

## CHAPTER TWO

### INTRODUCTION

Chapter one introduced the purpose of this research as the investigation of congregations meaningfully engaging their communities with a view to determining what role, if any, congregational ethos plays in the subsequent speech and action of the Spirit in and through such congregations to the larger (secular) community. The purpose of the three sections of this chapter is to be a prolegomenon to the research proper. It will explain the understanding of the terms “communities,” “spirituality” and “meaningfully engage” in which this study is undertaken and introduce the reader to some of the complexities and challenges contemporary Western society presents the church.

Section one explains “community” in terms of postmodernity, beginning with a discussion of the historical developments leading to the postmodern society, particularly as it relates to understandings of religion. The section continues with a description of the ethos of postmodernity in the United States and concludes with a discussion of the church in contemporary society, including some of the issues that it faces.

Section two follows with an elucidation of the manifestation of spirituality in the postmodern context described in section one.

Section three takes up the issue of meaningful engagement and discusses it in two parts. The first part presents Newbigin’s (1989: 222-233) concept of the Congregation as Hermeneutic of the Gospel as a heuristic model of community engagement in the context of the postmodern society, and that society’s understanding of spirituality, as presented respectively in sections one and two. The second part shows how “Holistic Ministry” is

realization of Newbigin's concept and is a logical locus of investigative research into congregational ethos.

## 2.1 SECTION ONE: THE POSTMODERN COMMUNITY

To begin with, Lakeland (1997: x, xi) points out that “a number of competing and overlapping issues and questions surround the postmodernity debate.” Noting the complexity of the matter, he writes:

Much of the confusion with which the debate about the postmodern is frequently bedeviled is often negotiated by the observation that there are two postmodernisms, and that postmodernity itself is a dialectical reality. This assertion follows [...] from the recognition that “modernity” is a term that we may use to label two quite distinct phenomena. One is the modernism of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century art, architecture, and literature; the other is the modern world of reason, science, and technological progress ushered in by the Enlightenment.

The following discussion occurs in the context of Lakeland's second identified phenomenon, that of reason, science and technological progress.

While many have undertaken to give a formal or extended taxonomy of the phenomenon of postmodernity from a variety of points-of-view (most recently e.g. Grenz 1996; Lakeland 1997; Powell 1998), the purpose here is simply to describe it as the milieu in which contemporary Western society finds itself and in which the church thus must necessarily function.

Since, as the name *postmodernity* suggests, it can hardly be understood apart from its forbear *modernity*, which itself must to some extent be historically contextualized, it is necessary here to provide a brief exposition of the historical development of the phenomenon described as “postmodernity.”

### 2.1.1 Historical Development of Postmodernity

As the name implies, postmodernity follows modernity as the latest in a series of cultural evolutionary developments that began with the Renaissance and continued through the Enlightenment.

Historically, the rate of cultural change has been slowly escalating, though from New Testament times through the late middle ages change was more political than social or technological (Newbigin 1989: 66ff). Social change began when the Renaissance period “rediscovered” ancient Greek and Roman literature and Renaissance humanists believed it was possible to improve human society through classical education in such subjects as poetry, history, rhetoric and moral philosophy (Grenz 1996: 58).

The Enlightenment, a revolutionary understanding and application of philosophy, rationalism, and scientific thought begun by Renee Descartes (1596-1650) and further refined by Isaac Newton (1642-1727), increased the rate of social change. The revolutions in philosophy and science they rendered resulted in a new view of the world and of humanity’s place in it.

In terms of theology, one outcome of the Enlightenment emphasis on rationalism was the displacement of the biblically-derived doctrines and teachings of revealed religion in favor of a “natural” religion involving a set of foundational truths – generally believed to include the existence of God and a body of universally acknowledged moral laws – accessible to all rational beings through the exercise of reason (Grenz 1996: 72).

Clearly these views were not sympathetic to the Christian faith. In *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695) John Locke (1632-1704, cf. Walker, et al. 1985: 570-1; Grenz 1996: 72) wrestled with the issues of natural theology and determined that

Christianity, once stripped of all its mystery and dogmatic baggage, was, however, the most reasonable form of religion. Conversely, using Locke's empirical approach as a template for rational, theological deliberation, other Enlightenment thinkers (e.g. John Toland [1670-1722]; Anthony Collins [1676-1729]; Thomas Woolston [1669-1733]; Matthew Tindal [1657-1733], cf. Walker, et al. 1985: 579-580) went on to construct Deism, a theological alternative to Christianity in any form. For those thinkers:

The modern world turned out to be Newton's mechanistic universe populated by Descartes' autonomous, rational substance. In such a world theology was forced to give place to the natural sciences, and the central role formerly enjoyed by the theologian became the prerogative of the natural scientist (Grenz 1996: 67).

The deistic philosophy was, by means of natural science, to reduce religion to its most basic elements – elements that, deists believed, were universal and therefore reasonable. Deists rejected the dogmas that the church had traditionally attributed to divine revelation as a standard for religious truth. All doctrines were evaluated using the criteria of reason, a philosophy that, for most deists, left room for a "first cause" or "creator" of the universe, a system of post mortem punishment and/or reward, and some sense of a personal spirituality (Grenz 1996: 72, Fuller 2001: 2).

Deism itself however soon came under attack from British philosopher David Hume (1711-1776, cf. Walker, et al. 1985: 582). Going right to the root of empirically based "cause and effect" deistic theology, which argued for the existence of a creator as first cause, Hume asserted that:

Experience gives us all our knowledge, but we receive it as isolated impressions and ideas. All connections between our mental impressions as related by cause and effect . . . are simply the inveterate but baseless view points of our mental habit. [...]. What we really perceive is that in our limited observation certain experiences are associated. [. . .]

[T]herefore cause and effect are ruled out; the argument for a God founded thereon is baseless.

Galvanized by Hume's radical skepticism, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804, (cf. Grenz 1996: 77) responded, in *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), by asserting that the human mind is not just the receptor of mental impressions but is active in the knowing process. The mind systematizes the raw data it receives in a process of "knowing." Kant hypothesized that the human mind is active in the epistemological process and determined that there was a distinction between what it could experience (phenomena) and what lay beyond experience (noumena). Realizing that this theory of knowing placed strict limits on the deistic philosophy that argued from sense experience to posit transcendent realities such as God and the immortal soul, and recognizing further that empirical knowledge and the character of virtue are not bedfellows and that mere knowledge will not be enough to deal with the moral challenges to human existence, Kant further postulated a theory of Practical Reason, a philosophy grounded in the moral dimension of human existence. Walker, et al. (1985: 629) writes that in *Religion Within the Bounds of Reason Only* (1793), Kant "emphasized morality as the prime content of practical reason, and reduced religion to theistic ethics."

In making the active human mind the ultimate agent and authority in the process of knowing and in the life of moral duty, the work of Kant (cf. Grenz 1996: 81) provided the foundation for the final emergence of modernism as a cultural phenomenon, for now reason was privileged over faith and the autonomous self became the central focus of philosophical thought.

The modern, post-enlightenment mind assumes that knowledge is certain, objective, and good. It presupposes that the rational, dispassionate self can obtain such knowledge. It presupposes that the knowing self peers at

the mechanistic world as a neutral observer armed with the scientific method. The modern knower engages in the knowing process believing that knowledge inevitably leads to progress and that science coupled with education will free humankind from our vulnerability to nature and all forms of social bondage.

Not only did the “Enlightenment project” (Grenz 1996: 03; Sim 2001: 238) open up the possibilities of free enquiry and debate and oppose the traditional powers and beliefs of the church, it brought all received, or traditional, notions and social relations subject to the use of “reason.” Further, tremendous social and technological advances followed Newton’s scientific revolution, ushering in an “improved” world of order and the promise of mastery over nature and history (Sim 2001: 239). The Enlightenment gave birth to the idea of the “betterment” of the human race, the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, and the concept of “moral progress,” ideas that ultimately grew to maturity as the modern technological society of the twentieth century. “At the heart of this society is the desire to rationally manage life on the assumption that scientific advancement and technology provide the means to improving the quality of human life” (Grenz 1996: 81; cf. Van Gelder 1991).

#### 2.1.1.1 Postmodern Reaction

Philosophical reaction to the Enlightenment project began with Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). Nietzsche (cf. Sim 2001: 325) attacked the idea of a rational attainment of knowledge as a finite concept of “truth” as articulated by Enlightenment thought, suggesting that there were various kinds of truth:

The first is those truths that fall under the general rubric of illusions, lies and interpretations (i.e. the various world views of metaphysics). The second is those truths that make the world habitable (i.e. scientific insights which yield practical knowledge of the environment). Both are expressions of the will-to-truth which seeks to appropriate life according to its needs. The difference between them is that the first kind of truth

flaunts its reliance upon a particular perspective, while the second seeks to deny its subjective condition. At heart though, all truth is figurative, a “mobile host of metaphors, metonymies and anthropomorphisms . . . illusions which have forgotten they are illusions”.

