

## **Reflection: Getting to Know the Neighbours**

January 18, 2008

One of the books I've been reading in the last six months suggests a little project for the congregation. It suggests doing what I did with the children in our imagination, but doing it for real. We get a group of people together and assign them in pairs to a section of the immediate neighbourhood. As we walk, we consider the following questions:

Who do we see? What ages, sexes, races, cultures; engaged in what kinds of activities in what places; what languages or accents do we hear? What else do we notice about whom we see?

How is the land used? Are there single-unit residences, apartment buildings, condos, row houses, stores, public services, educational or commercial institutions, industrial areas, parks and recreation facilities, agricultural areas? Is it low-income housing, middle-class or is it pretty high-end? What kind of condition are the properties in?

What kinds of condition are the streets in? Well-maintained, run-down, varying states of repair, bordered by sidewalks or flowerbeds or lawns?

If you've lived in the area or attended the church for a while, you might ask, what has changed since you first visited Langford?

If you are new to the community, what are you seeing that surprises you?

Are you seeing anything on this walk that you would not have noticed if driving in a car?

An interesting exercise, don't you think? One worth doing, because in doing so we learn something important. We learn about the neighbourhood in which the church finds its home, and we learn who the neighbours are.

The ancient teaching of Judaism is to love God with your whole being, and to love your neighbour as yourself. Jesus reaffirmed this when questioned; and to the question, "who is my neighbour?", he replied with a story. It's a story with a little twist at the end – one which we hardly notice, since we've heard the parable so many times. The questioner's intention is to turn this into a legalistic kind of debate. "OK, so I'm supposed to love my neighbour, now tell me exactly who it is that I am to love – who it is that I am to serve". Well, Jesus actually turns the question around at the end of the story. He asks, "Who was a

neighbour to the one who was hurt?” And the answer comes, “The one who showed him mercy”. It’s not about whom it is we are to serve, but who it is that we receive compassion from. It is the person we receive compassion from that we are to emulate. We are placed, not in the position of the righteous observer of the law, but in the place of one who has received mercy, and therefore extends mercy to others.

We are brought back to the centre of Christian faith: we love, because God has first loved us. We forgive, because God has forgiven us. We show mercy, because we have received mercy from God. We offer healing, because we have first been healed. We do not approach the ministry of the church from a place of self-righteousness, thinking we are the only ones who have anything to offer. We approach the ministry of the church from a place of humility – grateful for the gospel of Jesus Christ, grateful for the gift of this community of faith, wanting to share it with others, but also recognising that they may have something that we need to receive as well – whether they are inside or outside the church walls.

This is not to say that we call people into the church to do jobs that we feel we can’t do or don’t want to do. Sometimes, we think that way, don’t we? We think: “We need more young parents to teach Sunday School” or “we need some newly retired people with lots of time and energy to serve on our committees”. It may be true, but if that’s our only motivation for inviting people to join us, then we’re sadly astray.

We cannot see newcomers as solutions to our issues. Think about it: When a baby is born into the world or someone marries into the family, our first thought isn’t “Oh, good, someone to look after me in my old age” or “now I can get the leaky roof fixed”. We welcome them because they widen the circle of love that is the family; so do newcomers to the church widen the circle of caring and compassion which is Christ’s community. We welcome them because we want other people to share in the life we’ve known in Jesus Christ. They enrich us, not because of what they can do, but because they, too, are sisters and brothers of Jesus Christ.

Let’s return to these neighbours of ours: the folk that we see as we walk about the streets of Langford. I was hoping to have some stats to share with you about who makes up this community, but unfortunately we haven’t received most of the information yet. I can tell you a few things, though: I can tell you that there are slightly more women than men; that about a quarter of the population is under 19, another quarter between 30 and 45, and another quarter between 45 and 64. Only 15% of the population is over 65. Look at our

congregation. Guess who's missing? How can we connect with these unknown neighbours and share ministry with them?

