



DISLOCATED: NAMING THE CRISIS WE ALL CREATE

Abstract

*This chapter, the first in the book *The New Parish*, explains how we lost our capacity to be the “local church” - a body of Christians learning to share life faithfully together in, with and for a particular place. The second, living above place, develops from the habits and structures which conceal how our actions impact each other. Proximity in the new parish however reconnects us within our shared contexts, people and land, in all our diversity. Unlike the old idea of parish, this connection welcomes partnerships and collaboration. For any church this on-the-ground reality is a dare to faith and an invitation to participate with the Triune God in community transformation.*

You are Christ's body ... You must never forget this.
The apostle Paul, 1 Corinthians 12:27 The Message

You think because you understand "one" you must also understand "two," because one and one make two. But you must also understand "and."
Ancient Sufi teaching

In August of 2000, Toshiyuki Nakagaki made a very bizarre announcement to the world. He and his colleagues had trained a type of brainless slime to solve a complex maze. To demonstrate their achievement, Nakagaki's team decided to chop up a single slime mold and scatter the pieces throughout a plastic maze. The separate slime clusters began to grow and find one another, until they filled the entire labyrinth. Next, Nakagaki placed food samples at the start and end of the maze with four different routes to the goal. Four hours later the hungry slime mold had retracted its tentacles from the dead-end corridors, growing exclusively along the shortest route between the two pieces of food. The brainless blob became 'smart slime,' solving the complex maze.^[1]

In a world that trains you to reduce all things to the lowest common denominator, the collective characteristics of slime molds are breathtaking. When food is scarce, slimes that are in the same proximity don't fight over scarce resources. Instead, they join together in an orderly manner to form a completely new multicellular creature—a type of slug—from scratch. The right context and connectivity releases collective features you could never foresee by observing them individually. *The New Parish* is an exploration of a forgotten, but truly hopeful, possibility. Don't take this the wrong way, but we think the local church is meant to function like slime.

When followers of Jesus share life together in a particular place they become much greater than the sum of their parts—they actually become something altogether new. The parish forms the context, and relationships of faith form the connectivity for wonderful new possibilities.

For several years the three of us have been connecting with churches rooted in the neighborhood. Everywhere we go, we find the Spirit working miracles of transformation through their shared life together in the parish. The consistent storyline is so encouraging. When these faith communities begin connecting together, in and for their neighborhood, they learn to depend on God for strength to love, forgive and show grace like never before. We've also been inspired by the way these groups reach outward in love and care toward the neighborhood at large. The gospel becomes so much more tangible and compelling when the local church is actually a part of the community, connected to the struggles of the people and even the land itself.

It can be easy to miss what holds this together. By crafting a life together in a definable place, the parish becomes a platform for a whole new way of being the church. When the word parish is used in this book it refers to all the relationships (including the land) where the local church lives out its faith together. It is a unique word that recalls a geography large enough to live life together (live, work, play, etc.) and small enough to be known as a character within it.

Parish is also unique because it is a noun that holds within it a verb. It is a noun in the sense that it represents the church's everyday life and relationships within a particular place. But it also functions as an action word because it calls us to the telos, or purpose, of the church—living out God's dream and caring for the place we are called. Proximity in the parish allows you to participate in God's reconciling and renewing vision in ways you really can't do as an individual. We are convinced that what may seem at first like a subtle shift actually has the capacity to transform your entire experience of what it means to be the church.

The Myth of Individualism and Living Above Place

The parish is beginning to subvert what may be the two most fragmenting forces of our day. The first can be called the 'myth of the individual' and the second 'living above place.'

When we talk about the myth of the individual, it's not to say that people are not unique or that they do not have their own agency. It's simply to say that the individual is not autonomous. Professor Eva Feder Kittay reminds us pertly that 'the independent individual is always a fictive creation of those men sufficiently privileged to shift the concern for dependence on to others.'^[2] All of us are born dependent

on others, and whether we recognize it or not, we rely on relationships throughout our lives. 'Community is the essential form of reality,' writes educator Parker Palmer, 'the matrix of all being.'^[3]

'Living above place' names the tendency to develop structures that keep cause-and-effect relationships far apart in space and time where we cannot have firsthand experience of them. For example, you have probably experienced buying groceries without any idea where the food originated or who was involved in the production and delivery process. Living above place describes the process where this type of separation happens so frequently that we become disoriented to reality.

