Newbigin House of Studies in San Francisco: An experiment in Missional Theological Education

Introduction

During my final year of seminary I received a momentous invitation. A new church was being started on Manhattan’s Upper East Side and I was asked if I wanted to help out. To be honest, I wasn’t that interested in church planting, but I was game for weekends in NYC so I took the train and lent a hand. Before long I had fallen in love with this rapidly growing church and was ordained to serve on a multi-staff team. A few years later I planted the church’s first daughter congregation in Greenwich Village. The course of my life’s ministry—new church development in urban contexts—was set.

This was a wonderful ministerial destination, but the ride was unnecessarily bumpy. I left seminary loaded with information, with what I thought were answers. When I arrived in New York, in a missional context of thoughtful skeptics and spiritually curious seekers, I quickly found that my scripted answers were to questions no one was asking. To borrow Lessing’s famous phrase, there was “an ugly great ditch” between the shape of my ministerial formation and the realities of ministry. In the years that followed it was the city that became my seminary—a classroom made up of rich stories, diverse people, neighborhoods and cultures—these apprenticed me into the wisdom and skills that I needed for an engaged life of ministry.

I like to think that it has all worked out OK, that I’ve become a fairly decent pastor. But I wish my journey had less of a Johnny Knoxville/Jackass “5 feet short of a ten foot jump” quality to it. I do not blame seminary for all my mistakes, but it would have been better for me (and the church) if I had been more carefully prepared for pastoral leadership.

Nowadays I regularly interact with influential church leaders who openly disdain seminary education. Most of them have their own “ugly great ditch” story. As far as they are concerned today’s seminaries are ineffective, at best producing chaplains for static or declining “one hundred attender” congregations, or—to put it more starkly—a dying Christendom. Of course, they insist that the church needs leaders that are theologically educated. This outcome is not a matter for debate; rather, at issue is whether seminaries, as they currently exist, are the best model for training and developing pastors who can lead the
church in mission. Are there other leadership development models that are more effective?

“The seminary cannot exist without the church” says Daniel O. Aleshire, executive director of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). He is simply doing the math. If there are no faith communities sending students to seminary or congregations that want to hire seminary graduates, then seminaries will, in Aleshire’s words, “wither and die like cursed fig trees.” That is sober logic, but Aleshire is nonetheless optimistic about the future of seminaries. They need to focus on what they do best, what they were designed to do. They are good at formational learning, theological teaching and scholarly research. The ones that survive will be the ones that get better. Seminaries are institutions that have an incredible capacity to endure, and while some may close or merge, others will successfully adapt and develop new ways of offering effective theological education.

This is why I am participating in one of these adaptive strategies, a partnership between a historic seminary and a teaching church (Western Theological Seminary and City Church San Francisco). We are building a bridge between the two, a mediating structure enabling each partner to bring their particular strengths to the ministerial formation process. The hybrid entity we’ve created is called Newbigin House of Studies.

**Newbigin House of Studies**

The name honors Lesslie Newbigin (1909-1998) the British missionary-theologian whose life legacy was a call for the church to re-engage in mission. Newbigin taught that “the church is mission,” “the magnet between Christ and the world.” He frequently quoted Emil Brunner’s famous dictum, “the church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning.” According to Newbigin, spiritual renewal will only happen 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." Newbigin is iconic for many of us who think that the crucial need of the church in the West is for leaders who are capable of planting new mission-shaped churches or revitalizing churches in decline.

Newbigin House of Studies began in 2009, as the brainchild of myself, the Rev. Fred Harrell, the founding pastor of City Church San
Francisco, and Dr. Chuck DeGroat, the founder and director of the City Church Counseling Center. Fred and I are passionate about mentoring church planters. Chuck is a therapist with previous experience as director of the Spiritual Formation program for Reformed Theological Seminar. He is devoted to issues of pastoral health and sustainability.

We are presently involved in two primary projects at Newbigin House: first, the Newbigin Fellowship, a year-long discipleship program for lay-people with a strong emphasis on issues of faith and work; and second, the partnership for the Distance Learning Master of divinity (M.Div.) offered by Western Theological Seminary. I’d like to tell the story of these two projects and how they’ve come about.

