

What If...

What if... every Christian in every neighbourhood in North America (and around the world?!) actually loved their neighbours, those with whom they live in proximity—
as Jesus loves?

What if... every Christian in every neighbourhood in North America (and around the world) sought Kingdom Shalom in word and deed for the community in which they lived?

What if... every Christian in every neighbourhood in North America (and around the world) joined together with every other Christian in their neighbourhood, and together manifested the tangible Presence of God in that place as the real flesh and blood Body of Jesus?

What if... as they were formed and transformed into the people of God in that place, others also participated and, together, they discovered more of who God is and what the Spirit is up to?

And *what if...* that formation became the determining factor for who they were and what they did?

And *What if...as God did his work in, through and with them,*

they became more like Jesus *and less like consumers;*
more like friends *and less like service providers;*
more like disciples *and less like patrons;*
more like radical followers *and less like fans;*
more like salt, light and a city on a hill
and less like an institution, a program and an event;
more like a community with a mission
and less like an organization with a strategic plan;

And WHAT IF...

God has moved into the neighbourhood, making his home with men and women! They're his people, he's their God. —Revelation 21:3, *The Message*

Discipleship Shifts Learned from the Margins

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By Karen Wilk

We have many questions...How do we effectively live and share the gospel in a culture that is suspicious of institutions, and prepackaged programs? How do we keep each other accountable and faithful to Scripture, to the leadership of the Spirit, and the history of our tradition? How do we respond to movements of the Spirit that call us back to renewed faithfulness in aspects of the life of faith that we may have neglected or need renewed attention such as evangelism and love for the neighbour in our own context?¹

1. Martin Contant, *Ministry Review of Neighbourhood Life Ministry for Classis Alberta North and Christian Reformed Home Missions*, October 15-16, 2014, (Edmonton, AB), 7.

A Neighbour's Story-

Sarah (name changed) grew up the daughter of a pastor, entrenched in a conservative, charismatic community where she was both nurtured and sheltered... She married young and when the marriage started to fall apart, her whole world did. Her family told her to pray more and that she had to stay in the relationship-she'd made a vow before God... but the situation got worse, even abusive, and she had to get out. Doing so however, not only black-marked her in the community, and shamed her family but left her feeling alone and abandoned, disillusioned about God, and confused about what she believed. Consequently for a time she disassociated herself from everything to do with 'church.'

But God brought a wonderful man with Roman Catholic background into her and her young son's life. Together they began participating in a small church plant where they felt safe and welcome. They got involved in its ministry but it was exhausting— there were only a handful of people trying to maintain all the traditional programs and ministries; and get more people to 'come to church!' Despite the warmth of the fellowship, 'church' became a burden, draining them and others.

Sarah and her new man however, were doing great and eventually they married and moved into our neighbourhood. Meanwhile, sadly, the church plant disbanded and this new young family wondered again about the value of the 'institutional church.' *Was that really what it was all about?* At the same time, Sarah and her new husband were beginning to discover that God was at work 'outside' the 'church'—in their neighbourhood. They, she would later describe, were being invited by the Spirit to join in with what God was already doing out ahead of them right where they lived; it was a whole new paradigm! Sarah became a block connector and found God using her as she was simply present and available to her neighbours. And when she was diagnosed with cancer, her neighbours were there for her and her family—and continue to be. This experience and their eventual commitment to our neighbourhood Sunday morning house gathering has led to huge shifts in their theology; in their understanding of what it means to be a disciple—

-- Shifts that are happening amongst the people of God in communities across the continent as more and more followers of Jesus begin to recognize how the world has changed and how their modern Christendom understanding of the church, God's mission and the nature of discipleship no longer make sense. As Alan Roxburgh puts it,

The crisis is the ending of the Christian narrative as the operative, controlling map of North America culture. The emergence of postmodern maps is putting the churches into a radically different situation.²

Stanley Grenz affirms that, "The shift from the familiar territory of modernity to the uncharted terrain of postmodernity has grave implications for those who seek to live as Christ's disciples in the new context."³ What are those shifts? What are we learning about God's mission and our call to be and make disciples as we venture out into this uncharted territory? Those are the questions I hope to address in this paper. In order to do so, I will frame my observations with David Fitch and Geoff Holsclaw's "posts," namely postattractional, postpositional and

2. Alan Roxburgh, *Missional Map-Making: Skills for Leading in Times of Transition* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), xx.

3. Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 162.

postuniversal language to which I will add postcommuter.⁴ As I explore these shifts and their implications, I invite you to ponder with me, what is the Spirit up to and how is the church to disciple *for such a time as this*?

Postattractional

The first shift, postattractional, might simply be articulated by saying that the dominant culture is no longer *attracted* to the church. In the Christendom world (particularly the North American Evangelical context), the church was able to *attract* people to its programs and services and discipleship happened (we presumed) when people came.

(1) Today however, 'they' no longer seem interested in coming, no matter how 'attractive' we make 'church'.

Furthermore, the attractional approach we are realizing, was better at forming religious consumers than making disciples. Attendees simply chose the service that best suited them, went home and got on with their week, satisfied that they had done their Christian 'thing.'⁵ Consequently the call to love their neighbours, to bear witness '24-7', discipling and being discipled was perceived as optional or periphery, if considered at all. Carlson and Lueken came face to face with this reality in their megachurch and concluded that "consumer driven church" and "spiritual formation" are "conflicting influences" that "cannot coexist peacefully, for they are built on completely different foundational understandings of the life God has invited us to live."⁶ As those now participating in our Neighbourhood Life communities (NL) have articulated, "Something was amiss, we were longing for a more integrated life." This "simplifying has been life-giving but we still have lots of work to do to consolidate our lives in the neighbourhood." Others describe how they had been so involved in the "church bubble" but were now realizing that moving beyond 'attractional church' is a call to "a total life change," not just "an extra thing you have to do."

(2) A second related assumption of the attractional mode of being 'church' is its understanding of church 'success'. Success is about numbers, more and bigger. But, more people in the pews and programs does not necessarily indicate that more fully formed disciples. The latter, we are learning, requires that we ask different questions such as: Are we being faithful? Are we loving our neighbours? Are we seeking the shalom of our community? What practices are we engaging in that bear witness to the Kingdom of God right where we live that others might know?

*(3) A third shortcoming of the attractional paradigm concerns the individualistic approach to life and faith that it engenders. Church is about **me**: **my** needs, **my** relationship with Jesus, **my** comfort and so forth. Catholic missionary, Vincent Donovan concludes that this focus **on me** has consumed the vast majority of the church's resources, time, energy, and talent... individual responsibility, individual morality, individual vocation to the priesthood, self-*

4. David Fitch and Geoff Holsclaw, *Prodigal Christianity: Ten Signposts into the Missional Frontier* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2013), 6-12.

5. This is not intended to diminish the value and importance of a weekly communal gathering for the purpose of worship, fellowship, discipleship. Indeed, such a time together at the Table, shaped by the Word, mutually encouraged in sharing, discernment and prayer is essential not only for our formation, accountability and discipline (connecting us in the one, holy, catholic, apostolic church) but for our embodiment of God's kingdom reign here and now in our neighbourhoods.

6. Kent Carlson and Michael Lueken, *Renovation of the Church: What Happens When a Seeker Church Discovers Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, CA: IVP, 2011), 33.

fulfillment, individual holiness and salvation ... with little room for community in between.”⁷ Charles Taylor calls this “the unprecedented primacy of the individual.”⁸ But does catering to the individual produce disciples or have anything to do with what it means to be *communitas*, the community of God’s people formed by, witness to and participating in God’s mission?⁹ Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk challenge us in this way:

