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# Who Is My Neighbor? The Church's Vocation in an Era of Shifting Community

Dwight J. Zscheile

Luther Seminary, dzscheile001@luthersem.edu

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# Who Is My Neighbor? The Church's Vocation in an Era of Shifting Community

DWIGHT ZSCHEILE

One of the most common questions I get when speaking with church groups about practices of Christian witness with their neighbors is, “Who is my neighbor?” The ambiguity of the question today reflects shifts in patterns of belonging and connection in American society that this essay will seek to explore. If American society was once marked by relatively stable geographical neighborhoods (whether urban, suburban, or small town/village) to which people looked for primary relational connections, that is increasingly less the case. A series of transformations is underway in American community life that renders the questions of neighbor and neighborhood fluid and ambiguous.

The question “Who is my neighbor?” is, of course, hardly new. It is the lawyer’s question to Jesus in Luke 10:29, amidst an exchange about how to inherit eternal life. Jesus responds by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan, a story that redefines the obligation to love the neighbor in expansive terms of religious and cultural difference. The Samaritan demonstrates neighborliness by his acts of mercy and compassion, unlike the religious and cultural insiders (the priest and

*Dwight Zscheile is an astute scholar of the shifting patterns and contours of American congregational life, and how the changing aspects of American society are impacting them. He argues for local congregations paying renewed attention to the localized communities around them, as well as the new kinds of communities that have arisen in an age of new technological connections.*

Levite) who keep their distance from the wounded traveler. Jesus provocatively redraws the boundaries of neighborliness: it is the *outsider* who embodies the neighbor-love that God desires.

The cultural and religious difference at the heart of Jesus's parable is crucial to keep in mind amidst a wider fracturing of American society and culture unfolding today. Changes to the built environment and the rise of social media have both concentrated and created certain kinds of connections even as they have displaced and disconnected Americans from each other in various ways. This is a moment in which the church has an opportunity to reenvision and reclaim its identity and calling as a community of reconciliation amidst the unraveling of established structures and practices of belonging in American life.

### THE CHANGING SHAPE OF AMERICAN COMMUNITY

Many neighborhoods and towns a couple of generations ago clustered people of diverse classes and cultural and social orientations within common spaces such as housing, schools, voluntary organizations, clubs, and congregations, even as racism and other forms of discrimination excluded some Americans from full participation. Today many people self-select into communities of those most culturally or socioeconomically like them. Greater mobility has led many Americans to come to live amidst neighbors who share their social class, culture, political leanings, and theological commitments. This has been termed the "Big Sort" into sociologically homogeneous enclaves.<sup>1</sup> Generational stability in a particular place no longer holds sway like it once did. Others have little choice of where to live but find themselves surrounded by neighbors who share their economic and social constraints.<sup>2</sup>

This sorting corresponds with the erosion of the middle class and of a shared culture shaped by a variety of public institutions such as daily newspapers and broadcast media. For decades, these media brought a common interpretation of the world into American homes. Digital media allows people to choose from an endless array of cultural "channels." The result is a new micro-tribalism. This new media culture is highly co-creative and participatory, decentering traditional brokers of power and influence and allowing for rich collaboration.<sup>3</sup> It also fosters cultural segregation and the collapse of common spaces and narratives. Assumptions are often reinforced rather than challenged, and it is easy to demonize those with whom we disagree. Americans increasingly talk past rather than with each other.

<sup>1</sup>Bill Bishop and Robert G. Cushing, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008).

<sup>2</sup>For further exploration of these trends, see Charles A. Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010* (New York: Crown Forum, 2012); Robert D. Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

<sup>3</sup>See, for instance, Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008); Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

This contributes to a deeply polarized political environment in which what was once a robust center has shifted toward the extremes. Americans now hold more strident ideological views than they did in recent decades and also tend to inhabit differing geographies. Conservatives prefer to live in communities with more space between homes, for instance, while liberals like to cluster tightly together in walkable urban settings.<sup>4</sup> Many American communities now reflect distinct subcultures that are disconnected from each other—not only “red” and “blue” states, but regions, towns, and neighborhoods whose residents conform to shared political, cultural, and ideological assumptions. Common spaces in which people of differing views, outlooks, and commitments once intermixed and engaged one another are collapsing. As mediating institutions such as churches, clubs, and unions that once connected people in society disintegrate, people are left with the individual self, on the one hand, and the pressures of big forces of government and corporations, on the other.<sup>5</sup>