**City Church San Francisco and the City Classis**

City Church San Francisco, planted in 1997 by Rev. Fred Harrell. When he and his family moved to San Francisco the previous year, the person who recruited him gave him a list of contacts with only three names—one was a confident Christian, one was confidently not a Christian, the other was somewhere in the middle. Those three belief demographics were the roux City Church began with and have characterized it ever since. After a networking period of six months public worship began in February 1997 with around thirty adults. Today, City Church is multi-site congregation of 1700 people with 1,000 in weekly attendance. City Church currently gathers for worship at locations in lower Pacific Heights and the Mission district, and—eight times a week—in San Francisco County Jail! A new worship site will launch this Fall in the Tenderloin. The facility is currently in development in this community of deep need, a project of City Hope, the social justice subsidiary of City Church. With a mission to renew the city, City Hope equips and pastors hundreds of volunteers weekly to provide support to non-profits, schools, hospitals, jails, social enterprises and faith-based organizations throughout San Francisco.

From its earliest days, City Church has sought to be more than just a church. The founders wanted to be the catalyst for a movement of new churches and ministries that would renew the city spiritually, socially and culturally. City Church has catalyzed 26 new church starts during the last 17 years in cities around the country, and locally in Marin, Berkeley, and Silicon Valley. Beyond this, City Church has been instrumental in the creation of the City Classis, a new missional structure within our denomination, the Reformed Church in America (RCA). With a goal of creating healthy and reproducing urban
churches, City Classis has extended to Los Angeles, Denver, Chicago, Philadelphia and New York. Essentially, these are churches and church plants that are focused on ministry in large urban centers.

**The Newbigin Fellowship: The First Program**

When Newbigin House was launched, the initial focus was on the need for theological training for existing and future cultural leaders in various professional fields—technology, media, business, government, academia, and the arts. This was an important emphasis for Newbigin himself: the whole people of God who must be equipped for mission, discipled and supported for public life:

“If the gospel is to challenge the public life of our society, 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.”

—Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*

Our response was to launch the *Newbigin Fellowship*, a year-long intensive training program providing theological, spiritual and relational foundations for meaningful and sustainable integration of faith and work. Over 100 people have participated in the program. There are 30 fellows in the program this year, with cohorts in San Francisco, Berkeley and Sacramento.

The vision we cast for the Fellows program is one that sees every vocation as a kingdom activity, and the city as the best place to stay and live into one’s vocation. It’s a vision to fill San Francisco with influential followers of Jesus, with what Newbigin liked to call “subversive agents of the kingdom.” I realize that’s a loaded and provocative phrase! But he wasn’t calling for culture war or revolution; rather, for a faithful presence that engages our culture and brings gradual transformation, what he termed “challenging relevance.” The Fellows come to see that the church is simultaneously for and against culture. One the one hand, opposing idolatry and distortion of the creator’s intentions; on the other, bringing new meaning to cultural expression through the power of the gospel. N.T. Wright articulates the vision well:

Our task as image-bearing, God-loving, Christ-shaped, Spirit-filled Christians, following Christ and shaping our world, is to announce
redemption to a world that has discovered its fallenness, to announce healing to a world that has discovered its brokenness, to proclaim love and trust to a world that knows only exploitation, fear and suspicion...The gospel of Jesus points us and indeed urges us to be at the leading edge of the whole culture, articulating in story and music and art and philosophy and education and poetry and politics and theology and even--heaven help us--Biblical studies, a worldview that will mount the historically-rooted Christian challenge to both modernity and postmodernity, leading the way...with joy and humor and gentleness and good judgment and true wisdom.

—N.T. Wright, The Challenge of Jesus

I think it’s important to say that the Fellows have given back as much as they’ve received. (I’m not just referring to cool things like inviting me to lunch at the decadent employee cafeterias of Lucas-Film and Google)! I mean that when theology is done by people who are deeply engaged in the life of the broader society, when the voices of cultural leaders in other spheres participate in the conversation, then theology is simply better, more fertile, sumptuous and worthwhile. Martin Kähler observed that in the first century theology was not an academic institutional luxury, but something developed out of missionary necessity. Mission was the “mother of theology.” The Fellows program has given me a taste of what I think he meant. These folks are hungry for wisdom to live faithfully, to connect the true story of the world revealed in scripture to the issues and challenges of life in what is arguably the most secular city in the country.