Missional leadership is not effectiveness in meeting the inner, spiritual needs of self-actualizing and self-differentiating individuals or creating numerical growth. It is different from building healthy, non-anxious relationships among members of a congregation so that they appear attractive to people outside the church. Missional leadership is cultivating an environment that releases the missional imagination of the people of God.¹⁰

Not only has NL been incited to realize that church is not about meeting their needs but also that participation in God’s mission is about *we*. *We* are called as a city on the hill, the salt and light of the world *in the world* (Mathew 5:13-16). In following, one participant was motivated to think about “bringing the church to the people since the people were not coming to the church.” Another expressed how she was struck by “the vision of embodying Christ together, *here*—as my kids play with the neighbour kids ... organically, naturally; I’m not thinking or worrying about getting them to church.” As Henri Nouwen articulates, the togetherness of the Gospel reminds us:

It is Jesus who heals, not I; it is Jesus who speaks words of truth, not I; Jesus who is Lord, not I ... we proclaim the redeeming power of God together. Indeed whenever we minister together, it is easier for people to recognize that we do not come in our own name, but in the name of the Lord Jesus who sent us. ... Ministry is not only a communal experience, it is also a mutual experience.¹¹

We are in this together!

Postpositional

A second ‘post’ which we experience as we engage on the margins, is the recognition that the church (and other similar institutions) no longer holds authority, power and position in our society. “Our culture is increasingly less influenced by the gospel; the church has lost its place of privilege and is pushed to the margins.”¹² As a now marginalized entity, a number of the church’s long held suppositions are called into question including (a) that right thinking/believing is the main, and in many cases, the only thing that matters; (b) that church

7. Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), 68.

8. Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2004), 50.

9. Alan Hirsch, quoted by Michael Frost in *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 123. “Communitas” is “a community infused with a grand sense of purpose; a purpose that lies outside of its current internal reality and constitution. It’s the kind of community that ‘happens’ to people in actual pursuit of a common vision of what could be. It involves movement and it describes the experience of togetherness that only really happens among a group of people actually engaging in a mission outside itself.”

10. Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2006), 122.

11. Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1992), 58-59.

12. Michael W. Goheen, “A Critical Examination of David Bosch’s Missional Reading of Luke,” in *Reading Luke: Interpretation, Reflection Formation*, edited by Craig G. Bartholomew, Joel B. Green and Anthony C. Thisleton, 232 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005).

professionals are the experts and authority, and therefore carry the responsibility for discipleship and; (c) hand-in-hand with that, that ordinary, lay people (on their own) don't have what is needed to disciple and be disciplined.

(a) *All We Need is Right Thinking (and Believing)*. This modern appeal to reason led Western Christendom Christianity to assert that being a Christian meant believing the right things and ensuring (via logical argument and rational persuasion) that others did too. We're now clearly aware that discipleship is not merely about endorsing a "set of propositions" that "simply catalog a collection of statements about God, Jesus, the Spirit, sin, redemption and so on."¹³ As one person on the margins put it, "Either there is more to this, or its hogwash; you've got to show me God."

This is important for several reasons. Our neighbours are not going 'to believe' just because we provide logical evidence that the Bible is true or can win an argument about the reality of Jesus' death and resurrection. Instead the truth of the gospel is discovered, experienced and expressed through the whole of life and through *others'* lives. The Gospel truth after all has always been a Person, "*I am* the way, the life and the truth (John 14:6)."¹⁴ Furthermore, when we begin to embrace a more wholistic approach to discipleship, we discover the 'gospeling' that the Spirit is already doing out ahead of us, alerting others to the Kingdom of God come near. How meaningful it is when a neighbour remarks, "You're not like any other religious people that I know. I like you."