In addition to critiquing the notion of truth, Nietzsche also completed a task unwittingly begun in the Renaissance and continued in the Enlightenment; the deconstruction of the Trinity, and the removal of God entirely from the stage of human meaning.

#### 2.1.1.1.1 The Deconstruction of the Trinity

First articulated by Tertullian (in *Adversus Praxeam*) in his Montanist period (early 2nd century), the meaning of “Trinity” has been debated and restated countless times since.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the concept of the Trinity was a fundamental tenet of the Christian faith from Tertullian’s time until Calvin (cf. Walker, et al. 1985: 203-4; 479) published *De Trinitatis Erroribus* in 1531. The Scholasticism of the early Renaissance (11th – 13th centuries CE) placed the Trinity in the center stage of human life as a fundamental Christian philosophy “revealed” through scripture, apprehended by faith, and sustained by church tradition. Philosophical arguments revolved around the nature of God, of Jesus, and of the Spirit, and their Trinitarian relationship, rather than around their reality, which was a given (Walker, et al. 1985: 337-348). Scholasticism also focused on philosophically reconciling ancient Greek and Roman thought with contemporary religious faith and on demonstrating the truth of existing beliefs (ibid. and 324). Theology and philosophy were separate disciplines, to be sure, but the latter was nevertheless subordinate to the former, as Thomas Aquinas makes clear: “if a philosopher

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<sup>1</sup> e.g., at councils of Nicaea (325), Constantinople (383), Ephesus (431), Chalcedon (451), by John Calvin (*Institutes*, 1536-1559), recently by Walter Kasper (1976); Edward Schillebeeckx (1979), and Lesslie Newbigin (1995a).

arrives at a conclusion which contradicts, explicitly or implicitly, a Christian doctrine, that is a sign that his premises are false or that there is a fallacy somewhere in his argument” (Coplestone 1963: 17). During the early Renaissance the subordination of philosophy to theology was maintained principally because the great thinkers of the time were primarily theologians (ibid.)

Humanism, a literary and cultural movement in the Western Europe of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, shifted the focus of classical studies. Rather than reconciling them to the church, scholars mined the classics for their intrinsic value in terms of what they had to say about human interests, values, and dignity. Humanity – the human condition itself – became an increasingly important subject of study and philosophy began declaring its independence from theology (Walker, et al. 1985: 405-415). At this point humankind, heretofore worshippers at the foot of the stage whereon the characters of the Trinity held court, began, philosophically speaking, to share the stage with the Trinity. Subsequently the work of Descartes widened the rift between philosophy and theology and Newton’s later mechanistic view of the universe further reinforced the division. Humankind was taking over the stage.

The elevation by Kant (cf. Grenz 1996: 72) of the autonomous self – rather than God – as the central focus of human philosophical thought further destabilized the Trinity – and Christian theology – by reversing the positions of philosophy and theology, the latter now becoming subordinate to the former, and “revealed” Christianity was replaced with the rational theology of empirically-derived deism. This move effectively removed Jesus to the wings. While God and the Spirit remained on the stage, their part was now one of supporting cast to the starring role played by humankind (Grenz 1996: 73).



Nietzsche (cf. Grenz 1996: 73ff, 83-98), representative of a society that had largely embraced the promise of “Enlightened” science, art, politics, and technology, and which had no use for God, went a step further: First in *The Gay Science* (1882) and then in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1891) he used fictional characters – a madman in the former instance, the sage Zarathustra in the latter – to articulate an increasingly common belief: “God is dead.” With this announcement, God too is removed from the stage, leaving only the Spirit to find its place within the new cast, a cast in which humanity dominated and in which the starring role was played by rationalism. Colin Gunton (1993: 28) succinctly states the situation:

Modernity is the era which has displaced God as the focus for the unity and meaning of being [...] [T]he functions attributed to God have not been abolished but shifted – relocated, as they say today [...] God was no longer needed to account for the coherence and meaning of the world, so that the seat of rationality and meaning became not the world, but human reason and will, which thus *displace* God or the world. When the unifying will of God becomes redundant, or is rejected for a variety of moral, rational and scientific reasons, the focus of the unity of things becomes the rational mind.

Strangely, the intellectual difficulty the Enlightenment had with Christian and deistic theology seems largely not to have extended to affairs of the spiritual realm. Indeed, Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826, cf. Fuller 2001: 20) maintained that spirituality had a continued – though changed – role as the capacity “to perceive and feel a conviction of design, consummate skill, and indefinite power in every atom [of the universe].”

#### 2.1.1.2 The Failure of the Enlightenment Project

Outside the realm of philosophy it was not the theoretical issues of truth, nor the presence or absence of Jesus, God, and Spirit that were important to people so much as

the promise of the Enlightenment in terms of a better, managed society enjoying the benefits of a rationally based science and technology. Indeed, the deconstruction of the Trinity by the reduction of two of its principal characters to apparent insignificance was irrelevant if the trade-off was a generally enhanced human existence, an improvement of life evidenced in shared wealth and the elimination of poverty, improved health leading to longer life, more leisure time, better education and so forth. Belief in a Trinitarian God had served a purpose, but that purpose was now, it appeared, adequately met by the Enlightenment promise.

What the Enlightenment thinkers did not foresee was the duality of the Enlightenment promise, the reality that rationalism and its fruits – science, technology, and individual autonomy – had a dark side (cf. Sim 2001: 239). For example, individual autonomy led to the sense of “community” being overshadowed by an increasing focus on “self” – on individual gain regardless of the cost to others. At the same time peaceful scientific advances were accompanied by advances in weapons and warfare. For example, protection from Polio was offset by the intentional breeding of deadly viruses and the development of germ warfare; technology produced both automobiles and tanks, commercial aircraft and bombers, atomic energy and atomic bombs. The Enlightened world of Science and reason has “seen World Wars One and Two, Nagasaki and Hiroshima, rationally administered ‘ethnic cleansing,’ Apartheid, systematically managed death camps, various systems of totalitarianism, and ecological mismanagement on a global scale” (Powell 1998: 10).

The postmodern individual looks at these issues, which are not only a part of history but in many respects are descriptive of the current situation and identifies the

negative benefits of the Enlightenment project as the root cause of society's ills (Grenz 1996: 81). As a result, the dominant ideas of Enlightened modernity – the imputed authority of all forms of science, a belief in progress, the heavy reliance on instrumental reason, rationality, and objectivity – are rejected in postmodernity, which has come to view with skepticism the idea of inevitable advancement, or the need to continue exploiting the environment regardless of the long term effect:

In the postmodern world, people are no longer convinced that knowledge is inherently good. In eschewing the Enlightenment myth of inevitable progress, postmodernism replaces the optimism of the last century with a gnawing pessimism. Gone is the belief that every day, in every way, we are getting better and better. Members of the emerging generation are no longer confident that humanity will be able to solve the world's greatest problems or even that their economic situation will surpass that of their parents. They view life on earth as fragile and believe that the continued existence of mankind is dependent on a new attitude of cooperation rather than conquest (Grenz 1996: 7).

In sum, postmodernity, determining that the dark side of modernity too much overshadows its benefits largely rejects it. How that rejection manifests as a cultural ethos is the focus of the next discussion.

### **2.1.2 The Ethos of Postmodernity**

The “failure” of the Enlightenment project and the absence of Jesus and God as foci of hope has created what Astell (1994) characterizes as a “homeless mind,” fragmented through its loss of a center, open to experimentation and eclecticism, celebrating diversity and difference.

Jim Powell (1998: 3, 4) describes how this postmodern philosophy presents itself:

All the world's cultures, rituals, races, databanks, myths and musical motifs are intermixing like a smorgasbord in an earthquake. And this hodge-podge of hybrid images is global, flooding the traditional mass-media, and also cyber-space – a space ever-blossoming with new

universes and realities, and which is being probed by an ever-expanding population of cyber-punks and cyber-shamans who – like electronic rats burrowing sideways through a vast interconnected series of electronic sewers, cellars, passageways, caverns, gutters, and tunnels – are capable of navigating from cyber-site to cyber-site via an almost infinitely inter-linked catalog of codes. In other words, we live increasingly in a world of interconnected differences – differences amplified and multiplied at the speed of electricity. No longer is there one morality or myth or ritual or dance or dream or philosophy or concept of self or god or culture or style of art that predominates. The explosion of new communications technologies and the continuing fragmentation of cultures into thousands of little cultures has (sic) forced us to view our world as simultaneously expanding and shrinking.

