbigin asks the question, "Can the West be Converted?" The question seems to fly in the face of facts. 64% of North Americans call themselves 'religious,' and 34% claim to be born again (Hirsley 1991:8). Overall evangelical churches appear to be growing.

Behind these data are another set that pose deeper questions. Even as professions of Christian faith increase, morality in the U.S. has continued to fall. Only 37% say they want to share their beliefs with those of other religions - down from 42% in 1989 (Hirsley 1991:8). Furthermore, the differences in lifestyle between Christians and the world continue to drop.

It is because he is aware of these contradictory data that Newbigin raises a deeper question, "Has the Church in the West sold out to western culture, and lost its soul?" In our growth are we in danger of becoming religious clubs and no longer being the church?

In seeking to plant churches in North American today, we must understand the world in which we live, and the nature of the church as the body of Christ before we can ask the question how the church should find its expression in the modern world. I will look briefly at the first of these, namely the times in which we live. Others in this conference will deal with the nature of the church. It is our task in this conference to seek

together to determine how the church should look in the modern setting.

IN THE WORLD

In examining our North American context, it is important that we do not see it as a single whole. We live in a time of rapid pluralization of the world around us. Immigrants, refugees, students and businessmen are moving into our cities. In L.A. classes are now taught in more than 67 languages. Most of us in this room live in similarly diverse communities.

We also live in an age of transition. Modernity, the order in which we grew up with its industrialization, technological wizardry, massive institutions and social systems, and mechanistic view of reality is under attack. Some speak of the emergence of a Post Modern Era which will challenge the cultural foundations of our societies. It is not clear whether what is called Post Modernity is a rear-guard action against the massive centralization of modernity and that the latter will eventually win out, or that Post Modernity will indeed unseat Modernity and usher us into a New Age of relationships, spirituality, beauty and self-realization.

I would like to analyze our North American context in terms of the Modern - Post Modern distinction. It is a helpful way of looking at the world around us, but we need to realize that this model itself is still in question.

The World of Modernity

The age of modernity began about the sixteenth century, but it came to maturity only in the twentieth century. At the surface it is seen in modern technological advances, organizational management and science. At the deepest level it is a worldview that has profoundly affected us as Christians, and our churches.

This Worldly Orientation

As Max Weber has pointed out¹, modernity began with a shift from a focus on other-worldly, eternal realities to this-worldly, present realities. Gradually we focused our attention on life here and lost sight of heaven. Today we are mesmerized by the News and have lost our sense of History.

This emphasis on the present world has deeply influenced the world in which we live. Early on it gave rise to the sciences and technology with their study of this world, and to a valuation of business as an important part of life.² Later this led to an increasing secularization of western society as materialism become a dominant philosophy of the common people. Since the end of the nineteenth century it has given birth to pragmatism and to consumerism as a way of life.³

Today these four movements are powerful forces affecting our churches. Science and management by objectives influences the way we plan our church activities. The underlying assumption is that with proper planning and human engineering we can achieve our goals.

While our churches publicly oppose secularism, it is creeping into our sanctuaries by the back doors. It is seen in our loss of sacred symbols, and with them a sense of sacredness itself.⁴ It is seen in our move towards worship as entertainment, and our adapting the church to the schedules of the world.

Pragmatism, too, has become a North American way of life. We separate means from ends, and are more interested in techniques⁵ than in consequences, in success than in outcome, in doing than in being. We see this in our ads which show us that we can go anywhere in comfort in a Mercedes, but never ask us where we want to go in one.

Finally, as Bruggeman points out, while we argued with liberals of doctrine, both 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.

How should we as Christians respond to secularism, consumerism and human engineering approaches to life?

The Public-Private Split

A second characteristic of modernity is the division of life and reality into public and private spheres (table 1).⁶ Each of us experience this split in our everyday lives. At work reasoning and planning dominate our lives. We manage our feelings and become the roles we occupy (manager, secretary, plumber, etc). 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

As Newbiggin points out (1986), 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 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. As anabaptists, we have been uncertain about our

relationship to either of these spheres - seeking rather to return to a wholistic view of the Christian life.

Today this split is leading to an even deeper problem for us. So long as all our neighbors were Christians or secularists, we could continue our evangelistic outreach with little social discord. Now, however, our neighbors are Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists. All of us must study science in school because it is seen as objective, universal truth. In religion, however, if we all are evangelistic, social unrest is bound to occur. The simplest answer is for each religion to reach its own children, and to accept other religions as other equally valid religious systems. This kills evangelism and further makes religion a matter of subjective opinion.

We as leaders need to understand the tremendous societal pressure at work on our lay people not to seek to convert those of other religions. Our jobs are not at stake when we call for evangelism. Theirs often are when they put it into practice.

How should we as a church respond to the growing religious relativism and emphasis on tolerance in our modern context?

Individualism

A third characteristic of modernity is individualism.⁷ 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. It's unity is based on homogeneity. In the latter every family member is different. We must live with these differences, and we cannot opt out without dropping out of 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 (1991:3)* 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 the building of macro social systems of water, power, communications, transportation, banking, business, government, universities and politics. It is characterized by mobility, transiency, social diversity based on class and ethnicity, the proliferation of clubs, associations and networks, and specialization. Behind this lies a view of the world that stresses human engineering of nature and society; time and efficiency; achievement and profit; competition, pragmatism and success; and the celebration of diversity and an emphasis on tolerance of others.