(b) *We Need Experts*. The modern belief in reason and knowledge as the only real sources of truth, also led to our need for and dependence upon the experts and professionals as (often the only) disciplers. Those with the most know-how, training and skill, were listened to, trusted and given power and authority (for better and worse), period. This is no longer the case.¹⁵

Many in the church are threatened by and fearful of this loss. Nonetheless, it may be that through this 'post', the Spirit is opening up a way for the church to discover (or recover) a more Christ-like posture, in the midst of a changing, seeking world (Philippians 2). Experts presenting information or imposing rules, does not make disciples. "Finally the postmodern church," Smith proposes must "recognize that its primary responsibility is to live the story for the world" and therefore "Christians have a responsibility to 'act well'."¹⁶ NL participants have been aiming to "act well" as "they live the story" amongst their neighbours not as judges, authorities, therapists or care-givers but as friends and fellow-journeymen¹⁷—seeking to be "channel[s] of grace through which God can mend a broken world"¹⁸—but it is not easy.

(c) *Not Just 'Laity'*. It is not easy because the underlying modern positional framework of Christendom has told us that 'the average Christian' can't disciple; we don't have the expertise.¹⁹

13. James K.A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 74.

14. Italics mine.

15. George Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, Eds., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 41.

16. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism*, 79.

17. David Fitch, *The Great Giveaway: Reclaiming the Mission of the Church from Big Business, Parachurch Organizations, Psychotherapy, Consumer Capitalism and Other Modern Maladies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books 2005), Chapter 7.

18. Rick Rouse and Craig Van Gelder, *A Field Guide to the Missional Congregation: Embarking on a Journey of Transformation*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg 2008), 65.

19. This, despite doctrines that 'on paper' suggest otherwise.

The subtle, perhaps unintentional, message has been: Your job (as a person in the pew), is to get your friends and neighbours into the building and then, we, ‘the church’ (meaning the staff/the professionals), will take care of them, disciple them, etc.²⁰ Already in 1967, however, Hans Küng was asserting that “if the Church is the true people of God, it is impossible to differentiate between “church” and “laity” observing that the latter “simply does not occur in the New Testament. All members of the people of God have been called by the message of Jesus Christ to faith, obedience and complete devotion in love; in this too; all members of the Church are equal.”²¹ Put definitively, “In the Church of Jesus Christ, who is the only high priest and mediator, all the faithful are priests and clergy.”²² I wonder how different the church and world would be if we had heeded Küng’s admonition decades ago. Could initiatives like NL be a way for the church to commission “all members” to live as “priests and clergy” humbly serving and bearing witness to the Kingdom by their faithful presence in their neighbourhoods? Since we are all priests and clergy, “we as believers are [all] called to disciple everyone who comes into our orbit of influence—it’s that simple.”²³ Thus, as NL has sought to leave *positional* behind and take up this new (ancient) *posture*, we have become more aware that it is not our ‘story telling’ that should be supported by our ‘story living’ but rather our ‘story living’ that, via “Christ in us,” is supported by our ‘story telling’.²⁴

Postuniversal Language

A third shift in today’s culture that we have learned on the margins, is that we are now postuniversal language. There was a day (which some still assume persists in some places in North America) when everyone ‘spoke the same language’ or so we believed. Within this modern construct, the church could approach discipleship uniformly and assume that everyone understood what was being communicated, could take the same Discipleship 101, 102, etc. track and grow from the experience. One need only walk down a busy street in any city to realize that there is no longer one common language or common understanding in our neighbourhoods. Since we all have different backgrounds “a phrase can mean one thing in one context and something different in another.”²⁵ For many in Christendom systems, however, the implications of such an observation are only beginning to be realized. The church continues to speak ‘Christianese’ and expects others to understand and respond to it (as we would) even though the majority of our neighbours no longer attend church.²⁶

In our multicultural, diverse communities, showing and telling *the Story* conversely, must be far less formulaic and far more organic, contextual and relational. As Boren and Roxburgh

20. I confess that I perpetuated this myth in this way as a ‘professional’ in my Christendom church contexts. Please forgive me, holy, Spirit-filled and gifted ones in those pews!

21. Hans Küng, *The Church* (Colorado Springs, CO: Image Books, 1976), 169.

22. *Ibid.*, 559.

