



## GOD LOVES A GOOD PARTY

We were becoming convinced that a missional God who attends to us in person and in place was calling and empowering us to do the same. What might it look like for us to live among our neighbours as neighbours, community stakeholders alongside them. Could we be neighbours, rather than a church based service provider telling them their needs and how we would meet them? My passion and imagination had been awakened with a dream for us all to experience the Kingdom of God together. But where to begin?

In the Old Testament, God ordained the entire Jewish religious calendar around ten national parties, or 'feasts.' It seems the Creator went out of his way to tell his people that He wanted them to celebrate, to enjoy His good gifts! Such parties were inclusive gatherings, with lots of good food, good friends, and good times:

---

*Abraham threw a big party on the day Isaac was weaned. (Gen.21:8 The Message)*

*...spend the money for whatever you wish—oxen, sheep, wine, strong drink, or whatever you desire. And you shall eat there in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your household rejoicing together. (Deut.14: 26)*

*Happy is the land whose king is a noble leader and whose leaders feast at the proper time to gain strength for their work, not to get drunk... A party gives laughter, wine gives happiness, and money gives everything! (Eccl.10:17,19)*

*Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength...And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing. (Nehemiah 8:10,12)*

*They were with David for three days of feasting celebration, with food and drink supplied by their families. Neighbors ranging from as far north as Issachar, Zebulun, and Naphtali arrived with donkeys, camels, mules, and oxen loaded down with food for the party: flour, fig cakes, raisin cakes, wine, oil, cattle, and sheep—joy in Israel! (1 Chron.12:39-40)*

The partying continued into the gospels, so much so that Jesus is accused of indulging in parties (Luke 7:34)! His first miracle was at a wedding party (John 2:1-10 ). He was anointed for his burial at a dinner party. (Luke 7:36-50). We're told that when a sinner repents, heaven throws a party. (Luke 15: 5-7, 9-10, 22-24) And when Jesus spoke of the kingdom of heaven, he called it a banquet party. (Luke 14:15-24). This is one of the stories that really caught our attention:

*As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at his tax collector's booth. "Follow me and be my disciple," Jesus said to him. So Matthew got up and followed him. Later, Matthew invited Jesus and his disciples to his home as dinner guests, along with many tax collectors and other disreputable sinners... "I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners." Matthew 9:9, 10, 13*

What if Christians in the neighbourhood began to throw parties like Matthew? What if our neighbours accused us of indulging in too many parties? We, church attending people, were good at it in the context of the 'church' basement or fellowship hall where there had been innumerable potlucks and other celebrations. *Why not in our own homes and with neighbours, instead of church folk?* My family committed to giving it a try a few years ago with a neighbourhood Christmas Open House. I designed and printed invitations and we put them in

the mailboxes of everyone on our street (because we were too chicken to knock on their doors!).

*The day arrived, the house was decorated and the table was spread with a myriad of sweet treats and appetizers, Christmas punch, hot apple cider and more... The first couple rang the door bell and before she had her coat off and we had introduced ourselves she blurted out, 'we just had to come to see who would do such a thing, inviting strangers into their home!' ....and so began our journey into the joy and richness of discovering that the kingdom of God is a party right on our street! "*

That first entrance comment also moved me to confession. How had it come to be that I/we, as followers of Jesus whose greatest commandment for us was to *love our neighbours*, have neighbours who think of us as *strangers*?[2]

Since then those on this journey we call 'Neighbourhood Life' have discovered again and again God's presence in our midst as we have celebrated with our neighbours. In fact, we have become blocks that love to celebrate together, whether it's for a new baby, a retirement, birthday, anniversary or holiday, our blocks find a way to get together. We don't even need an excuse anymore. 'How about we have a red party?', one neighbour suggested. Others from our heritage congregation have hosted '*apple-icious*' socials, barbeques, wine and cheese nights, tea parties, Halloween chili campfires... The creativity keeps growing.