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Mark Dunkelman describes this shift in both the built environment and the culture of America as the “vanishing neighbor.”<sup>6</sup> Americans today spend more time with their intimates (immediate family and closest friends) as well as in an outer ring of loose social ties facilitated by social media and the Internet around specific interests. What is disappearing is the middle ring—traditionally the city neighborhood, village, or township where voluntary organizations like congregations exist. Expectations for neighborliness have changed—from block parties and potlucks, sharing tools and child care, to keeping to oneself and not interfering in your neighbor’s business. Adults involved in intensive parenting spend more hours with their children, while these overscheduled children spend fewer hours roaming the neighborhood with their peers. Americans look to their devices to connect with people on social media who may be geographically far removed, ignoring the people next to them on the bus, street, or at the playground. People can now largely avoid relationships with those of differing views.<sup>7</sup>

This represents a significant transformation of everyday life for American communities. The institutions that offered the common spaces for people to con-

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<sup>4</sup>Pew Research Center, “Political Polarization in the American Public” (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, June, 2014), at <http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/> (accessed September 5, 2016).

<sup>5</sup>Yuval Levin, *The Fractured Republic: Renewing America's Social Contract in the Age of Individualism* (New York: Basic Books, 2016) 89.

<sup>6</sup>Marc J. Dunkelman, *The Vanishing Neighbor: The Transformation of American Community* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014).

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 111.

nect with strangers and neighbors, such as clubs, service organizations, adult sports leagues, and congregations, are all facing marginalization and organizational decline. People are not present to one another in public in ways they were a generation ago, particularly due to the rise of digital devices. MIT professor Sherry Turkle describes contemporary America as a world of constant digital interruption, continuously fragmented attention, and multitasking. The result is an erosion of people's capacity to be present to one another or hold face-to-face conversations. Empathy among college students has decreased forty percent over the past two decades.<sup>8</sup> Children fight for the attention of digitally distracted parents. Conflicts are negotiated through text and chat rather than in person. As one woman in her fifties from Portland, Maine, interviewed by Turkle remarked: "No one is where they are. They're talking to someone miles away. I miss them."<sup>9</sup> The paradox of a technologically interlinked society is increasing aloneness.

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Technology has also sped up life for many people who feel they lack the time to be present with neighbors. Jobs often demand that employees be connected at all hours. People choose to dedicate increasing amounts of time to social media, which offers avenues for connection that transcend geography. Once-isolated rural residents can now be linked with people who share their passions or interests, for instance, in ways unimaginable a few decades ago. The open, democratic, participatory nature of social media makes it a space of massive creativity, contribution, and sharing. There are genuine connections possible there that would otherwise not be taking place. But it is also making "neighbor" less and less a geographical descriptor. Who is my neighbor in a world in which I might spend more time connected relationally to people on the other side of the globe than those across the street?

It is easy to look back nostalgically to the more cohesive, seemingly unified American culture of the mid-twentieth century, as a variety of politicians and public voices are doing today. For many congregations in particular, the post-World War II period was their high-water mark of organizational strength and cultural influence in a society that valued institutional belonging. The cultural conformity of that period had its downsides, of course, particularly for those excluded from full participation and power by their race, gender, or sexual orientation. Most Americans would agree that there is much to celebrate in the diversity and dynamism that has replaced it. At any rate, there is no going back.

<sup>8</sup>Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin, 2015) 21.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 277.

Yet one of the dilemmas of the twenty-first century is that shared, transcendent cultural frameworks for meaning in American society have eroded, and nothing has arisen to replace them. Underneath this is a deeper shift in late modernity toward the individual self being the ultimate source of authority.<sup>10</sup> Established structures and roles that once provided identity, meaning, and community have been supplanted by an expressive individualism that seeks liberation from structure and tradition through endless choice. The self may join like-minded travelers on its journey, but the patterns of belonging are fluid, the connections loose.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, in an America that is increasingly diverse, there is little basis for common recognition.<sup>12</sup> When overarching narratives and structures that provided coherence no longer seem plausible and people disaggregate into cultural micro-tribes, what remains is a contested pluralism. Tolerance becomes the last remaining virtue, and it strains under the forces of tribal anxiety, mistrust, and enmity.<sup>13</sup> We see this in ongoing racial conflict and violence, an increasingly fractious political discourse, and the breakdown of institutions like the US Congress predicated upon trust and compromise. The questions of community become existentially important not just for individual selves seeking to navigate a culture where many common spaces and patterns have dissolved, but also for society itself, whose established structures and narratives are unraveling at the seams.