Most people believe they have some sense of how their actions affect others. But what happens when a society lives above place for generations? Over the course of time, whole populations can develop a cocooned way of life, unaware of how their lives really affect each other and the world at large.

Your parish is a relational microcosm that helps bring many cause-and-effect relationships back together again. Being in collaborative relationships in real life (where you live, work and play) awakens you to the effects of your actions both on people and on the place itself. It creates a context where your church can see whether its faith is more than just talk. The local place becomes the testing ground, revealing whether you have learned to love each other and the larger community around you. In essence, the parish is a dare to your faith.

As more systems encourage you to create your own online worlds and niche communities, the easier it becomes to spend time primarily with people who support your views. If people really get on your nerves you can just delete them—right? Of course, hanging out with affinity groups is not a problem in and of itself, but if you do this at the expense of practicing genuine, on-the-ground community life, serious problems can develop in nearly every dimension of life.

Social psychologist Christena Cleveland has observed that when the church left its historical focus within the neighborhood it ended up becoming homogeneous and consumer-oriented.

Today's churchgoers . . . tend to shop for churches that express their individual values and are culturally similar. We often drive by dozens of churches en route to our church, the one that meets our cultural expectations. American society has engaged in an evangelical spiritual consumerism that some scholars pejoratively call "Burger King Christianity."^[4]

Not only does living above place disconnect you from the effects of your actions, it enables you to concoct visions regarding the welfare of others without ever being in relationship with them. As Shane Claiborne, cofounder of the Simple Way community in Philadelphia, often says, it's not that we don't care about the poor. It's that we Christians don't know the poor.^[5] Living above place makes it possible for you to imagine that if you just pay a tax, the government will take care of people. Or you might assume that each individual should pull themselves up by their own bootstraps and make their own way without needing others. Either way, without a practice of being with diverse neighbors in real-life contexts, it is easy to forget that humans need reciprocal friendships and communities of genuine care if they are to flourish.

Diverse neighborhoods are growing exponentially in North America, but there are still plenty of places where extreme privacy or various types of exclusion rule the day. And there are still plenty of neighborhoods where everyone looks and acts in similar ways or makes about the same amount of money. In these contexts, it is not enough to be rooted together. As this book will make clear in several ways, healthy rooting together in the local parish requires good partnering connections across parishes as well.

The Nature of God: Dynamic Relationality and Radical Locatedness

Christians believe that God is revealed simultaneously as three persons in one being. The Trinity gives you an example of the paradox of individuality and community happening at the same time. This vision of uniqueness in the midst of relational unity pervades Scripture. For example, the apostle Paul gave the church in Corinth this urgent reminder regarding how they should fit together as a body:

We all said good-bye to our partial and piecemeal lives. We each used to independently call our own shots, but then we entered into a large and integrated life in which he has the final say in everything. . . . The way God designed our bodies is a model for understanding our lives together as a church: every part dependent on every other part. . . . You are Christ's body—that's who you are! You must never forget this. (1 Corinthians 12 The Message)

If the nature of God as Trinity models your relational calling, then the incarnation of God demonstrates your missional calling to live into time and place. When God chose to enter the

world, it was not in some ethereal generic manner but in a particular family, in a particular town, in a particular country with particular socio-religious practices. Just as Christ “became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14 The Message), so also the people that comprise the local church in the parish are meant to be a tangible expression of God’s love in the everyday reality of life.

Shane finds it interesting that the gospel is filled with proper nouns, the names of real people and places, like Jesus of Nazareth.

