



EIGHT VILLAGE CHURCHES AND ONE LIFE

I work with eight village churches in rural North Wiltshire, and my wife and I are housed by the Diocese of Bristol in a cul-de-sac in a housing estate in Chippenham, several miles away from my churches. My working week is usually between 50 and 60 hours over six days. I often arrive home late at night and leave early in the morning.

My life and ministry embody a paradox. I am committed to working with local churches and their communities, yet I commute to do this. I am committed to building relationships between local churches and their contexts, yet I am seldom at home in my own neighbourhood. In effect, I am part of modern Western culture. My 'living space' in Chippenham has become 'a privatized area...a sort of dormitory

where [I am] warehoused between bouts of work and recreation'.^[1]

This raises uncomfortable questions. If my ministry is confined to my 'working hours', and if my working patterns mirror those of my neighbours, is there anything distinctive about our household that our neighbours can notice? Tomlin poses the question starkly:

How different are my values, my home and my behaviour from those of my neighbours and friends who are not Christians? Is there anything there that might make them want to know more, to want what I have?^[2]

Then too, if I am unable to find the time and energy to invest in my own neighbours, how can I expect to 'train people how to have conversations with neighbours or set times aside to talk with another human being?'^[3] As a church leader in the Anglican tradition, I have vowed that I 'will fashion [my] own life and that of [my] household according to the way of Christ, that [I] may be a pattern and example to Christ's people'.^[4] Reflecting on my current relationship with my neighbourhood raises the uncomfortable question: 'am I living the story?'^[5]

After all, this story is one that values the local and particular. We follow Jesus Christ, the eternal Word of God, who became flesh in a particular time and place (John 1:14). Jesus' own ministry was a series of local face-to-face encounters.^[6] He was Jesus 'of Nazareth' after all, a local man rooted in his particular context, known to his hearers (Luke 4:22-24). If I am trying to pattern my life on Christ, the gospels suggest that I also should live as one who is available to his neighbours. As I reflect on Jesus' sending of the seventy (Luke 10:1-12) I ask myself: who am I blessing locally? To whom am I saying 'peace'? Where am I healing and proclaiming? Where am I receiving and giving hospitality?

As I look back on my two years living on my street, I realise that there have been occasions when I do share life with my neighbours. Taking part in the Diamond Jubilee street party in a downpour, chatting to Tom as we mow our lawns, catching up with someone at the gym, even receiving help when I locked myself out - all these are part of the warp and weft of life. The example of Jesus, however, invites me to look deeper and see God at work. Peterson describes this 'prevenient grace' well:

Like one who walks in late to a meeting, I am entering a complex situation in which God has already said decisive words and acted in decisive ways. My work is not necessarily to announce that but to discover what he is doing and live appropriately with it.^[7]

Occasionally such opportunities are clear. Over the last two years I have chatted occasionally to my neighbour Judith as she has found her own faith deepening, leading to training for licensed lay ministry. These are rare occasions however. What am I to say to my retired neighbour who spends his life pottering about his garden, or cleaning his car, or cleaning his house? What am I

to say to our young neighbours with their first baby, or their elderly neighbours who complain about the noise? What do I do when I notice that the local resident's association has organised a barbecue, but I'm already committed to another church meeting? In short, how, without stress and burnout, can I respond to the outflow of God's trinitarian love in my neighbourhood? If Christ is at work among my neighbours, how can I 'step out of the boat' and join him? (Matthew 14:28-32)

There are plenty of 'waves and wind' to discourage me: the demands of my work, my wife's ill health, my own introversion and vulnerability. But Christ also has authority over the chaos of the sea (Job 9:8) and rescues Peter despite his little faith (Matthew 14:31).[8] Perhaps a first step for me might be to trust in the presence and prevenience of God not to overwhelm me with demands but to be present in the encounters that he provides. In this case, responding to Christ's call lies in the simple things. Maybe it will come as I decide to have a conversation rather than scurry indoors at the end of the day. Maybe it will be when I stop the car and wander over to the barbecue for a few minutes. Maybe it starts simply with 'being a neighbour'.[9] Maybe it starts with my own repentance, my own *metanoia*: my re-visioning of my street as a place where 'the Kingdom of God is at hand' (Mark 1:15).

[1] Springdale College, *Reading a Community: Verbatim notes for 406.6.1* (Springdale, 2014) 7.

[2] G. Tomlin G, *The Provocative Church* (London: SPCK 2002) 13.

[3] Alan Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011) 146

[4] Church of England, *Common Worship: Ordination Services Study Edition*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2007) 38

[5] Robinson M and Smith D, 2003, *Invading Secular Space*, (Oxford: Monarch) .34

[6] Sedmak C, 2002, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for the Artisans of a New Humanity*, Maryknoll: Orbis.163

[7] Peterson E, 1989, *The Contemplative Pastor*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 61

[8] Allison D, 'Matthew' in Barton J and Muddiman J eds., 2001, *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.863

[9] As McLaren, 2002, p. 95, puts it: 'I decided to be a neighbour again, something I had become "too religious" for in the previous two years...too many of us Christians are invisible, absent neighbours, no neighbours at all - always running to church, to Bible study, to committee meetings, never having time to play golf or go for a walk or catch a cup of coffee with a neighbour (or help a mugged Samaritan lying beside the highway)'. McClaren B, 2002, *More*

Ready than you Realize, Grand Rapids: Zondervan



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'traditional' village churches. Phil lives with his wife Rhoda in Chippenham.