



THE

Surprising Return of the Neighborhood Church

Discover How Your Church
Is Primed to Reach Your Neighbors

Sam Rainer
THOM S. RAINER, SERIES EDITOR

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The Surprising Return of the Neighborhood Church: Discover How Your Church Is Primed to Reach Your Neighbors

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*To the members of West Bradenton.
You believed God would work in the neighborhood,
and he did.*

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Introduction

Calling for a Comeback

“THERE’S A CHURCH ON EVERY CORNER in that community!”

I’ve heard this comment many times over the years. In most cases, the tone indicates a level of disdain. It’s understandable. Church buildings seem to be everywhere, while God’s mission seems to be nowhere. But I don’t believe we need to give up on these churches. God hasn’t.

Your church is located right where God wants it. The problem is that many churches are not doing what God has called them to do where he has placed them. Every church *in* a community exists *for* the community. Your church is God’s instrument to reach the neighbors in *your* community.

God doesn’t need a plot of land to plant a church, but every spot with a church building has a sovereign strategy from God. Drive around your community and check out each street corner

that has a church. At some point in the past, God selected that very spot for his Kingdom work. Maybe the church is already doing great things in the community. Maybe they've struggled for decades. Whatever the case, God doesn't want his work to stop. Until Christ returns, every church is meant to continue God's mission on earth. The life cycle of a church should not include death.

Each location with a church—no matter the size or health of the congregation—is a strategic Kingdom outpost with specific orders from God. What if a movement sprang up in which many of these churches revved back to life and activated their people for service to the Kingdom? I believe we are on the cusp of such a movement. Neighborhood churches experienced a boom following World War II as congregations followed the path of suburban sprawl. Many later faltered and remained dormant for decades. But they are primed for a comeback. Neighborhoods are returning to life as Millennials have families and purchase homes, with many people now working from home. As neighborhoods are revitalizing, the church can make a comeback as well. It's already happening in many places.

Southpoint Fellowship appeared on the precipice of closure for decades. Year after year, the church remained in a state of unhealthy equilibrium, with weekly attendance holding steady at around thirty while a string of bi-vocational pastors came and went. Just enough giving came through to pay the bills. The piano player faithfully showed up every week for worship. The same group of people gathered every Sunday, enjoyed their fellowship, and then went home.

The church members cared for each other. There were meal trains and prayer meetings. About once a year, a new couple would join the church, bringing just enough growth to offset the loss of

those who moved away or died. Eventually and inevitably, however, the church of fiftysomethings and sixtysomethings became a church of eightysomethings, and members started passing away at a rate that outpaced the arrival of new people. Soon, Southpoint had declined to about twenty people; and a short time later, they were down to about a dozen regulars. The weekly offering started to dip, and the piano player could no longer drive to church on her own. Then the latest bi-vocational pastor moved to another town and could no longer commute to preach.

One long-standing member refused to give up. She reached out to another local pastor for help.

“We don’t want our church to die. What should we do?”

“How many of you live in the neighborhood?” the pastor asked.

“We all moved to other places about fifteen years ago, and we drive in each Sunday.”

The pastor knew it would be a challenge to help this struggling church, but he felt compelled to do something. Southpoint was the only church in that particular neighborhood. The coastal community was changing quickly as affluent, young Hispanic families moved in and elderly homeowners on fixed incomes sold their homes and moved out. A major apartment development had just been completed one block away from the church. And a new police station was being built across the street. God’s Kingdom could use this prime, two-acre location in the heart of a transitioning neighborhood.

“We can help you,” said the pastor, “but I have no idea what God might do here.”

“Anything God does will be better than what we’ve done the last twenty years.”

The following week, the pastor received a call from a friend in ministry.

“We’ve got a young, bilingual intern looking to become a pastor. He’s moving to your community, and we’re willing to fund his ministry for three years. Do you have a place for him?”

Two years later, the church of a dozen members had grown to an average attendance of about sixty, and they had a children’s ministry for the first time since the 1980s. The neighborhood was abuzz about the ministry there, and the police officers especially enjoyed the baked goods that church members brought to the station each week.