The seeds of the gospel are really small. They’re really about meeting God at dinner tables and in living rooms and in little towns that may not be known by the rest of the world. But it seems like that’s exactly what happens when God moves into the neighborhood in Jesus. . . . It’s that which I think we’re invited into is to grow into a neighborhood, to plant ourselves somewhere and to get to know people there, and to see the seeds of the kingdom grow there.^[6]

When parishioners long to share relationships together, in and for a particular place, it is because they desire to reflect the nature of God in their relationships. They believe this is God’s intention for what it means to be humans together in communion with the Spirit. At the end of the day, our aim is living into the fullness of life that Jesus calls us toward (John 10:10). While a relational and located perspective is at the heart of this book’s understanding of what it means to be the church, it’s also at the heart of what we think it means to be human.

We believe the notion of a new parish blends insights of contemporary culture, scriptural reflection and theological justification. However, being firsthand witnesses to the renewal in neighborhoods all over North America is what made our passion for these ideas take root. We’ve seen lives changed. We’ve seen communities transformed. Whole systems of brokenness and degradation have been renewed. From these real-life experiences we have become convinced that the new parish is worth our collective attention.

The Hidden Movement: The Return to Relationality and Place

Popular imagination holds that North American churches are dwindling away, frozen in irrelevance and dying from divisiveness. Many books on the church in recent years highlight statistics that speak of the church’s decline in the Western world. While it is certainly true that all is not well within popular Christianity, those collecting the data may be asking the wrong questions. The persistent questions regarding Sunday-morning attendance, program involvement or the building budget may not be the wisest measurements for discerning the health of the church.

The new parish introduces the possibility that something spectacular is brewing beneath the level of categorical definition. Indeed, there is an immense distributed population, often unrecognized by official figures, who are learning to love their neighbors in everyday ways.

Within a single mile of wherever you are reading this book, it's quite likely that there are dozens upon dozens of people who are loving their neighbor as an expression of their love of God. And here's what we find most exciting: right now there are millions more migrating toward this relational way of being the church.

Over the course of the past few years we have walked the streets, eaten in the homes, and entered the shops, gardens and ghettos of over three hundred diverse neighborhoods across North America. We have been on an expedition to discover coalescing local bodies of believers sharing life together in particular places. Throughout the course of our explorations we have stumbled on a very surprising phenomenon. Contrary to all the clamor about dying churches, the closer we get to the everyday life of people in their neighborhoods, the more we find burgeoning expressions of reconciliation and renewal.

Our dear friend Brandon Rhodes, a longtime member of the Springwater faith community in Lents, Portland, has guided us through his neighborhood, where on one strip there are five different church buildings representing five different denominations. While each church is struggling to survive and suffering from dwindling congregations, there is another story at play in the area. From simple acts of hospitality, garden sharing, urban farm harvest parties and intersection repair projects, Springwater is a tangible expression of God's love in the real life of the neighborhood. Along with neighborhood friends they have encountered along the way, members of Springwater are weaving together the fabric of love and care across the parish. Their lives bear witness to another way of living together in every dimension of life. But you would never notice this by looking at those five church buildings.

A simple switch of the imagination can produce a whole new set of questions regarding the health of the church. Here are just a few that we ask our hosts when we are visiting communities. These questions also serve as prayers as we invite God to lead our exploration. What would you ask if you were surveying neighborhoods, searching for signs of the Spirit's movement?

- Are there people who have found a way to share a life of love together here?
- Are there people leading movements toward reconciliation and renewal here?
- Are there people living on behalf of justice with the marginalized and poor here?
- Are there people entering into relational forms of civic and economic life here?

- Are there people creating reciprocal relationships of care across parishes globally here?

If we begin to ask different questions, we get different answers regarding the state of the church. What if more and more of us were on the lookout for the Spirit's movement, bearing witness to signs of new hunger for reconciled friendships, cooperative collaboration and the responsible stewardship of the place we live?

What is critical for receptivity to the new endeavor is the capacity to see how the Spirit may be at work in both the institutional church and the world at large. Both parties are finding themselves drawn from different directions toward a shared center. Throughout this text you will see a constant dialectical movement between the work of the Spirit in reforming the church and the love of God on the move in the neighborhood, drawing it toward reconciliation and renewal.

Learning to see the immeasurable and radical forces at play will require a new lens. It will require a new imagination that expands beyond our current concept of church and begins to track new patterns of renewal at work in the world. Ultimately, learning to see will require reorientation, new postures and new ways of practicing faith.