23. Alan and Debra Hirsch, *Untamed: Reactivating a Missional Form of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010), 146-147.

24. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism*, 79.

25. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism*, 52.

26. As of 2005, 33% of Canadians never attend a worship service and the number who attend weekly has also declined from 30% to 21% in that time frame. (Colin Lindsay, “Canadians attend weekly religious services less than 20 years ago.” Statistics Canada, 2008. Catalogue no. 89-630-X. I suspect that those percentages would be even lower in 2015. The greatest drop has been in the boomer generation (from 39% attending weekly to 22%) which parallels an informal survey of the Christian Reformed Church, showing the greatest dropout rate in this age group. Furthermore the percentage of Canadian teenagers (age 15-19) who identify as affiliated with a Protestant tradition dropped from over 35% to 13% between 1984 and 2008. Reginald Bibby, *The Emerging Millennials: How Canada’s Newest Generation is Responding to Change & Choice*, (Project Teen Canada Books, 2009), 176.

contend, “it’s not about being trendy or catering to the culture but about being missionaries in [our] neighbourhoods, shaping the gospel in the forms and language of the local people.”²⁷ After all, Jesus Himself did not come with ‘one text’ but rather expressed and displayed *the Kingdom of God come near* in person and differently for different people. Accordingly, as one NL Community member observed, “We’re exploring faith together; I can hear my Buddhist neighbour and even learn from him; believing the Holy Spirit is at work in him.” As Earl Creps has pointed out, “listening to the voices of others is an essential part of being the church.”²⁸

We Need the Community. A second aspect of the postuniversal language shift is the acknowledgement that “we can’t interpret a text, thing or event without the conventions and rules of an interpretative community; indeed language itself is inherently communal and intersubjective.”²⁹ In other words, contrary to our primarily individualistic approaches to evangelism and discipleship, we are (re)learning that, our sharing and interpretations invite us to discover a God and a Story (not a model or a doctrine) that embrace many voices. On the margins, we hear from our younger brothers and sisters (‘out of the mouths of babes’); we are attentive to those of different ethnic, socio-economic, national and denominational backgrounds; we make space for ‘nones and dones’ and, we are the better for it! On the margins, we are realizing that “we don’t have to prove anything or argue for God’s existence”, rather, being a disciple and discipling is about “trying to live the gospel with friendship and love ...” “Since its God’s mission, we’re more relaxed about getting involved with our neighbours in our typical daily lives and waiting for the Holy Spirit to make apparent an opportunity for us to act, pray, proclaim or console. God generates connections.” “Spiritual conversations just flow naturally, they’re part of our life together.”

Postcommuter

We are witnessing a resurgence of interest in questions of place – it comes in multiple forms such as rediscovering the local or understanding what the Christian life has to do with presence.

*This is quite a significant shift in which many of us are trying to sort out what it means to be located, to have our lives shaped by the notion of neighborhood.*³⁰

A fourth and final postmodern shift affecting our discipleship today, is what I have labelled ‘postcommuter’. North American culture has once again begun to realize the significance of the local, of place, of being rooted. In fact, there is increasing evidence in our communities of a “late-modern cultural nostalgia for the local, a concept lost amid the big box stores and MacDonaldised franchises now homogenizing every square inch of the United States.”³¹ Indeed, it is much more than nostalgia. As one NL couple reflected, “We’re learning the importance of proximity” and how this postcommuter shift impacts the church, her identity, discipleship and witness.

27. Alan Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church: What It Is, Why It Matters, How To Become One*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 131.

28. Earl Creps, *Off Road Disciplines: Spiritual Adventures of Missional Leaders* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 69.

29. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism*, 56.

30. Alan Roxburgh, *Editorial: Questions of Place*, *Journal of Missional Practice*, Winter 2018 <http://journalofmissionalpractice.com/questions-of-place/>

31. 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, <http://erb.kingdomnow.org/leonard-hjalmarson-no-place-like-home-review/> (accessed March 4, 2015).