The Postmodern Western society is one where cultures meet and meld, where religions fall prey to syncretism, where mixed marriages are in greater evidence, where myths and legends and faiths cross social and cultural boundaries and paradoxically become new while remaining old and where music is an amalgamation of East and West and culture within culture. The postmodernist feels free to “let it all hang out,” (where “it” is personal self expression devoid of any social or self-imposed censorship), free to “question authority,” free to demand instant gratification – instant credit, instant hamburger, instant banking, instant whatever-I-need, free to have sex however, whenever and with whomever they want. Poe (1996: 159) writes:

The moral approach of the counterculture of the 1960’s has entered the mainstream of Western life in Europe and the United States. Grossly stated it is this, ‘If it feels good, do it.’ In other forms it appears as ‘I would never knowingly hurt anyone.’ It is a morality that lacks rules and authority but looks for some universal principle or guide to give direction to its chaotic drift, which has led to destructive interpersonal decisions.”

It is an interesting paradox (or, better, enigma), that while postmodernity largely rejects modernity as a cultural philosophy, the technological fruits of both movements continue to be encouraged and utilized in postmodern society. Indeed there are very few people who have not in some degree been at least somewhat influenced by, and

appreciative of, such fruits. More and more homes, representing the entire spectrum of the human age demographic in the United States, are having more and more television channels delivered to their homes by cable or satellite. In the quest to fill the ceaseless demand for rapidity, scientists are constantly multiplying the speed of computer processors and advances in Information Technology are such that the postmodern individual is bombarded by more information than they can assimilate. To make it manageable, information reduces to slogans, sound bites, and factoids. In postmodernity technology, fashion, language, entertainment, systems of education, communication methods, medical practices, and transportation systems are outdated and replaced at a dizzying speed. Now, inhabitants of Western society can bank, order groceries and books and CD's and tapes and take advantage of a plethora of other goods and services "on-line," and expect everything to happen at high speed. Only a stalwart few have resisted "quick" this and "express" that, "drive thru" food and drink, banking, dry cleaning, and pharmacy services.

Thus in a Gradual, surreptitious and pervasive manner people both young and old have been seduced by what may be called a "now!" mentality and approach to life. In *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything*, James Gleick (1999: 85) notes that before Federal Express shipping became commonplace in the 1980's, the exchange of business documents did not usually require package delivery "absolutely, positively overnight." But this is not all. The promise of the enlightenment and of the technological advances it spawned was one of happiness. Since standards of living in the United States have more than doubled in the last fifty years and people are healthier, live longer, own larger homes, and enjoy many modern comforts like air conditioning, the

expectation is that people should be happier. But British economist Richard Layard (2005) suggests they are not. The reason, he notes, is that that people consider happiness relatively, measuring their happiness by looking at those around them. If they have less than their neighbor, they are “less happy.” Their neighbor, on the other hand, is “more happy.” In their desire to catch up to their neighbor, the less happy individual works harder to acquire more luxury items. At the same time however, their happier neighbor – who is only relatively happy by comparison to some other less-happy neighbor – is also acquiring more in order to be as happy as some other, better endowed person. This “hedonic treadmill,” as Layard (2005: 48) calls it, is increasing individual angst and with it a desire for some form of inner peace.

Clearly the postmodern period is an age of significant change – of worldview, of outlook, of expectations, of approaches to sexuality and inclusiveness, of attitudes towards religion and spirituality, and of what it means to be happy. The ethos of postmodernity is that of a society de-constructed, de-centered, eclectic and catholic. Harry Poe (1996: 4) describes postmodern society as one where “all the rules have changed. To be more precise, there are no rules.” It is clearly evident that while this study is not about postmodernity *per se*, any understanding of church/community engagement must be mindful of the increasing presence of postmodernists and the postmodern ethos in both congregations and communities.

### 2.1.3 Postmodernity and the Church

#### 2.1.3.1 Congregational Studies

The study of congregations has been an ongoing reality since the turn of the 20th century, although it was only in the 1980's that a named field of inquiry called "Congregational Studies" emerged (Stokes & Roozen 1991: 183).

Congregational studies are a form of sociology, intended to give an accurate knowledge of the realities of congregational life so that the nature, form and dynamics of congregations as human organisms may be understood (Stokes & Roozen 1991: 186, 187). Reasons for wanting such understanding include enabling "more faithful congregational leadership," (Dudley, Carroll, & Wind, 1991, in the *Dedication*), "understand[ing] the relationship between social change and congregational life" (Ammerman et al. 1998: 3), or as a prelude to bringing about change, because:

[S]uch change is best accomplished when we take seriously and appreciatively, through disciplined understanding [a congregation's] present being – the good and precious qualities that are within them – as a means of grace themselves that enable the transformation of congregations into what it is possible for them to become (Carroll, Dudley & McKinney 1986: 7).

Today, the field of congregational studies is extensive. Ammerman et al. (1998) identify six broad categories under which congregational studies may be assembled: Ecological studies, which focus on the sociology of church and community (e.g. Dudley 1991, 1996, 1997; Ammerman 1997; Wuthnow 1998; Eiesland 2000); Cultural Studies, which focus on the congregation as a community (e.g. Ammerman 1987; Dudley & Johnson 1993; Roof 1993; Becker & Eiesland 1997;) Process Studies, which analyze how congregations organize themselves (e.g. Roof 1978; Halverstadt 1991; Gillespie

1995; Becker 1999); Resource Studies, which essentially deal with the church fiscal resources and management (e.g. Hoge, Zech, McNamara & Donahue 1996; Wuthnow 1997; Mead 1998); and (self-explanatory) Leadership (e.g. Carroll 1991; Hahn 1994; Wimberly 1997) and Theological Studies (e.g. Browning 1991; Anderson & Foley 1998; Guder 1998). A seventh category collects these six under the heading of General Congregational Studies (e.g. Hoge, Carroll, & Scheets 1989; Wind & Lewis 1994; Ammerman, Carroll, Dudley & McKinley 1998).

As the volumes referenced in the previous paragraph indicate (and there are many more), much work has been done in the area of congregational studies. Of particular interest to this study is the work of Richard Cimino and Don Lattin (1998). While their contribution falls within the context of Ammerman's "Ecological Studies," i.e. the sociology of church and community, what they offer in *Shopping for Faith* (1998) is essentially a distillation of Congregational Studies scholarship from all the categories just listed. The resulting work highlights upwards of thirty-six socio/religious trends of postmodernity. A representative few of the trends they identify are:<sup>2</sup>

- A growing gap between personal spirituality and religious institutions (1998: 11).
- [A] "pick and choose" approach to faith, the desire to "take from it what is wonderful and good." (1998: 23).
- [A] market-based approach by congregations to finding new members and keeping the ones they have, (1998: 56)
- Ministering to the different races and ethnic groups of multicultural America a central concern for religious institutions (1998: 108).
- Continuing efforts to find common ground between religious groups in conflict over abortion, welfare, and other social controversies (1998: 153)

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<sup>2</sup> Bayer (2001: 161, 162) produces lists with similar trends.



Clearly, the study by Cimino & Lattin (1998) is broad ranging, taking in issues of postmodern spirituality, multiculturalism, ecumenism, church “marketing” strategy, politics, medical ethics and the like. While all of what they report is of interest to this research, their comments on congregational trends and spirituality in postmodernity are particularly relevant to the present study. (The focus here being on congregations and congregational trends, Cimino and Lattin’s observations regarding spirituality are deferred to the next section.)

First, in their overall assessment of the religious scene in the United States at the turn of the millennium, Cimino and Lattin (1998: 9-30) note that there is growing evidence that one effect of postmodernity is to increase the number of people who are dissatisfied with “conventional” or “traditional” church (e.g. a church that embraces traditional, doctrinal theological interpretations of the Bible, practices liturgical worship services, sings traditional hymns – usually accompanied by an organ. Some – but by no means all – such churches often practice an inward-looking, church-community focus with little lay participation in ministry and outreach, exercising instead multiple clergy-initiated and managed programs) and are looking for a church whose outlook is not only more current (e.g., employs a broader, non-doctrinal theological interpretation of the Bible, practices contemporary worship services with guitars, drums, and “modern” praise songs, and practices community outreach to the local community mainly identified, developed and managed through lay leadership)<sup>3</sup>, but that is also non-denominational,

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<sup>3</sup> It should be observed that the exercise of one of these approaches does not pre-suppose the others. For example, there are many traditional churches who practice a contemporary worship style, and many contemporary churches that practice little community ministry, etc.

informal, and has at least some interest in ecology and the environment. This finding is very much in keeping with the ethos of postmodernity discussed earlier.

Next, (*contra* Mead 2001: 77, who maintains that “the church is still owned by its clergy” [cf. Bayer 2001: 8]), Cimino and Lattin (1998: 83) observe a developing “decentralization of power away from the clergy and into the hands of laypeople,” and note (Cimino and Lattin 1998: 133) that one result of this decentralization will be that “religious groups and individuals will become more self-conscious and forceful about extending their influence in society, thus forging new links between spirituality and social action”. The implication is that with a reduction in ministries that are clergy-identified and managed, there will be a concomitant increase in congregationally-identified and lay-managed ministries.

