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May 4, 2017

### Neighborhood Church Encouraging Reconciliation and Oneness

Living in a broken, fallen world, all are bound to get hurt. This is a reality. It seems as though there is consistent brokenness and repair, through relationships and communities, and our reluctance to forgive and reconcile continues to grow as living in community produces continual hurt. Beauty of restoration shows commitment to wholeness and oneness; it offers a connectedness that shows assurance to community. Reconciliation, at its heart, thrives on human interaction and nearness. There seems to be a dividing line among the church and non-believers; this line could be there because of unresolved animosity; it also could be there because of lack of every day interaction. In either of these cases, there is a lack of oneness (regardless of religious views/beliefs) among one another. Not only does this lack of oneness cause a separation, it produces thoughts and mindsets about the “other” that are both destructive and, often, misinformed. Eric Jacobsen writes, “If the church wants to be the “body of Christ” by including every member in its life, shouldn’t the church advocate a communal life that can fully include all members of the society as well?”<sup>1</sup> A neighborhood church could be a step in the right direction and, perhaps, bring reconciliation and togetherness that produces a community that lives in peace and intentionality.

<sup>1</sup> Eric Jacobsen, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2003).

Eric Jacobsen writes, “living in close proximity to our neighbors forces us to make compromises of our needs and wants—sometimes allowing us to learn the difference between the two.” He later writes, “When we successfully negotiate these informal social contracts, what we gain is a deeper and more honest relationship with those among whom we live.”<sup>2</sup> Although Jacobsen is writing about individuals, the same can be said about the church and its impact in a neighborhood setting. A deeper, more honest relationship of the church with its neighborhood should be a priority, as this brings together a separation into a whole. In his book *Connecting*, Larry Crabb suggests that “the greatest need in modern civilization is the development of communities—true communities where the heart of God is home.”<sup>3</sup> The physical setting of a church inside of a community is important, as it stimulates the calling to be one in community. I recently traveled to Henrico County, Virginia and witnessed reconciliation in a unique situation. A church was looking to expand their facilities, along with potential ideas for reshaping the community to make it more walkable and safe. Third Church invited all members of its community (business owners, church members, school goers, neighbors) to meetings to discuss possible plans of changing the community and expanding the church. Input was gathered, and respected, by all who wanted a voice and was truly considered by the church and the design team. I observed the interactions between the church leaders and the community and saw some hurt and animosity toward the church from a few people; bitterness of past interactions was apparent from the interaction. But, when the intentions of the church seeking honest input and

<sup>2</sup> Jacobsen, 28

<sup>3</sup> Larry Crabb, *Connecting: Healing Ourselves and Our Relationships* (Nashville, TN: W Group, 2006).

consideration from the neighbors was recognized, reconciliation was established and healing began. *This* is an example of inclusion. *This* is an example of wholeness.

A neighborhood church creates identity and produces togetherness, straying from the individualistic mindset and soaring into the communal living that yields much opportunity for healing, reconciliation, and restoration. The church, which resides amidst its neighbors (non-believers) offers alternative ways of the world. One that abandons exclusion, self-pity, and individualism, and embraces inclusion, reconciliation, and community. There is no physical division between the church-goers and those who don't attend; the living in togetherness erases the so often drawn line of separation and exclusion.

Jacobsen writes of "incidental contact" in his book and advocates for every day interactions with his neighbors. He writes that "incidental contact allows us to get to know people in their

ordinariness and even in their pain."<sup>4</sup> By integrating the church (a building different in use than its surroundings) into the fabric of a neighborhood, it encourages mixing of "types" of people. Now, the church must be a place that is wanted by its neighbors, not resented. But, how does the church become a center to its community with pre-established relationships between itself and non-church-goers?

A church successfully fully integrated into its community can be more easily achieved when it is thought of as a "third place." Reverend Dr. Robert G. Moss, senior pastor at Lutheran Church of the Master in Lakewood, Colorado wrote of this topic in his article "The Emerging Neighborhood." He writes that "as long as churches continue to exist primarily for themselves and their members . . . our inroads into our neighborhoods seem to be limited." This calls to attention the reason for the church's existence. Architecturally, a third place is a place between

<sup>4</sup> Jacobsen, 90

home and work; a place where anyone can feel comfortable. Ray Oldenburg discusses what constitutes and what flourishes a third place in his book *The Great Good Place*. He writes that "third place is just so much space unless the right people are there to make it come alive, and they are the regulars."<sup>5</sup>

This, certainly, puts the responsibility on the members of the church: to create a *place* to live out the purpose that they are preaching.

Often a church's focus is bringing hope to all the nations, whatever that means to the church and however overly ambitious that is. But what about the surrounding neighbors? The ones closest to the church? Katongole and Rice bring to the light this very subject, in their book *Reconciling All Things*. They write that "The Christian vision of hope never disconnects the question of whether we can reconcile the nations from whether we can live in peace and forgiveness with those nearest to us—in our homes, at work, in worship and even on the

road."<sup>6</sup> Seeking reconciliation and togetherness for our neighbors must first be the priority before expanding, and a neighborhood church gives physical practicality to the internal vocation of peace and wholeness.

