

Redefining the Parish Model: An Old Concept Finds Revival Within the PCA

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If reviving a parish model of church ministry is the goal, perhaps there is no greater testing ground than in the gritty exuberance of post-Katrina New Orleans — a city described as the best example of heaven on earth, and the best example of hell on earth. Here, the rate of evangelical church attendance is one-quarter that of New York City; crime, poverty, and corruption abound, and the city continues to experience significant challenges as it rebuilds after Hurricane Katrina.

Ray Cannata, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church (PCA), feels especially called to serve as the “parish pastor” within New Orleans’ Uptown neighborhood of 60,000 people. He seeks to serve his neighborhood in myriad ways to see schools improved, justice served, crime reduced, and lives transformed by the power of the gospel through the work of the church. “We want to be used by God to see this place look more like the kingdom,” he says.

Focusing on geographical community in this intensive way, referred to as a neighborhood model or parish model of church planting, is an old concept that is experiencing revival within the PCA and beyond — particularly within urban contexts.

This revival sparks several questions: Do smaller knots of believers living intentionally within their distinct neighborhoods reflect biblical teachings? Can it result in a church becoming a visible, distinctive part of the community, where neighbors are attracted to the faith and local institutions are enhanced?

Redefining the Parish Model

Whereas parish churches traditionally functioned as administrative units of the greater church body (one priest for one church for one district), today’s model focuses more specifically on close-in regional churches that have a passion to reach non-Christian neighbors through collaborative ministry.

Frequently, such churches are planted in areas where the church is in decline, and that are underrepresented by traditional Christianity.

This is certainly true of New Song Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Salt Lake City, Utah, where Sam Wheatley serves as senior pastor. “We have a radical desire for pastoral ministry on a local level,” he explains, as he describes his church’s mission to serve a predominately Mormon population. “The people I pastor are those who live and work in my neighborhood, instead of those who just attend New Song.”

And this changes the way his church does ministry, according to Wheatley. “We focus less on starting new ministries and partner with existing institutions instead. We’re not competing or playing politics, but expanding the web of care for this neighborhood. Our common mission is for our neighborhood to thrive.”

The parish church seeks to be a part of God’s answer for the neighborhood, not *the* answer, he says. “That means that we raise the bar on involvement. We ask members to be very engaged in ministry. We ask, ‘Are you willing to make the neighborhood’s issues your issues by being salt and light here? By considering moving here?’”

Such an approach has its costs and benefits. Depending on their geographical home, some may feel excluded from the church. Others may lament the loss of structured programs.

“Pooled resources allow you to do bigger things,” said Paul Tripp, president of Paul Tripp Ministries, who has written extensively on the topic of community. “But you have to work harder to create intentionally-intrusive, grace-driven, gospel-driven, redemptive community in a large church.”

It is certainly harder to reach those who are not in your neighborhood, says Cannata, emphasizing the need to trust God. “It’s heartbreaking when I feel there are people being neglected who live 20 minutes away.”

But the parish model also provides a deep sense of purposefulness and camaraderie in ministry. “When a new Christian comes to faith,” says Wheatley, “dozens of people are rejoicing together in the body. We

know God has used all of us in different ways [in this conversion]. It's more obvious that new Christians are God's blessing to us."

Still, the parish model is not for everyone. "Churches are like an ecosystem," said Wheatley. "There's a need for different ones to serve in different ways to reach different parts of the body."

A Cultural Impetus for Change

In a culture fascinated with all things local — food, beer, live/play/work communities — it is not surprising that a new wave of church planters is interested in reviving and reinventing the parish philosophy of ministry.

This pattern also reflects a reaction against the church growth movement that began in the 1960s, according to Dr. Roy Taylor, stated clerk of the PCA. Whereas many evangelical churches during the past 50 years focused on continuous numerical growth and specialized ministries, seminary students today frequently express a desire to pastor a small church where they will have greater contact with their parishioners.

"The present generation has a great desire for relationships," said Taylor, "and the neighborhood church is an expression of that desire. If a church gets above 500 members, it becomes very difficult to maintain fellowship and accountability."

He affirms the parish model's power to connect members, particularly those from varying socioeconomic groups, while urging parish proponents to steer clear of nostalgia. "There is a danger for every church to either live in the past or try to recycle it."

Walter Henegar, pastor of Atlanta (Ga.) Westside Church (PCA), describes a "pervasive loneliness" he sees endemic to modern American culture, where individuals are both physically and emotionally disconnected. "We have no idea where our food comes from, economies are on a global scale, people are isolated — and this has so many implications for the stuff every pastor deals with: marital problems, depression, and people who are overworked."

