

Shortly after I started my first pastoral ministry I was invited by some youth to attend a birthday party. I showed up and rang the doorbell and heard a loud voice announcing my arrival and someone yelled, “Turn on the lights.” As I entered the house and went down to the basement, the music was softer and, of course, the dancing stopped.

I stayed until the birthday cake was cut and as I stepped outside of the house, I heard a voice yelling after the door was closed, “The coast is clear!” I chuckled a bit and assumed that the real party continued.

If God appears in our gathering, I wonder how people respond. How would you respond if He physically shows up in your house or neighbourhood?

We began a new series three weeks ago called Distinct, exploring Cornerstone’s distinctives—that unique mix of values and practices that give us the distinct culture we have as a local church.

Before we took a break to celebrate and appreciate all the women in our midst last Sunday, we looked at the two of seven Cornerstone distinctives, ***Thinking Theologically and Unity-in-Diversity***. This morning we’ll look at ***God in the Neighbourhood***.

God is not the “unknown god,” a scary kill joy who is a party pooper; He has always made Himself known and desires to be known – He is not an impersonal, distant & cruel deity - His glory and love radiates and cares for the whole creation.¹

God is a missionary God - His love flows out of His character and expresses itself in the most practical and tangible manner:

Jn. 1:14 The Word ***became flesh and made his dwelling among us***. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (NIV)

The Word became flesh and blood, and ***moved into the neighbourhood [tabernacling/tenting in our midst]***. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish. (*The Message*)

The tabernacle/temple in the ancient world is a sacred space that functions as

the centre of power, control, and order from which God brings order to the human world.

¹ See esp. Acts 17:16-31; Gen. 1-3; Ps. 19; Rom. 1:18ff.

The tabernacle or later the temple in Jerusalem was to shine as

a prophetic witness, showcasing a flourishing and functioning life system.²

The mystery of the incarnation – God-in-the-flesh- embodying - means that God-in-Jesus who became human and lived in a particular local context, **pouring out Himself fully and deeply in the neighbourhood in order to bring people to flourish via sacrifice and service.**³

Author J. Kirk Johnston notes that the four gospels record 132 contacts that Jesus had with people –

6 were in the Temple,

4 in the synagogues,

and 122 were out with people in the *mainstream of life*.

² Sayers, Mark. *Reappearing Church* (pp. 85, 87). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition. [Cf. John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*, loc. 708-12, Kindle; *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible*, p. 88.]

³ Cf. Gerald W. Schlabach, *Unlearning Protestantism: Sustaining Christian Community in an Unstable Age*, p. 106; cited by Mark Votava, *The Communal Imagination: Finding a way to share life together*, p. 30.

⁴ J. Kirk Johnston, *Why Christians Sin?*, p. 142

⁵ 1 Cor. 3:16 Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?

Jesus did not remain secluded in the desert, he moved around in different neighborhoods in Palestine!⁴

We are reminded by Paul that **the corporate gathering of individual Jesus-followers is God's temple, the residence of the Holy Spirit – the home of the infinite and invisible Creator of the cosmos** (cf. 1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16-20).⁵

Just as God-moved-in-the-neighbourhood, Cornerstone is the tabernacle/the tenting presence of Christ's love in place, locality neighbourhood.⁶

The incarnation – God-appearing-in-the-neighbourhood - models for us how to live out our faith in our local context.⁷

When God is in a place, something is going to change!

Cornerstone is community-oriented since day 1; **we want to be a church that the community would miss, if Cornerstone ceases to exist.**

² Cor. 6:16 For we are the temple of the living God ... ¹⁹ Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?"

God dwelling in the midst of His creation and His people has always been His plan from the beginning to the end. (Cf. Rev. 21:3.)

⁶ Votava, p. 63.

⁷ Votava, p. 31. Cf. Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, p. 36: a dwelling, a place takes on a sacred meaning, i.e., the fully human Jesus was formed through his real engagement with his social milieu.

For 17 yrs. before we moved into this building, we had served our community in many different ways, e.g., Free Giveaways, Easter Egg Hunt, Free Car Wash, Fundraising events for social agencies, Life-skills Workshops, starting and organizing Ultimate league, Hospital Visitation, helping Markham Food Bank, just to name a few.