Neighbourhood Matters. For example, in my hometown, 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.³² Edmonton has a “Great Neighbourhoods” program, numerous “Go Local” emphases including a walkability index as well as 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 therefore “we have lost touch with social, economic, environmental and global impact.”³³

This trend towards the local is also evident in our personal choices. For instance, a young family new to our neighbourhood explained that they were planning to stay for twenty plus years.³⁴ A NL Community member acknowledged 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, that we could contribute to and feel a part of.” Another couple shared how as a young family moving into a new community, they had experienced the significance of ‘next door’ relationships... there is so much more to our life together, it is 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.”³⁵ Wendell Berry believes that “being rooted is perhaps the least recognized and most important need of humans.”³⁶

There are also good theological reasons to renew our understanding of the significance of and to recover a sense of place and particularity. As one NL Community participant bluntly asserted, “Commuter church might actually be contrary to who God is.” As Alden Bass observes, “localism is the reigning philosophy of the day, and theologians have not been exempt from its pull.”³⁷ Nonetheless, while ‘the pull’ is being explored by numerous present day theologians and practitioners, most of today’s North American church attendees continue to commute often a significant distance to ‘go to church’.³⁸

Commuter Church. As associations of commuters, North American churches have functioned and sought to achieve their purposes in ‘spaces’. Commuter congregations occupy a

32. 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).

33. 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.

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

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

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

37. Bass, *Closer to Home than We Realize*, (accessed March 4, 2015).

38. For example: Michael Frost, *Incarnate: The Body of Christ in an Age of Disengagement* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2014); Len Hjalmanson, *No Place Like Home: 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).

generic space once or twice a week under the assumption that what we do *there* will attract and bear witness, disciple and grow those who attend and those whom we want to attend. As a result, the church is not a stake holder in the neighbourhood and while perhaps 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 one NL member 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 in the neighbourhood who is receiving the ‘volunteers and services’. The neighbours recognize that the church has its own agenda, and that it may, or may not, understand or have the best interests of the neighbourhood in mind. Indeed, a commuter congregation can engender negative responses from the residents who perceive them as ‘outsiders’ using their resources and their place.

Space Versus Place. The occupation of *space* as opposed to *place* 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 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.”³⁹ “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 NL, are seeking to do experiments as the Body of Christ in person and in place. In this new (ancient) paradigm, church is less about a space, a service and an organization and more about being a community of Jesus followers doing life together in a neighbourhood such that they alert others to God’s kingdom come *near*. Perhaps Michael W. Smith’s struggle to find his “place in this world” 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 by finding her “place in this world.”⁴⁰

In Summary: Spies of New Cultural Paradigms

As we have been experiencing the cultural shifts of our postmodern, post-Christendom context, the Spirit it seems, has been inviting us to trust and follow the Triune One into ancient-new places, postures, practices and paradigms.

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

40. Michael W. Smith, *Go West Young Man*, Album, 1990.

This journey reminds me of the account of Moses sending the twelve spies to scout out the Promised Land in order to assure the people that this was a good—a God-way forward. Moses sought to provide his people with the assurances, which many in our churches may also need, as we face our own journey ‘out of the wilderness.’ How will the Body of Christ continue to proceed; trusting that *though foreign*, the land flows with milk and honey; that *though remote*, God is present; that *though not tilled in our ways*, the fruit is good and plentiful; and *though inhabited*, we need not fear—this *place* is God’s place, plan and gift!

Two spies (Joshua and Caleb) come back and, like many NL participants on the margins, are wide eyed with anticipation. They have seen the potential of the Promised Land, the joy and wonder of following God to the place which He has already prepared for them and to which He is sending them with His power and authority. As one NL member declared, “We’ve experienced the faithfulness of God; He’ll be there, He is there when you’re on His mission, you don’t have to worry! It’s so freeing! God has gone ahead and will be there long after we’re gone. God is pursuing people, we just look for the ways the Spirit is doing that in our neighbours—and in us too!”

