

LEAD ON

HOW TO GROW INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP

BY NICKY SMITH

What does the work and life of Lesslie Newbigin teach us about indigenous leadership?

Lesslie Newbigin was a 20th century missionary for the church in South India. He is often referred to for his pithy quotes on the nature of the Church. But what, if anything, might he have to say about leadership?

Newbigin's legacy is venerated in his writings but often overlooked is his missionary praxis. He had a distinctive approach to communicating the gospel in the South Indian context. Through his work in serving and empowering locals within the Tamil Church, Newbigin offers insights for the UK Church in encouraging contextual leadership.

WHAT IS INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP?

Indigenous leadership is a concept coined from missionary literature. It involves raising leaders within a specific context, often to take on ecclesial oversight. This leadership model particularly empowers locals to have ownership within a faith community.

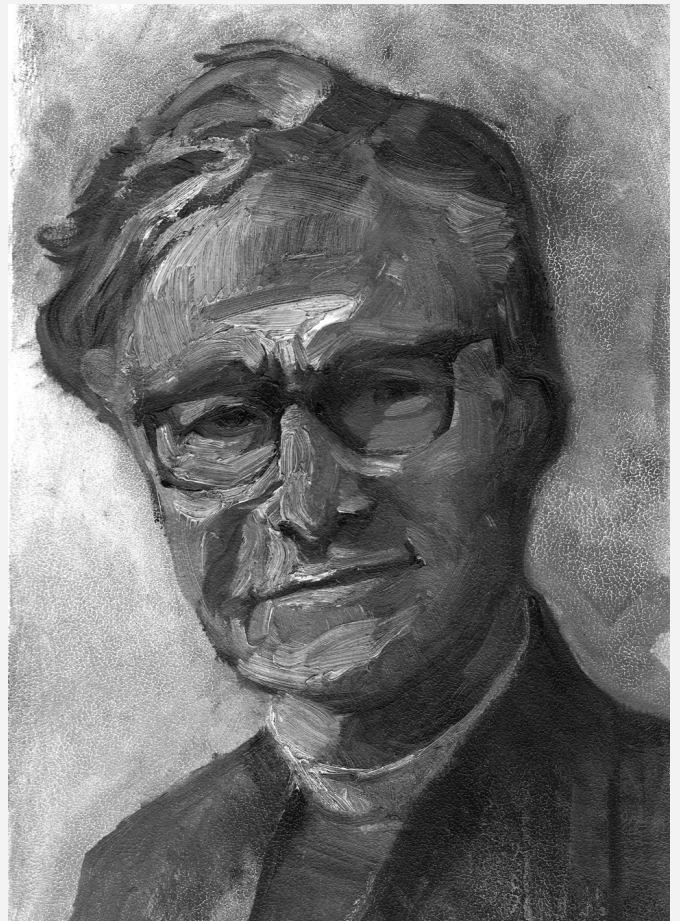
Within the indigenous missionary model, space is left for contextual faith communities to grow uniquely, specific for the place, and appropriately structured to serve the needs of the local context. The role of the outsider, or missionary, is to facilitate the identification of those individuals with giftings and then to provide support in releasing those giftings.

Donovan captures the essence of this missionary perspective in his book *Christianity Discovered*. He says, 'Once the gospel has been accepted, it no longer belongs to the missionary; it belongs to the people. We need to believe and trust that the locals are now under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who will lead them towards a faithful expression of faith in their context.'¹

Newbigin's work reveals traits of the indigenous leadership model in at least two ways.

1. Leadership requires a posture of listening to the context we are called to serve.
2. Leadership involves identifying unexpected leaders in any ecclesial context.

Newbigin's approach offers direction to church leadership practice in contemporary Western society.



1. A LISTENING POSTURE

Newbigin was attentive to his context. His missionary journey began in 1936. This marks a period in South India that would span 32 years. He is instrumental in the birth of the ecumenical Church of South India, and was made Bishop of Madurai in 1947 and Bishop of Madras in 1965.