Pre-pandemic we had quarterly rec guides that list community programs, workshops, and family friendly events.

Cornerstone church and facilities are tangible space and instrument that we offer as **a gift to the community so people could experience God's loving presence!**

When that happens, "God becomes a subject of discovery through the relational context of the neighborhood."⁸

Let me ask you a question: **do you think that Canadians want to live well?**

Although it's written almost 20 yrs. ago what Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby remains true: "... **spiritual interests and needs are pervasive among Canadians, including those who are not highly involved in churches ... Canadians do not only want to stay alive, they want to live well.**"⁹

⁸ Votava, p. 39.

Pre-pandemic, many of our relatives, friends, colleagues, and neighbours were already under *stress and anxiety*.

I think it's fair to say that during and post-pandemic the stressful spirit of the time is worsened!

If that is the case, and if God's desire for humanity is to have life to the full, then Cornerstone's presence in the neighborhood should address the *spiritual, personal, and relational needs* of Canadians and the many ways we serve the community will become **the entry point of faith and relationship with God for many of our neighbors, friends, colleagues, and relatives.**

For the watching world, we ourselves serve proof that God is alive. We form the visible shape of what he is like.

Philip Yancey

Let me suggest two practical ways we can be conduits of God's love in our neighbourhood.

Seek the welfare of the city; discern what God is doing and join Him.

Jer. 29:7 Also, **seek the peace and prosperity of the city** to which I have carried you into exile. **Pray to the Lord** for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.

⁹ *Restless Churches*, p. 85, 91.

“Seek the peace and prosperity of the city” means **we participate in God’s life-generating mission**

**to bless the land by developing relationships,
being culturally sensitive and wise,
pursuing social justice, and investing in kingdom
endeavours.**¹⁰

In *Church After Christendom* Stuart Murray suggests that **we must do mission from the margins in our post-modern culture and infiltrate the place where we live.**¹¹

We must seek – pursue in prayer – to discern what God is doing in and through different people, agencies, non-profits, and churches to help people to flourish, to thrive in their homes, workplaces, and economy.

As we interact with our neighbours we will discover more of their needs, their hopes, and their dreams around us.¹²

When they find peace and prosper, we too will prosper

because we fulfill our purpose in God’s world restoring mission, to make all things right.

A recent survey by the Angus Reid Institute suggests that **evangelical Christianity is perceived to be more damaging to Canadian society than beneficial and Canadians do not make room for its beliefs.**¹³

And according to YPULSE **Millennials are most likely to look to therapists for guidance and Gen Z turn to musicians** – for both generations religious organizations and figures are not top source of guidance, and they don’t make the top 10 for Gen Z..¹⁴

Cornerstone aims to change this negative perception and distrust. Since the beginning of the pandemic we have doubled our efforts to serve those who are in need, and generated much positive response and goodwill from the community.

I want to thank you and commend you for your generosity and faithful service; for 2021...

¹⁰ Cf. See the description of the temple in Ezekiel’s vision, chs. 40-48 – out of which flows the river of fresh water that restores the land] and to live out our corporate identity, i.e., *together spurring each other to do good [cf. Heb. 10:23ff.].* See also Tim Keller’s *A Theology of Cities*, <https://www.cru.org/us/en/train-and-grow/leadership-training/sending-your-team/a-theology-of-cities.html>

¹¹ Stuart Murray, *Church After Christendom*, p. 155. (Cited by Leonard Hjalmarsen in *Text & Context: Church Planting in Canada in Post-Christendom*. Urban Loft Publishers. Kindle Edition. Location 326.)

¹² Cf. John Fuder, *Neighborhood Mapping*.

¹³ <https://globalnews.ca/news/8759564/canada-religion-society-perceptions/>

¹⁴ https://www.ypulse.com/article/2022/05/04/religion-doesnt-make-the-top-10-ranking-of-where-gen-z-turns-to-for-guidance-support/?utm_campaign=The%20Culture%20Translator%20Premium&utm_medium=email&_hsmi=212977891&_hsenc=p2ANqtz--diawnhxyrgdStufRy2c8MgiECCKlyKuWLdXvMKZyZy_Eu4bJZGQdhtTUWZYHQ4wzjYLFylQmvFWt6t0UceCJYA58OsHIFLjQ6f852FirpN-eVvc&utm_content=212979501&utm_source=hs_email

200+ GROCERY & VACCINE

Grocery deliveries & vaccine runs to those in our local community.