Reverend Dr. Robert G. Moss, senior pastor at Lutheran Church of the Master in Lakewood, Colorado wrote an article about the stature of a church body titled “We Will No Longer Be a Welcoming Church.” Now, this title sounds foolish, perhaps a bit ridiculous, but Dr. Moss carefully distinguishes what the role of a church in its community should be and calls out a need to redefine a church’s mission amongst its surroundings. He says that instead of being a “welcoming” church they will be an “inviting” church. These two different words have two very different mindsets. Dr. Moss mentions that, from a missional perspective, welcoming is passive;

<sup>5</sup> Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*. (Philadelphia: Da Capo, 2005), 33.

<sup>6</sup> Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice, *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008), 100.

it’s waiting for “them” to come to you. Inviting requires action and shows more purpose and more willingness to live in a communal, full way. The neighborhood church encourages this “inviting” behavior because it requires everyday living with its close proximity to the unbelievers around.

Conflict resolution is less easily avoided when living close and unity is more easily achieved. Striving toward oneness in a community is an important aspect when considering the roles that a community plays. In *Community 101* Bilezikian writes, “God loves human oneness because of the God-likeness of oneness. He hates divisions because they are the work of the enemy.

Oneness has beauty and goodness, simplicity and nobility.”<sup>7</sup> This oneness can be encouraged through the literal placement of a church in a neighborhood. Jacobsen writes “We’ve given very little thought to the physical structure of our cities and how that provides the framework for the human relationships that go on in these places.”<sup>8</sup>

A neighborhood is a place where people live among shared, public spaces and places. It is in these shared places that community is developed and enlivened. When the church is viewed more as a public than a private space among a neighborhood, real relationships are created, not forced ones. Jacobsen writes, “Public spaces provide the neutral territory that is necessary for the formation of informal relationships and for the building up of existing relationships.”<sup>9</sup> If physical structure is a way to provide framework for human relationships, then the fostering of those relationships can be more organically grown and, more specifically, a church and its surrounding neighbors can be more organically intertwined.

<sup>7</sup> Gilbert Bilezikian, *Community 101: Reclaiming the Church as Community of Oneness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1997), 101.

<sup>8</sup> Jacobsen, 65.

<sup>9</sup> Jacobsen, 79.

The involvement of the church in its community has the potential to impact its neighbors in a godly way. The proximity will create a relationship that understands, confronts, and flourishes. Katongole and Rice write that “Over time a community [. . .] can transform a place through its service and work, creating space for human life to flourish.”<sup>10</sup> *Over time* are the key words in this. Like my recent visit to Henrico County, reconciliation didn’t happen with the snap of a finger. Rather, the invitation of reconciliation from the church to its neighbor was noticed and, eventually, accepted.

Beauty comes into the conversation when we decide to use space as an intentional means of community and conversation. Bess writes in his article titled *Metaphysical Realism, Modernity, and Traditional Cultures of Building*, “In traditional urban settlements, space is not a voice without form, but rather its opposite. Traditional urban space is a void with definite form, something with breadth and depth, with limits, with figure.”<sup>11</sup> Treating the neighborhood church in a way that utilizes the space to achieve its goal of reaching its neighbors shows intentionality and togetherness. Eric R. Osth, architecture studio director at Urban Design Associates in Pittsburgh and member of the Congress of New Urbanism, writes in an article titled “The Church and the Neighborhood: Past, Present, and Future” that “church communities often played an integral role in the creation and the continuation of neighborhoods. The urban patterns, whether developed privately or publicly, were often designed around public buildings of civic pride, including churches.” He goes on to write “Through secular and church leadership, we have an incredible opportunity to rebuild our nation’s communities and congregations at the same time.

<sup>10</sup> Katongole and Rice, 107.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Bess, "Metaphysical Realism, Modernity, and Traditional Cultures of Building" (Wilfred McClay, and Ted V. McAllister, NY: Encounter Books, 2014).

When it comes to church health, urban context matters.”<sup>12</sup> Oneness has beauty and nobility. How beautiful a picture of believers and unbelievers living as one, despite their differences. This is the crux of the importance of a neighborhood church. With members a part of the community, it cultivates a personal ownership of the vocation of the church. This doesn’t become a place where a family drives their car to a building in the middle of a cornfield that parks hundreds of cars and seats hundreds of people. Nor does it become a place where one has convenience by sneaking in and out of the back, never talking or socializing with anyone. A neighborhood church, ultimately, shows a real way to live in their own turf; not separating the church from their turf. Consequently, this brings more accountability and authentic, deep relationships. By living in the same space as the church, all members of the community do (should?) not feel segregated, but rather included. Architecturally the church (in the setting of a neighborhood) isn’t some unattainable, uninviting structure. Rather, it is integrated with its neighbors in a way that is attainable and inviting, while still showing prominence and distinction: integrated, but different; present, but set apart. Third Church is an example of convincing its neighbors that they valued all voices (even the “opposing” voices), not just their own. Katongole and Rice write, “An authentic way to work together in a pluralistic world is not to silence our difference but to truthfully share the convictions by which we see the world and to seek common ground where that leads us.”<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the addition of a church to a neighborhood is what is required for the mending and reconciliation of the church and the hurt community; the only thing left is for the people of the church to actually live out the vocation of love.

<sup>12</sup> Eric R. Osth, “The Church and the Neighborhood: Past, Present, and Future” *The Institute for Sacred Architecture: Volume 15*.

<sup>13</sup> Katongole and Rice, 30.

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