



NEW CHURCHES

MULTIPLY THE MISSION.

POSTMODERN, POST-CHRISTENDOM... POSTCOMMUTER?

By: Dr. Karen Wilk

Our culture has once again begun to realize the significance of the local, of place, of being rooted. In contrast,

Enlightenment thinkers subsumed particular “place” to universal “space.” At least this is the argument made by phenomenologists like Martin Heidegger, who believed that Truth could be revealed only by carefully attending to the things and people nearest to us. The philosophical recovery of particularity converged nicely with a late-modern cultural nostalgia for the local, a concept lost amid the big box stores and McDonaldized franchises now homogenizing every square inch of the United States.¹

There is increasing evidence in our communities of this “late-modern cultural nostalgia for the local” which I believe is much more than nostalgia, even as we wrestle with conflicting values and structures in its pursuit.² As one couple in our Neighbourhood Life missional community reflected, “We’ve learned the importance of proximity especially with our move. It’s really hard to keep up with former neighbours. We need a neighbourhood where you can go for coffee at your neighbours’ in your pajamas.” In this article, I want to consider the growing interest in this postcommuter shift in our culture and its impact on the church, her identity, and her witness.

Neighbourhood Matters

In Edmonton, many city officials, civil servants, community leaders, and neighbourhood boards are convinced of the power and significance of the local community for the social and personal well-being of citizens and the metropolis as a whole.³ Edmonton has a “Great Neighbourhoods” program, numerous “Go Local” emphases, including a walkability index, and the Abundant Community Initiative (ACI), a foundational principle of which is “human scale.” The culture is realizing that “living above place” has allowed us “to develop structures that keep cause-and-effect relationships far apart in space and time where we cannot have firsthand experience of them” and, consequently, has caused us to lose touch “with social, economic, environmental and global impact.”⁴

This trend towards the local is also evident in our personal choices. For example, a young family new to our neighbourhood explained that they were planning to stay for twenty-plus years.⁵ A new member of our missional community explained that their move from another city after seventeen years was precipitated not by a job but by a search “for a place to call home; a community of people who cared about each other and to whom we could contribute and feel a part of.” Another participant marveled at how, just by hanging out regularly at the local coffee shop, he had developed some significant relationships with people. Another couple shared how as a young family moving into a new community they had experienced the significance of “next door” relationships. They described the communal dinners that happened every Sunday in their townhouse complex: “Everyone came, felt welcomed, included, like they belonged. We would have dinner, then put the kids to bed and all come back out with our baby monitors to have a glass of wine together. There was so much more to our life together. It was multidimensional.” Andy Crouch has concluded that while “the twentieth-century American dream was to move out and move up; the twenty-first century dream seems to be to put down deeper roots.”⁶ Wendell Berry believes that “being rooted is perhaps the least recognized and most important need of humans.”⁷

There are also good theological reasons to renew our understanding of the significance of place and particularity and to recover a strong sense thereof. As one Neighbourhood Life participant bluntly asserted, “Commuter church might actually be contrary to who God is.” Another, whose friends had jumped on board with Neighbourhood Life before her, confessed that she “felt kind of jealous when they were super involved in their neighbourhood and we weren’t invited because we didn’t live there.” As Alden Bass observes, “localism is the reigning philosophy of the day, and theologians have not been exempt from its pull.”⁸ Nonetheless, while that pull is being explored by numerous present-day theologians and practitioners, most of today’s church attendees continue to commute a significant distance to “go to church.”⁹

Commuter Church

As associations of commuters, North American churches have functioned and sought to achieve their purposes in “spaces.” Commuter congregations occupy a generic space once or twice a week under the assumption that what is done there will attract and bear witness, disciple, and grow both those who attend and those whom they want to attend. As a result, the church is not a stakeholder in the neighbourhood. Although she may be able to be a service provider and “do outreach” there, she is not an incarnational presence. Consequently, for church members who volunteer in this space, there is no sense of personal ownership or commitment. As “outside Christian volunteers,” we can choose when to engage and can opt in and out of caring at all because we feel no particular responsibility for the people or the place. In contrast, as another member of our community noted, “being a neighbour makes it more real and integrated, like church is supposed to be—an extension into all of life—and neighbours can reveal how God works, how the world works, and [thus] the context in which we live.”