The majority of those living in private households in Langford are living alone or with one other person. 50% of adults in Langford are single, divorced or widowed. That suggests there may be a need for a place to connect, to belong, a place with a strong sense of family. Are there ministry needs there we can meet? How about the 2500 new immigrants who lived in Langford in 2006? The 1200 single parent families? The 11 or 12% of the population on income assistance or EI in 2007?

These are the kinds of things we need to know about our neighbours. How can we serve each other if we do not know each other? I came across a quotation from Ralph Nader this week. He said, "When strangers start acting like neighbors... communities are reinvigorated." I might also add, churches are reinvigorated, because they have a new sense of mission – a new sense of what it means to love our neighbours as ourselves.

So where do we start? As a congregation, we can start by gathering information about our neighbours, by walking through our neighbourhood and observing, and then by having conversations with neighbourhood organizations – schools, city hall, service groups, local representatives – about the needs and gifts of our community. As individuals, we can take up the challenge I threw out before the summer – to talk to our friends and neighbours about their impressions, concerns and hopes for the community and the church – and then bring that information back to the congregation.

I know it's not easy to talk about these things. It might surprise you, but I too have some discomfort about this. Talking with friends and neighbours is one thing –striking up a conversation with a stranger? You might as well ask me to walk on my hands! It does not come naturally to me at all – and yet, if I'm going to really get to know the community, I have to be willing to take that first step – even on my hands, figuratively speaking. 😊

Sometimes we're held back because we assume how other people will react. We'll assume that they feel negatively about the church, that they don't want to talk about questions of meaning and purpose, and that faith is a taboo topic. But we might find ourselves surprised!

I find myself amused by the story of Jonah – the Bible's most reluctant prophet. He doesn't want to talk to the people of Nineveh and give them God's message: not because he doesn't think they'll listen, but because he's afraid they will!

He's afraid they might actually be changed by what God has to say to them, and then he won't be able to justify his negative judgements and his outright enmity towards the people of Nineveh. And God says to him, "Look. You cared about that little tree that gave you some shade in the heat of the day. Don't you care about all these people? Don't you care about their lives, too?" It's a blessing that the people chose to listen to Jonah – so why is he so mad about it?

Whatever holds us back from talking with our neighbours about things that matter – well, if we actually care about them, then we need to get over it. It's hard for me, and it's hard for you. But, after all, it's not nearly as hard as what some have done in the name of Christ.

I came across a sermon the other day by Peter Hawkins, a professor of religion at Boston University. He told the story of seeing a powerful play that brought the gospel to life – made it live and breathe and "have legs" as they say. Leaving the play they literally stumbled on a drunken man who had reeled out of the doorway of a bar and landed on the pavement. Attempts to get him help from the bar were unsuccessful. One and all the patrons agreed that he was a rotten, abusive, sour and angry old drunk, who didn't deserve any help. The man, too, insisted he didn't want or need help – he cussed, and swung at them – but he clearly needed to get home. So Peter and his companion bundled him into a taxi, and rode with him to his Park Avenue apartment. When they got him inside, the man continued to insist that they leave him with his whisky and his cigarettes and get out of his home. With the story of the Good Samaritan alive in their hearts, they couldn't do it. They phoned every name in his address book, and all of them said the same thing – there was no point even trying to help the man. They offered to stay with him, and he swore at them so more. They ended by pouring the whiskey down the sink, taking all the matches out of the house so he couldn't set himself on fire, and leaving him a note, offering to talk any time he needed it. They never heard from him again.

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These people felt that they were living inside the Gospel of Christ that day. Can we do any less? What would it mean for the story of the Good Samaritan to be our story – our church's story? What would it mean to give and receive mercy and compassion, help and healing with our neighbours? We already do this to varying degrees, but the possibilities of more ministry are exciting! Let's open our hearts and minds to our neighbours, and see what comes of it, as the Spirit leads. Amen.