

## BUILDING RELATIONSHIP NETWORKS

### GOING: ON MISSION IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

This is the fourth and last of our brief series on Building Relationship Networks.

So far we have looked at:

- **Understanding:** understanding the community in which we live.
- **Knowing:** knowing who is my neighbour.
- **Being:** being a friend.

And today we're looking at **Going:** Being on mission in our neighbourhood. Each of us have a mission field right outside our front door. With that in view, today's sermon is going to be very practical in that I'm going to make some suggestions as to how we might take up mission within our neighbourhood in particular. That's the most immediate context in which we can proclaim Jesus through both word and deed. Some things we may already be doing; other things might spark a thought. In preparing this I've adapted some of the material from Simon Holt's book *God Next Door*.

#### The Incarnation

*The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood. John 1:14 (MSG)*

I love the way Petersen puts this because it brings it right down to earth. In the incarnation, Jesus came and lived among us, literally in the neighbourhood. In part that's why our immediate neighbourhood is a prime place for mission because through God's Spirit within us we are Jesus to our neighbours.

## ENGAGING WITH OUR NEIGHBOURHOOD

### Seeing God in the Neighbourhood

The first thing that may need to happen is a change in our thinking and attitude. Engaging with our neighbourhood begins with the understanding that God is as interested, and is as much at work, in our neighbourhood as he is anywhere else. He is interested in, and is part of, the ordinary things and places of life.

"So what's new about that?" you might ask! "That's stating the obvious." Yes, it is stating the obvious because we know that's how God sees things. But I wonder if that's how we see it in reality because one of the things that's happened in recent decades is a false separation between the sacred and secular. We have no problem seeing God present and at work in Sunday services, in the Church's ministries, in our personal Bible reading and prayer, but I think we are less likely to think of him as being present and at work in ordinary, everyday things and relationships.

But God is present and active in every aspect of our lives, in the ordinary and routine, the everyday things of life and relationships. He is with us. He is with us in our neighbourhood (John 1:14) as profoundly as he is with us anywhere else and any other time. What we do in the neighbourhood is as much ministry as what might happen through church activities and programs. The kingdom comes near to others through us.

**Practice 1: Open our eyes to see where God is active in our neighbourhood and relationships.**

#### Reset Our Priorities

One of the reasons we may not see God at work in the ordinary is because we are so busy that we simply don't take time to look. This raises a question of where our priorities lay. Are we sowing into the kingdom or are we sowing into other things? If we are so busy doing all sorts of things how can we see what's happening in our neighbourhood and be on mission there? Sometimes we may need to make deliberate choices that help us line up with the life and work of the kingdom.

**Practice 2: Take a look at our priorities and reset them to align with the life and work of the kingdom.**

#### Look for What's Happening

Take a walk around your neighbourhood trying to read what is there: signs of life, hope, despair, community, alienation, beauty and neglect. Look for the detail that together paints a picture of the life and character of our neighbourhood. Here's some questions:

- What do you notice about the houses in your area? Condition?

- What do you notice about the front gardens? Does your neighbourhood feel like a cared-for place?
- How many houses are for sale? Is this a neighbourhood where houses change hands frequently?
- Are there any parks, public spaces? Community buildings or facilities?
- What people do you see?
- What do you notice about them?
- What kinds of commercial buildings are there?
- Any churches?
- Are there places in your neighbourhood you wouldn't like to go? Why?
- What sense of connection do you feel to your neighbourhood as you walk through it?

As we take the time and effort we may see things that we've never seen or realised before about the area in which we live. Put all this together – what does it tell us about the area where we live and how we might bring the salt and light of Jesus into it?

**Practice 3: Go for a walk in the neighbourhood with eyes and ears open to really see what's there.**

### Prayer Walking

I don't know about you but I often find it easier to pray while walking than when I'm sitting at my desk. What better opportunity could there be than praying while we're walking around our neighbourhood.

- We can pray for those who we know by name as we walk past their place.
- We can pray for particular things of which we are aware in the lives of our neighbours.
- We can pray for people whom we don't know as we walk past their house.
- We can ask that God will bring healing and hope into the neighbourhood.
- We can ask for opportunities to be his salt and light.

Some of you probably already do this. I wonder what would happen if more of us took it up? What might happen or change in our neighbourhoods?

**Practice 4: Walk through your neighbourhood and pray for the people and households.**

### Proclaim the Gospel

We spoke last week about building friendships through simple serving because it is through such relationships that we bring the kingdom near to people. Whenever we nurture that kind of relationship we open up the possibility of an encounter with God for both of us. How do we present the gospel to people? One thing we can be sure of is that inviting a neighbour into a relationship with Jesus will not work according to a formula e.g. four spiritual laws. For instance, as we read the stories of Jesus interactions with people, one of the things that stands out is that he had no standard presentation of the gospel. Every conversation and interaction was different and different things happened. But they were all grace-filled and people knew they were accepted and loved. Just being the people whom God has made us to be is a presentation of the gospel.

But there are times when we need to actually speak. Story is one of the best contexts for that. Our neighbours will have their story to tell. Listen to it. In time we will have opportunity to tell our story, part of which will obviously include our faith journey. Through that we can invite our neighbours to envision a new story, a new way of being that comes through living within the kingdom of God. It's a natural part of, and progression within, the relationship. And the thing is, is not down to us. We do all of that in the power of the Spirit.

**Practice 5: As we build relationships with others, invite them to envision a new story of their life with God.**

### Build Church

Generally speaking, our thinking is locked into seeing church as happening in a church building on a Sunday morning. What if there were a number of people within a neighbourhood who came to faith? What if traditional church just did not compute with them, but they were happy to sit a round a bbq as a context for worship and spiritual growth? Could not this have the possibility of becoming a church in it's own right?

**Practice 6: Grow church right where we are!**

There's a list of 6 possibilities. All of them are quite simple and they will work out in different ways for each of us. God has given us a mission field which is ripe for harvest. Let's take it up and see what he does!