



The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches Are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community

Paul Sparks , Tim Soerens , Dwight J. Friesen

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2015 Christianity Today Award of Merit (The Church/Pastoral Leadership) 2014 Readers' Choice Awards Honorable Mention 2014 Best Books About the Church from Byron Borger, Hearts and Minds Bookstore "When . . . faith communities begin connecting together, in and for the neighborhood, they learn to depend on God for strength to love, forgive and show grace like never before. . . . The gospel becomes so much more tangible and compelling when the local church is actually a part of the community, connected to the struggles of the people, and even the land itself." Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens and Dwight J. Friesen have seen in cities, suburbs and small towns all over North America how powerful the gospel can be when it takes root in the context of a place, at the intersection of geography, demography, economy and culture. This is not a new idea the concept of a parish is as old as Paul's letters to the various communities of the ancient church. But in an age of dislocation and disengagement, the notion of a church that knows its place and gives itself to where it finds itself is like a breath of fresh air, like a sign of new life."

The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches Are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community Details

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From Reader Review The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches Are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community for online ebook

Dan Gill says

This book is the basis for nearly all of my thoughts on Christian community in our culture.

Al says

Place Matters. Neighbors Matter. What We Do About Both Matters Most!

Three guys who I consider friends and mentors have taken several years hard work and thousand of miles of travels to bring is this head start on how to be more useful on our own blocs!

I have great respect for this team of authors. What you read here is the result of both a collaboration and a calling to serve their neighborhoods. What you will read here should inspire you to connect your story with their stories.

The New Parish is an excellent read that digs deep into the importance of place, neighborhood and community. Chapter by chapter, the authors build a strong foundation for caring for our built environment and the places where we live. You will experience stories that are compelling, practical and inspiring. The authors teach and they encourage.

The aspect of this book I appreciated most was that the authors left room for me, the reader, in their story. I felt drawn into the narrative and found myself relating personally to what they were sharing.

Many of us live in big neighborhoods in big cities and find ourselves often disconnected from our primary place of resident because of our easy mobility and the fact most of us work and shop someplace other than where we live. The same syndrome can also effect life in the suburbs or small towns. The New Parish story is a wake-up call to come home and open our eyes and our hearts to who and what we find around us in our place.

The book is well written, extensively researched, based on actual practice and moves along very fast. The book is full of story and charm.

Some of the early readers who also gave the book high praise are:

Phyllis Tickle
Hugh Halter
Michael Frost
Alan Hirsch
Walter Brueggemann and
Felicity Dale

The above is not bad company!

If you want to renew your faith journey and connect it to your neighborhood, or just do a better job of relating to the place where you live, I highly recommend New Parish.

PD says

Reading approach: deep skim

This book invites the reader to love the people and place you are located well. The authors provide an excellent framework to the book that unpacks their vision and passion. They succeed at giving good examples of people attempting to love well with a faithful presence.

Although the authors frame their premises mostly on Scriptural principles and biblical theology, there are aspects that need more nuance and slower digestion. This will be especially true for Christian traditions that have robust categories for ecclesiology, missional engagement, and the relationship between Gospel proclamation and cultural renewal.

The book is not earth-shattering for me; however, it is a good contribution to this topic. The challenge will be for people to read the book and not do the very thing the authors challenge: getting excited about a revolutionary new technique or program and merely restructure everything to *do* ministry. They rightly talk about complex, adaptive problems needing adaptive solutions.

Nick Jordan says

I owned this book for a year or two before finally reading it. While I find much of the missional theology movement (Hirsch, Guder, et al) practically challenging, it often lacks theological depth and richness. This is not the case with this book. It's the rare book on ministry that I would recommend to normal lay Christians even more than pastors.

James says

I can criticize this book in places. I wish it was a little meatier in theology and more practical and less suggestive in practice. But some books find you when you need them. I attended the Parish Collective conference this year and picked up the book there. The conference was good for me. I was a crying mess through most of it because of the joy of being in a room with so many like-minded people. But they were practitioners, I was a pastoral candidate dreaming of ministry ahead.

As serendipity would have it, I was in conversation with a church in Florida. Now some months later I am their pastor. Some months after the conference, I finally cracked open my copy of *the New Parish* and read it cover-to-cover. This book describes the direction of where I would like our church to move and gave me some language around it. It also gave me some practical hooks for inhabiting place a little more.

A church within and in-with the community is a faithful presence integrating community, mission and formation. This is grand vision for church. One question I have is how to move a commuter church (which my congregation is partly) to this gently without alienating those who feel less connected.