The Southpoint turnaround is remarkable, but it shouldn’t be unusual. Chances are there’s a church strategically located near you that is poised for a similar move of God. Neighborhood churches everywhere can grow from a small group of survivors to a thriving body of Kingdom workers. The neighborhood church is about to make a surprising return, but it will not happen automatically.

How can your church and other churches in your community seize the opportunity?

The Opportunity Is Right Down the Road

The importance of neighborhood churches is underscored by the findings of a 2017 Baylor University study that 68 percent of church attendees live within fifteen minutes of the church they attend, and 21 percent live five minutes or less from their place of worship. Only 9 percent live more than half an hour from their church.¹ The setting of the church—urban, suburban, or rural—has no bearing on people’s willingness to commute. What was fascinating, however, was the influence that churches have on neighborhood satisfaction. Even adjusting for “religious tradition and location size,” the study found that “the people most satisfied with their neighborhood are those who attend congregations in the neighborhood.”² It’s a hopeful sign for neighborhood churches.

In the not-so-distant past, growing churches often relocated away from their neighborhoods and built large campuses at major intersections. The thought was that the drive would be worth the distance. This strategy seemed to work when these large churches were master-planning their sprawling campuses in the 1970s to early 2000s. They were championed and celebrated. Many large churches grew at tremendous rates, and many of them accomplished an incredible amount of good for the Kingdom of God, continuing even today.

But starting around the turn of the twenty-first century, many of the largest churches shifted to multisite campuses and multiple venues. The massive, single-site church was no longer the focus of their planning. A glance at the Outreach 100 list of largest churches reveals that almost all of them have grown through multiple site expansion since 2000.³

Something further changed around 2010, when the exponential growth in the number of US megachurches slowed, and then all but stopped, prior to the pandemic.⁴ How will the pandemic affect the number of megachurches? The answer will take years to uncover, but I believe it's a safe assumption that the largest churches haven't benefited from the events of 2020 and 2021.

In the Neighborhood but Not Ready for the Neighbors

What does a neighborhood church look like? How is a neighborhood church different from other kinds of churches? I will answer these questions in depth in chapter 1, but for now let's look at the definition of a neighborhood church.

In the simplest terms, a neighborhood church is one that is surrounded by residences within the recognized boundaries of a specific neighborhood. Suburban subdivisions can be neighborhoods.

Enclaves within a small town can be neighborhoods. Boroughs of large cities can contain many neighborhoods.

A neighborhood is a local community of residences with a recognized identity, often distinct from other surrounding areas. Neighborhoods are both geographic and social. For example, sometimes a city council or other government agency will define exact boundaries of a neighborhood, but people may identify with a neighborhood even if they live outside the established boundaries. A neighborhood is a *place*, but also a *social attachment*.

Neighborhood churches are congregations located geographically in and socially identified with a particular neighborhood. The name of the neighborhood might even be reflected in the name of the church. My childhood church, Azalea Baptist in St. Petersburg, Florida, is surrounded by homes, with the Azalea Community Garden next door and Azalea Middle School across the street.

Neighborhood churches are typically small to midsize established congregations. A church may be planted with the vision of becoming a neighborhood church, but it may take years to be accepted as such. A well-established presence at a particular address is key to becoming a neighborhood church.

Most importantly, neighborhood churches are culturally woven into the fabric of the local community. A neighborhood church exists not only *in* the community but also *for* the community.⁵ Neighborhood churches are in every city and small town across the United States. Though it's difficult to get an exact count, they are perhaps the largest single category of churches. Neighborhood churches are numerous, and it's time to leverage those numbers into a movement of revitalization and renewed health.

But here's the problem. The typical neighborhood church isn't prepared for an influx of new people. They aren't primed for growth. Though they are in their neighborhoods geographically,

they are not fully present culturally or missiologically. They are not geared to understand or reach their changing neighborhoods. Most American churches are small—with fewer than one hundred people. Most American churches have been in existence for decades.⁶ Though there are far more small and midsize churches than megachurches, the trend toward larger churches has been in place for many years. The largest one percent of Protestant churches, for example, comprise approximately 15 percent of all the people, money, and staff.⁷ Small neighborhood churches are used to being small and often do not think about growth beyond their current size.

