



REFLECTION: OPEN HOUSE, OPEN COMMUNITY

Karen's life as an urban missionary in the 'lonely city' of Vancouver embodies a challenge to the traditional ecclesiocentric language of mission. Her gentle but intentional ministry of presence comes almost as an answer to a question posed by Alan Roxburgh in his provocative study of Luke 10:

What if an element of what God is saying to us in this passage is that the nature, meaning, role and function of the church will be rediscovered only to the extent we learn to discern what God is up to in the interactions with people in the public space and homes of our towns and villages?^[1]

Karen contrasts her previous life as a city pastor, living on 'adrenaline and deadlines' with the posture of radical listening and deep reflection that she adopted in her pioneering missionary role. Although Karen's ministry seems to have emerged organically as she has interacted with her diverse community over a sustained period of time, this should not downplay the prayerful intentionality of her approach. She articulates the missional imagination underlying her work by noting that 'Jesus primarily ministered in serendipitous moments.' Karen is always seeking to

live in a way that creates space for such encounters: an approach to time that owes less to *chronos* and much more to *kairos*.

It is an approach characterized by radical hospitality: Karen's house has become a 'community' house where shared meals and table fellowship have created a generative space for 'divine encounters.' This ministry is not bound by the four walls: neighbourhood meals are attracting diverse gatherings, and she is quietly encouraging her neighbours to make use of their front porches to build community: to 'move the backyard into the front yard' as she puts it.

Karen's narrative strikes sparks off my own experiences at several points. There is an inevitable gulf between us. Although we are both denominational ministers she is living and working among diverse and largely un-churched urban communities in North America, a stark contrast to my life as a country vicar working with six village churches in rural England.^[2] Far from leaving the church behind and moving out into the community, a large proportion of my working day is spent on the boundaries between church and village – and those boundaries seem very porous in both directions. While Karen is seeking to build community, I am living in villages in which a sense of community has been cherished over generations.

Yet it is the similarities that strike me even more than the differences. I am struck by the importance Karen attaches to deep listening, to truly hearing the story of a community, of a person. This is a practice that I am striving to develop as an Anglican priest. While she might not agree with the ecclesiology that is associated with the term, Karen might recognise the practice of the 'cure of souls' as described by Eugene Peterson:

...the cure of souls is a cultivated awareness that God has already seized the initiative. The traditional doctrine defining this truth is *prevenience*... *Prevenience* is the conviction that God has been working diligently, redemptively, and strategically before I appeared on the scene, before I was aware that there was something here for me to do.^[3]

Like Karen, I am intentionally creating spaces to listen and to discern God's *prevenient* grace in the lives of our communities. Like Karen I am using our house (in this case the 'vicarage') to extend and model hospitality to our neighbours and churches, keeping times of 'open house' and inviting visitors in. This is part of the 'cure of souls' with which I have been entrusted. Karen challenges me deeply, however, in her practice of 'radical hospitality' as opposed to the more 'compartmentalized' and restricted hospitality of her old life as a church pastor. What boundaries have I subconsciously erected? Am I really open to learning from the 'other' and how might this even be possible in largely mono-cultural and wealthy villages? Where are the hidden stories?

Then, too, Karen struggles honestly with the call to share the gospel, and finds the answer more in 'practices' than in 'proclamation'. She talks of living the message in terms that conjure up Newbigin's famous phrase 'The congregation as hermeneutic of the gospel'.^[4] Reed is certainly

seeking to live in this way. Yet while her narrative is inspiring for missional leaders, I am left to ponder the difference between a lone missionary attempting to 'join God in the neighbourhood' and a congregation sharing in the adventure together. That, for me, is our great need, in rural Wilshire as much as in urban Vancouver.

[1] Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011) 146

[2] Since I wrote the piece 'Eight Village Churches and One Life' in this issue I have begun work as a vicar in a nearby group of six rural villages. I still have only one life, though.

[3] Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989) 60

[4] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, (London: SPCK, 1989)

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<http://journalofmissionalpractice.com/living-slowly-in-the-city/>



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'traditional' village churches. Phil lives with his wife Rhoda in Chippenham.