Rob O'Lynn says

I really enjoyed *The New Parish*. I have been looking for something like this, a book that talks about how local congregations can engage their community without the mission becoming territorial or cliché, for awhile. I thoroughly appreciated the authors' concepts and their ability to "pull back the curtain" and show us how they practically came up with this "new parish" concept. My experience was that the book was easy to read and the authors' kept me engaged through their mixture of theological reflection, narrating examples and drawing conclusions and action plans. The glossary was also especially helpful in keeping track of these new missional terms that the authors' defined for us.

My primary concerns, however, are two-fold. First, I am not sure that adopting a missional model is as easy as the authors make it sound. Through my reading of David Bosch, Michael Frost, Alan Hirsch, Chris Wright, Adam Hamilton, John Perkins and others, it seems that becoming missional is quite difficult. The authors make it sound like they met around a coffee table at a workshop, all realized they were thinking the same thing and simply went to work. That's how it may have happened, yet my experience as a minister, professor and consultant shows me something different--implementing God's mission is hard work and it does not happen overnight.

Second, I think that existing local congregations will get left behind in this model. The authors seem to write from a "church planting and missional communities are the only way" mentality. Now, don't misunderstand me; we are not where we are because the local congregation has been exceptionally effective. It, generally, has not been. Yet that does not mean that missional leaders should circle around existing congregations like ecclesiastic vultures waiting for the local group to die off so that they can prance on the building. Any congregation can engage in missional activity if the people once again believe God can work through them. Therefore, I would have liked to see some ink given to helping existing, non-church plant congregations adopt this mentality given their more entrenched ecclesiastic mentality.

Overall, however, I think this is an important book that needs to be read, regardless of whether we agree with their conclusions. I am glad that I selected this as a textbook for this fall.

Noel Walker says

I have been reading about the missional shift in imagination for about 5 years and I have been waiting for a book to unfold a picture of what missional leadership would look like in an existing congregation. I've read lots of books about setting up that cool, hip, funk, coffee shop church thing in the forgotten downtown in your community and I've thought, "That's great! Good! Praise God for efforts like that, but what about the guy who feels called to the existing church? Do I just cut and run and find my own cool, hip thing? Who is going to walk the existing church through this shift in imagination?" If you have ever thought this, (or even if you haven't) this book is for you.

I've never read a book that so effectively describes the way forward for people who truly love their church and also want to join in what God is up to in their neighbourhood. You may still leave the beaten path and explore a new trail with the Holy Spirit, but this book articulates the radical shift in leadership that is necessary for our path forward.

This is the book that I am going to be giving to people for the next few years. Thanks Paul, Dwight, and Tim!

Robert D. Cornwall says

This book touched on a subject that has long been on my mind and heart. It still occurs in small towns, but in the suburbs especially, the idea of the parish has long since disappeared. The idea that a church would be planted in a neighborhood and that it would take on a concern for that neighborhood, whether or not everyone was part of the congregation has been replaced with programmatic emphases. We see ourselves, too often, as various brands seeking customers for our wares (God). The mega-church is, of course, an expression of this, but even smaller congregations can get on this train.

In my own ministry, I've been contemplating ways in which our congregation, which though it is small draws folks from a very wide arc of distances, can place the community in which it dwells at the top of its concerns.

Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens, and Dwight Friesen have provided what I believe is a compelling vision for what the church might look like if it saw itself as invested in the neighborhood. They entitle the book "The New Parish," to distinguish their vision from an earlier one that was rooted in the Christendom vision. Here is the key: "Whereas the old parish was often dictated by a single denominational outlook that functioned as law, the new parish can include many expressions of the church living in community together in the neighborhood" (p. 31). We as a new parish don't define the neighborhood, but we live our faith in conversation with the neighborhood.

The book has three parts, that get increasingly longer. Part one seeks to answer the question of why we need a new parish -- that we are living in a world of dislocation and the church itself has lost its place. Part two defines the New Parish in terms of faithful presence, ecclesial center (focusing on the role of worship), and the new commons. The final section focuses on practices -- presencing, rooting, linking, and leading. I'll say more in my blog review, but I want to note the need to keep rooting and linking together. The authors speak of the importance of stability -- of dwelling in a community and investing in it, while linking speaks of connecting across places, whether another neighborhood or another place in the world. The importance of linking is that it keeps us from siloing. This is especially important, in my mind, for suburban congregations that can get too comfortable with their surroundings.