As the megachurch movement has begun to wane, it presents an opportunity for smaller and midsize established churches. The problem is that people won't flock back into neighborhood churches from larger churches simply because it's a shorter drive from home. Most churches—of all sizes—are smaller than they were a few years ago, due to the pandemic. The revitalization of neighborhood churches is not a foregone conclusion. It will take a lot of work, but I believe it can happen. Many neighborhood churches are right around the corner but off the radar. Your neighborhood church can regain the attention of the neighbors. The potential for this movement is enormous. I believe you can be a part of it.

The Potential Neighborhood Church Movement

When I see a church on three acres buried in a dense neighborhood, I don't think "landlocked and limited potential." I see opportunity. Who else is better situated to reach the people there? These little churches that dot the landscape of many cities, towns, and suburbs may be in desperate need of revitalization, but they have a future. I don't believe that God intends to give up these strategic

corners of the Kingdom. There is significant hope for neighborhood churches across North America because many church leaders and their congregations are leveraging their resources and reclaiming their neighborhoods for Christ.

My aim here is to help you realize the tremendous potential of the neighborhood church. We need to get excited about how God can use these congregations that are already situated in neighborhoods across our nation. A church on every street corner is precisely how God's Kingdom can grow!

Chapter 1 examines the mission of neighborhood churches and how so many have declined over the last several decades. The Great Commission and the Great Commandment apply to every church globally, but neighborhood churches have a distinct calling to weave into the fabric of their communities. Your church address is not an accident. God has sovereignly selected each location, and every church has a responsibility to serve and reach the people who live nearby.

Chapter 2 points to the bright future of neighborhood churches. Although they grew quickly in the 1950s and 1960s, following the path of suburban sprawl, many of these churches eventually became destination points *from* the neighborhood rather than reaching people *within* the neighborhood. This chapter addresses both the history of the neighborhood church and emerging opportunities.

Chapter 3 reveals the marks of a healthy neighborhood church—starting with how they create ministries uniquely tailored to the immediate community. Neighborhood church leaders should be connected to the community power grid and recognize their potential for impact. Healthy neighborhood churches view their community as a place to *serve*, not as a pool of people to merely add to the membership rolls.

Chapter 4 explores a new framework for neighborhood churches. The perspective of the community and the perspective of the church are jointly utilized in this framework. Understanding both perspectives is critical to leading a neighborhood church back to health.

Chapter 5 debunks some myths about neighborhood churches. Too many church leaders assume that neighborhood churches have a limited potential for impact. The problems are real but not insurmountable. A landlocked campus is just as much an asset as it is a limitation. And a small congregation doesn't necessarily mean a small influence. Neighborhood churches are more than just a vestige of a previous, older generation. It's time to push through these myths and capture the true potential of the neighborhood church.

Chapter 6 unpacks what needs to change in order for neighborhood churches to fulfill their potential. Growth and influence will not occur automatically. It will take work to overcome the various challenges. If a large number of neighborhood churches were already healthy and growing, the movement would be at full steam. The reason it's not is mainly because too many neighborhood churches are unhealthy. Most neighborhood churches must *change* in order to become a vital presence in their community.

Chapter 7 evaluates how to lead change in a neighborhood church. *Trust* is more important than *vision*. The church must get out of the *power run* cycle—whether it is run by the pastor, one or more families, or a group of influencers. The pace must be accelerated while not derailing the change effort. This chapter also looks at several cultural issues within neighborhood church congregations. Is the church healthy and willing? Or is it entrenched, desperate, or on life support?

Chapter 8 demonstrates effective ways to reach the neighbors. There is hope for leaders and members of neighborhood churches!

I share specific and concrete ways congregations can reach their neighborhoods. Many paths are available immediately, and they can be accomplished even with minimal financial resources. These ideas can move neighborhood churches from scapegoat excuses to positive action right now.