Others see only the giants in the land (Numbers 13). Nonetheless, for those out ahead, Kingdom discipleship is taking on new forms consonant with the Promised Land that they are settling in.⁴¹ They are praying that as the church is willing to enter into and inhabit her changing context(s), the Spirit will continue to reveal new entry points and develop new or renewed beliefs and practices to shape her into *more and more* of what she is *already* called and made to be—the sign, instrument and foretaste of the Triune God who reigns both now and forever more.

From “Posts” to Signposts: What’s on the Other Side?

In our NL Communities, the “posts” have become not merely descriptions of what we know is being left behind, but *signposts* as to where we are going. Posts demand an answer to the question, what’s next—so if not *that*, then what? The journeys of NL participants are a response to that question, not prescriptively but descriptively. They point to a way of being and doing by which the church can disciple and bear witness *today*. This entry point might be summed up as ‘*communitas*’—authentic, Spirit-led relational community that participates in the mission of God as she lives in, with and amongst her neighbours. ‘*Communitas*’, an expression of faithful presence, is what comes out ‘on the other side’ of the four posts—namely incarnational engagement (versus attractional), humble posture (versus positional), life as witness or Story living (versus universal language) and, place and proximity (versus commuter). It is not simply theoretical work but an anticipation of, and a link to, the “daily practices and lifelong pursuits” that, as Lau Branson affirms, embody the gospel.⁴² Thus, NL participants feel called and empowered to engage in postures and practices that envision and cultivate new forms of an ancient discipleship DNA of church as “God’s **personal presence** in the world [in our neighbourhoods] through the Spirit.”⁴³

41. Schreiter’s approach described by Stanley Grenz and John Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 155.

42. Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004), 62.

43. Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), 25. Emphasis mine.

Postures and Practices

Prompted by their stories and experiences, NL participants have been developing postures and practices that are shaping them to “participate [more] fully in God’s mission in [their] particular context[s].”⁴⁴ Nancy Ammerman asserts that “practices are the pathways that shape our lives. Practices take us from the memories of the past and steer us through the uncertainties of the present.”⁴⁵ NL practices are framed by three postures that we believe bear witness to the incarnational, missional God. These postures have been helping us to discover how to disciple and be ‘communitas’ in our neighbourhoods, tangibly revealing the reign of God, the Oneness of the Body that Jesus’ prayed for and the keeping of the great commandment (John 17:11). The three postures that NL has found significant are ‘Among’, ‘In’ and ‘With’. Although we have yet to live into them fully, we are nonetheless aware that the articulation of them, the stories told around them and our ongoing experimentation are shaping and guiding us anew as “His family of disciples” in our neighbourhoods.⁴⁶

The Posture and Practices of AMONG. Our first posture is that of ‘Living Among’ our neighbours as neighbours.⁴⁷ Jesus identified Himself as embodying the kingdom of God *among* the people (Luke 17:21). Among practices include: sharing our lives and practicing hospitality, celebration and God’s ‘one another’ plan.⁴⁸

The Posture and Practices of IN. Our second set of practices focuses on how disciples are to abide *in* Christ. Jesus’ example and instructions are reiterated in John’s first letter.⁴⁹ The cultivation of ‘in’ practices are instrumental as we seek to be ‘communitas’ in our neighbourhoods. ‘In’ practices include what have been traditionally called spiritual disciplines such as prayer, dwelling in the text, Sabbath keeping, and sharing in the Sacraments. In all of these, God’s ordinary people embrace a missional attentiveness aimed at discovering what God is up to in the neighbourhood and joining the Spirit at work there.

