

# Walking with Lesslie

## A Personal Perspective

by H Dan Beeby

*We invited Dan Beeby, friend and colleague of Lesslie, to write in the form of a 'walk' with Lesslie drawing on memories of their shared experiences.*

Brought up as a Northern English Presbyterian, it seems I can hardly remember a time when I didn't know of Lesslie as a legend. We nearly met on a cold Whit-Monday in London in 1946 when the Newbigin family returned on furlough from India. I, ordained and married, was studying Chinese while waiting for a ship to China. Illness and the cold changed their plans. They went direct from Southampton to Newcastle and we didn't meet. First contact was in 1965 when our two sons conjointly had a difference of opinion with their headmaster in Kent and were not welcome in their school for a spell. Lesslie and Helen were in Geneva, my wife was in Taiwan, I was in New York and tomorrow was my doctoral oral. With visions of our erring sons loose on London streets, Lesslie and I corresponded. When I was farewelled on retirement in 1986, Lesslie read my letter. He had kept the letter.

We finally met at a large conference in Montreat, North Carolina. Lesslie was there as Associate General Secretary of the World Council of Churches to help ease relationships between a conservative mission and its 'younger missionary churches'. From a distance, on the back rows, I saw the quintessential Newbigin: the brilliant speaker, the clear thinker and also the severe critic when he rounded on one prominent minister and thundered, 'Today thou hast borne false witness against thy neighbour'. As village preacher and Indian bishop, as missionary statesman and ecclesiastical civil servant he could see every point of view, he could prosecute and defend and finally could heal.

In 1974, Lesslie in retirement came to teach in Selly Oak Colleges and he was given an office next to mine. The legend finally took flesh and became even more legendary while at the same time more human as I had the joy and the privilege of working alongside him in various capacities. He had returned from India full of honours and an Indian halo to episcopal offers, moderatorships and preaching at Balmoral; but he saw himself as someone learning to teach and the minister of Winson Green URC, opposite the prison. We were in and out of each other's offices, we borrowed each other's books, we sat on the same committees and when he could no longer drive, the four of us went shopping together.

One committee we shared was on Christianity and other faiths and there I saw some of the beginnings of what led to Lesslie's booklet *The Other Side of 1984*. Its impact on publication surprised everyone, not least Lesslie himself who claimed he had said nothing new. Others disagreed strongly and the British Council of Churches formed a committee to continue what he had started and to work towards a conference on the Gospel as Public Truth in 1992. When I retired, I was asked to co-ordinate this work. Nothing could have given me greater joy because I regarded retirement as a heresy and I delighted in working with Lesslie. He gave one the self-honesty to know that one was the monkey on the barrel organ but yet that monkey felt a little leonine; knowing you were four foot high you felt basketball tall and inspired with a 'proper confidence'. Treating you as equal he

would even say he was indebted and really believed it.

And there were things that I could do. I could blow his trumpet when he couldn't or wouldn't and I could counter his humility when necessary. In the States there was enthusiasm for 'The Gospel and Our Culture' but Lesslie was hesitant to suggest that they should inaugurate a movement and begin to organise. They did and it flourished splendidly. One morning, he said he had just turned down an invitation to lecture in Glasgow which wasn't fair to Helen. Hesitatingly, I suggested he might offer to give the lectures at a later date. He said nothing but the following day he told me that he had taken my suggestion and with a grin he said 'May God forgive you'. I am sure he has because I think *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* will be seen as Lesslie's most influential book.

Like many great men there was mystery about him that sometimes puzzled because it seemed to imply contradiction. This brilliant

**The Revd Dr H Dan Beeby is a minister of the United Reformed Church. He lectured at Selly Oak Colleges, where he was Principal of St Andrew's Hall, and is a consultant to Bible Society for the Recovery of Scripture programme.**



and profound writer left a manuscript of limericks, recently published and he was wonderful with children, sometimes standing on his head to illustrate a children's address.

He lived to unify and to reconcile but he was always in conflict. To unify Indian churches he fought with Anglicans; since the sixties he had struggled with his beloved World Council of Churches, specialist in Hinduism and other religions he was a warrior for Christ, and to his deep, deep distress he died in conflict with his own church.

He was a scholar who said that he wasn't and didn't use footnotes although he read other people's. Perhaps he was pointing us to new ways in scholarship because like Paul, he was an intellectual who knew only one thing: Jesus Christ and him crucified.

He was known to others in the old people's home where he and Helen lived as 'that kind old man who does our shopping for us'. To thousands, in many lands, he was their pastor. He was an incomparable friend because he could be stern as well as tolerant and his generosity was such that his right hand hardly knew what the same hand was doing!

In speaking of his labours since 1983 he always said 'we' and 'our' without the hint of a smile. When asked by the family to preach at his funeral, I felt that nothing could be more sad yet that there could be no greater honour than to have been his friend.

*“Is it the primary business of the ordained minister to look after the spiritual needs of the church members? Is it to represent God's kingdom to the whole community? Or – and this is surely the true answer – is it to lead the whole congregation as God's embassy to the whole community?”*

*(The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, SPCK, p. 237.)*