Instead, employing the parish model of ministry, Henegar proposes a life of holistic integrity — living in a small geographic radius and having face-to-face contact with as many people as possible. This, he says, is how God created humans to work. "If not, there are lots of side effects. We were intended to live our lives in front of and for others."

Cannata agrees, noting that the parish model makes it more difficult to hide the true self. His home sits five feet from the sidewalk on a main thoroughfare within the Uptown neighborhood of New Orleans. "It's good and bad — people are more likely to help one another and know each other's needs [by living in close proximity], but my neighbors and parishioners can hear when I yell at my kids," he says with a laugh.

Loving Our Neighbors Where They Are

Does the Bible support the idea of intentional, geography-based ministry, as outlined in the parish model? Cannata says yes, contending that in the Bible, place matters. "It's a way of saying 'I believe in the Incarnation,'" he says. "Having an earthy eschatology is part of it."

The parish church seeks to be a part of God's answer for the neighborhood. "That means that we raise the bar on involvement. We ask members to be very engaged in ministry. We ask, 'Are you willing to make the neighborhood's issues your issues by being salt and light here?'" Henegar points to the biblical emphasis on place outlined in Genesis and in Jeremiah 29.

"Biblically, there's a tension between the deep importance of living in the land, and the reality that we're sojourners and that this is not our home," he says. In Genesis Abraham is the ultimate wanderer, but is also promised to be the recipient of land, he says. "In the Bible, people flourish in a distinct place. This is the way God made people — to have a normative connection to place. Our identity as Christians is that the land is yet to come."

He also cites Jeremiah 29:7: "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." God wants us to depend on the place

where we live, says Henegar, like trees depend on soil and sun and rain to stay alive.

However, modern mobility often creates a unique set of struggles, including frequent moves, shallow relationships, and isolation.

Shayne Wheeler, pastor of All Souls Fellowship in Decatur, Ga., has said, “Every time you move you reinvent yourself a little; you reposition yourself as a certain kind of person, and it takes years for friendships to peel back the layers to discover who you really are. Unless you stay somewhere for a long period of time, you’ll never really be known.”

In a similar thread, Henegar relays this wisdom from an anonymous “desert father”: “If a trial comes upon you in the place where you live, do not leave that place when the trial comes. Wherever you go, you will find that what you are running from is ahead of you. So stay until the trial is over, so that if you do end up leaving, no offense will be caused, and you will not bring distress to others who live in the same neighborhood.”

Resolving conflict is an area of particular importance at parish churches, where members cannot simply avoid one another, knowing that they will run into one another in the neighborhood. “We believe in redemptive friction. The more surface area contact, the better. We spend a lot of time dealing with conflict biblically. It isn’t a distraction. In fact, it has made our bonds stronger,” says Henegar.

Transformation on the Ground

One of the greatest desires embedded within the parish model is the practical outworking of seeing individual lives and entire communities transformed by the gospel.

But this doesn’t happen naturally. In Cannata’s case, he found that getting rid of his car and walking to appointments and meetings have resulted in multiple benefits. “That’s how you meet people,” he said, as he huffed and puffed down Magazine Street through a 2 ½-mile walk to meet a church member. He now knows every shop owner by name down this strip of independent, locally-owned stores — some of whom have joined the church. He’s also lost 40 pounds.

As Christian community development leader Bob Lupton has said, sometimes the best Christians make the worst neighbors. That is because church commitments typically pull you out of your community, said Henegar. “We had neighbors we’d barely talked to for five years because we drove past them to go do ministry elsewhere. But they began attending when we started this church in our neighborhood, and have since become Christians.” Another couple in Henegar’s neighborhood had struggled with substance abuse for decades. Their lives have been transformed, he says, by the gracious intervention of loving neighbors. “If we had been putting all our energy into a bunch of programs, we would have missed them,” he said.

Perhaps the most compelling example of changed lives comes from a blog post of a PCA woman in Mississippi who shares her story of transformation: “By worshipping in our community, it becomes easier to share one another’s burdens. We become accountable one to another because we are seeing each other on a regular basis, and not just on Sunday morning. ... Sharing burdens makes us stronger. Two is always better than one, and three is even better.”

Recently, her husband of 24 years was killed in a car accident. Eighteen days later she wrote this: “I have always been a very private person, not so much keeping my burdens to myself, but just a private life in general. Michael and I were at peace and happiest in the presence of our family and within our ‘four walls.’ Life is rich in this place. It is different now. I have needs that can only be met by those outside the walls. I need to have other people help carry some of these burdens as much as they have a need to carry them. ... [This is] the mystery of the body of Christ.”