Third, Cimino and Lattin (1998: 161) note that the “cutbacks in federal assistance to the needy and the shift of the welfare burden to state and local governments will inevitably make religious groups more involved in community development and helping the poor.” Currently, for most churches “welfare” consists in the collection and distribution of food and clothing (Cimino and Lattin 1998: 162). The reduction in government funding opens opportunities for the church to offer community service in the form of mentoring, drug addiction counseling and other “step” programs, the pursuit of social justice for the community disenfranchised, job training and placement, childcare, and a multitude of other supportive community ministries (Cimino & Lattin 1998: 162).

Fourth, in keeping with the movement of control away from clergy into the hands of the congregation, Cimino and Lattin (1998: 133) remark that “religious groups and individuals will become more self-conscious and forceful about extending their influence

in society.” One increasingly evident outcome of this movement is that issues of politics and social justice are becoming progressively more important as matters of congregational interest and action.

Finally, first noting (Cimino & Lattin 1998: 76ff) that small groups are a primary response to the needs of postmodern Christians because they address their de-centralized (not in church), intimate (in each others’ homes), ad-hoc (they do not necessarily meet at a regular time and place) and community (interested friends and associates can meet in the less-threatening environment of someone’s home) approach, and because they give a greater role to women and the laity in religious life, Cimino and Latin (1998: 78) further observe that “The emergence of the small group movement will be more than a passing trend because these gatherings are at the fulcrum of forces affecting religion and society in the United States.”

The assessment by Cimino and Lattin (1998) of the trend development in postmodern church and community raises two fundamental questions of postmodernism in terms of the church: First, should the church be shaped by, or be a shaper of, society? How this question is answered – and it must be answered in the understanding, as the works of Kraft (1979) and Luzbetak (2002) make clear, that there is a fine line to walk between responding to the pressures of society and maintaining a meaningful doctrine – will be primary to the shape and practice of the church in post modernity.

The second question, equally complex, is a corollary to the first. In view of the fact that society is multifaceted and has a multitude of varying needs, and in view of the fact that the Christian quest is to meet those needs and, at the same time, bring the Gospel to the greatest number of people, the question is: How is the Church to meet the

exigencies of postmodern society without compromising the Christian faith and message?

Another way of framing the question is to ask, to what extent may, or must, the gospel be contextualized to be a meaningful resource in and for postmodernity? Newbigin (1989: 226) asks:

How is it possible for the Church to truly represent the reign of God in the world in the way Jesus did? How can there be this combination of tender compassion and awesome sovereignty? How can any human society be both the servant of the people and all their needs, and yet at the same time responsible to only to God in His awesome and holy sovereignty? How can the Church be fully open to the needs of the world and yet have its eyes fixed always on God?

Newbigin proposed that the best way to meet society in terms of the gospel – and avoid the possibility of compromise – is, as Hunsberger (1998: 279) phrases it, for “Christians [to] be ‘the *hermeneutic* of the gospel – the interpretive lens through which people will see and read what [the] gospel has to do with them and the world in which they live.’” Before turning to Newbigin, however, the question of the Spirit and spirituality in the postmodern context must be addressed.

## 2.2 SECTION TWO: POSTMODERNITY, SPIRITUALITY, AND THE SPIRIT

Philosophical, cultural, scientific and technical changes of the size, extent and variety of those described in Sections 2.1.1 and 2.1.2 cannot but have a deep affect on the society that has experienced (and is experiencing) them. These changes and affects have been comprehensively addressed elsewhere (e.g. by Williams 1980; Roof 1999; Lippy 1996; Zinnbauer & Pargament 1997).

It is the effect of these changes in terms of the Spirit and spirituality that is the focus of this section.

To begin with, it was shown above (Section 2.1.1.1) that the Enlightenment project was successful in philosophically removing Jesus and God from having a meaningful role on the stage of human existence and that for reasons that are not entirely clear the Spirit and the human sense of spirituality largely avoided the attention of Enlightenment philosophers.

In the case of the former, the lack of attention is unsurprising. As long ago as the fourth century C.E. Gregory of Nazianus (cf. Schaff and Wace 1994:318) termed the Spirit the *Theos agraptos*, the God about whom nothing is written. McDonnell (1985: 191) notes that, “Anyone writing on pneumatology is hardly burdened by the past.” “The Third Article of the Apostles Creed has been neglected, contributing to a listless Christianity,” writes Molly Marshall (2003: 3), adding that the situation has remained largely unchanged from Gregory’s day to the present. Ditmanson (1978: 209) has reviewed the historical de-emphasis on the Spirit and suggests that the undue prominence given by Montanists and other enthusiasts through the centuries on the presence of the Spirit seemed to the official churches to “lessen the ties between the Spirit and the historical Christ, or between the Spirit and the letter of Scriptures, or between the Spirit and institutional church life, in ways that were both discouraging and theologically frightening.” Confronted by such threats to the unity of the Godhead, by perceived evasions of God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ, and by a “vague and unregulated spiritualism” (ibid.), “church fathers appropriated biblical texts that might have sustained a theology of the Spirit, turning them instead to a ‘doctrine of the Logos, the second person of the Trinity’” (ibid.). If Ditmanson is correct in his assessment, then the profile

of the Holy Spirit during the Enlightenment may have been so low that it simply did not warrant philosophical attention.

The fact that the Enlightenment neglected the Spirit does not mean the Spirit was inactive. The work of the Spirit does not depend on human acknowledgement, nor even on human participation. The “Spirit is always moving ahead, drawing us to new life and receptivity to God’s presence with us” writes Marshall (2003: 4). The Spirit is not a separate, independent, less important manifestation of God, but an intrinsic part of a Trinitarian relationship. Where the Spirit is, there too is God and Christ.

This conclusion is strengthened by a consideration of the relation between the Spirit and God’s *action*. Recent biblical and theological studies agree in using the formula: “the Holy Spirit is God in action.” The etymology of the biblical words for “spirit” provides a basis for saying this. The Hebrew and Greek words refer primarily to wind or storm. The meaning shifts to the movement of air caused by breathing, and from breath it is a short jump to [the] principle of life or vitality. “Spirit” means that God is a living God who grants vitality to his creation (Ditmanson 1978: 213).

Human spirituality equally seems to have been overlooked by Enlightenment philosophers. This may have been because, as the Jeffersonian comment reproduced above suggests, it was thought that only through the channel of spirituality could the nature and purpose of God be understood. It may equally have been because there was a deep-seated realization that spirituality is an intrinsic part of the human condition. Diarmuid Ó Murchú (1998: vii, cf. Frankfort et al. 1977), noting that spirituality has been a part of the human DNA far longer than institutionalized religion, asserts:

Our spiritual story as a human species is at least 70,000 years old; by comparison, the formal religions have existed for a mere 4,500 years [ . . . ] Spirituality is, and always has been, more central to human experience than religion, a fact that is borne out in the growing body of knowledge accumulated by cultural anthropology and the history of religious ideas.

In the foreword to Hay and Hunt (2002) David Hay, noting that he has been engaged in empirical research on the nature of spiritual experience for “rather more than twenty-five years,” adds, “The results of my work have strengthened my belief that spiritual awareness is a necessary part of our human make up, biologically built in to us, whatever our religious beliefs or lack of them.”

Whether spirituality is part of human DNA or is a result of a conditioning in some way common to all cultures is outside the purview of this discussion. It can only be said that a sense of a spiritual side to the human condition appears to be an almost universal experience of humanity, fundamental to “one’s basic nature and the process of finding meaning and purpose” (Canda 1998: 2).

How spirituality manifested itself in pre-history is a subject also outside the scope of this research, but that there was spirituality and that it did seek outlet is evident from the results of the kind of anthropological and ethno-archeological studies to which Ó Murchú refers. In the early history of Western culture spirituality likely first manifested, as in other ancient cultures, as animism (cf. Frankfort et al. 1977, esp. ch 1). Later, spiritually-driven, socially-developed mythological images coalesced into cultic, paganistic forms such as druidism. Subsequently, the Greek and Roman Empires added their own spiritually-derived pantheons to the pagan gods of conquered terrain. Finally, with the rise of Christianity, spirituality in the West was forced to coalesce within the Christian paradigm, finding meaning and purpose as an aspect of religious adherence to Christian dogma. Within the Christian religious realm, experiences and expressions of spirituality that did not conform to church dogma were largely considered potentially “evil,” perhaps even heresy, and were condemned (e.g. 2nd-century Montanism [Walker,

et al. 1985: 69, 70], 12th century Joachimism [Walker, et al. 1985: 320f], and the 13th century development from Joachimism, “Spiritualism” [Walker, et al. 1985: 321]).