The city poses a new challenge to the church, not only because so many people are moving there, but because it is a different way of life. The church in North America, for the most part, was shaped in a rural setting. This placed an emphasis on enduring relationships, stability, continuity over time, and a rhythmic cycle of days and seasons. It assumed a homogeneous community that participated in all of the church activities. It also assumed one basic style of worship and ministry.

Rural ways, however, do not often work in cities. They continue to work in immigrant communities in cities made up of people from an ethnic group, such as the Chinese, Hmong and Mennonites, or of rural migrants to the city. In any city there are these pockets of rural life - barrios, favelas, bustees and ghettos. In two or three generations, however, the second and third generation 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 the U.S. and Canada 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.

Pluralism

To some extent North America has always be pluralistic. Immigrants from many parts of the world have settled on its shores, trying to find a place in a larger society.

Until the 1980s, however, the effects of this pluralism were tempered. First, the vast majority of immigrants came from Europe and shared a basic worldview. Their surface cultures differed, but underneath, the people had roots in a 'Christian civilization.' Christian morality, if not faith, dominated their values. Enlightenment rationalism was the foundation for their beliefs.

Since the 1980s North America has faced a flood of immigrants from around the world - immigrants with radically different worldviews. The people of North America now comprise a mosaic of more than 500 ethnic groups. More that 100 million Americans identify themselves as language-culture people, speaking some 636 languages and dialects (Home Mission Board, SBC, 1991). Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Confucianists, Bahais, and animists of a thousand sorts have crowded into our cities. We no longer share even the basic assumptions of a Christian-Enlightenment worldview.

A second tempering factor until now has been the faith that in time the diversity in North America will melt into a single culture. At first North America was seen as a 'melting pot' in

which people of all cultures would merge into the dominant American culture. Later it was referred to as a 'stew pot,' implying that different peoples would keep their distinctives, but would become part of one larger, integrating culture. Even that metaphor is now obsolete. We now ask whether people should indeed seek some fundamental unity underlying their differences, and, if not what would hold us together if we all affirm our diversity.

In the worldview of modernity, we recognize the present diversity of peoples, cultures and religions as a fact, but seek for a common foundation in which to build our nations. In such a world, Christians have the right, even responsibility, to seek to convert other people to faith in Christ. After all, Christianity was one of the foundations on which western society has been built.

Current evangelical efforts to reach new immigrant communities have been quite successful. Southern Baptists, Methodists and others have rapidly growing 'language' or 'ethnic' churches. This has posed other problems, how do these churches fit into the larger denominational structures? How should these allocate money and power? On a lower level, how can several diverse congregations live together in a single church building? Who, for example, should keep the kitchen clean, and what does it mean to be clean?

The growth of non-Anglo congregations masks another deeper issue. The Anglo membership in many evangelical denominations

continues to drop. For example, the growth of the Southern Baptists is all a product of nonWhite growth. Is 'Anglo Christianity,' which has served as the heart of these denominations, dying at the core?

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 (cf. Niasbitt 1982). It is not clear whether this is simply another rearguard action in the private sphere against the advance of modernity with its massive systems, or, indeed, an early sign of the demise of modernity and the birth of a new era.

In either case, post-modernity is increasingly a part of our lives, and we as a church must be aware of it. What are its chief characteristics, and how do these affect our being the church and planting the church in North America?

Deconstructionism

At its root, post-modernity is a rebellion against the massive unified, materialistic and mechanistic systems of modernity. It seeks a new 'spirituality' based on an organic-relational view of reality. This new worldview shows itself in several ways.

Glorying in pluralism and smallness If modernity is characterized by massive uniformity (e.g. McDonalds, G.M.), Post-Modernity glorifies in diversity and smallness (eg. shopping malls with a variety of food stalls and small specialty shops).

Decentralization, not centralization, is valued. Relationships, not efficiency, take priority.

Behind this fragmentation lies a new view of pluralism.

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.

As a dogma, pluralism 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.

Missionaries have always faced this relativism as they went into the world to minister. Today 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. (Quote)

Deconstructionism has begun to affect the church. Bibby (19##), 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.

Relativism and tolerance In a pluralistic society in which we affirm differences, tolerance is a prime value. We may invite

others to join us, but we must not seek to convert them. We must respect the rights of others to believe differently from ourselves.

We must also recognize that there are many roads to spirituality, and that all of these lead to the same end. Relativism becomes a way of life.

Social unity is found not in centralized systems and bureaucracies, but in networks of cooperative activities. In these, each group maintains its own distinctives, but joins other groups in common causes.

Spirituality

Post modernity moves beyond modernity with its emphasis on self-fulfillment to self-realization. A key question is that of identity, particularly in relationship to others and the world outside. This, in part, helps us understand the emergence of sports as a pseudo-religion (###).

Identity is now sought not in rational but in emotional unity. 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. As ## points out, we are moving into a therapeutic age. The concepts of sin and evil are replaced by ignorance and desire. The answer to the present human dilemma is not salvation, but healing.

Guruism

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 in our own church image in language, worship styles, 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 will work. 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.

The Uniqueness of the Gospel

Our response to the relativism 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 minister in 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 contextualization¹⁰ 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.

I believe we as a conference are at a critical point in our spiritual walk, and the decisions and actions we take here and at other similar conferences will affect profoundly where we will be in fifty or a hundred years.

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