



EDITORIAL: QUESTIONS OF PLACE

We are witnessing a resurgence of interest in questions of place – it comes in multiple forms such as rediscovering the local or understanding what Christian life has to do with presence? This is quite a significant shift in which many of us are trying to sort out what it means to be located, to have our lives shaped by the notion of neighborhood. It’s a tricky question because since the early 60s modern western life has been characterized by mobility. The highway, the high-rise, the automobile and the plane became the structured shape of our living. Coupled with notions of progress and upward mobility the aim of life was moving up and this usually meant moving away. Place was a place holder on the way to somewhere else; it was real estate to be bought and sold as we sought the next level of success. The Euro-tribal churches built all their congregational and denominational systems into this created imagination so that for some four generations this has been the only model of Christian life within the once dominant churches of Europe and North America.

All of this is changing. What, therefore, is the meaning of place for Christian life in the modern West? I'm discovering this is not as easy a question to answer as I first imagined. I thought I had this one figured out from the perspective of Christian life. Now I'm not so sure. There is a complexity here that I had not imagined and my lack of imagination came from having conversations limited to my own tribal group (the Euro-tribal) rather than listening to the others in our midst. It's one thing to be a 71-year-old, white, middle class Euro-tribal who owns real-estate and talk about place; it's another to be a Hispanic person who has lived all his/her life in the US, who now can never be sure when the place where they dwell will be taken away, with a knock at the door and deportation. It's another thing to be an African or Syrian immigrant/refugee torn from one's place and relocated in a strange land. It is an entirely other thing to be an indigenous person in North America living with a profoundly different relationship to land than the dominant culture.

A young, educated millennial often sees place (with its connotations of neighborhood and belonging) as something of an outmoded notion in a digital world where the geographies of modern cities and their relationships are more determined by technology and social media than by physical space. For a young person living in many parts of North America there may be a deep desire to stay rooted in generations of family location, but find it impossible as a globalized economy makes finding work impossible. My grandchildren, like a majority of their contemporaries across North America, are deeply anxious about whether they will have a place to live and be when they grow up. In major cities, such as Vancouver where I live, they know that the price of housing means there is no place for them.

This complicated question of place presses into often taken for granted assumptions we carry around inside of us. I listen to many Euro-tribal Christians for whom space and place are given meaning through the lenses of "real-estate" (property to be owned, bought and sold for the purpose of maximizing one's social and economic life) or the lenses of career development where place is a moment in time, where I happen to be somewhere, but then will be moving on to somewhere else at some point. I listen to the leaders of these Christians talk about purchasing real estate for their "church buildings", so that people can drive many miles to be together as affinity groups. Place is unimportant compared to ease of location (highways) and the costs of owning.

Then I listen the people you will be meeting in this Issue of the Journal: Hispanic, Asian, African and First Nations peoples across North America. Then I realize how limited and out of tune is the Euro-tribal church's relationship to place. The language of real estate and the primacy of the economic value of land as a resource, is for indigenous peoples, for example, not just foreign but abhorrent and destructive - a significant source of the disease of the modern West. For these people, land is neither object nor commodity. It is alive with story and it indwells us as much we indwell it. I listen to the African-America theologian Willie James Jennings declare that Christian life can only be lived as a radically reconciling gift to the world, when Christians are rooted in the soil where they live. He, too, tells us that soil is alive, the earth (creation) is alive and we have to sit in it (dwelling in it deeply) if we are to have any clue about what God is doing in the world today. This is a radically different understanding of place that cannot be framed in terms of social media, transportation, cost-benefit analysis or generational preference.

How do we square the circle between these radically different narratives? Each carry within them their own “theologies”, their own framing of God, creation and what it means to be human. Place is a big deal. Whatever else we may want to say, it is a critical issue that challenges us to the core of our identities as Christians in the modern West.

In this Issue of the Journal we want to invite you to join with us in listening with other Christians who are wrestling with this question of the local and place. For them this is not about new tactics to become a relevant church. It goes deeper than that. Over the coming weeks you will be introduced to a number of Christian leaders from various “tribes” sharing their understanding of what place means in the context of being God’s people right now. We begin in this Issue with [Bishop Mark MacDonald](#). Mark is an Anglican Bishop who, for the last decade has been the Bishop for all indigenous Anglicans in Canada. I was struck by the care, patience and love with which Mark entered [this conversation](#) while, at the same time, he unambiguously laid out the theological, biblical and praxis issues that must be addressed by any “missionally” concerned Christian.



Alan Roxburgh

TMN founder, consultant, pastor, teacher and writer with more than 30 years experience in church leadership, consulting and seminary education.

[Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Full Bio](#)

Alan on [Amazon](#)