Having parties is fun but of course there is more to it. For example we find that our participation disciples us! After several coffee socials with a number of neighbours, I began feeling that God wanted me to make it a regular thing. I was hesitant, so I said to the Lord that if that idea really was from Him, could three neighbours agree that it was a good idea. The very next day, I was out walking our dog and I 'bumped' into a neighbour who had been a part of these coffee times. I asked her how she felt about them. Then I inquired as to what she thought of the idea of having them more regularly, *say every other week*? She immediately agreed that that would be great and, you guessed it, before 24 hours were up, I had three affirmations. Our Friday morning '*Yak'n snak's*' were on the calendar. '*O ye of little faith!*' Once again, God had taught me to follow for He is leading and *He knows where He is going*. Not only that, this wasn't about getting my neighbours 'to go to church' or come to a church program, event or service, it was about me going with nothing, trusting, as 'just a neighbour.'[3]

It wasn't long before other households started taking turns hosting and what had started out as a women's thing included a number of men too. 'The Christians' didn't come with an agenda, a Bible study or even all the right answers. We were neighbours! I did however pray before and for the gathering and every so often it seemed the Spirit took control of the conversations and did amazing things. One time, I suggested that we all 'just tell each other a bit about our family of origin'. Almost instantly, we had gone from strangers to acquaintances to relationship. Everyone has 'something' in their family background that is difficult. We shared of losing a parent, of being new to the country, of addiction, of abuse, dysfunction, loss and struggle. We



laughed and cried together and those of faith had opportunity to share how the Lord was there to comfort and come alongside even on the darkest days. Another time, we were talking about the weather, a popular pastime in our region, especially in the winter. 'I can't remember when we had this much snow last.' 'Can you believe that it has been minus 30 degrees for five days in a row?' and so on for close to twenty minutes. Then one of my neighbours out of the blue, stood up with arms loosely crossed and said, 'I'm getting pretty tired of talking about the weather' and turning to me, 'Karen, is there anything in the Bible about the poor?' No kidding- I was stunned. Nonetheless I nonchalantly replied, 'Well, actually yes, there is, shall we have a look?' For the next half hour, *Yak'n snak* was more like a Bible study than some official Bible studies I have attended!

Another way we have discovered God at work in our community through celebration is in the context of block parties. Block parties have been so significant here that the municipal government has declared June, '*Block Party Month*' and will give block communities up to \$150 towards the party! Numerous congregants, all ages, in different kinds of neighbourhoods have with this incentive, begun to participate in the experiment. The two most common reflections have been how fun it was and that there were people on our block/street/floor/complex that have lived there for years (twenty plus years in some instances) and this was the first time they had met! Here are a couple of stories from party people:[\[4\]](#)

*Over the last couple months, God has led me to realize that the best way I can share the overflow of God's love for me is by loving my neighbours and I couldn't do that until I had met them. I started looking up block parties in Edmonton and got connected with Karen. She gave me the resources I needed and off I went! I got great responses immediately after sending out invitations and one couple offered their backyard and to host it! The block party itself was a success and about 25 people showed up from the block. Most of them were so thankful to have had this planned because they had wanted to get to know people in the area. Since then, I have felt a lot more comfortable meeting with and talking with my neighbours and it's been a blast! God is working, because there's no way this could be going so well and be so easy without him. I want to be available to the people I live beside... There's too many lonely people in this world! To God be the glory!*

*It was a seriously hot Sunday afternoon. I hauled out to my front yard a big patio umbrella, three lawn chairs, and a cooler containing soft drinks and beer. I 'assumed the position' in one of the chairs. Our neighbour, Cindy came over and asked me what I was doing. I told her I thought this would be a good way to meet and greet new and old neighbours. I offered her a beverage but 'she had gardening to do'. 'Send Mark [her husband] over,' I called out, as she departed, but she said he would never have a beer in the front yard. About ten minutes later Cindy reappeared and sat down. While we were chatting another neighbour, Dave, drove up and inquired: 'What's going on, B?' I invited him for a drink so he drove home and about ten minutes later he and his wife Marg came over with two more lawn chairs. After another ten minutes 'Cindy's' Mark came*

*over with his own beer. Mark asked: 'Are you from Ottawa B?' He told us that when he'd been posted in Ottawa his neighbours there had hung around in their front yards. I told him I now liked Ottawa! A short time later a couple of other neighbours, Carl and Darlene, returning home from a walk, stopped by and joined us. It wasn't too long after that that their son Paul drove up. He had a lawn chair in his trunk so he joined in. Cindy and Mark had another commitment so they left only to be replaced by Susie (from across the street) and her six month old baby. We chatted, laughed, and hung out. No one drove by without doing a double-take. The double-takes grew in intensity as the group increased in size! We will certainly do it again. It sure beat hanging out in our back yard all by ourselves.*

As party stories are shared and celebrated with those in our churches, they produce not only an incredible sense of gratitude but of anticipation and imagination. Listeners begin to anticipate what God might be up to at 'a party with their neighbours' as well as to imagine how, when, where they might take the first step towards a celebration party in and with the hood. There is a deepening sense of freedom and joy in knowing that the most important thing we have to do is be there, be with, faithfully and attentively being present like Jesus who came and lived among.