Chapter 9 discusses how to become a neighborhood church for the nations. The global mandate to reach every tongue, tribe, and nation cannot be neglected, even when a neighborhood church is going through the process of revitalizing their local mission. All neighborhood churches must have a corresponding heart for the nations. Without this global perspective, many neighborhood churches will stop moving outward and revert to an inward perspective.

The conclusion looks at what you can do to make the neighborhood church comeback a reality. These unnoticed and often neglected churches are about to fire back to life. If we can get them moving, then a major Kingdom advance is ready to happen.

Some pastors in established churches don't know how good they have it. There are church planters out there setting up and tearing down every week in movie theaters and schools. Sure, your roof leaks. I get how frustrating it can be. In my church, I inherited an old, tiny one-seater bathroom on the main hallway. The light switch also turned on a fan, which swirled so loudly that the first time I went in there, I thought the rapture was occurring. But we have a permanent location and an address everyone knows. Our real estate is a huge benefit to our ministry. The opportunity is one of geography, demographics, and sociology. But there is a greater reason to be excited about the neighborhood church. Spiritually, these churches can reach neighborhoods across the United States for Christ. God's mission awaits. Let's go reach our neighbors!

Your Address Is Your Assignment

EVERY LOCAL CHURCH has a clear assignment given directly by God. Your address is your assignment. The location of your church is God's strategy to reach and serve the community. No church is called to *sit*. All churches are *sent*. The church is not a destination. The church is a vehicle designed by God to take the good news of Jesus into our neighborhoods.

As I mentioned in the introduction, I spent my childhood in St. Petersburg, Florida. We lived on 28th Avenue North, and our church, Azalea Baptist, was located on 22nd Avenue North. Because my father was the pastor, I spent many weekdays roaming the church and the neighborhood. One of the members was a pipe organ specialist who traveled the world in his job. In his spare time, he built one for Azalea. One of my favorite hideaway spots was the organ area, with its many pipes, sounds, and secrets.

Recently, two leaders from Azalea contacted me. The church had declined to about twenty people. It's a familiar story, but one that shook me. I remember the days of a lively sanctuary, lots of children, and my father busy with a growing congregation. My surprise was not that a church in St. Petersburg was in decline. The area has become a wasteland for churches, with many closing and selling off their property—about two each month. Once thriving campuses are now home to an insurance company, a fast-food restaurant, and several residential developments.

One church with an average age of seventy-four received an investor's offer to buy their church property. At first they considered it "a nudge from the Lord," but they made the right decision to continue ministry in their location.

"We are reinvesting," the pastor said. "We are more cohesive in understanding what our financial situation is, what our membership demographics are, what our challenges are. Now time is ticking. We have to do something."¹

The time is short for Azalea, as well. I met with the current leadership, and they pulled out an old photo album with pictures from the 1980s and early 1990s. My family was on almost every page. Tears welled in my eyes. My childhood was the church's heyday. Unfortunately, an album did not exist for the last several years, because there was not much of a story to tell.

"We want to be like this again," one longtime member said, pointing to the album.

"Then you can't be like you are now," I replied.

The Message, the Messenger, and the Mission

Three "greats" stand out in the Gospels: the Great Confession (Matthew 16:13-20; Mark 8:27-30), where Peter declares Jesus as the Messiah; the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:34-40; Luke

10:25-37), that we are to love God and love our neighbors; and the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20), to make disciples of all nations. The Great Confession reveals the message: *Jesus saves*. The Great Commandment clarifies the posture of the messenger: *love*. And the Great Commission demonstrates the mission: *making disciples*. The key to each of these three greats is the outward movement of God and his people.

God's work in the world involves *sending*. Francis DuBose, in his classic missiological work, *God Who Sends*, calls this "the divine modus operandi"—that is, God's method of operation.² God works through outward movement. His *message* (Great Confession) must be proclaimed by *messengers* (Great Commandment) sent on a *mission* (Great Commission) to share good news. Though the implications of this biblical principle are profound, one lesson is obvious: A stagnant, stationary church is a disobedient church; whereas a church on the move is following God's design. DuBose rightly notes that humanity is both the *object* and *instrument* of God's sending. God desires to have a personal relationship with humanity (object), and this desire is communicated through other people (instrument).

