

A Church in Englewood and Place in our Culture

Chris Smith is co-author of *Slow Church*^[1] and editor of the [Englewood Review of Books](#). Here in conversation with Alan Roxburgh he describes how his own church transitioned from its life as a large city church into a vibrant neighbourhood church deeply embedded within its community. That church was able to make this transition because of its long history in that part of Englewood; the place was part of its identity. It chose to embrace this identity, even as the nature of the local population changed and became more socially and ethnically mixed. The church opted to remain in the locality when similar churches were leaving the city for the suburbs in so called 'white flight'. (See the video at 1-11 mins)

The church went on to thrive within its local community, both in the depth of their life together, and in their relationships and care for the wider neighbourhood. Chris puts this down in part to their practice of *conversation*, an organised gathering of talking and listening which allowed room for conflict. Gradually, over a decade or more, the people in the congregation became more able to be present with one another, and more at ease with difference. Chris felt they were then better equipped to engage in an open way with the diversity of their surroundings, learning to resist the desire to fix or control. (Video 12-19 mins)

This capacity to be present to one another has led to an appreciation of every person in the congregation as a gift from the God who is shaping them all within their context. Chris describes the economy of shared gifts and skills which has emerged involving individuals and also partnerships with local organisations. (Video 19-25 mins).

Alan wonders in this conversation how Chris would respond to those who challenge that a commitment to a place is not a desirable or achievable aim in a networked culture. Chris has been influenced by the theologian Willie Jennings who in *Christian Imagination* has explored colonialization and the impact of displacement, both for the colonized and the colonizers.^[2] In Jennings' view the problems of race, place and economic injustice can only be resolved by peoples who are willing to be settled in a locality together. (Video 25.30-28 mins)

Jennings has also written a commentary on the book of Acts recently where he reflects on the tension between tradition and transformation visible in the story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10.^[3] Chris asks how we remain faithful to a tradition but also ready to discern where that tradition must be reworked for God's transforming purposes. Alan and Chris conclude this conversation speaking of the significance of Jennings' work which understands our contemporary perception of place and our experience of places as within the long stories of our cultures. (Video 28- 36 mins)

^[1] C. Christopher Smith and C. Pattison, *Slow Church: Cultivating Community in the Patient Way of Jesus*, (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP USA, 2014).

^[2] Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, (Yale University Press, 2011).

[3] Willie James Jennings, *Acts*, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2017).