Western Theological Seminary

Newbigin House began with a desire to actually start a new seminary, a West-Coast RCA seminary, there currently being seminaries on the East Coast and the Mid-West. But as we did our research we quickly saw that astronomical costs would be involved in a start-up, and that many existing seminaries are finding it difficult to sustain themselves economically. So we began to look for other creative ways to get involved in theological education. We learned from the President of the GTU, that ATS has a designation for what we were trying to do— “House of Studies,” i.e. a partner organization in the theological education process that comes alongside the seminary; the seminary is solely responsible for and grants the academic degree, but the house of studies is a partner in providing something unique and distinctive that does not exist within the seminary. We realized, “that’s what we want to be, a house of studies,” then proceeded to search for a seminary that would be a good fit.
We approached Western Theological Seminary (WTS) in Holland, Michigan because of our denominational ties through the RCA. We quickly saw that we had ties that were even stronger than those of denominational affiliation: WTS was laser-focused on becoming a recognized center for training women and men who could lead the church in mission. The President, Dr. Timothy Brown, was passionate about church planting and urban church revitalization. We also learned that WTS had been a leading provider of accredited distance learning education for more than a decade. But most importantly for us, we found partners who valued what we could bring to the table, and immediately and enthusiastically welcomed the conversation. The President and the academic Dean, Dr. Leanne Van Dyk, worked tirelessly with us to develop a partnership plan, and to bring the various stakeholders—the denomination, the faculty, the trustees—on board with the vision. We eventually settled on a contract model for the partnership: Newbigin House is a ministry of City Church and is governed as such; our obligations to WTS, and theirs to us are guaranteed by contract. Most importantly, there is an entente cordiale, a commitment towards one another to a deepening relationship of trust-confidence. We are bound together by shared values and vision, and awareness that we really need each other for the mission to succeed.

The WTS-Newbigin Distance Learning M.Div.

This M.Div. has been developed to train women and men for ministry in urban and secular contexts. It is for those who want to revitalize struggling congregations, launch new ministries, or plant new churches in cities. It includes coursework, mentoring and spiritual formation with a focus on urban ministry, and internship placements in a variety of urban settings. Newbigin House is for those who want to apprentice for ministry in the city, but also for those who want to be apprenticed by the city for ministry.

• The Educational Model

This degree brings together some of the best of WTS’s coursework with courses taught by the Newbigin House faculty. It is offered via distance learning technology, along with face-to-face instruction and mentoring within a cohort community. The students participate in 3 one-week intensives per year: two are held on campus at the
seminary, in October and May; in July they come to San Francisco. The mentoring takes place primarily in years 3 and 4 during their embedded urban internships (see description below).

**• The Faculty**

Our small faculty are designated as “Senior Fellows” at Newbigin House, and “Newbigin Faculty” at WTS. Two of us are based at City Church, three others are involved in either City Classis churches or urban churches in our network. Beyond this, the entire pastoral staff at City Church is engaged with the program in various respects. City Church has committed itself through and through to becoming a "teaching hospital," a center for hands-on training in urban and missional ministry. All of the Senior Fellows/Newbigin Faculty have ongoing responsibilities for ministry within their respective churches. This is an essential commitment for our team, for all to keep some ministry "skin in the game" to keep our edge sharp.

**• The Students**

Our cohorts are small, 12-15 students per year. They have not been recruited fresh from college campuses. Most of them are late-20s, early 30s, and already engaged in ministry in various cities around the country. Some were actually converted within the church they now serve. Some are recognized as a key talent that the church does not want to lose. Some serve on church staffs, some are already church planters credentialed as "Commissioned Pastors" within a Reformed denomination, such as the PCUSA, RCA or CRC. Some are pastors within other networks that lack traditional Protestant ordination requirements, “PDEs” (Post-Denominational Evangelicals), but they come to us with a recognition of their need for theological education. They are hungry for it and teachable.

Feedback on the educational model has been very positive. What we’ve heard from these students is a clear preference for distance learning combined with face-to-face intensives, over other educational models that feature classes on nights and weekends traveling to a regional seminary extension site. And they love the camaraderie that comes with being in a community of city loving entrepreneurs and church planters.
• **2—year Embedded Urban Internship**

At the heart of this program is a 2-year embedded internship in years 3 and 4 in the context of an urban church, church plant or mission-shaped congregation. During the summer prior to the beginning of the embedded internship, students undergo an Urban Ministry/Church Planting Assessment as part the course, “Introduction to Urban Church Planting.” The Assessment process is designed to accurately and objectively gauge the developmental level of the student in light of a competency model in order that the student might best understand how to grow in leadership. The assessment indicates areas of weakness and strength measured according to core competencies, dimensions and characteristics of effective church planters. The students develop learning contracts with their coaches informed by the findings of the assessment process. The coach works with the director of the Urban Church Planting Center at Newbigin House, who oversees the embedded internship process. This team (director/coach) access progress and growth in these crucial areas of ministry competence at the end of each semester and give a report to the student.

