

A Rapid response to ‘Dislocated’, Chapter 1 from *The New Parish* by Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens and Dwight J Friesen

Any book that helps the Christian community take a more thoughtful approach to place is, in my view, to be welcomed and by focusing on the idea of the ‘new parish’ Sparks, Soerens and Friesen draw attention to aspects of place that are important for the theology and practice of mission. The book creatively envisions mission (especially in the North American context) in terms of liveable and humanising communities and connects constructively with a sense of anxiety felt by many around growing feelings of rootlessness, dislocation and displacement which shape our everyday relationship with place.

If, as Sparks et.al. suggest, Christian communities are to become more attentive to and grounded in their own neighbourhoods, I propose that there needs to be a much deeper exploration of the subject of place itself. What is place; how does place function; how do we think theologically about place; can places be renewed, transformed, or ‘re-placed’? *The New Parish, particularly in this first chapter*, begins to make some important observations in relation to these questions, identifying for example, the way in which increased mobility (especially through the use of the car) has profoundly altered people’s experience of the neighbourhood so that for many, particularly in urban areas, there is a considerably diminished sense of neighbourhood and very little experience of what ‘being a neighbour’ really entails. *The New Parish* helpfully draws attention to connections between place and the shape of everyday life so that a place that embodies the values and behaviours of a ‘new parish’ becomes relationally resilient and rich, not through any grand schemes, but precisely because the very mundane and ordinary performances—such as walking instead of driving—make connections that are humanising.

A crucial observation made in this chapter, that ‘place’ has been largely overlooked—in their terms, people have ‘lived above place’ (p.15)—might seem somewhat ironic given that all mission, and indeed all living, happens in places. Nevertheless, it is an oversight that is shared by many disciplines so that even geographers have only relatively recently experienced their own ‘spatial-turn’. This spatial-turn in the social sciences is opening up new opportunities for theology and missiology but it also raises some critical questions that need to be carefully considered if mission strategies which seek to be more attentive to ‘place’ are not simply to become a reworked expression of hierarchical power which Sparks et.al. suggest was embodied in the ‘old parish.’

One such theme which is, I suggest, critical for this discussion about the new parish and is still relatively unexplored in missiology, is the association of power to place; an association which claims that to talk about place is also to talk about power. This association profoundly shapes experiences of everyday life. Consider for example an office—an ordinary place—where an executive arrives one morning to find the cleaner sitting in his chair. She (and it often is a ‘she’) would be reprimanded and possibly dismissed. What was her offence? She was ‘out of place’; and furthermore we might all agree that she should have ‘known her place.’

There are some important observations to be made from this illustration. First that place itself is

not simply the physical location and the material stuff it contains such as the desk and chair, but crucially place is a combination of both the social and the spatial—and we might argue from a theological point of view, the spiritual. Second we need to note that place embodies social meaning which determines a person's status or place in society. Thus place embeds hierarchical arrangements which express strongly held 'truths' about people's identity and value and how they are to behave. In this sense an apparently unassuming, everyday place such as an office is seen to be part of a wider landscape of social and ideological power, where cleaners and executives should 'know their place'. Thirdly, in most cases these things are simply taken for granted as the way the world works. Precisely because social power and meaning are embedded in, and expressed through, physical locations and material 'stuff' such as offices, they assume the status of 'the natural', or 'given' order of things and thus go unnoticed and unquestioned.

The connection between place and domination is an idea which is deeply embedded within the gospel accounts. Social settlements of place that defined 'insiders' and 'outsiders' were maintained through systems based upon religious purity codes, patriarchy, and 'oikoumene' (civilized-place). Therefore, Jesus's location in Galilee was not simply an expression of incarnation as particularity—that God himself can be known in a particular small neighbourhood (see Sparks et.al. p.27)—but equally importantly it was a challenge to the prevailing and overwhelming arrangements of power that excluded a majority of people to the deprived and dehumanising social and geographical margins. Thus Jesus' engagement in marginal places was not simply 'ministering to the poor' but was exposing and attacking the very systems of power that defined and maintained their poverty.

Put concisely, I am suggesting that all power finds expression through places, and that Jesus himself engaged with power and the powers through their place-based expressions. Furthermore, Jesus' actions were not simply to expose and subvert these powers, but through his own presence he established a new kind of place. This new redemptive place (which I like to refer to as an expression of Jesus-Space) is no longer predicated on hierarchical or ideological power structures of exclusion, but embodies a radical relational connectedness that is expressed through practices of open hearted hospitality, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Jesus' life, death and resurrection therefore brought into being a whole new kind of place which embodies new characteristics, values and behaviours. Perhaps it seems only natural that with a new creation and a new humanity, one might hope for a 'new place.'

How then might these arguments inform the conversation about the 'new parish'? I suggest that there are a number of important connections. We might consider for example how the new creation of 'Jesus-Space' becomes practically embodied within neighbourhoods or parishes and inform the particular practices or spiritualities that a missional community might pursue as they seek the redemption of places. We might also think about how mission engages with prevailing arrangements of power that work to exclude and marginalised the less powerful and indeed about our own complicity within those systems. We might even begin to explore not just the conversion of people, but the conversion of places or neighbourhoods.

In conclusion, I very much warm to the ideas expressed by Sparks et.al. in *The New Parish*,

especially ideas about connectivity, neighbourhood, imagination and movements from the margins. The book however raises some critical questions that, I believe, need to be considered. For example, it seems to me that it is not so much the size of the place—a table, parish, town, city, country—that is of primary importance, but rather the nature and function of the place itself. Indeed, the very act of defining a 'parish' as the ideal size of a place could cause the 'new parishioners' to become unwitting participants in the very expressions of power they seek to subvert. An additional point that I have not had space to explore in this article is that place is not what it used to be, in the sense that the incredible rise of mobility and networking has irreversibly changed the human experience of place. In developing ideas and practices that seek to recover the sense of locally liveable places and neighbourliness we need to be careful that mission is not simply framed as turning the clocks back to recover some long lost expression of neighbourhood, but deals courageously with the new hyper-connected and mobile world in which we find ourselves.

Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens and Dwight J Friesen, *The New Parish: How Neighbourhood Churches are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014.