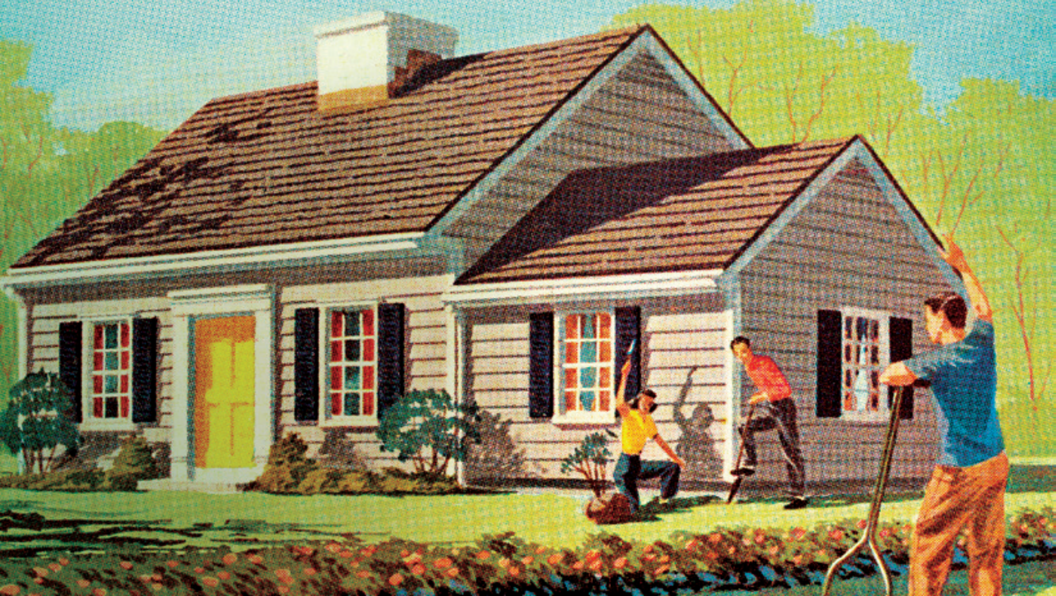
LANCE FORD & BRAD BRISCO

Next door AS IT IS IN Heaven

LIVING OUT GOD'S KINGDOM IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD



When our understanding of mission is “somewhere else,” the great commission feels out of reach. We’re left wondering where we have to go to make a difference in the world. We miss the fact that God sends us *to the lives we already have*, to the places and spaces we regularly inhabit. What could it look like to see our ordinary lives through the fresh lenses of kingdom possibilities? In this engaging and practical resource, Ford and Brisco train us to live and love like everyday missionaries in our here and now, that we might see God’s life and transformation next door as it is in heaven.

JO SAXTON
Board chair of 3DMovements and author of *More Than Enchanting*

Lance and Brad are the real deal. They are true practitioners, and this book is filled with their valuable knowledge and firsthand experiences. *Next Door as It Is in Heaven* is a must-read for anyone who is serious about taking the Great Commandment literally.

DAVE RUNYON
Coauthor of *The Art of Neighboring*

With all of Jesus’ teaching on the kingdom, why does it seem so far away and so difficult to understand? *Next Door as It Is in Heaven* invites us to see the reality of the kingdom breaking out in our own neighborhoods and to follow Jesus’ invitation to join him there. It lays a very reasoned and biblical case for focusing relationally and locally on the

people around us. Having challenged us to live as neighbors who reflect the life of Christ, the authors do not leave us there. Each chapter gives practical ideas on what we can do both individually and with others to bring the values of the kingdom to our neighborhoods. This is not a book of techniques but a call to the abundant, loving kingdom life that is lived with the people next door.

AL ENGLER
Mission director, NavNeighbors

In a culture where fear and scarcity have taken the day, this is a timely call for a reorientation toward generosity and abundance. Seasoned with real-time stories, principles, and biblical examples, this book is a both a starting block for missional observers and a map for those well on their way to lives of incarnation. *Next Door as It Is in Heaven* is a call to emerge from our safe cocoons and step into possibilities right under our noses.

ALAN BRIGGS
Church-planting catalyst and author of *Staying Is the New Going*

Modern suburban life can offer privacy and self-sufficiency, but at the cost of loneliness, isolation, and relational poverty. *Next Door as It Is in Heaven* is a warm invitation to create the margin and the practices that foster God's dream for our local neighborhoods. Lance Ford and Brad Brisco bring a wealth of sociological analysis, biblical inspiration, community development principles, and stories of best

practices to the question of how to foster good news in our own streets and local neighborhoods. They offer invaluable wisdom for any Christian or local church that is serious about neighborhood transformation rather than just tinkering with Sunday worship. Bring on a new era of living and serving locally!