The Posture and Practices of WITH. In our third cluster of practices, we assume the posture of ‘with’, serving *with* the people of peace (Luke 10), *with* our neighbours and neighbourhoods that we all might increasingly experience God’s yet-to- be-grasped Shalom Kingdom and recognize our parts in God’s Story. This

discipline of nurturing [a] good place means inhabiting [it], believing in [it], investing in [it] and doing everything we can to make [it] fully human ... investing both resources and energy in order to create a community of shalom; a community of completeness and wholeness in which people individually and collectively experience health, prosperity, security and spiritual renewal.⁵⁰

44. Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2007), 182.

45. Nancy T. Ammerman et al., *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville, TE: Abingdon Press, 1998), 34.

46. Brad Harper and Paul Louis Metzger, *Exploring Ecclesiology: An Evangelical and Ecumenical Introduction* (Ada, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 27.

47. Living Among is articulated in verses such as Matthew 4:23,18:20; Mark 6:6b; Mark 9:19a; Luke 7:16, 17:20-21, 22:27,37, 24:36; John 1:14, 20:19; John 1:26, 27; Acts 2:22, 4:12; 1 John 4:9; Revelation 21:3.

48. ‘God’s One Another Plan’ refers to the 30+ Bible verses that employ the ‘one another’ phrase. For example, Rom.12:10; Col.3:13, 16; 1 Thess. 5:11, 15; James 4:11.

49. 1 John 2:5b-6, 24, 28; 3:17-18, 24; 4:13-19.

50. Simon Carey Holt, *God Next Door: Spirituality and Mission in the Neighbourhood* (Victoria, Australia: Acorn Press, 2007), 132.

Thus, by practicing ‘with-ness’, we are seeking to collaborate, engage and be present in the midst of neighbourhood life. Again there are practices that we believe guide us into humble engagement *with* our neighbours as Christ followers. They include compassion in action; seeking peace and justice; stewarding well the earth and all its assets; giving generously and cheerfully; and sharing and affirming every neighbour’s gifts, wisdom and resources.

Conclusion: The ‘Sent to Follow’ Adventure

As these postures and practices are actually being tried out, enacted and ‘made flesh’ by participants on this journey, they are meeting the Triune One and discovering more of what they are called and made to be as Christ’s disciples, right where God has placed them.

As I ponder the wonder and joy of these experiences—this ‘experiment on the margins’—I speculate as to why the church has so often settled for so much less. Such pondering reminds me of the typical answer I get to the question: what does it mean to be a Christian (a disciple of Christ)? “Well, it means I believe in Jesus as my Lord and Saviour; and I go to church, pray, read my Bible and try to be a good person.”

And that’s it. How motivating is *that*?

I wonder, in contrast, how Jesus’ first followers might answer the question. I imagine them saying, with passion, conviction and intensity something like this:

Well, it’s been the craziest, most exciting, wild, life changing experience you could ever imagine, *more than we could have ever imagined!* We have never before experienced such love and acceptance. It’s so empowering and freeing! Yet, Jesus is always pushing us—sending, challenging, confusing and inspiring us. Our heads are spinning and our hearts are pounding almost all the time. He’s got us being friends with people we would have never even glanced at before; and going places and hanging out where we never would have dreamed of finding ourselves. We’re learning to listen, to follow, to trust and to love *everyone*. Life will never be the same again—*we’ll* never be the same again. Although it scares us half to death most of the time and we’ve had to let a lot of things go, we wouldn’t trade it for anything. Of course, there have been sacrifices, not least of which are our agendas and self-righteousness. We’ve even had to leave some people behind ... yet there’s no life like it; in fact, there’s no life! Wherever Jesus leads, wherever He sends, *that’s* where THE Kingdom is and that’s where we want to be. Shalom, joy, grace, mystery, sacrifice, adventure—that’s how we would describe being a disciple of Jesus: *the way, the truth, the life*.

I wonder what being a disciple of Jesus will look like for you and I, and the church in the next decade...the next *century*. As we step out into this new Promised Land, where we’ve been sent to follow, may we see-- not giants but giant grapes! –The fruit of the Triune One at work in, amongst, with and through us for the sake of His Kingdom and in His Name. Amen.

Humbly submitted by,

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