I found the book to be well written. While three authors contribute to it, I didn't find it to be disjointed. I believe that it would be well worth reading this book in conjunction with two other IVP books of recent vintage -- *Slow Church: Cultivating Community in the Patient Way of Jesus* by Chris Smith and John Pattison as well as *Faith-Rooted Organizing: Mobilizing the Church in Service to the World* by Alexia Salvaterra and Peter Heltzel. If we are to be a blessing to the nations, then it will start locally in the parish where we live and work and play.

Lydia says

This was an interesting read but I personally had a difficult time getting into it and clicking with the content. I felt that the writing utilized a lot of "hip" or popular terminology and it all seemed pretty tedious to me. I really enjoyed the idea of faithful presence and found that helpful. I also wished that they would have used

more Scripture to outline their thoughts. It felt like the authors were trying to redefine, or even bring back, the church to what it should look like but I didn't find a lot of explanation from the Scriptures. I would have liked to see more of that.

Jordan Constantine says

Reviewing "New Parish" is incredibly difficult.

The spirit of the letter here is stronger than the letter itself. Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen should be commended for turning our gaze back to our local neighbourhoods. These are the "gardens" in which we must be attentive to the growth of the Gospel; they deserve our focus. As well, the authors' discussions on listening to story and their reflection on the nature of the Fall are high points and demand a revisit.

Unfortunately, I find myself unable to recommend this text wholeheartedly. For, at the center, lies a hole, a question of the Cross. Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen helpfully root their structure in the life of Jesus, specifically the Incarnation. Yet, I was driven to ask often in my reading -- how does the Crucifixion shape the structure of the local church? It is the triumphant climax of the Incarnation, the reconciliation of God to man.

And this is possibly their greatest fault in the text. Without being rooted in the deep problem of the world -- its opposition to God -- transcending limitations and avoiding responsibilities remain peripheral issues. First and foremost, in the way the church interacts with its local places, it ought to pursue the reconciliation of its citizens to their Lord, lest we seek of the restoration of human relations outside of Christ's work on the Cross. Christ is the first common; then we can press into the new commons.

If anything, the vision of Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen is a step ahead. It seeks human reconciliation and flourishing before our divine reconciliation with our Father. But I do not fault the authors on this, for I presumably doubt they mean to neglect the Cross. But the text before me does in significant ways, for this I must give caution. And to that, I recommend Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop's "The Compelling Community." As I read "New Parish," I constantly felt like it was an amazing partner to Dever and Dunlop's text, two books that were meant to be one, turning our attention to the garden and the Gardener.

Tim Hoiland says

From the beginning, Christians have recognized the call to love our neighbors as central to following Jesus. More recently, many of us have started to wonder how that command relates to our neighborhoods as well. Some have even begun to talk about "a theology of the city" and to consider how that theology might translate into the choices that give shape to our common lives.

These developments inevitably lead to a new set of questions: Does God care about the engineering of municipal plumbing systems? Does it bother him if street-corner utility boxes are drab eyesores? Does he care about the physical, social, economic, and spiritual well being of those on both sides of the tracks? Does he call people to run for city council?

I've come to believe that questions about the ways we inhabit and give shape to the places where we live, work, and play are integral, not incidental, to the mission of God. And I'm certainly not alone. Many of you are familiar with Christianity Today's This Is Our City project, which aimed to spotlight how Christians were "responding to their cities' particular challenges with excellence, biblical faith, and hope."

Last spring, I was part of Common Good PHX, an inspiring two-day event at which a diverse swath of folks gathered to collectively dig deeper into what it would look like for our city and our neighborhoods to truly flourish. I'm sure there are plenty of examples of similar gatherings and initiatives where you are.

As more and more of us have been asking these questions and working to discern tenable answers, three consistently thoughtful voices in these conversations are Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens, and Dwight Friesen, who together have written *The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community*.

Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen (referred to henceforth as “the authors”) open the book by making their case for something they call “the new parish” (a theme we’ll return to in a moment). They go on to describe it as a place—and just as important, a people—of faithful presence, with an ecclesial center, and a fresh understanding of what constitutes “the commons.” Next, they get down to discussing such things as rooting, linking, leading, and “presencing” (which may or may not have anything to do with what Otto Scharmer talks about here). The authors lay their cards on the table early:

"It is our conviction that humans are meant to share life together, to learn to fit together as a living body in relationship with God, with one another, and for the place to which they are called. We think that entering into these common relationships with growing faithfulness and fidelity is what it means to be human. The gospel of Jesus enables us to live toward this full humanity. And the local church is a body that bears witness to this way of becoming human in Christ, through both manifesting that growing reality of our lives together and becoming those who see and proclaim the signs of this work happening in the people and places around us."