## RETURNING TO THE LOCAL

Modernity sought to deliver humanity from the vicissitudes of the local and particular through abstracting to the (supposedly) objective and universal. This logic is still reflected in the sameness of many American communities, dominated by identical big-box retailers and chain franchises. Values of standardization and homogenization for the sake of efficiency and uniformity still profoundly shape daily life, particularly under the sway of multinational corporations. Life is lived in uprooted form for many Americans today. Yet there is a quiet rebellion underway among those seeking to rediscover the local and unique. This is reflected in the rise of the craft and maker movements, in the intentional embrace of local food and small businesses, and in attempts to recreate local community.

The church version of this trend has been articulated in recent years by a variety of voices calling for local engagement, such as the Parish Collective.<sup>14</sup> Rather

<sup>10</sup>See Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

<sup>11</sup>See Robert Wuthnow, *Loose Connections: Joining Together in America's Fragmented Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>12</sup>Adam Seligman, *Modernity's Wager: Authority, the Self, and Transcendence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) 120–122.

<sup>13</sup>For further discussion of these trends, see Robert Hunt, "Public Missiology and Anxious Tribalism," *Missiology* 44/2 (2016); Joseph Bottum, *An Anxious Age: The Post-Protestant Ethic and Spirit of America* (New York: Image Books, 2014).

<sup>14</sup>[www.parishcollective.org](http://www.parishcollective.org) (accessed September 27, 2016). Representative texts include 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); Alan J. Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Chang-*

than having people drive miles across town to the Christian equivalent of a big-box store (a mega-church) to consume programming that itself may have been generated on the other side of the country, these Christians are going local, envisioning the geographical neighborhood as the primary context for ministry, and emphasizing the formation of relationships with the people who live and work there. This involves simplifying church life, slowing down, and focusing on the common good of a particular place and its inhabitants in collaboration with community partners. The old Christendom concept of “parish” is being retrieved as a framework for missionary engagement within a geographical space.

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Theologically, this turn toward the local is inspired by the incarnation—God’s indwelling of a particular cultural moment and context in Christ. Eugene Peterson’s rendering of John 1:14 captures it well: “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.”<sup>15</sup> The incarnation is about God joining humanity in the local and particular, sharing our place and our struggles, accompanying us where we are. The church as the body of Christ thrives when it, too, dwells deeply within its surrounding communities, joining neighbors there.

This turn toward local, incarnational mission through accompaniment, cultivating reciprocal relationships with neighbors, and contributing to what God is already doing to bring peace, justice, and well-being to the neighborhood is a promising development. Through it, churches are discovering new life, especially when they travel lightly like the seventy disciples sent by Jesus in Luke 10:1–23 to join in the daily work of the community, relying upon the hospitality of the neighborhood. Such a posture of vulnerability and compassion can go a long way to counter the deep-seated tendency in many congregations to treat their neighbors as objects (of attraction or fixing) rather than subjects in their own right. It opens up an imagination for joining the Triune God as the primary acting subject of mission in the surrounding community.

But here’s the dilemma: such a geographical-neighborhood approach runs deeply against the grain of the sociological transformations in American society named above. While a small percentage of people are reclaiming geographical neighborhoods as spaces of intentional community life (typically in urban areas), many more are not or feel they cannot. They are caught in larger sociological shifts that conspire against it. Neighborhood is simply no longer a meaningful frame-

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*ing the World: The New Shape of the Church in Our Time* (New York: Morehouse, 2015); C. Christopher Smith and John Pattison, *Slow Church: Cultivating Community in the Patient Way of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2014).

<sup>15</sup>John 1:14, *The Message*.

work for how many Americans spend their time or look to invest themselves relationally. Expectations are changing, and many people aren't present to one another in these spaces like they once were. Moreover, sociologist Nancy Ammerman's major study of the everyday spirituality of Americans found neighborhood (along with money and work) to be a sphere of life with little transcendent meaning for most people.<sup>16</sup>

It is worth pausing briefly to note the historical backdrop to this conversation. American Christianity inherited from Europe the basic paradigm of the neighborhood/village church or "parish." This was modified from the start on these shores by religious pluralism. In the twentieth century, the automobile disrupted the basic pattern of the neighborhood church even further. Together with freedom of religion and a growing consumerist culture, congregations have been struggling ever since to attract and retain members who have many options, not only of where to attend but also what to do with their time.