Why Is The Word Parish Resurfacing? What's New About It?

When the three of us talk about what seems to be happening in the 'new parish,' it is important to distinguish from the old, or prior, understanding of parish. To propose that a new parish understanding is emerging is not to write off all that was good about the old, but to see it as the root from which new learning and growth can emerge. It also awakens us to the massive shifts in global society that mandate fresh vision and meaning for the current context. While the ancient word parish carries important memories of love, home and goodness throughout its history, it also recalls various types of manipulation that have been instituted through centralized hierarchies, patriarchal structures and other forms of abuse. There have been streams of beauty and hopeful possibility, but there has also been oppression, fear and control.

We are contrasting the new parish with lingering conceptions the church has carried since Christendom, when the institutional church more or less dictated the form of the neighborhood. The church that is emerging in the parish today is different in many ways. The first difference is that the neighborhood—in all its diversity—has a voice that contributes to the form of the church. There is a growing sense that the Spirit works through the relationships of the neighborhood to teach us what love and faithfulness look like in that particular context.

The new parish is also different in the way diverse church expressions with different names and practices are learning to live out their faith together as the unified church in and among the neighborhood. Whereas the old parish was often dictated by a single denominational outlook that functioned as law, the new parish can include many expressions of the church living in community together in the neighborhood. Not only do parishioners learn to love and listen to neighbors from

other church expressions in the parish, they also seek out partnerships with people from other faith perspectives who have common hopes for the neighborhood.

When we say the word new it does not refer to something we have invented and now present for the first time. Instead, it is a phenomenon that we have born witness to, something we have seen playing out in embryonic form that is different from the old conception. What's surprising is the origin of the new parish. We have found that those who have allowed the Spirit's movement in the neighborhood to give shape to the church in North America have often been urban leaders in historically underresourced neighborhoods. These leaders are guides toward a new way of thinking about the meaning of parish.

What is both radically and profoundly hopeful is that once disparate groups are now finding connections across places. This linking phenomenon actually changes the very nature and meaning of parish, from old typecasts of insularity and abuse to transparency, innovation and subversive ecumenism. The work that pioneers have done is catching on, spreading across parishes and coalescing toward something altogether new. It is beyond what any one of us could dream. The three of us hope to be part of those who are bearing witness to this new work and offer hopeful possibilities for the church in this new century.

Prayer For The New Parish

Triune Creator, Give us eyes to see the abundant possibility all around us. Foster within us a hunger to grow together as a loving and caring expression of Christ's body in the parish. Amen.

Conversations For The New Parish

- Where do you live? Describe the contours of your neighborhood. What narratives or values seem present in the place where you live?
- What might "listening to your neighborhood" invite of you? What assumptions do you tend to make about the place you live? Why do you think you've come to believe these ideas?
- How might you describe your current relationship to your place? It may be helpful to locate yourself on the following continuum:

I live above my place ——— I'm a known character actively seeking the flourishing of my neighborhood □

Postures And Practices For The New Parish □

- **Map and marker:** Take out a map of your area and trace the outline of the definable neighborhood where you live. Mark where people live, work, play, and gather with friends and family. As you hold your place in your heart, mind and body, what are you observing?
- **Prayerful walking:** Intentionally walk your neighborhood inviting God to help you see your place with God's eyes. What signs of life, redemption, creativity, unity and love do you notice?
- **Personal story of place:** Plot out the story of your life as told through "place." How has your personal story of place shaped your relationship to place?

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[1]See Ferris Jabr, "How Brainless slime Molds Redefine Intelligence," *Scientific American*, 7th November 2012, accessed 12th May 2014, at www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=brainless-slime-molds

[2]Eva Feder Kittay, *The Subject of Care: Feminist Perspective on Dependency* (New York: Rowan & Littlefield, 2002), 354.

[3]Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2007), 100.

[4]Christina Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces That Keep us Apart* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 26.

[5]Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

[6]"Small Seeds, Real Places, and the Gospel: A Conversation with Shane Claiborne," Parish Collective, 18th August 2011, <http://vimeo.com/27850420>, accessed 12th May 2014.