Jesus clearly instructed us to love our neighbors. Love is an active decision, not merely an emotion. Too many relationships fall apart because they are based on how people feel. Frankly, the foundation of biblical love is actions, not feelings. If we do the actions of love, the feelings of love will follow. When we love our husband or wife, our parents or children, through right actions, they will feel loved. The same goes for our neighbors. If we show them the actions of love, they will feel loved. If we are struggling to love our neighbors, we can do the acts of love, and our emotions of love will follow. Love is proven by what we *do*. It is not based on how we may feel at any given moment.

The people of the church are both messengers and neighbors. As messengers, we deliver God's truth. Every believer is an ambassador for Jesus. An ambassador is a person sent to a foreign place to speak and act on behalf of his or her government. The ambassador is a country's highest-ranking representative to other nations. Though their day-to-day responsibilities will differ based on their assignment, all ambassadors are responsible to represent the best interests of the sending nation.

We are ambassadors for our King, Jesus, and we represent the interests of God's Kingdom. We are sent to proclaim the message of truth—the good news about Jesus. This truth is not to be modified. The gospel doesn't need improvement. The message of truth is not to be restrained or watered down. The gospel message is good news to all humanity, just as Jesus himself is good news.

While we must share the message about Jesus without compromising the truth, we must deliver this good news with love. As Paul writes in Ephesians 4:15, the way that we grow to become “more and more like Christ” is to “speak the truth in love.” We bring God's truth as *messengers*, and we do so in a spirit of love as *neighbors*. In Matthew 22:39, Jesus explicitly commands us to love our neighbors. But a similar account in Luke 10 raises an important question: Who is our neighbor? Is God's good news for everyone? Are his messengers obligated to bring the message to *every* neighbor?

I've had some strange neighbors. Maybe you can relate. One in particular is unforgettable. He would stand in his yard over a bonfire with nothing on but a bathrobe, smoking pot for hours. He fueled the fire with fallen branches from trees in the neighborhood. (In that way, he helped keep our yards clean.) My wife and I simply called him Bathrobe Guy. One time Erin made him cookies, but he may have been disappointed they weren't “fortified.” We

invited him to church, half wondering whether he might take us up on “come as you are.”

Bathrobe Guy needs Jesus. Your neighbors need Jesus—and, yes, that includes the corner curmudgeon, the loud car dude, and the yippy dog lady. All our neighbors need to hear the message of Jesus from us. People who do not act like us, look like us, or have the same interests we do are exactly the people God wants us to reach.

Jesus told a parable to make the point that everyone is our neighbor—even the most unlikely people. In Luke 10:25-42, an expert in the law challenged Jesus, hoping to trap him with a trick question. This expert stood up to ask the question, an outward sign of respect and honor. But the intent of his question was to “test Jesus,” which reveals an inward attitude problem.

The expert asked Jesus which law was the greatest. In typical rabbinic style, Jesus answered the question with another question: “What does the law of Moses say?” The answer was one the legal expert knew well: “You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind. And, ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Jesus’ rejoinder was perfect: “Right!”

The expert then tried to justify himself, asking, “And who is my neighbor?”

He probably expected Jesus to say something to the effect of “your friends, your coworkers, and people you like.” But Jesus cut to the core with one of the most recognizable parables in the New Testament, the story of the Good Samaritan, which established a foundational biblical truth: *Everyone is your neighbor.*

Martin Luther King, Jr. offered a remarkable insight into this parable: “I can imagine that the first question which the Priest and the Levite asked was: ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen

to me?’ Then the Good Samaritan came by, and by the very nature of his concern reversed the question: ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’”³

Why serve the homeless? Why foster a child? Why befriend someone of a different political persuasion? Because of what Jesus teaches in this parable. When it involves the message of Jesus, it’s not our place to limit who hears it. If we believe that God can save *anyone*, we should be willing to share the gospel with *everyone*.

We also cannot specify *when* we will share. The Great Commandment is not based on our convenience. Have you ever noticed that serving others is rarely convenient? Like the priest and Levite in the parable, we can come up with a variety of legitimate excuses to avoid serving our neighbors.