One of our more recent block parties got off to a slow start. It was rainy and windy at our three p.m. scheduled set up time, nonetheless I sat there on my lawn chair with an umbrella over my head while my neighbour sat in her car. We persevered in the inclement weather, setting up tables and a canopy. Thankfully and to the surprise of many neighbours, within three hours the sky had cleared and there were 40-50 people coming and going, eating, talking, laughing, meeting with one another, some for the first time, others renewing acquaintances or catching up with closer friendships. As the feasting and connecting continued, some of the teens and young adults got a casual football game going and others joined in, including four year olds and our forty-something Down syndrome neighbour Marco. It was a beautiful, touching sight and those around began to notice how the 'strong' players were watching out for and including the 'weaker' ones. Older neighbours commented on how right this felt and that this was the way neighbourhood should be. One retired neighbour who rarely participates in events such as this but who talks with us whenever we're mutually out and about, came over to me and began to say thank you and how much she appreciated all that was going on in the neighbourhood and how wonderful it was to see Marco smiling and embraced in the game. She didn't finish her sentence. She was all choked up looking out over the gathering and the game and before I knew it, she was giving me a big hug. I believe she experienced a taste of the Kingdom of God that day. 'The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, Generous inside and out, true from start to finish.'<sup>[5]</sup>

Later that evening, as we were back home cleaning up and putting leftovers away, our youngest daughter said to me:

*I get it now, Mom. That was so fun. We had so much fun playing football and nobody got mad*

*and everyone was including the little ones and did you see Marco? He was just so full of smiles... I couldn't stop smiling either... we have to do this again. I get it now.*

My daughter recognized our role in the neighbourhood as 'resident celebrants - neighbourhood priests who embody and celebrate the presence of God where we live.'<sup>[6]</sup> She too felt the Spirit of God present and at work in our midst as we 'partied' with our neighbours, celebrating and experiencing God's gift of community. In fact this gift of community is the gift of God's Self. Thus we have echoed the words of the apostle John, 'Look! Look! God has moved into the neighborhood, making his home with men and women! They're his people, he's their God.'<sup>[7]</sup> Neighbourhood parties have become a way of recognizing and showing our gratitude for the goodness and generosity of God in our midst. They have also affirmed over and over again that as we are *with* others, God is there too. In fact *the Spirit has gone ahead of us*. Our job is to discern Him in the midst and partner with what God is already doing. What if partying reveals the kingdom of God?

*How can we participate with God at work before us in our neighbourhoods and communities?*  
We could start with a good party!

[1] Karen Wilk, *Don't Invite them to Church- Moving from a Come and See to a Go and Be Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Faith Alive, 2010), 14.

[2] Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 19:19b, 22:37-40, Mark 12:31, Luke 10:27, 28, Romans 15:2, 13:8-10, James 2:8.

[3] Luke 10:1-12.

[4] Names have been changed in these stories

[5] John 1:14, The Message.

[6] Simon Carey Holt, *God Next Door: Spirituality and Mission in the Neighbourhood*, (Brunswick, Australia: Acorn, 2007) 19.

[7] Revelation 21:3, The Message.



## Karen Wilk

Karen is a National Team Member of Forge Canada's Missional Training Network, and a Missional Leader Developer for the Christian Reformed Church in North America. She is also a neighbour, wife, mom, and minister who is leading her own neighborhood community. Karen is the Pastor of NEW (Neighbourhood Engagement Workers) Community in Edmonton, where she engages church leadership in moving their congregations out into neighborhoods. She is pursuing a Doctorate in Missional Leadership at Northern Seminary. Karen has written a number of books including 'Don't Invite Them To Church: Moving From a Come and See to a Go and Be Church'. Recently she was included in the Bridgeway Foundation's list of '100 Fantastic Canadian Christian Women Leaders.'