At the beginning of his missionary journey is an experience of uncomfortable reorientation. Initially, as he becomes immersed within the South Indian context, Newbigin struggles to relate theologically to others. This experiential struggle underpins the development of his 'listening first' principle within the missionary context.

Newbigin describes in his autobiography the experience of stepping into a new culture. It involves the stripping of previously held assumptions. Having been educated in Cambridge, he acknowledges his previously held confidence in navigating the world. Yet, he has no experiential knowledge to prepare him for entering a new culture. 'Such experiences test as with fire those views which first took intellectual shape in friendly battles round college coffee cups.'²

For Newbigin, the uncomfortable process of re-orientation into the new missionary context births a reliance upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit and attentiveness to the local context – listening first.

Leaders in the UK may sometimes experience cultural disorientation that encourages the listening first approach, but even when we aren't culturally disorientated, viewing our context from an outside missionary's perspective may increase our awareness of the potential for gospel redemption. Perhaps the listening process, rooted in prayer, may enhance the ability to truly see that context in light of the gospel.

2. IDENTIFICATION OF UNEXPECTED LEADERS

The second example of contextual leadership is Newbigin's efforts to offer leadership training in the rural village communities.

In 1946, Newbigin spent part of his time travelling to remote communities. During his stay, he would share fellowship with the small churches, reading the scriptures, worshipping and working alongside the villagers in their daily chores. He says, 'I lived with them for a week of relaxed meetings, and we studied the Bible, sang Christian hymns, discussed village problems, and trekked off each morning to preach in some neighbouring village.'³ Newbigin would reside within these communities for short periods.

A key feature of this work was the investment in local leadership. He says, 'I was sure that the only way forward was to develop a local leadership within the village congregation, even though the vast majority of the members were illiterate.'

He describes this as counter-cultural to how church leaders and other missionaries behaved. Newbigin spotted potential in the rural villagers, even when others did not. 'These were uneducated men and women, but they were shrewd, often wise, and generally devout. I was sure that they were capable of being real leaders of their congregations'.⁴

Investing in the unlikely candidates for leadership is the second principle to be learned from Newbigin's journey. His support of indigenous leadership within the village communities is synonymous with how Jesus raised his disciples and those around him. Jesus spotted the potential in others, even when these giftings were unformed or rough around the edges.



Newbigin sought to identify where God was already at work, encouraging and supporting others to grow in their talents. 'What was required was the ability to stand aside and give responsibility to others – putting their growth in Christian leadership as the first criterion of success.' He says, 'More and more I feel the test of our sincerity must be: are we putting the training of Indians in responsibility above the efficient running of the machine?' ⁵

As we reflect on our own context, how often do we prioritise the maintenance of the machine over and above the development of the people? Who are those in our context it is easy to overlook, but whom God wants to grow as leaders within the community? Such an approach is increasingly important as many dioceses look to focal ministers to lead congregational life. Take a look at [Leading One Church at a Time](#) by Bob Jackson.

CONCLUSION

Newbigin's story is an example of the lessons that can be learnt from the missionary journey. The cross-cultural experience is informative to those leading in an increasingly plural society. Listening first within any cultural context is fundamental to leading well. Leadership outcomes are poorer without this crucial step of taking others with you. A focus in leadership on raising the unexpected leaders within a context is also foundational for the church's flourishing into all its fullness.

1. Donovan, Christianity Rediscovered.
2. Newbigin, Unfinished Agenda, 55.
3. Newbigin, Unfinished Agenda.
4. Newbigin.
5. Newbigin.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- What conditions may be necessary for gospel encounter in your community?
- How does your church support the locals to grow in faith?
- Do you think Newbigin's principle of 'listening first' to the context is a good starting point for ministry and mission?
- How often has prayerful listening accompanied your transitions in ministry?
- What might be learned from a listening exercise in your context?
- What are the things in your context that reflect gospel principles?
- What are the things in your context that may be contrary to a gospel perspective?
- Who are the unlikely leaders in your context?