81 BLOOM BOXES

For mothers with children delivered to the Markham/Stouffville Crisis Pregnancy Centre

800+ CARE PACKAGES

For those in our community Essential workers, those experiencing human trafficking and street friends.

1000+ MEALS

Given to frontline workers

175 PIZZAS

Delivered to essential workers

10K+ MEALS

Given to those living on the street. Including hot meals, sandwiches & baked goods.

20-40 FOOD BOXES

Distributed monthly from Cornerstone Pantry

As I have learnt in one recent webinar, whatever Cornerstone has been doing to serve the community during the pandemic, we must press on to do **10x more**. Let's continue to seek the welfare of the city, fulfilling God's purpose in making the world right!

The second practical way we can be conduits of God's love in our neighbourhood is this:

Break down the "insider/outsider divide" - touch one life at a time.

In a recent book about church planting in Canada in post-Christendom it has been pointed out that both the un-church and de-churched Canadians [i.e., people who have left for a variety of reasons] continue on some kind of spiritual journey: **"there is a growing spiritual hunger: a**

and the first quarter of 2022 Cornerstone had done much ...

10 CARE KITS

For women exiting trafficking situations with U R Home Each of these kits includes \$500 in gift cards and assists as women take steps towards healing.

1 LIFE HELPED

Emergency support for a woman exiting a trafficking situation We covered the costs of lodging, food, counseling and support as well as essential supplies through BridgeNorth.

140+ FOOD BOXES

Our Food Pantry provided 30-40 food boxes to families in our community each month.

61 CARE PACKAGES & MEALS

Care packages and meals enough for each staff member at Greensborough Public School.

1 LIFE CHANGED

We assisted a street friend in getting set up for his new job by providing new boots, work clothes, and money for transit.

10 FAMILIES

We have provided emergency food support to over 10 families in our community who are going through challenging times.

hunger for transcendence, a hunger for significant relationships, and a hunger to connect with meaning.”¹⁵

Many people nowadays “are relationally bankrupt ... have never been so connected – and never so lonely ... the defining condition of our time is a sense of loneliness and alienation.”¹⁶

If “to be a person is to be made for love,” then this is an important question, “What kind of place do we require to thrive as persons?”

According to Andy Crouch, “we need a place where we can invest ourselves deeply in others, come to care about their flourishing, and giving ourselves away in mutual service and sacrifice in ways that secure our own identities instead of erasing them.”¹⁷

Crouch rightly states, “The story of every human being’s life is the story of a chain of persons.”¹⁸

Rom. 12:9-10 Love from the center of who you are ... Be good friends who love deeply ... ¹⁶ Laugh with your happy friends when they’re happy; share tears when they’re down ... Make friends with nobodies.

¹⁵ Leonard Hjalmanson, “Post-Christendom and Adaptive Challenge,” in *Text & Context: Church Planting in Canada in Post-Christendom*. Urban Loft Publishers. Kindle Edition. [Location 176.]

God’s plan for redeeming this world isn’t slick, it isn’t sexy and it isn’t new. Instead, it’s the good-old-fashion plan of life-on-life. It’s not efficient and it can get messy. It takes time, proximity, and repeated encounters with every individual God has brought into our life.

Let us review Cornerstone’s Mission Statement:

Making Space for Jesus to Shape People Together in God’s Love

While we are rescued to be in touch, in tune, & in love with Jesus, the impact of our intimacy with Jesus should be felt one life at a time.

Remember this each morning when we get up:

Every encounter we have with each individual becomes a divine appointment.

If “mission is putting love where love is not” (St. John of the Cross, 1542-1591), then we are representatives of Jesus in the continuation of God’s mission of love.

The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference.

Elie Wiesel 1928–201

¹⁶ Andy Crouch, *The Life We’re Looking For: Reclaiming Relationship in a Technological World*, pp. 11, 12, 59.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 30, 150ff.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 202.)

If a local faith community like Cornerstone is God's temple, then the **strength** of our faith-in-obedience is more critical than the **size** of the congregation.