The rise of the attractional lifestyle congregation in the 1970s and later has been the primary response, using strategies and techniques to niche market the church to various population segments or affinity groups. Rather than see themselves as "parishes" for everyone in their geographical vicinity (as the state churches in Europe did), many congregations narrowed their focus around a particular cultural, generational, or socioeconomic tribe. Examples include the "seeker sensitive" movement aimed at Baby Boomers, or the emerging church. Established denominations like Lutherans or Presbyterians that historically focused on a particular ethnic or socioeconomic group still struggle to expand beyond it.

This misses an integral dimension of Christian community in a diverse context like the United States: the Spirit's reconciliation of people across lines of social difference into a new household of faith. When the church merely reflects social divisions, something vital about its identity and witness is compromised. Today, the strategies that fueled the attractional lifestyle approach to congregational life are now largely exhausted. The options on Sunday morning have only proliferated, and the church finds itself further marginalized within American culture.

Yet looking to the geographical neighborhood as the primary context for ministry can run the risk of defaulting to a lifestyle choice within a particular urban subculture—the church equivalent of people who shop at farmers' markets and brew their own beer. The turn toward the geographical neighborhood can simply miss where and how most Americans live. Many Americans may desire to eat and shop local, hang out in funky one-of-a-kind cafes and share unhurried potlucks with their neighbors, but instead they find themselves caught by powerful economic and social forces that make such an ideal unattainable. They do not experience themselves as having those choices, or they live in contexts where life is

<sup>16</sup>Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) 229.

patterned very differently. Meanwhile, many others have no interest in such a lifestyle at all.

Imagining the geographical neighborhood as the primary place to be present to neighbors may also play into the socioeconomic segregation of American communities. If Americans are now “sorted” into neighborhoods and communities of greater homogeneity, focusing there can easily perpetuate the very social divisions that reclaiming the parish framework in ministry is intended to avoid. Some geographical neighborhoods contain a wide range of socioeconomic and cultural diversity, but many others do not. While reclaiming the geographical neighborhood is a commendable and countercultural act in the face of the uprooting tendencies of modernity, it doesn’t fully address some of the deeper ambiguities of what it means to be a neighbor in today’s United States. Again, we’re left circling the question, “Who is my neighbor?”

#### “A NEIGHBORHOOD CHURCH WITH A WORLDWIDE COMMUNITY”

The congregation where my wife and I serve in St. Paul articulated its identity at some point before we arrived eleven years ago in the tagline, “A neighborhood church with a worldwide community.” This language references the congregation’s origins in the late 1880s as a neighborhood church for the St. Anthony Park area of St. Paul, where most of its members lived for the first decades of its history. The “worldwide community” reflects the presence of immigrants from a dozen majority-world nations who have been integral members of the congregation for the past few decades. It also gestures toward an awareness of living in a globalized world.

Early in our time at the congregation, we posted a map of the Twin Cities metropolitan area in the parish hall and invited members to place a sticky dot where they lived. While there was a critical mass within the geographical neighborhood, the dots spanned the many counties of the metro. This is hardly unusual for American congregations today. So which “neighborhood” is the congregation a church for? The immediate geographical one, or those in which its members live and work, dispersed across many miles? What does it mean to live in a “worldwide community?”

Over the past decade, the congregation has wrestled with these questions in a variety of ways. There are, of course, no quick and easy answers. The people of this local church inhabit a variety of locales—urban and suburban, in both established and newer neighborhoods—both in their places of residence, work, and play. We assume, on the one hand, that God has gathered this community and set it in a particular place, and that there is significance to the immediate geographical location of the church building. In other words, the neighbors whom we are called to love are in part those who walk and drive by our church building each day and dwell nearby.

But our neighbors surely also encompass the people in the midst of whom the church members live and work. As we have sought to refocus the ministry energy of the congregation toward daily vocation by the whole people of God in their

spheres of influence (rather than primarily activities within the church building), the question of neighbor has become even richer to unpack. We cultivated spaces for deeper conversation about the questions and dilemmas members struggled with in their daily work, in family life, and in their engagement with society.