Commuter church participation in a neighbourhood also fosters a certain response by the neighbourhood receiving the “volunteers and services.” The neighbours recognize that the church has its own agenda. They recognize that it may or may not understand or have the best interests of the neighbourhood in mind. A number of Neighbourhood Life Community participants have told stories of such experiences, particularly of how difficult it was for them “as the neighbourhood” to try to help the commuter congregation to understand what they were doing. For example, one Neighbourhood Life couple awkwardly found themselves in the middle of a dispute between some neighbours and a commuter congregation that was planning to build a new facility in their neighbourhood. Indeed, a commuter congregation can engender negative responses from the residents as one church recently experienced. Their “community survey” revealed that residents were very frustrated with the parking habits of Sunday morning attendees.

Space Versus Place

The occupation of space as opposed to place, however, has deeper implications for the church than teaching commuter attendees where to park on Sunday mornings. It forces us to wrestle again with what it means to be the church. Can we fulfill our mandate as God’s people simply by doing good deeds somewhere/anywhere and then going home? Might a church that operates in a space, a building which is not the habitus of its people, be missing something critical not only to its witness but to its identity and formation as the people of God? What did Jesus mean when He prayed for the church to be one? As the culture is rediscovering the importance of place, perhaps the Spirit is

also nudging the church to re-examine what it means for her to be “the personal presence of Jesus by the Spirit in the world.”¹⁰ “A disembodied church,” it has been quipped, “doesn’t have a leg to stand on!”

Contrarily, the good news in the Scriptures portrays a God who goes on mission in person and in place. The wonder of the Incarnation is the presence of the loving God in our ordinary, everyday lives. To this the church is now made, empowered, and called to bear witness in her very being—as an incarnational presence. If this be so, the postcommuter shift in our culture is an invitation from the Spirit for the church to think again about the implications of her formation in detached spaces around a myriad of affinities from doctrine to musical preference. Meanwhile, fresh expressions of church, such as Neighbourhood Life, are seeking to do experiments as the Body of Christ in person and in place. In this new (old) paradigm, church is less about a space, a service, and an organization.

Church is more about being a community of Jesus followers doing life together in a neighbourhood such that they alert others to the fact that His kingdom has come near. “When we began to recognize the significance of neighbourhood, of place,” one Neighbourhood Life Community participant, who is still an elder in his commuter congregation, explained, “that’s when our congregation decided to be a community of communities and commit to this [neighbourhood life], but we were really the only ones who actually did it; who measured it out and paid the cost.” Perhaps Michael W. Smith’s struggle to find his “place in this world”¹¹ is actually the struggle of an ethereal church now stirred by the wind of the Spirit to reimagine what it means to be the people of God finding her “place in this world.” I wonder if it is time for the church to get out of the building and for the building to get out of the church.

ENDNOTES

¹ Alden Bass, Closer to Home than We Realize: A Review of No Home Like Place: A Christian Theology of Place by Leonard Hjalmarson, Englewood Review of Books, August 22, 2014

² There are lots of people who desire to be postcommuter, but cannot afford housing near where they work, nor work near where they live. We may want to live more locally, but some are not quite ready to give up the “dream” of owning a large house with a large yard.

³ For example, John McKnight, and Peter Block, The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods (Oakland, CA: APA and Berrett Koehler, 2010); Dr. Will Miller, and Dr. Glenn Sparks, Refrigerator Rights: Creating Connections and Restoring Relationships (Later versions: Our Crucial Need for Close Connection) (Amherst, MA: White River Press, 2007).

⁴ Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens and Dwight J. Friesen, The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014), 24.

⁵ In contrast, when we moved to Edmonton twenty-plus years ago, we said “two years max,” as did most of our peers.

⁶ Andy Crouch, “Ten Most Significant Cultural Trends of the Last Decade” Qideas Article. Quoted in Leonard Hjalmarson, No Home Like Place: A Christian Theology of Place (Portland, OR: Urban Loft, 2014), 126.

⁷ Leonard Hjalmarson, “Becoming Doctors of the Church” (DM7015 Lecture, Northern Seminary, Chicago, IL, January 23-27, 2012).

⁸ Bass, Closer to Home than We Realize, (accessed March 4, 2015)

⁹ For example: Michael Frost, Incarnate: The Body of Christ in an Age of Disengagement (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2014); Len Hjalmarson, No Home Like Place: A Christian Theology of Place (Portland, OR: Urban Loft, 2014); Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens and Dwight J. Friesen, The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2014); C. Christopher Smith and John Pattison, Slow Church: Cultivating Community in the Patient Way of Jesus (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2014).

¹⁰ Craig Van Gelder, “Incarnating the Gospel in Culture” (DM 7613 Lectures, Northern Seminary, Chicago, IL, June 18-22, 2012). Emphasis mine.

¹¹ Michael W, Smith, Go West Young Man, Album, 1990.