



A RAPID RESPONSE TO 'DISLOCATED', CHAPTER 1 FROM THE NEW PARISH BY PAUL SPARKS, TIM SOERENS AND DWIGHT J FRIESEN

A few years ago, in the very early days of social media, I attended an impressive presentation from a pioneer in this field. As part of the presentation he invited subjects for debate from the audience and then presented these on the internet using a variety of social media. Dozens of replies began to appear on the screen in front of us. By the end of his talk hundreds of responses appeared. "This", he confidently announced, "is the future of community." Impressive as his presentation was, I was not

convinced, but it does go to the heart of the question, “what is community and does it matter what shape it takes?”

There are those who claim that the loss of community is just part of the present late modern landscape and we just need to adjust to it. Developing affinity groups regardless of distance, connecting through social media, developing our autonomous lives, is just how we will live. Is it the case that the church simply has to respond to this new reality – adapting to it, accepting it as inevitable, or is there something about the gospel that protests, that wants to shape an alternative future?

The argument presented by Soerens, Sparks and Freisen is that there is a dual crisis for community life produced by the interaction of two key issues: “The first can be called the ‘myth of the individual’ and the second ‘living above place.’”

The myth of the individual – the idea that our ultimate goal in terms of freedom and happiness is to be autonomous individuals – is a potent myth and produces many kinds of disintegration. Community of any kind is obviously one of those casualties but arguably our sense of what it means to be human is an even more wounding outcome. The failure to connect with others – to live above place, is an inevitable product of the first myth.

But, as the authors of this article suggest, the solutions are not easy or obvious. To turn the reality of a particular space into something that has enough significance to allow us to experience it as place requires a particular kind of commitment. I don’t think this is in the first place to be achieved by directly confronting power issues. What is required is action of a particular kind, a way engaging, that carries with it the potential to produce different outcomes.

In a private conversation with Maurice Glasman, he spoke to me about the need to create what he called “mediating spaces.” He had in mind, not the power of the domineering groups in a place, but the crushing power of the narratives of the Market and the State. The narrative of the Market suggests that commercial solutions can meet every human need while the opposing narrative of the State suggests that only the centralizing power of government is adequate to create solutions for ordinary citizens. In reality these competing narratives both collude and collide with each other. For Glasman it is ordinary people that become crushed in the middle of these forces. He pleads for mediating spaces in which other possibilities may emerge.

For Glasman, the church is one of the few institutions that has the ‘on the ground’ presence, resource, commitment and vision to allow the creation of such spaces. This is what the new parish sets out to achieve. It is important to recognize that the church is not in itself this new space – another dominating force with its own agendas. It is more that the narrative of the gospel, by pointing to forces beyond our own horizon has the potential to create spaces for exploration and creativity.

As our writers suggest, this demands a particular kind of commitment, engagement and connection that insists on a deep involvement in the life of particular neighbourhoods. They make the following claim:

...our parish is a relational microcosm that helps bring many cause-and-effect relationships back together again. Being in collaborative relationships in real life (where you live, work and play) awakens you to the effects of your actions both on people and on the place itself. It creates a context where your church can see whether its faith is more than just talk. The local place becomes the testing ground, revealing whether you have learned to love each other and the larger community around you. In essence, the parish is a dare to your faith.

This is a plea for a new way of creating relationships in a given community. Seen in this way, relationships are not instrumental - existing for the benefit of the church, they are valuable for their own sakes. In other words the church exists for the good of the community and not the other way round.

By daring to suggest that such a movement is beginning to emerge, our imaginations are challenged and we are encouraged to strengthen our faith to believe that God is up to something. Our ability to understand what is happening in the new parish is critically important for the future of mission.

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.



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