First the Renaissance and later the Enlightenment loosed the dogmatic grip of the church on what were considered appropriate spiritual manifestations and behavior. Once re-liberated from the confines of the church spirituality experienced a Thermidorian reaction, a radical shift from adherence to institutionalized concepts of religion to individual expressions of spirituality. Early expressions of such spirituality found form in Swedenborgianism, Transcendentalism, and Mesmerism, then as “spiritualism, the New Thought or Mind Cure movement, and finally Theosophy,” which “refined the occult-leaning vocabularies of the [nineteenth] century’s earlier metaphysical ‘isms”” (Fuller 2001: 11). In more recent years a developing “global” perspective and “global” marketing have increasingly exposed the Western world to Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Shintoism, and many other expressions of spirituality as experienced by different cultures, faiths and beliefs (ibid). Further in this regard, Diana Eck (2002: 4, 5) writes:

In the past thirty years massive movements of people both as migrants and refugees have reshaped the demography of our world. [The United States has] about 30 million [immigrants], a million [more] arriving each year . . . Just as the end of the Cold War brought about a new geopolitical situation, the global movements of people have brought about a new geopolitical reality: Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims are now part of the religious landscape . . . mosques appear in Paris and Lyons, Buddhist temples in Toronto, and Sikh gurdwaras in Vancouver. But nowhere in today’s mass of world migrations, is the sheer range of religious faith as wide as it is today in the United States. Add to India’s wide range of religions those of China, Latin America, and Africa. Take the diversity of Britain or Canada, and add to it the crescendo of Latino immigration along with the Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Filipinos. This is an astonishing reality. We have never been here before.

Berthrong (1999) calls the resulting display of religious iterations a “Divine Deli,” and Richard Cimino and Don Lattin (1998: 23) note that this plurality of spiritual



expression has led to “a ‘pick-and-choose’ approach to faith, the desire to take from it what is wonderful and good,” and predict that this attitude will carry through the early decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. “The same consumeristic and experiential approach popularized via Eastern mysticism will be brought to the spiritual teachings of the West” (ibid.). Cimino & Lattin (1998: 21) note further that “[S]piritual seekers . . . will continue to turn to the East for spiritual direction and inspiration, even though relatively few will formally adopt these Eastern religions as monks, nuns, or formal lay practitioners.” As postmodernity expands, there will be a mixing of elements of different traditions into new hybrid forms as seekers, inspired by spiritual plurality and concomitantly separated by cultural sea changes from their religious heritage, search out new expressions of faith. Driven by a consumerist approach to satisfy personal need society will demonstrate an increased interest in, for example, Reiki, meditation, Tai-Chi, aromatherapy, Celtic mysticism, paganism, goddess spirituality and American Indian shamanism as well as orthodox Jewish, Christian and Islamic faiths. In addition, “This tendency to mix elements of different traditions into new hybrid forms will continue into [the 21st century], as seekers separated from their religious heritage search out new expressions of faith” (Cimino & Lattin 1998: 26).

The resulting spiritual pluralism has the potential to produce a person who:

[S]ees no contradiction in attending a Quaker meeting in the morning, eating a Zen macrobiotic breakfast, sitting for Chinese Taoist meditation, eating an Indian Ayurvedic lunch, doing a Cherokee sweat before Tai Chi, munching down a soy-burger for dinner, dancing in a full-moon witching ceremony with her neo-Pagan Goddess group, and then coming home and making love with her New Age boyfriend according to Hindu Tantric principles (Powell 1998: 2, 3).

Clearly the Enlightenment-induced reduction of the church's control of "authentic" spirituality, added to the various aspects of spirituality brought in by immigrants to the West, and then coupled with the "delicatessen" approach has seen a concomitant rise in individual expressions of spirituality. Richard Harries (2002: ix, x) mentions the report of a 1999 United Kingdom survey that notes in part:

While 65 percent of the population still believes in God, only 28 per cent were willing to affirm that this God was personal. The other 37 per cent thought of God in vaguer terms such as spirit or life force. At the same time, while 27 per cent of those surveyed were willing to describe themselves as religious, another 27 per cent claimed to be spiritual. What is even more significant is that while 39 per cent said that they were not religious, only 12 per cent were willing to be described as "not a spiritual person." Or, to put it another way round, *88 per cent of the population resisted being called "not a spiritual person"* (emphasis added).

Comparable recent studies undertaken in the United States (e.g. Roof 1999, esp. chas. 4 & 5; Fuller 2001; King 2002; Kosmin & Mayer 2001), similarly indicate that while large numbers of the population are shifting away from institutionalized religion, many of those that remain in the traditional church are contemporizing traditional Christianity, for example by re-shaping their understanding of Christian theology to a wholly Evangelical form (Roof 1999: 26ff). Those that do leave the institution cling to a sense of "spirituality" that often manifests, as has already been shown, as re-worked iterations of old religions – for example, paganism re-invented as neo-paganism. Other iterations of non-institutional spirituality include forms of social activism, such as the various "peace and justice" movements,<sup>4</sup> concerns for global ecology,<sup>5</sup> and so-called

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<sup>4</sup> e.g. "United for Peace and Justice," <http://www.unitedforpeace.org/>; "Institute for Peace and Justice," <http://www.ipj-ppj.org/>; "Peninsula Peace and Justice Organization," <http://www.peaceandjustice.org/>.

<sup>5</sup> e.g. the Amsterdam, Netherlands-based "Greenpeace" movement was founded out of a postmodern concern for global ecology. (cf. [http://www.greenpeace.org/international\\_en/history/](http://www.greenpeace.org/international_en/history/))

“parachurch” organizations, “voluntary, not-for-profit associations of Christians working outside of denominational control to achieve some specific ministry or social service” (Reid 1990: 863). Cimino and Lattin (1998: 38) note however that spirituality is not just the purview of traditions and movements: “As the entertainment media becomes the primary conveyor of common culture, it will compete with religious groups as the main bearer of spiritual and religious insight, no matter how mundane and homogenized those revelations may be.” That is, the media, too, influence spirituality, producing programs that, at least temporarily, fill the spiritual void that many people feel. Such people like the “easy” religions of the media; movies such as *Michael*, about a cigarette-smoking, all too human “angel,” starring John Travolta, *The Preacher’s Wife*, which tells how an angel softens the heart of a fundamentalist pastor (Denzel Washington), and the classic *It’s A Wonderful Life*, in which an angel visits a suicidal Jimmy Stewart and causes him to see his life in a new light. Television shows too (*Touched by an Angel*, *The “X” files*, *Joan of Arcadia*) are appreciated for the way they allow people to “get in touch” with their spirituality for thirty or sixty minutes each week without the necessity of making any personal or community commitments. (For a discussion of the religious/spiritual role of movies in postmodernity, see Van Gelder 1999: 39-63.) Similarly, authors produce much contemporary literature written intentionally to appeal to the sense of individual spirituality that has emerged in postmodernity. The scope of such literature is vast. A plethora of “self-help” books appeal to the self-centered nature of postmodernity, and at least two publishing houses, Westminster/John Knox and Abingdon, have published a series of small volumes based on, in the former case, the concept of “wisdom,” (Law

1997, *The Wisdom of the Prophets*; Louth 1997, *The Wisdom of the Greek Fathers*. Other titles listed [the author is not named] include *The Wisdom of Mother Theresa*; *The Wisdom of Solomon*; *The Wisdom of Desmond Tutu*). Abingdon's publications are works based on Celtic Christianity (e.g. De Weyer 1997, *Celtic Prayer*; and De Weyer 1998, *Celtic Praises*). The volumes from both publishers are non-doctrinal, small, lavishly illustrated, but contain minimal text which, as the earlier discussion of the ethos of postmodernity shows, is exactly the kind of material postmoderns appreciate. Similarly appreciated are volumes that offer simple, or quick (and preferably both) solutions to postmodern angst, (e.g. Wilkinson 2000, *The Prayer of Jabez*,)<sup>6</sup> or programmatic solutions to the question of Christian lifestyle (e.g. Warren 2002, *The Purpose Driven Life*).

Sales numbers bear out another aspect of the postmodern ethos: an appreciation by some for literature that tends to disparage the Judeo-Christian tradition (e.g. Von Daniken 1970, *Chariots of the Gods?*; Baigent 1982, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*; Picknett 1997, *The Templar Revelation*), or re-write it (e.g. Brown 2000, *Angels & Demons*, 2003 *The DaVinci Code*; Gardener 2003, *Bloodline of the Holy Grail*). Equally hot sellers are volumes on ecology, a subject, as has been mentioned, that is near and dear to the heart of postmodernity (e.g. Hallman 2000, *Spiritual Values for Earth Community*; McDonough & Braungart 2002, *From Cradle to Cradle*).

From the evidence presented here a number of conclusions may be drawn. The first is that regardless of the attention, or lack of it, given by humankind to the Holy

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<sup>6</sup> In this slim volume Bruce Wilkinson (2000:17) asserts that the ritual, daily utterance of the prayer of an obscure character identified in 1 Chronicles 4:9,10 will assure that "God's great plan will surround you and sweep you forward into the profoundly important and satisfying life He has waiting."