Sharing God’s truth in love comes with a level of risk. We could be hurt emotionally. In some places in the world, there is a chance of being hurt physically. People might take advantage of us. Or they may laugh us off. But we mustn’t forget that at one time we were that person on the side of the road, beaten and dying. And Jesus was the one who stopped to save us. Jesus is the Good Samaritan—the perfect neighbor.

As sent ambassadors, carriers of the message of Jesus, we have a job to do. But our job is not to recruit our neighbors to come to church. Rather, we are to invite them to become part of the most extraordinary mission the world has ever known—the proclamation of the glory of God to the ends of the earth. Why do we exist? Our lives matter to the extent that our mission is to bring glory to God. In Isaiah 43:5-7, the prophet proclaims that God will gather his children from all over the world, even “from the distant corners of the earth.” Why? God tells us: “I have made them for my glory.” We were made to be saved. Saved to be sent. And sent for the glory of God.

The Unique Features of a Neighborhood Church

God's mission travels in one vehicle: the church. As David Platt has written, "We are the plan of God, and there is no plan B."⁴ In the same way that different kinds of vehicles travel our roadways, many different churches share the good news message. The neighborhood church is but one kind of church. No congregation has a corner on the Kingdom, and every Bible-believing church has the potential to be an asset in the Kingdom of God. But the unique characteristics of a neighborhood church make it a powerful tool to reach local communities.

What exactly defines a neighborhood church? How are neighborhood churches different from other kinds of churches?

Surrounded by Residences

One of the easiest ways to spot a neighborhood church is that its campus will be bordered by residences. These churches are not located on major thoroughfares or at exits on the interstate. Many were planted at the same time the neighborhood formed, without any consideration of drawing people from other parts of town. Often, neighborhood churches are built just before an area becomes populated and homes go up around the church. People in the neighborhood know the location of these churches, but those who live outside the neighborhood may not know they exist.

Centrally Located

Neighborhood churches are located at the heart of a social network. They are near public parks and schools. In some communities, they are just around the corner from a main commercial area. Anyone in the community can quickly drive to the church, and many will be within walking distance. The parking lot of a neighborhood church is where children learn to ride their bikes.

The church playground is utilized by young families, even if they don't attend. People who enjoy walking may swing by the church campus, and those with dogs will conveniently forget to clean up messes in the grass.

Built into the Fabric of the Community

When the local elementary school is looking for sponsors, the neighborhood church is often included in the mix with commercial businesses. You may see the church logo on the outfield fence at Little League games. Graduation ceremonies are held in the sanctuary. Though geography obviously locates the church within the neighborhood, it is the social connections that solidify the church's identity as part of the community. A healthy neighborhood church will have members who are schoolteachers, local business owners, and service workers. One of the defining features of a neighborhood church is how the members are embedded in the cultural context of the neighborhood.⁵ Neighborhood churches are connected to the local culture, often at a micro level. The influence of these churches is limited to a few blocks in an urban area or a couple square miles in a suburban or rural area. Though restricted by geography, the cultural impact of a neighborhood church can be substantial among the people who live nearby.

Established History and Legacy

Most neighborhood churches have long-standing locations and extensive histories within the community. Sometimes these histories are recorded and documented as part of the local folklore. The reputation of a neighborhood church can be both positive and negative. Indeed, most have a mixed bag of successes and failures throughout their histories. Their legacies are rarely

pristine. And it is common for generations of families to be connected to the neighborhood church, even if some family members no longer attend.

Capped Size and Footprint

Though neighborhood churches can be quite large, with upwards of a thousand in attendance on a weekly basis, most are much smaller. Neighborhood church campuses tend to have landlocked lots and limited parking. Sites of two to four acres are common. The limitations on attendance and facilities are typical but shouldn't be disconcerting. No church can grow infinitely. Though most neighborhood churches are in need of revitalization and increased attendance, the goal is not to become megachurches. Indeed, the physical limitations of the campus often act as a natural ceiling on membership size. Still, there is a bright future for neighborhood churches and their bounded campuses. But first we must determine how so many neighborhood churches lost their sense of mission and fell into decline.