You might say that the authors are trying to give the concept of parish a facelift, as something more friendly than the “lingering conceptions” people have of an arrangement through which, we’re told, manipulation, hierarchy, patriarchy, abuse, oppression, fear, and control are given free reign. In contrast to all of these nasty descriptors they see the new parish more happily characterized as bottom up, organic, relationally defined, and ecumenical.

While I find their overall vision for the new parish to be compelling—and I should emphasize here that I really do—I’ll admit that at one point they left me scratching my head. Now, I could be wrong, but it seems to me that the kinds of people who will read this book are not, for the most part, folks for whom the concept of “parish” is any sort of a hang-up. Rather, I’d hazard a guess that the authors are writing to an audience well acquainted with (and perhaps a bit disillusioned by) a kind of church that by its very definition is anti-parish—a kind of church without any sense of place beyond that which relates to zoning permits, traffic patterns, and the demographics of potential tithers.

Again, the authors lay out a compelling case, and in many ways I consider it a step in the right direction. But I wonder if there’s a grain of truth to the idea that, to tweak (or, I fear, to maim) G.K. Chesterton’s line, “The old parish ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and—at least in our contemporary Protestant context—left untried.”

I make that suggestion because, in my reading, the vision for the new parish presented in these pages is not really an attempt to reform and revive the old model; it’s rather a stab at creating something new, while appropriating and redefining the term. And that’s perfectly fine as far as I’m concerned. But I’m left wondering whether the authors also see a place for Christians to breathe new life into more traditional parishes, or whether new entrepreneurial ventures and missional urban communities are rendering the “old wineskins” redundant. If they get at that in the book, I’m afraid I missed it.

I’ll conclude by saying that what I appreciated most about the vision for the so-called “new parish” is its consistent emphasis on rootedness and relationship as the context for transformation. Throughout the book,

the authors do a wonderful job of inviting us to look beneath the surface and to see past façades. Flourishing doesn't always announce itself on billboards, after all, or through the proliferation of restaurants with valet parking in the hip part of town.

The authors of The New Parish invite us to see our neighbors and our neighborhoods anew, to experience their joys and their sorrows as our own, and to celebrate signs of life wherever we find them. Whether we consider that vision new or old, it's a vision I'll gladly get behind.

- See more at: <http://timhoiland.com/2014/05/the-new...>

Bryan Atkinson says

Great read on being engaged relationally with the people next door and across the street.

Corey says

Decent book with some good reminders for missionally-minded leaders, but kind of weak theologically and could use more storytelling and examples.

Thomas Kidd says

My recommendation is to read a Wendell Berry book instead. Seriously, there are some nuggets in this book, but it is largely lost in sociological niceties. The audience of this book is probably a 20 or 30 something left of center Evangelical (not once can the authors use Christ's own address in prayer "Father", surely because of some patriarchal, daddy abuse inflicted on us all). However, I, as a 40 something right of center Reformed Christian who already journeyed through left evangelicalism 20 years ago, found little specificity as to how the church can and should return to being a light on the hill as a local parish.

Gary Hansen says

The New Parish makes one noble call and explores lots of implications. The call is for Christians to attend fully to their place. That is a good and holy thing: we need to take seriously the call to love our neighbors as ourselves, and if we try to do that without attending to the actual neighbors in the actual neighborhood we are missing something. And that happens a lot.

I gave the book an extra star in honor of this good central call. I value the work of the authors in experimenting, investing themselves in a variety of ways in the communities of their churches in the Seattle-Tacoma area where I was raised.

The explorations of implications bring in a wide variety of quotations and illustrations, while being, I think, a bit tentative in light of the state of the authors' ongoing work in ministry.

I was not, however, fond of the book. My displeasure had to do with a number of things. This included

diagrams that I found less than helpful in conveying the concepts -- or which seemed to add credence to concepts that did not seem to be strong enough on their own.

It also included various matters having to do with the use of words: essential words in the case of "parish" which has, it seems to me, different and less problematic meanings historically and globally than the authors credit, and which the authors' own use is, I think, convoluted; Biblical words, in the case of quotations from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase *The Message*, with commentary that seemed to credit the biblical authors with the paraphrastic additions; and awkward neologisms like "presencing" for "being present."

Perhaps my problems with their use of common word with multiple meanings, "rooting," are just my quirks. They wanted to think of a plant putting down roots. I kept thinking in terms of what I think is the more common meaning of digging with one's snout.