DARREN CRONSHAW

Mission catalyst, Baptist Union of Victoria; and professor of missional leadership, Australian College of Ministries

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The Team:
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Contents

INTRODUCTION
There Goes the Neighborhood xi

1. PLACE MATTERS
The Priority of Incarnational Presence 1

2. THE *REAL* NEIGHBOR
Open Hearts, Open Doors 19

3. YOUR COMMUNITY BANK
Realizing Our Resources and Possibilities 35

4. HERE COMES THE NEIGHBORHOOD
Moving from Scarcity to Abundance 55

5. GETTING TO KNOW YOU
Seeing Your Neighbors for Who They Really Are 75

6. NEVER MET A STRANGER
The Power of Biblical Hospitality 91

7. MEALS ON HEELS
The Big Deal about Eating Together 109

8. HANGOUTS
The Importance of Third Places 125

9. TREASURE HUNT
Finding the Gifts in Your Neighborhood 141

10. KNOCKING ON HEAVEN'S DOOR
Doing the Stuff 157

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 173

NOTES 175

ABOUT THE AUTHORS 181

INTRODUCTION

There Goes the Neighborhood

It occurs to me that this is not a neighborhood;
it is only a collection of unconnected individuals.

PHILIP LANGDON, *A BETTER PLACE TO LIVE*

SOMETIMES OFFHANDED COMMENTS come across as backhanded compliments. What do you do when your young neighbor cheerfully says, "We love you guys! I always wanted to live next door to Fred and Ethel"?

What! Frumpy old Fred and matronly Ethel Mertz from *I Love Lucy*, the television classic that revolved around the lives of two neighborhood couples? Seriously, we remind you of them?

My first thought was that Hilary was calling us old. I know my wife and I (Lance) aren't exactly Brad and Angelina, but really? Come on. I'm cool. I'm in shape. And I'm not a penny pincher. Plus, I certainly don't hike my pants up past my belly button. And my wife, Sherri, is very fit and beautiful and . . .

Still, I knew what she meant. It was actually a compliment. Hilary was voicing good feelings about the friendships among a few of us neighbors by tapping into the nostalgia of days gone by. Heck, I want to live next to the Mertzes too.

Something has happened to the good old American neighborhood. It may be more accurate to say it *hasn't* happened. Most of us never experienced what Fred and Ethel and Lucy and Ricky experienced. The world of television and the movies is, for many people, their only experience of a community of connected friends and neighbors. Who wouldn't love to live in Beaver Cleaver's Mayfield or Andy Taylor's Mayberry—where you go to church with the same people you hang out with at the local barbershop or hair salon? Where you can stroll down to the only gas station in town for a bottle of pop with a group of friends? Or how about having a circle of friends in the city from a wide range of professions—blue collar to white collar—who hang out several times per week at a tavern named *Cheers*?

Those of us who grew up with these shows or ate breakfast in *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* when we were young, carry with us an unfulfilled longing for a neighborhood that actually works. We want to live across the hall from an entertaining neighbor personality like Chandler Bing or J. J. Evans, or on a street with neighbors named Martha, Ward, George Bailey, or Aunt Bee. We'd even welcome quirky neighbors like Cosmo Kramer or Steve Urkel. We long for a kitchen with a Dutch door where neighbors drop by and lean in to borrow a cup of sugar and talk about the weather. Or to stroll across the backyard in the evening to draw upon the wisdom of Wilson, our neighbor on the other side of the privacy fence, as we process a problem or crisis. I don't need a home where the buffalo roam. Give me a front porch with

a swing and rocking chairs for friends and neighbors to serendipitously stop by to swap insights, opinions, dreams, and disappointments.

In recent years entrepreneurs, city planners, and real-estate developers have sought to tap into these subconscious desires. Howard Schultz, the visionary behind Starbucks, commenced building his espresso and coffee kingdom after visiting the quaint coffee shop culture of Italy. His imagination was captivated as he lingered in numerous shops with baristas who greeted patrons by name and knew their order without it being spoken. Schultz returned to Seattle with a desire to create a connecting point for community and conversation—a slowing-down place for people on the go to spend time with old friends and create new ones. Schultz's vision shaped coffee tastes across America but failed to deliver its original vision as a genuine hangout. For hangout purists, the addition of drive-through service was the ultimate sellout.