Why Neighborhood Churches Decline

No doubt you've heard the phrase, "There goes the neighborhood." Historically, it has been associated with ethnic minorities moving into white neighborhoods.⁶ Tensions reached a fever pitch during the era of desegregation, and to some degree they are still present today. During the civil rights movement and the following decades, many white neighborhood churches changed locations, often moving to the growing suburbs where fewer minorities lived. For the congregations that stayed, the fracturing of the neighborhood also meant the fracturing of the church. Many neighborhood churches struggled to understand the changing demographics and failed to reach their new neighbors. Once the ties were cut in

these communities that had bound the people into a single, comprehensive village, many churches struggled to find their place in what they viewed as a fragmented world.⁷ The mission of every church is to go into a fragmented world and share the good news of Jesus that heals the brokenness. Historically, many neighborhood churches believed their meaning and identity would shift with changing demographics. Such thinking was antithetical to the gospel. The white flight of churches was horrid, but it alone does not explain the decline of neighborhood churches. More was at play and is still affecting these churches today.

A Me-First Mentality

Inward-focused churches always decline. Some more quickly than others. But spiritual navel-gazing always kills a church. People with a me-first mentality believe the church exists to meet their needs rather than as a way for them to serve their community. When personal preferences are elevated above God's mission, the church will turn inward, creating a culture of selfishness and entitlement. The operating budget is often the first indication of inward movement, even before attendance begins to decline. When money that once was allocated for outreach evangelism shifts to ministries that serve the members, the church is moving inward.

During the pandemic, a pastor in the upper Midwest shared his frustration with me. Over the past decade, his church had declined from almost two hundred in attendance to less than fifty.

“Before all this, they were fighting about the color of paint on the walls. They are *still* fighting about the paint. The only difference is that now they are yelling at each other through masks.”

The me-first mentality can pertain to trivial matters such as the color of the paint or the carpet, or to more consequential

issues such as ethnic minorities moving into the neighborhood. The result, however, is inevitably the same: An inward culture will always kill a neighborhood church.

Church Bubble Syndrome

“I’m interested in joining your church, but I’m struggling with all the foster children here. They can be rowdy, and I don’t know if I want my children around them.”

Though I understood this mother’s concern, I had to inform her that our church was not a bubble to shield its members from the community. Instead, we had a specific calling as a neighborhood church to help tackle the toughest issues in the community. Sadly, she chose not to join our church.

When a church views its role as protecting members from the rough-and-tumble world of the surrounding community, walls will inevitably go up. Though these walls aren’t physical, they might as well be—letting certain people know they’re not welcome. And when you stop welcoming one kind of person, it becomes much easier to stop welcoming others, as well. Some neighborhood churches declined because they tried to exist for only part of the neighborhood. Ironically, most would probably say, “All are welcome!” I’ve even seen that phrase on church signs. But it doesn’t take long to figure out who is truly welcome and who is not. Church bubble syndrome limits the reach of the gospel into the surrounding community, and God will not honor churches that limit his mission.

No Expectation of Growth

I mentioned that no church can grow indefinitely. Even massive churches with exponential growth curves will eventually slow down. It’s a physical reality due to the size of their campuses. It’s

also a statistical and sociological reality. But far too few neighborhood churches have a culture and expectation of growth. There was a palpable excitement in these large congregations during the heyday of megachurch growth in the 1990s and early 2000s. Their people expected and wanted growth.

If you examine a neighborhood church in decline, you will often find a congregation with an entrenched mentality. They want the church to stay the way it is. Visitors are welcome so long as there aren't too many at once. Growth is viewed as a risk, and new people become a threat to the ideal size of the church.

Unnoticed Demographic Mismatches

In a recent consultation with a neighborhood church, I asked the leaders what percentage of their community was ethnic minorities. Their responses varied from about 5 percent to 15 percent. When I showed them the actual statistics, they were shocked. About 45 percent of the community was African American or Hispanic.