Spirit, this third person of the Trinity continues and maintains a creative and sustaining function as an equally-participating member of the Godhead. Second, it is evident that a spiritual sense is intrinsic to the human condition. Third, such spirituality is reflective of the de-constructed, de-centered, eclectic and catholic ethos of postmodernity noted at the end of the previous section. Next, such spirituality is dynamic, seeking outlet, some form or way of expressing itself as an aspect of human existence; human spirituality seems to quest in some way to satisfy an inner longing for completion, or “self realization.” Noting that “The turn in culture is away from life lived in terms of external or ‘objective’ roles, duties and obligations and toward a life lived by reference to one’s own subjective experiences (relational as much as individualistic),” Heelas and Woodhead (2005: 2-4) add:

The [subjective life] has to do with states of consciousness, states of mind, memories, emotions, passions, sensations, bodily experiences, dreams, feelings, inner conscience, and sentiments – including moral sentiments like compassion. The subjectivities of each individual become a, if not the, unique source of significance, meaning and authority. Here the ‘good life’ consists in living one’s life in full awareness of one’s states of being; in enriching one’s experiences; in finding ways of handling negative emotions; in becoming sensitive enough to find out where and how the quality of one’s life – alone or in relation – may be improved. The goal is not to defer to higher authority, but to have the courage to become one’s own authority. Not to follow established paths but to follow one’s own, inner-directed . . . life. Not to become what others want one to be, but to ‘become truly who I am.’ Not to rely on the knowledge and wisdom of others . . . but to live out the Delphic ‘know thyself,’ and the Shakespearian ‘To thine own self be true.’

Within the context Heelas and Woodward describe the evidence further suggests that this drive for a sense of spiritual completion, or self-realization, takes two polar forms: The first form is one in which spiritual fulfillment is thought to be achieved through a strong emphasis on self, such as “self-help” and “self-realization.” This

emphasis promotes the idea that through personal effort, one can be spiritually complete without community commitment or involvement. The second form, quite the opposite, is one in which community engagement is thought, or felt, to be intrinsic to a sense of individual spiritual wholeness. In this form the individual feels in some way driven to community action as a way of responding to an inner, spiritual motivation.

Regardless of the form human spirituality takes Marshall (2003: 25) stresses that the Spirit of God and the spirit of humanity, while not identical, are “undeniably related. The Spirit of God evokes the spirits of all that are created, enabling them to participate in the perichoretic movement of God with creation, the dance of the universe [. . . .] All spirit is the gift of God; all spirit is sustained by the vivifying presence of God’s own Spirit.” Apart from our own efforts, the Spirit “is always moving ahead, drawing us to new life and receptivity to God’s presence with us” (Marshall 2003: 3, 4).

For some, that new life and receptivity to God’s presence is, Cimino and Lattin (1998: 5) note:

[O]ften a search for community, a longing for belonging. It can also inspire greater social conscience. Religious individuals of all varieties tend to be more involved in community life. More and more religious congregations find themselves at the forefront of community development, providing charity and social service in an increasingly privatized world.

While community action can be exercised in a number of ways – for example through parachurch organizations – it is the way in which spirituality drives individuals to community service within institutionalized congregations, as hermeneutic of the gospel, that commands the attention of this study.

## 2.3 SECTION THREE: CONGREGATION AS HERMENEUTIC

**2.3.1 Lesslie Newbigin**

The development of Bishop Lesslie Newbigin's *hermeneutic* thesis can be traced through the works he published.<sup>7</sup> In summary, the bishop determined that there were two historical developments that gave rise to the situation he believed confronted postmodern society: religious pluralism and the post-Enlightenment focus on "reason."

## 2.3.1.1 Religious Pluralism

Newbigin (1989: 3, 14, and Chas. 13 & 14) describes "Religious Pluralism" as "the social condition in which multiple religious group[s] maintain their theological differences while participating fully in the dominant society," and further asserts (Newbigin 1989: 25) that:

[R]eligious pluralism has been a mark of the world for as long as we have known anything of the history of religions and . . . most people, for the majority of history, have lived in societies where one religion was dominant and others marginal. In such societies, patterns of belief and practice are accepted which determine which beliefs are plausible and which are not. Thus, the dominant religion provides, in and of itself, the "plausibility structure" *for* that society.

Pointing to Berger (1979) as his source for the term "plausibility structure,"

Newbigin (1986: 10) explains that:

A "plausibility structure," as Berger uses the term, is a social structure of ideas and practices that create the conditions determining what beliefs are believable within the society in question. Plausibility structures will vary from time to time and from place to place and the "reasonableness" of any belief will be a judgment made on the basis of the dominant plausibility structure.

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<sup>7</sup> A full bibliography of Newbigin's published works may be found in Foust et al. 2002: 252-281, and Hunsberger 1998: 283-304. See also [http://www.newbigin.net/searches/non\\_new.cfm](http://www.newbigin.net/searches/non_new.cfm)

Newbigin maintains that all human thinking takes place within a plausibility structure that determines which beliefs are responsible and which are not. Concluding that no amount of argument will make the Gospel sound reasonable to those in the reigning (contemporary Western) plausibility structure, Newbigin (1989: 227) surmises that the “only possible hermeneutic of the Gospel is a congregation which believes it and lives it.” For Newbigin, the Christian congregation, as a community of truth, has the missionary task of challenging the existing plausibility structure. That Christians should – and can – do so comes from their position as inhabitants of a different plausibility structure. Assuredly, every person living in a postmodern Western society is subject to an almost continuous bombardment of ideas, images, slogans and stories which presuppose a plausibility structure radically different from that which is controlled by the Christian understanding of human nature and destiny. However, those persons rooted in a community of praise and thanksgiving, a community of truth, a community for the world and of the world, a community of responsibility for God’s new order, and a community of eschatological hope; those persons inhabiting a Christian community which constantly remembers and rehearses the true story of human nature and destiny can, with effort, maintain a “healthy skepticism” of the reigning (secular) plausibility structure. Such skepticism then allows a member of the Christian community to take part in the life of society without being bemused and deluded by society’s own beliefs about itself (Newbigin 1989: 228, 229). But, it is not enough not to be deluded. Nor is it enough to maintain a separate plausibility structure:

It is in the ordinary secular business of the world that the sacrifices of love and obedience are to be offered to God. It is in the context of secular affairs that the mighty power released into the world through the work of Christ is to be manifested. The church gathers every Sunday, the day of



resurrection and of Pentecost, to renew its participation in Christ's priesthood. But the exercise of this priesthood is not within the walls of the church but in the daily business of the world. *It is only in this way the public life of the world, its accepted habits and assumptions, can be challenged by the Gospel and brought under the searching light of the truth as it has been revealed in Jesus* (Newbigin 1989: 230, emphasis added).

Further, the Gospel "will only challenge the public life of society," Newbigin (1989: 233) maintains:

[W]hen a congregation not only believes it, but when they also renounce an introverted concern for their own life and recognize that they exist for the sake of those who are not members as a sign, instrument, and foretaste of God's redeeming grace for the life of society; when, in fact, they live as the hermeneutic of the Gospel in the secular society they inhabit."

In summary, it is Newbigin's assertion that the Gospel cannot be accommodated as an additional pluralistic element in a society that has pluralism as its reigning ideology and Critical Reason as its dominant plausibility structure. The church cannot accept as its role simply the winning of individuals to a kind of Christian discipleship that concerns only the private and domestic aspects of life. Christian faithfulness to a message that concerns the kingdom of God, God's rule over all things and over all peoples, requires the reclamation by the church of the high ground of public truth. To suggest a phrase, the future of the church lies in its character, and it is to the character of Newbigin's "hermeneutical" church that this discussion now turns.

### **2.3.2. Characteristics of the Hermeneutical Church**

Of course the character of the church referred to above does not lie in the bricks and mortar of the church building and only to some extent in denominational or particular church polity (though polity does play a role in either liberating or limiting congregations). Rather, the character (it might be said the *ethos*) of the church lies in its

congregation. Newbigin (1989: 227-233) suggests a number of markers, or distinctives, that will identify the character of a congregation as being the hermeneutic of the Gospel.<sup>8</sup> Generally, it will be a congregation made up of people who believe in the Gospel and who individually and collectively practice these principles which, he argues (Newbigin 1989: 222-233), are firmly rooted and grounded therein. Specifically, such a congregation will be a community of praise, of thanksgiving, of truth, of involvement in the larger, secular neighborhood, a community that exercises the calling to individual priesthood, a community of mutual responsibility, and a community of hope.