• **Curriculum**

Courses taught by Newbigin Faculty include: The Urban Christian; The Urban Church; Urban Church Planting; The Urban Pastor; Gospel, Culture, and Church; Systematic Theology (with a strong missional emphasis); The Missional and Ecumenical Theology of Lesslie Newbigin; The Practice of Worship and Preaching.

I’d like to take a few minutes now to talk about that last course (it’s one that I teach!), because this is a key component to our program, and it deals with a core ecclesiological question that brings us together for this conference: what is the connection between liturgy and mission?

As the leader of Newbigin House, I am strongly committed to the project of missional theology. I believe worship cannot be an exception to the rule that we must rethink all of our theology in light of the *missio dei.*
Missional Liturgics at Newbigin House

I currently chair the Commission on Christian Worship for the RCA, and I’ve had over 20 years of experience leading and shaping worship in congregations where I’ve served as pastor—as a church planter in Greenwich Village, then helping a “praise band” church in downtown Atlanta embrace some of the riches of the liturgical spirituality, and now in San Francisco at City Church. During that time, I’ve seen scores of churches “pick up” liturgical practices that they experienced when visiting our worship service. City Church follows the lectionary and church year closely, and celebrates the eucharist weekly. We kneel, we light candles, we make the sign of the cross, we follow a lectionary. Most of the churches and church plants within the City Classis do the same. Why? Because the planters have seen the missionary wisdom embedded in the ancient patterns developed by the greatest missionaries of all time, the early Christians! They’ve come to see the liturgy as a gift for the church’s mission, and our seminarians at Newbigin House are of a similar opinion.

There are two questions I’d like to address here: First, what is missional worship? Second, in what ways can liturgical worship be missional?

In his book Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles Walter Brueggeman argues that preaching must, on the one hand, be thick enough to form identity of exiles in Babylon. I would add that liturgy also needs to meet this “thickness” criteria, and that the identity that needs to be formed is a missional identity. But, says Brueggeman, this preaching is also meant to be overhead by Babylonians among whom the exiles live, and whom God desires to bless. This is the challenge and opportunity of missional worship. It is worship that is thick enough to form missionary disciples and AT THE SAME TIME comprehensible enough for outsiders to overhear.

My church planting mentor in New York, Dr. Timothy Keller, puts it this way: “to reach this growing post-Christendom society in the West will obviously take more than what we ordinarily call an evangelistic church: it will take a missional church. This church’s worship is missional in that it makes sense to nonbelievers in that culture, even while it challenges and shapes Christians with the gospel.” (Tim Keller, Center Church, p.141).
So what is the connection between missional worship, defined this way, and the liturgy? I propose this: missional worship is shaped by and engages the world with the biblical story. And the historic liturgy is nothing less than a covenantal narrative expression of the biblical story, and an application of that story to our own, so that it becomes our story. Let me unpack this:

• **Shaped by the Biblical Story**

In the words of theologian James K.A. Smith, “to be restored is to be re-storied with the story.” Newbigin calls it “reliving the story”:

The community of the Christian Church understands itself and the human and cosmic history of which it is a part in terms of the biblical story. Its being and life are incomprehensible apart from that story. Its liturgical actions are the reliving of this story...The gospel, the account of God’s actions for the creation and redemption of the world, is always in narrative form.

—Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*

It is this reliving of the story, that grounds the church in its missional identity and vocation, bearing witness in word and sacrament to the risen and returning Lord Jesus, to his inauguration of God’s kingdom, and to the mission of God into which we are called to share.

According to Newbigin, this “reliving” happens in what he calls the “painful tension... between the 2 embodiments of God’s people.” On the one hand, we are members of our cultural communities, shaped by our cultural stories. But we also part of a new humanity shaped by the biblical story. Worship is a drama of living at the crossroads of these two stories. The great missionary theologian, Andrew Walls, describes this dialectical tension as an “indigenizing principle” and a “pilgrim principle.” Christianity can be at home everywhere, even as it is at home nowhere.

Not only does God in Christ take people as they are: He takes them in order to transform them into what He wants them to be. Along with the indigenizing principle which makes his faith a place to feel at home, the Christian inherits the pilgrim principle, which whispers to him that he has no abiding city and warns him that to be faithful to Christ will put him out of step with his
society; for that society never existed, in East or West, ancient
time or modern, which could absorb the word of Christ painlessly
into its system

—Andrew F. Walls, The Missionary Movement in Christian
History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith (Maryknoll,

The wisdom of the historic liturgy becomes apparent in light of
this tension. Thick identities require deep grounding in the narrative
of scripture read and preached, and the covenantal renewal of
sacramental life at font and table. We need to be re-storied with the
story.

