

Finding Roots in Stroud Green... Or Across London

2014 sees our hearts divided between our long-loved scattered church and the local Stroud Green neighbourhood, where we are growing roots. I begin this reflection with both trepidation (as I know some would criticise my scattered church) and hope (for a clearer vision).

I will reflect on four ways of engaging locally: through our congregation, London Community Church ('LCC'); through Holy Trinity Stroud Green (the 'Parish Church'); through a missional community; and through encounters in our Stroud Green neighbourhood. This reflection covers similar ground to an essay written for the Springdale College MA^[1] and adds a more personal slant, primarily viewed through the lens of drinking coffee.^[2]

London Community Church

LCC's focus has been shifting from the church to the community for some time. We have encouraged our members to engage in their own local neighbourhoods, in our preaching and by designing flexible mid-week meetings; and we have also planned church activities to support the community around our (rented) Sunday meeting place, currently running a community football club. We have been searching for a building for decades; and our changing vision illustrates our changing focus.

We used to assume that we needed a venue for Sunday morning meetings, but recent proposals have been more community centred. The most recent was for a coffee shop on London's busy Finchley Road: hosting community events such as a language café and mother and toddler groups; incorporating the church office; supporting our mid-week meetings; enabling church leaders and members to meet in view of the community; and, of course, serving drinks. I love this idea. Although the proposal was ultimately rejected, the leader's meeting afterwards was a delight as I heard the other leaders, now so committed to a community building instead of a meeting venue.^[3]

As part of our proposal, the leaders had asked me to prepare a business case for the prospective landlord. So I had travelled to the locality, walked the streets and sat down in a coffee shop, aiming to estimate footfall and occupancy, to better understand the unfamiliar business and to get in touch with that neighbourhood.

But the previous fortnight I had been experimenting with a Hirsch and Altclass suggestion, by preparing my paper in a coffee shop near my home on the Stroud Green Road;^[4] and in my heart I wished I was there. LCC may yet run a coffee shop, but it is not likely to be in our Stroud Green; LCC is our church home, but it is distant.

The Parish Church

As we engage locally we find ourselves involved with the Parish Church, who have, for example, supported our school bible club and helped us with a pastoral situation in the school.^[5] Increasingly we find our local connection is stronger than our theological differences (they

are high Anglican and we are charismatic evangelicals).

Coffee at the parish church usually means their Thursday community lunch. This is a Godsend for my eighty-eight year old father in law, who cannot walk far enough to the Stroud Green Road and its coffee shops.

The largely retired community still feels unfamiliar, though.^[6] It would seem odd to join it; and that would also highlight our theological differences. The Parish Church is becoming our local friend, but it does not feel like our home.

The missional community

The ideal might be to live in a local missional community, combining a common vision with local roots. Coffee then would mean popping in and out of each other's houses, meeting together in Stroud Green's coffee shops and pulling one another into conversations with our neighbours.

We might achieve this by selling our homes and buying somewhere else with other like-minded people, like the Australian group Hirsch describes;^[7] or we might form a community in Stroud Green. A missional community, even with just one other family, would help transform our local engagement from an isolated effort into a communal outreach.

But I have not connected with such people yet. LCC has aspired to form local groups for decades, but attempts at co-location often just added yet another move and church neighbourhood as London moved people on, leaving others isolated.

Stroud Green encounters

The local bike shop sells coffee and that's even closer than the Stroud Green Road, on the route home from school. But you could not write a paper there: they just have a table and a coffee machine squeezed amongst the bikes. This inspired me to put a table and chairs in our front garden with the hope of meeting with local people.^[8] After I did this, I spotted a neighbour sitting out on his front steps with a cup and a bowl; and went over to talk to him. As we spoke he hailed a stream of people as they walked past and told me about the local grocer.

Both the grocer and the bike shop, it turns out, are thinking about opening a local coffee shop just where I want it because they want to serve the community, though neither venture is certain. Perhaps we do not need our own LCC coffee shop after all: perhaps we could run our community projects from other people's coffee shops.

So we have LCC, our church home, but distant; the Parish Church, which is becoming a local friend but does not feel like home; Missional Community, an ideal still to happen; and Stroud Green's businesses, with some similar ideas. All show some promise, none are concrete.

Place as Promise

This is why Brueggemann's emphasis on landless Israel stood out.^[9] He reminded me that:

'Faith is precisely for exiles who remember the land but see no way to it'[10] and that biblical land is not just for those who have it, it is Promised Land.

When I consider my reflections alongside the sources I used for my Springdale essay, the local church of Sparks, Soerens and Friesen and Roxburgh seems far off.[11] We are, though, experimenting with these missional writers. We are walking home and turning aside to the parish green with de Certeau,[12] drinking in the community (though the bike shop is not quite Roxburgh's 'hot-spot'[13]), sitting in coffee shops with Hirsch and Altclass[14], groaning at rootless London with Inge[15], listening to neighbour's stories with Roxburgh[16] and creating a garden (though not on Jordan's scale[17]). There is, then, an encouragement to keep on experimenting with all sorts of ways of engaging locally; [18] and a pain, because the promise is so much more; and we still 'see no way to it'. [19]

[1] MA in Missional Leadership, Springdale College (Now renamed Formission) See <http://springdaleweb.sdcol.org.uk/>

[2] As it happens I do not drink coffee, so in my case this would be drinking tea (or, ideally, chai tea latte).

[3] I have rarely seen such positive commitment following a knock-back.

[4] Alan Hirsch and Darryn Altclass, *The Forgotten Ways Handbook*. Kindle edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009, kindle locations 1398-9. The school holidays stalled that experiment and I would like to pick it back up again.

[5] My youngest son's primary school

[6] The lunch is primarily attended by the retired and this seems to reflect the church's demographic; though it is possible that I am mistaken.

[7] Hirsch and Altclass, *Forgotten Ways Handbook*. Kindle locations 1405-8

[8] I do not know whether this will work, because the table and chairs arrived recently, with the rain at the end of the summer. We did play a game of monopoly and bumped into our next door neighbour, who liked the idea.

[9] Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as gift, promise and challenge in biblical faith. 2nd Ed. Edition, Kindle*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002 Kindle location 355.

[10] Brueggemann, Kindle location 396, see also Heb. 11:8-16

[11] For example their accounts in: Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens and Dwight Friesen, *The New Parish: How Neighbourhood Churches are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP,2014) 23 and the title. Alan Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the*

Neighbourhood (Grand Rapids: Baker,2011) 136.

[12] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) (English version, translated by Steven F Rendall ,.), 91-102

[13] Roxburgh, *Missional*, 15

[14] Hirsch and Altclass, *The Forgotten Ways Handbook*, loc 1398-9.

[15] See John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place: Explorations in practical, pastoral and empirical theology* (Surrey: Ashgate 2003) ff. 13.

[16] Roxburgh, *Missional*, 170, for example

[17] Jordan, Glenn, 'The City of God in the Here and Now' in Aaron Kennedy, and Andrew Walker, *Discovering the Spirit in the City* (London: Continuum.2010) 66-77, considering for example Zech. 8:5 and Rev. 21-22:2

[18] Again Sparks *The New Parish* 187-8,.

[19] Again, Brueggemann, *The Land*, Kindle location 396, see also Heb. 11:8-16.