#### 2.3.2.1 Praise

Negative feelings toward the universality of the tenets of Christian faith are not contained in the facts and values argument alone. Reverence, the attitude which looks up in admiration and love to another who is better than oneself, is generally regarded as beneath dignity in modern Western society, which places great store in the concept of “equality.” Further, it is a characteristic of Western society to always find the weak point, the “Achilles’ heel,” the “feet of clay” of the one held up as worthy of praise. In terms of Christianity, this skeptical attitude has critics searching the scriptures for contradictions, errors, discrepancies, and apparent failures on the part of God, Jesus, the church, or anything else that can discredit the faith. Such attacks can only be combated by Christian congregations and then only by congregations that “find their true dignity and their true equality in reverence to one who is worthy of all the praise we can offer” (Newbigin, 1989: 228). To be effective, and to be the true hermeneutical congregation, such praise is not merely offered within the limitations of liturgy, or within the confines of the church’s

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<sup>8</sup> Newbigin (1989:227-233) actually identifies six specific markers, one of which is in two parts. For reasons of clarity they are rendered here as seven discrete characteristics.

walls. To be effective, such praise is lived out in the community, in social relationships and in communal activities. Not, as Jesus notes, pretentiously (cf. Mk 12:38-40, Lk. 11:43), but as an expression of indwelling Christian character (Mt 5:13 and pars; cf. Mk 4:21, Lk. 8:16). The congregation should let its light so shine that people marvel at it (Mt. 5:16; cf. 1 Pet 2:12) and, if they do not glorify God, people observing the light may at least seek to know more about what motivates the congregation to act the way it does.

#### 2.3.2.2 Thanksgiving

In keeping with contemporary Western attitudes to praise, Newbigin (1989: 228) notes that thanksgiving too is considered to be an unacceptable act of subservience. In a society that speaks much of individual human rights, demeans charity, and seeks personal justice, the hermeneutical congregation confesses that it cannot speak of rights except the rights of others for, in terms of justice, we ourselves have been dealt with charitably. “Justice would demand our condemnation, but the amazing grace of God is boundlessly kind, for we have been given everything, forgiven everything and promised everything so that (as Luther said) we lack nothing except faith to believe it” (Newbigin 1989: 228). Not only must a hermeneutical congregation’s worship be filled with thanksgiving for charity and for relief from true justice (cf. Jn 1:16, 17), its thanksgiving should “spill over into care for our neighbor” (Newbigin 1989: 228) and that not as a moral crusade, but as charity to the community as an expression of gratitude for God’s charity to us (Mt 5:43, 19:19, 22:39 pars, cf. Lk 10:29-37).

#### 2.3.2.3 Truth

It was noted earlier that every person in this postmodern Western world is, through advertising, social attitude, the arts, and business practices subjected to constant

reinforcement of the “Market Economy” idea of “self;” self gratification, self promotion, individual advantage, personal gain, personal health, personal wealth. While, as Reno (2002: 27) writes, “we need to see that in Christ we are not called to love strength and power and beauty,” we are nevertheless, it seems, constantly encouraged to love those very characteristics as being fundamental to self-fulfillment and self realization. And we are entitled to strength and power and beauty, to self-fulfillment and self-realization, the reigning plausibility structure claims, even if the getting of them is to the detriment of our neighbor. Indeed, not only is our neighbor’s disadvantage not a matter for consideration, the concept of having more than, being better off than, having advantage over one’s neighbor are all mind-sets being constantly promoted. As was noted earlier, in the face of such an overwhelming social attitude, the reigning “plausibility structure” can only be effectively countered “by people who are fully integrated inhabitants of another” plausibility structure (Newbigin 1989: 228). “Fully integrated” means “fully believing.” Only those who believe totally in the Gospel – those for whom the truth of the Gospel is as intrinsic to their faith as breath is to life – can hope to effectively challenge the reigning plausibility structure. Maintaining integration in the separate reality of Gospel living in the face of a constant media and social avalanche of culture and lifestyle information exuding from a society that urges us to the contrary is not easy.

A first step in maintaining separation – and being and remaining a community of truth – is to meet often to remember and rehearse the true story of human nature and destiny (Newbigin 1989: 229). Western society is daily exposed to the seductive pressures of secular humanism. To counteract such persistent and seemingly omnipresent influence requires that a Christian congregation not be casual in its attendance in church,

in gathering in mutually supportive community, and in constant, ongoing participation in the hermeneutic. A second step is, as both congregation and church, to eschew the methods of modern propaganda – manipulation, emotional exploitation, hidden agendas, and “end-justifies-the-means” strategies – for, “if the congregation is to function effectively as a community of truth, its manner of speaking the truth must not be aligned to the techniques of modern propaganda, but must have the modesty, sobriety, and the realism which are proper to disciples of Jesus” (Newbigin 1989: 229). In other words, modern propaganda methods are not only egregiously false and deceptive; they keep the congregation in the very world toward which it is trying to maintain a healthy skepticism! A community of truth avoids – indeed abhors – prevarication (Mt 22:16 and pars; cf. John 4:23), promotes adherence to law (Mt 13:41; cf. Mt 22:17-21), and lives the truth (Jn 3:21).

#### 2.3.2.4 Place

The hermeneutical congregation will be a community of “place.” That is, it will be a congregation that does not live for itself but is deeply involved in the concerns of the immediate neighborhood in which it exists (Newbigin 1989: 229). While anyone meeting membership criteria can be a part of the congregation, they must do so in the understanding that the congregational role is to serve the community in which the church – the building itself – is located. Newbigin notes as “significant” that, “in the consistent usage of the New Testament, the word *ekklēsia* is qualified in only two ways; it is ‘the church of God,’ or ‘of Christ,’ and it is the church of a place” (Newbigin 1989: 229). Combining the two meanings suggests that the church is God’s embassy in a specific place. Failure to understand the dual roles of embassy and place may lead either to an

emphasis on place, where the focus becomes the self-image of the people of that place rather than the vehicle, or tool, of God's judgment and mercy for that place, or the congregation may be so wrapped up in its concerns for each member's relationship to God that any involvement in the neighborhood is irrelevant to its concerns.

#### 2.3.2.5 Priesthood

The Church came into the world to carry the message of God's revelation, continuing the work Jesus started and in the power of the same Spirit (Jn 20:19-23). In this instance, "church" means more than "community of believers." Since the earliest days of Judaism the role of "priest" has been to stand before God on behalf of the people and to stand before people on behalf of God (Newbigin 1989: 230, cf. the numerous explications of the function of the priest/priesthood in Leviticus and Numbers). The role of priest found its pinnacle in Jesus, who alone can fulfill and has fulfilled this office to perfection (Heb 4:14). Through Jesus' death and resurrection we have become participants in His priesthood. Thus the hermeneutical congregation, in addition to being a community of believers, will be a community of priests (Heb 3:1; cf. Rom 15:15, 16). However, this priestly ministry is not "lived out" within the walls of the church building, but in and through engagement with the daily business of the world, where it will challenge the world's habits and assumptions by promoting "gospel" living, illuminating society with the light of truth as revealed in Jesus. The hermeneutical church will be a place where its members are "trained, supported and nourished" in the exercise of priestly ministry to the world (Newbigin 1989: 230).

It is important to understand here that the exercise of priestly ministry to the world is one based on individual talents. God gives different gifts to different members

of the body and calls them to different kinds of service (cf. Rom 12:1-8; 1 Cor 12; Eph 4:7-12; 1 Pet 4:9-11). The hermeneutical congregation will work together to help identify and nurture community gifts and individual, spiritual gifts and so develop ways of using those gifts productively both within the church and in the larger society (see 1 Cor 14 for Paul's analysis of the productive nature of gifts).

#### 2.3.2.6 Mutual Responsibility

Newbigin (1989: 231) maintains that part of the problem of contemporary Western society is an "individualism which denies the fundamental nature of our human nature as given by God." To combat the existing nature of "social individualism" in the postmodern Western world, the hermeneutical congregation must be "effective in advocating and achieving its own social order" based on a "relationship of faithfulness and responsibility to one another" (Newbigin 1989: 231). The hermeneutical church must be an organism of mutually responsible community. As such, it "stands in the wider community of the neighborhood and the nation not primarily as the promoter of programs for social change [ . . . ] but as itself the foretaste of a different social order" – a social order based in gospel truth (Newbigin 1989: 231). Such a congregation, being itself liberated (living in a gospel community liberates it from the restrictions imposed by secular society), will become an advocate for human liberation in general. It follows that the hermeneutical congregation will be, and will be seen to be, the overflow into community of a life in Christ, where God's justice and God's peace are already being experienced.

### 2.3.2.7 Hope

Finally, Newbigin (1989: 232) claims, the hermeneutical congregation will be a community of hope. Although science and technology move us forward to ever more amazing inventions and developments, they seem to do so in an atmosphere of increasing moral bankruptcy. “Innovations” in accounting methodology led to the Enron debacle, when that organization put corporate bonuses and shareholder profits ahead of ethical business practice. Stem cell research and cloning offer us a tempting future in terms of cures for a wide range of diseases – but at what moral and ethical risk? Homosexuality and gay parenting, genetic manipulation of plants, human organ transplants, and even the freedom considerations of post 9/11 “National Security” raise serious questions of justice and ethics, creating moral and spiritual dilemmas that people are ill-equipped to face.

