

BOOK REVIEW: THE NEW PARISH: HOW NEIGHBORHOOD CHURCHES ARE TRANSFORMING MISSION, DISCIPLESHIP AND COMMUNITY BY PAUL SPARKS, TIM SOERENS AND DWIGHT J FRIESEN

By Darren Cronshaw

Journal of Missional Practice

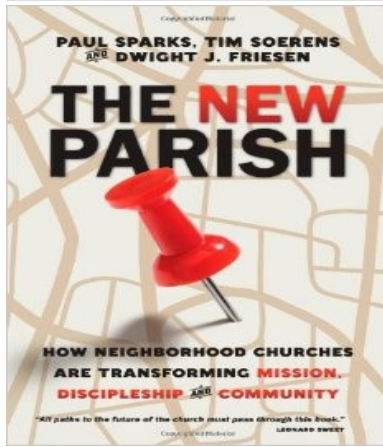


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As a pastor I've served Auburn for a little over 4 years. It still feels like early days but this is the longest I have been in ministry in one place, and the longest time since leaving school I have lived in the one home! Jenni and I came to Auburn with a vision for long-term ministry and adopting our local neighbourhood as our parish. We wanted to get to know our suburb, be grounded here as a family, and help the church find new avenues for local community ministry. I planted fruit trees as a spiritual exercise of stability. We were inspired by Eugene Peterson who said he wanted to get to know wherever God sent him, and then to keep on getting to get to know it. This is a growing edge for me. I like the next challenge.

Yet I sense God calling me to a deeper place in ministry through connecting locally in deeper and longer-lasting ways. This is why I picked up *The New Parish* - I need the encouragement and wisdom of others who are seeking renewal through engaging at a local grassroots level with what God is doing.

Paul Sparks is a curator for a faith community in Tacoma, Washington, and regular speaker and consultant for other groups exploring a more local expression of ecclesial life. Tim Soerens is founding advisor of Hub-Seattle, a co-working space for non-profit and business change makers. Dwight Friesen, pastor by background, is associate professor of practical theology at Seattle School of Theology and Psychology. They collaborate together in leading Parish Collective, a network and 'fabric of care' for fostering parish renewal <www.parishcollective.org>. Out of their local experience, and collecting stories from others on a similar journey, they explore three main questions about the New Parish.

Firstly, 'why do we need a new parish?' They address how the myth of individualism and living above place fragmented the church in the West. Instead of driving over to get 'Burger King Christianity' from wherever we feel spiritually satisfied, the New Parish urges us to be church *within* a local particular place while collaborating *in* that place *with* others. The limitation of locality forces us not to be church just for others like us, but for all our neighbours. It's like a synergy of missional church inspiration with a return to the local expression of mission in the early church, with a narrowed footprint and 'rooting deeply in the place God has planted you and expecting that your sense of community, your formation and your participation in God's renewing mission will integrate right where you live your everyday life' (p.47). It's an imagination-grabbing idea, albeit counter-cultural.

The second question is 'What is the new parish?' They distinguish the new vision from the old Christendom perversion, pointing to the importance of ecclesial life being centred in a local neighbourhood or 'the new commons' rather than a worship event. New Parish churches, at their best, take a local interest in education, civic leadership, economics and environmental care. Churches that really care for their neighbourhoods, and take an interest in reconciliation and renewal, are the sort of churches people want to join. The biggest challenge of this second part of the book is the call for an end

to renewal techniques that perpetuate fragmentation. Rather than being preoccupied with controlling results and strategising the future, the writers invite readers to be content in the boundaries of their own place and to love and be attentive to people they are with, with a renewed confidence in and reliance on God's Spirit.

Thirdly, the writers unpack, "How do we practice the new parish?" This begins with "presencing" - through listening (in *Lectio Divina* style to the Bible but also to your own story and the story, needs and hope of your own place), discernment of what God is doing and collective action. It also requires "rooting" - growing stability in your place with personal and group practices; e.g., frequenting local cafés, exercising locally, and prioritising local community advocacy. As well as going deeper locally, the writers urge "linking" with and learning from churches elsewhere, in other places. Finally, they urge a new approach to 'leading' that is not about self-obsessive influence but living a life that is worth others following. It's about bringing people together, orchestrating the parts to function as a whole and being a player-coach; encouraging others while staying in the game. My favourite story of this section was Majora Carter, whose activism for neighbourhood transformation was sparked by seeing garbage dumped while out for a run, and who prophetically challenged: 'You don't have to move out of your neighbourhood to live in a better one.'

There was some desolation for me reading *The New Parish*. The stories of local business and community development projects sounded daunting. The cultural information reminded me of contemporary pressures that local parish ministry must resist, including individualism, busyness, mobility and commuting. I think less people in our church live locally now than when we started four years ago. We came with a vision to foster neighbourhood church but it's hard work! Desolation came as I realized how far we still have to go, and how far the reality falls short of my rhetoric. At least my ideal gives us something to aim for. However else we grow, I pray that more people in 5 years time in our church will live within walking distance - both because some people have relocated and because we have better connected with our neighbours. Maybe we bravely need 'Back to *your local church* Sunday'.

On the other hand, there was also consolation. The book gave me fresh eyes to be attentive to local opportunities and strengths. The day I wrote this review some fellow dreamers and collaborators discussed the book over lunch and we visited our local "Glenferrie Road Festival". We saw local traders giving out food, charities inviting children to engage their creativity, Mexican restaurants calling people to dance, local Council informing people of their initiatives, and clubs inviting people to join to get fit, sew craft or serve the needy. It was an opportunity to listen to the heartbeat of our parish; its needs and hopes, flavours and vibrancy. I met a few new local characters, connected with friends from local university and sports contacts, and renewed my love for my parish block, bounded as it is by Glenferrie Road. Reading the book and then walking the length of the Road with festival in full swing reminded me that the leadership challenge, for me as pastor, is to both take seriously my parish ministry beyond the walls of the church, and to lead my congregation in being attentive to the neighbourhood and the good things God is doing.

I will be encouraging my local church leaders and denominational staff colleagues to read, discuss and

apply this book. I will be looking out for the opportunity to learn from the related [Inhabit Conference](#). A New Parish posture is not rocket science and it's not that hard, but it does take initiative and intentionality. Ultimately, the collegiality of others who are on the same journey help me to keep learning.

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



Darren Cronshaw

Darren Cronshaw is passionate about training and resourcing missional leaders through his work as Mission Catalyst – Researcher with the [Baptist Union of Victoria](#) and pastor of [AuburnLife Baptist Church](#). He serves as Head of Research and Professor of Missional Leadership at [Australian College of Ministries](#) (SCD), Honorary Research Fellow at [Whitley College](#) (University of Divinity). He is co-author with Kim Hammond of [Sentness: Six Postures of Missional Christians](#) (IVP 2014).