• **Engaging the World with the Biblical Story**

I recently read that T.S. Eliot loved vanilla ice cream with
chocolate sauce. He was eating it in a restaurant once and a man
opposite said, ‘I can’t understand how a poet like you can eat that
stuff.’ Elliot, with hardly a pause, said, ‘Ah, but you’re not a poet,’ and
went on eating.”

This reminds me of the several conversations I’ve had about the
experience of the liturgy over the years - both with long-time
Christians and those exploring the Christian faith. The churches I’ve
planted or led have been “liturgical” and, by God’s grace, they have
been effective in introducing people to faith in Jesus Christ. I have
found seekers, whether skeptical or mildly curious about faith, on the
whole, to be poets who recognize the poetry. They find the silence
refreshing; the hospitable explanation of unusual acts such as
confession of sin to be immensely helpful and practical. I don’t
remember a month when someone hasn’t decided to come forward
and take communion as their act of conversion. (This regardless of
how clearly communion was explained)! But I don’t mind. They want
to be part of the story that is unfolding before them.

But there are those who do not hear the poetry, or perhaps a
more charitable thing to say would be, who prefer other poetry. Every
critical comment I’ve ever encountered about a liturgical element of
worship —a responsive psalm, confession of sin, passing the peace,
weekly eucharist, Lenten observance, etc.—every SINGLE one has
come from a long-time Christian, someone who has been traditioned in
another pattern of worship.
I recently read an article by the popular biopsychologist Nigel Barber arguing that religion is becoming obsolete and can no longer compete with what he calls “rival feel-good products” such as psychotherapy, anti-anxiety drugs, movies and sports. “However hard religions struggle to be modern, relevant, and entertaining, they seem destined to fall behind in the sense that attending church has become an exercise in self-imposed tedium.” Based on what we’re seeing in our church plants in the City Classis, he couldn’t be more wrong. In the midst of a world of competing narratives that tell people who they are, how they should feel, what they should buy, what they must achieve, in short—what they should LOVE—in the liturgy we hear and see enacted before us the true story of the world, the only story that can enable any of us to truly understand ourselves. When worship is led and the sacraments celebrated with even a modicum of missionary sensibility and skill, the nations overhear. Congregants begin to trust the leaders with what is being offered, and they bring their friends.

In Newbigin’s classic work, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, he asks this question: “how is the life of Christ, the life which is a true foretaste of the kingdom, continued in the period after the ascension”? He gives this answer:

It will be in the life of a community which remembers, rehearses, and lives by the story which the Bible tells and of which the central focus is the story told in the New Testament. The remembering and rehearsing will be through the continual reading of and reflection of the Bible and the continual repetition of the sacrament of baptism and eucharist.

Our strong conviction at City Church, within the network of churches of the City Classis, and at Newbigin House, is that liturgical worship, rightly modeled and taught to the students and pastors who lead and will lead the church in its mission, is uniquely suited to shape the church with the biblical story, and at the same time engage with world with its true story.

**Conclusion**
Newbigin believed that for ministers to be effectively trained there had to be changes to the structure, content and method of theological education. Classical seminary education took its shape in the context of Christendom when the church had lost its missionary character and was “entirely conceived in terms of pastoral care of existing congregations.” The future shape of theological education lay in answering this question: “what kind of ministerial leadership will nourish the Church in its faithfulness to the gospel in a pluralist society”?

This is the primary question we are wrestling with at Newbigin House. We have more questions than we do answers, but we’re pretty confident that one of the ways to scale the “ugly great ditch” is by bringing the seminary and the church together in the formation process, rethinking the content and context of theological education, assessing for and nurturing essential ministry competencies.

I began writing this article during the holidays shortly after watching my favorite British sci-fi drama “Dr. Who.” At a dramatic moment when the building that the Doctor and his companions are in turns into a spaceship, he is forced to act on the spur of the moment. As the building begins to take off, his companions shout in panic asking him what to do. The Doctor calls over his shoulder, “Do what I do—hold tight and pretend it’s a plan”!

That image has stayed with me as I think about the experience of launching Newbigin House. This is an experiment in faith. The uncertainty of what lies ahead is a bit unnerving, but I’m holding tight. Thankfully, I don’t have to pretend. This plan reflects my deepest convictions about the future of theological education: seminary and church in partnership, serving the mission of God together.