Then I asked them which generation was the largest in their community. Every leader said Baby Boomers, though in fact the Boomers were fourth, behind the Gen Xers, Millennials, and Generation Z. They had a hard time believing me.

“Where do you go? Who do you hang out with?” I asked.

They all admitted their worlds were quite small, even within the neighborhood. They hung out at the same places and with the same people. These church leaders had not noticed the demographic change in their community because they unintentionally avoided it. Though they were not opposed to reaching a new segment of people, their patterns of living and inward-focused church culture kept them from seeing the reality that was right in front of them.

Lack of Vibrant Prayer

Most churches pray. Just about any church of any size, background, or doctrinal persuasion will pray. But are they perfunctory prayers or vibrant prayers? For example, we have a deacon in our church named Daryll, and I love to hear him pray because you can tell he genuinely believes God will work. Though he is soft-spoken, he urges God to move. He's passionate and emotionally engaged.

Does your church pray more for hip surgeries than for gospel conversations? Both are important, but you should place more emphasis on God seeking the lost. Of course, Jesus heals physically, and we should ask God for such healing. But Jesus didn't say of his mission, "For the Son of Man came to seek and save those having surgeries." A vibrant prayer life in the church will be weighted toward pleading with God to save your lost neighbors.

One of the first books on revitalizing neighborhood churches, *Basic Communities: A Practical Guide for Renewing Neighborhood Churches* by Thomas Maney, was written in 1984. It was way ahead of its time. Maney correctly identifies prayer as the key to neighborhood church renewal. He notes that prayer prompts a congregation to move from indifference to enthusiasm, from being bored to being engaged.⁸ Neighborhood churches in decline almost always lack vibrant prayer.

Poor Leadership Coupled with Apathy or Antagonism toward the Community

I don't know of a neighborhood church that relies on the personality of a nationally known leader with charisma. Growth or decline in these churches is based on issues at the local level and not the global platform of their pastors. But every church requires leadership. The most influential leader is typically the lead or sole pastor—the one preaching during worship services.

When leaders respond poorly to the surrounding culture, the church will tend toward one of two responses: *apathy* or *antagonism*. Some pastors even encourage these responses through poor leadership. A church that doesn't work to understand or listen to the community culture will inevitably stop caring for the neighborhood or will start hating the people there. Apathetic churches become islands and disengage from the neighborhood. Nothing may physically change about the campus, yet the church will mysteriously slip into oblivion in the minds of the community.

While an apathetic church may go completely unnoticed, an antagonistic church will garner much attention. Lawsuits against the local government, negative campaigns against school boards, protests against local businesses, and extreme measures such as book burnings are all tactics of antagonistic neighborhood churches.

The community knows nothing about the apathetic church, while the antagonistic church is known for what they oppose. A healthy neighborhood church will be known for what it supports, and it will have leaders who respond graciously to changes in the local culture.

Unattractive Facilities

Some neighborhood churches seem to care very little for their campuses. They've gained a reputation as eyesores rather than points of pride in the community. Too many neighborhood churches are not investing in their God-given addresses. A church campus should be the most well-kept spot in the neighborhood. Why would someone visit a church when the campus looks more like a run-down gas station than a place where people worship Almighty God? If the members don't care about their facility, how will they care for their neighbors?

Conversely, there are neighborhood churches that care more for their campus than they do for the surrounding community. They put up locks and chains and don't allow any outside use of their facilities. A run-down campus is unattractive because it is an eyesore, but an inaccessible campus is unattractive because it tells the neighbors they're not welcome.

A Shift to a Brighter Future

Neighborhood churches have the potential to be both nimble and flexible. Typically, they have smaller campuses, which often means less deferred maintenance compared to larger church facilities. And whereas larger regional churches must consider a broader demographic of people from various locations, ministries at neighborhood churches can be tailored specifically to the people right around the church. In the era of waning denominational loyalty, neighborhood churches can capture people based on their local presence rather than denominational preference. Though many challenges remain for neighborhood churches, a vibrant sense of mission is just waiting to be renewed. Your location is a key asset, and the future is bright. Let's turn our attention now to the prospect of a better tomorrow.