One of the things that became clear is that no other space existed in our members' lives for people to come together across lines of difference and share life in the way that the congregation provided. In our case, that was particularly the case with cultural and ethnic differences, since the church's members represent about a dozen nations around the world. A shared Anglican heritage helped connect people to our church, but the church's life and practices opened up ways of listening, praying, and practicing reconciliation together that no other institution in society offered. For instance, as our nation and local community has struggled with ongoing racial violence and conflict in recent years, we have been able to share stories across racial lines that would otherwise not be heard, challenging one another and lamenting together.

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*by beginning with small steps of listening to one another in the congregation, our church has grown in its ability to listen across the differences that divide our society*

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It has been a space to practice what Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice describe as integral steps in the journey of reconciliation: unlearning speed, distance, and innocence.<sup>17</sup> The congregation functions as a holding environment for learning how to be community together in a culture that conspires through its rapid pace, patterns of geographical and cultural separation, and micro-tribalism to keep people apart. The journey has extended from our St. Anthony Park neighborhood to North Minneapolis and the Frogtown neighborhood of St. Paul—communities facing deep challenges of generational poverty, economic injustice, and racism, where some of our members live and work, and where we have sought to learn from and with local leaders. By beginning with small steps of listening to one another in the congregation, our church has grown in its ability to listen across the differences that divide our society.

#### THOSE WHOSE LIVES ARE CLOSELY LINKED WITH OURS

In the process of wrestling with the question of neighbor, a line from the Prayers of the People in the *Book of Common Prayer* has come to mind for me: “those whose lives are closely linked with ours.”<sup>18</sup> It would be easy to hear such a line as referring to our intimates—the inner ring of relationships identified by

<sup>17</sup>Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice, *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Race, and Healing* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008).

<sup>18</sup>Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation and Seabury Press, 1979) 388.

Dunkelman where people today are spending more time. But our lives are in fact closely linked across many levels in today's world. We live within systems and structures of housing, work, food production and distribution, culture, and economic and social life that are both profoundly globalized and highly local. We depend upon our neighbors—and they upon us—in far more ways than we often imagine. Our lives and fates are closely linked indeed, whether we recognize it or not.

So who then is my neighbor? In today's America, that question must be answered expansively, recognizing the complexity of relational patterns in how people connect and are disconnected. My neighbor is the person next door, in the next cubicle at work, in the fields where the food I eat is grown, in the factory where my clothes are made. My neighbor lives in the parts of town I may rarely visit but where life is shaped by systems in which I participate or in which I am caught. My geographical neighborhood may be a meaningful space in which to participate in God's mission of forming and restoring community. But so might my workplace, the sidelines of my child's soccer games, the school across town where I might be called to join with neighbors in helping children thrive, the places I am called to be present and form relationships. There is simply no easy answer.

"Who is my neighbor?" in today's world is ultimately a matter of ongoing discernment. Discernment is not the freedom to choose who our neighbors are like any other lifestyle or consumer choice in American society today. Discernment is about hearing, submitting to, and participating in the Holy Spirit's leadership in the circumstances of daily life. The Holy Spirit works both within us and also *between* us and our neighbors in creating and restoring relationships of just and merciful flourishing. For many congregations, discernment is an underemphasized dimension of the Christian life. The capacity to discern faithfully requires intentional cultivation among the whole people of God, not just to address occasional organizational decisions facing the congregation, but as a way of life for everyone.

As followers of Jesus, our calling is to discern the Spirit's gifts and leading wherever we are, in whatever local spaces God has set us, whether they be geographical neighborhood blocks or social media chat rooms. In a society that has lost many of its common spaces for connection as well as its practices of neighborliness, the church has an opportunity to be a public community defined not primarily by lifestyle affinities, but by its witness to the God of reconciliation in Christ. This means claiming and living deeply into its core gospel story and connecting its sacramental practices of Baptism and Eucharist with the ambiguities, divisions, and dilemmas of life in contemporary America. In a world of eroding, shifting, and fragile community, the church stewards a most precious gift: God's restoration to communion of those once estranged in Christ, who joins us in the local, particular, and ordinary. ⊕

*DWIGHT ZSCHEILE is associate professor of congregational mission and leadership at Luther Seminary and associate priest at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in St. Paul, Minnesota.*