Increasingly, as people live out the secular market economy, winner-take-all approach to a life that reveres strength, beauty and wealth, they begin to acknowledge a vacuum in their lives and ask questions about the true meaning and purpose of life (cf. Reno 2002: 130f; Cimino & Lattin 1998: *passim*). Modern Christianity, which in many ways has either “sold out” to the dominant plausibility structure or been sidelined by it, holds little to no spiritual value to such people. It is no wonder that people in the West are drawn to Eastern spirituality, perhaps because of the sense of difference from traditional (read “Christian”) responses to the sense of “spiritual vacuum” such people feel, but more likely because “the timeless peace of a pantheistic mysticism is easier to deal with, and less threatening to personal autonomy, than the struggle to achieve the purpose of a personal creator” (Newbigin 1989: 232). For such people, everything they know, everything they have been taught, “suggests that it is absurd to believe in the true



authority over all things is represented in a crucified man” (ibid). But even while secular humanism is rejecting “values” while seeking “facts,” human beings, individuals, are seeking some kind of spiritual anchor, an unshakeable vantage point from which to make sense of, to discern the purpose of, life. And here is where the hermeneutical congregation holds out hope. Not the hope of desire, as in the tentative or doubtful “I hope it turns out well,” but the confident hope that “what is believed, what is anticipated, what, indeed, has been promised, will come about; that that in which we hope – the ‘reconciliation of all things with Christ as head’ – is utterly reliable” (Newbigin 1989: 101). The hermeneutical congregation will be an expression of that hope in action, working in the sure and certain knowledge that the Kingdom of God can be made real.

It is important here that Newbigin’s use of the future “will be” (see above and 1989: 227-232) be noted, for it indicates that the characteristics he describes are *evidential*. What Newbigin has established are the characteristics of successful churches, rather than strategies that lead to success. That is, that churches exemplifying his criteria of secular engagement have – perhaps unknowingly – keyed in to the strategy of success without necessarily knowing what it is.

To be clear, it is not the systematic *praxis* of these characteristics that makes a congregation the hermeneutic of the gospel, but rather being the hermeneutic of the gospel is *evidenced in the praxis of the characteristics*. Congregations under the Lordship and leadership of Christ will be those through whom and in whom the Spirit speaks and acts (Newbigin 1989: 118,119), performing ministry that has been characterized as “Holistic.”

### 2.3.4 “Holistic Ministry”

In terms of what Ammerman et al. (1998) have termed “Ecological Studies” – the relationship between church and community – there has been in recent years an explosion of interest, particularly from the aspect of understanding the activities of congregations and other religious organizations in the community (Unruh 2001). A plethora of studies<sup>9</sup> have “significantly expanded our knowledge of congregations’ involvement in caring for the needy” (Unruh 2001: 1). Such studies “are revealing the complex but complementary patterns of data on the proportions of congregations offering social services, the congregational characteristics associated with social activism, the range and capacity of the services provided, and the resources and collaborations that make them possible” (ibid.).

One such study is an analysis of research undertaken in selected churches in the greater Philadelphia, Pennsylvania area of the United States. Ronald Sider, Philip Olson and Heidi Unruh (2002), following on previous work by Sider (1999) and others (e.g. Kehrein 1992; Perkins 1993, 1995; Ammerman, Carroll, Dudley, & McKinney 1998; Dudley 2001) used resources such as faith-based social service agencies and denominational headquarters to identify 145 churches in the Philadelphia area broadly fitting prescribed community engagement criteria. From the 145, fifteen congregations of various denominations were selected for study, reflecting a wide variety of size, income, location, and exercise of ecclesiastical practice (Sider & Unruh 1999). Rather than simply identifying the characteristics of those churches which, following Stokes and

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<sup>9</sup> e.g. Wineburg 1994; Printz 1998; Billingsley 1999; Mata 1999; Reese 2000; Saxon-Harrold et al. 2000; Ammerman 2001; Chaves and Tsitsos 2001; Cnaan and Boddie 2001; Grettenberger 2001; Parks and Quern 2001; Polis Center 2001; Bartkowski and Regis 2003.

Roozen (1991: 186) they call Holistic churches, they report on *what is being done* in and by those churches in terms of congregations engaging their local community in ways that “make a difference” in that community. Further, eschewing analytically developed “top down” strategies (that is, strategies intended to filter down through hierarchical, institutional structures), they focus instead on analyzing the “bottom up” approach, studying congregations that have spontaneously developed programs and ministries that positively engage their communities.

Sider, Olsen and Unruh (2002: 36) observe:

[W]e cannot predict where [holistic] churches may be found, or what ethnic group will fill the pews, or whether they will sing hymns or contemporary choruses, or which political party they will endorse, [neither can we] associate holistic churches with a particular kind of ministry. In fact, churches that foster a holistic mission may not agree on all the ‘right’ priorities for ministry or on the best way to share the gospel,

Even so, there is, throughout Sider, Olsen and Unruh’s report strong evidence of one unifying factor: a “radical dependence on the Holy Spirit” (2002: 13) – not as a casually-invoked endorser of a previously determined strategy, but as the animating principle of their holistic ministry (cf. Nel: 241ff).

The kinds of speech and action Newbigin holds as fundamental to effective ministry – that is, speech and ministry produced by faith in Jesus and thus under the direction of the Spirit – appear to be those identified in the churches studied by Sider, Olsen, and Unruh. While an implication of their study is that doing what these churches do – duplicating their actions – will produce the same results in other churches, they are careful to point out that while it is important to study models of holistic ministry, “[congregations] shouldn’t simply copy them – because then [congregations] won’t become what God is calling [them] to be” (Sider, Olsen and Unruh 2002: 249) That is, it

is one thing to set up the machinery of community engagement, quite another to develop the community heart (or ethos) necessary to see the ministry of such engagement through. Nel (2003: 243ff) similarly indicates the importance of churches finding their individual identity and allowing that identity to shape their purpose, rather than allowing a generalized purpose to shape an individual congregation's identity. Rather than sharing the same institutionally-based actions, congregations that successfully engage their communities may instead share something of the same Spiritually-driven *ethos*, an ethos that, as Newbiggin asserts, develops out of the centrality of faith in Jesus Christ in the life of the congregation.

#### SUMMARY

This chapter has shown the development of the phenomenon of postmodernity, its cultural ethos, and some of the challenges it presents to the church. In particular it has shown how Enlightenment thought displaced a radical dependency on the Trinity with a radical dependence on science and technology, and how the subsequent failure of the enlightenment project left Western society adrift from any spiritual anchorage. In taking up the theme of Spirit and spirituality in the contemporary Western culture, it was then argued that spirituality seems intrinsic to the human condition; that large numbers of the population acknowledge in principle a sense of spirituality and that such spirituality seems constantly to seek and obtain inner fulfillment from external expression. It was further maintained that the way spiritual needs are fulfilled depends on the way spirituality is understood and exercised, that such understanding and execution varies widely and that because of the de-centered, eclectic nature of postmodern society,

expressions of spirituality freely cross ethnic, cultural, and social boundaries in what may be a quest for an “authentic” sense of spiritual well-being.

Discussion then turned to Lesslie Newbigin’s hermeneutic principle and the characteristics of the hermeneutical congregation were demonstrated to have parallels with the nature of holistic churches as described by Sider, Olsen and Unruh. It was argued, however, that Newbigin’s hermeneutic characteristics are those of congregations that have achieved a *fait accompli*, in that they are already the hermeneutic of the gospel. While Newbigin’s approach unmistakably re-identifies the church as finding its *raison d’etre* in secular engagement, and while such engagement appears to result in the outcomes observed by Sider et al., it was further argued that such engagement, and such successes, do not develop from programmatic approaches, but rather describe the individual character of churches that, under the Lordship and leadership of Christ, become the place where the Spirit speaks and acts. Finally, it was argued that the ability of the Spirit to speak and act through a congregation develops out of the Christian ethos of that congregation.

The empirical research that is detailed in the following pages was motivated by the idea that in addition to observing the ministry of successful churches, the character of the congregation, too, must be observed with a view to understanding the ethos of churches that gives rise to the development of holistic ministry. The research anticipated that if there is a commonality of ethos, such ethos may be generalized throughout Christian congregations and lead to stronger and more meaningful engagement of contemporary Christianity with the larger, secular community.

For this reason, the criteria identified by Newbigin as characteristic of successful churches are the same criteria used to identify the churches studied in this research. Those criteria have been reduced to the following sentence: “Holistic ministry is a form of group Christian activity demonstrated through high levels of congregational participation in church internal activities coupled with high levels of congregational participation in the identification, organization and management, practice, and/or support of outreach ministry focused mainly on the local community.” It is this understanding of Holistic ministry that guides the research that follows.