Suburban housing developers are attempting to recapture the ethos of what have become known as "walkable" neighborhoods. The objective is to include features that nurture relational connections. Seaside, Florida—which served as the backdrop for the Jim Carrey movie *The Truman Show*—and the Walt Disney Company's master-planned development of Celebration, Florida, are examples of communities developed with hopes of being a throwback to the town square, where retail shops and commercial enterprises can be reached from home on foot. With walking trails and sidewalks—elements widely forgotten by developers for decades—the idea is that

people will naturally connect and build relationships through the frequency of day-to-day interaction. These communities are a reflection of what's been called the "new urbanism."

Given how much value we place on neighbor relationships in our media and marketing, why do such relationships seem so old-fashioned? Immediately following World War II an increasing demand for affordable housing by a suddenly prosperous American citizenship and returning GIs produced the first suburban neighborhoods. America had become an automobile culture, and planners designed new housing developments with this in mind. Levittown, New York, is widely considered the first postwar suburban housing development, setting a pattern for thousands to follow. In recent years, critics of the modern suburb model have pointed to the lack of elements that foster natural interaction among residents. Besides the push indoors from air conditioning, television, and the Internet, neighborhoods suffer from a lack of commercial enterprises, sacrificed on the altar of zoning laws. To purchase even the smallest food or medicinal item, residents must drive out of their neighborhood. There is no corner pub or coffee shop within walking distance where they might spend time around a drink with their neighbors. Long gone are the days where folks waved from their front porches or made small talk as their neighbors passed by on the way to the corner drugstore or butcher shop. Those destinations have been written out of the neighborhood.

The notion of a neighborhood church has almost completely disappeared, and with it, the concept of *parish*—a

body of Christians who live in proximity to one another and sense a call and privileged duty to care for one another. In all but rare cases, church members now drive to church services from all over a city. Few members of any given church live in proximity to one another as neighbors. This means the church you are a member of consists mostly of people you don't do day-to-day life with.

National surveys reveal that less than half the American populace knows most of their neighbors' names. It is sad to consider that many people live for years in an apartment complex or neighborhood without so much as knowing their neighbors.

What does all this neighborhood business have to do with the gospel? How is it connected with the kingdom of God? As Jesus followers—people of the Good News—we follow the one who said the most important commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. We have a tremendous opportunity before us: to take notice and help to resurrect rich relationships in our neighborhoods.

But too often that opportunity is left untaken. Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon relate their collective horror and embarrassment when a city official said to them and a group of their fellow Denver area pastors, "From the city's perspective, there isn't a noticeable difference in how Christians and non-Christians neighbor in our community."[1]

Let that sink in. If anyone should "neighbor" differently, it should be us. So let's do it. Let us love our neighborhoods as ourselves.

As you traverse the pages ahead, keep in mind your particular context: where you live, work, eat, and play on a regular basis. The Holy Spirit has sent every Christian to those places. It is no accident that you live where you do, even if it is temporary. Moving through the book, you will gain an understanding not only of the needs around you but also, happily, of the resources and ability to meet those needs. You'll also have great fun and joy along the journey, as you discover that there are others all around you who desire to see the neighborhood come alive in rich relationships as well.

-1-

Place Matters

THE PRIORITY OF INCARNATIONAL PRESENCE

There's no place like home. There's no place like home.
There's no place like home.

DOROTHY, *THE WIZARD OF OZ*

To be a stranger in a strange land, to be lost . . . is perhaps
the condition most typical of contemporary life.

IAIN CHAMBERS

Being rooted is perhaps the least recognized and most
important need of humans.

WENDELL BERRY

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.

JEREMIAH 29:7, ESV

THE 1990 FILM *AVALON*, directed by Barry Levinson, begins on the Fourth of July, 1914. Sam Krichinsky, one of four brothers who eventually relocate from Russia to America, arrives in the Baltimore neighborhood of Avalon. Gradually, the other Krichinskys arrive, pooling their resources to bring over more and more family members. Each new member settles in Avalon and joins the ever-expanding network of relationships.

The first half of the film highlights the integration of the extended family. There are scenes of siblings and numerous cousins playing in the streets between the Baltimore row houses. Mothers talk with each other across front porches, asking when their neighbor will be walking to the nearby market and whether they might walk together. Children are seen with not only parents but also grandparents, aunts, and uncles who either live in the same house or nearby. The weekly family dinner becomes so large that several tables have to be put end to end to accommodate everyone for the shared meal.

Avalon begins as a portrait of a robust, relationally rich extended family. Life is lived *with* others, both in times of shared joy and in periods of struggles and hardships. People are connected. Conversations are many. Common meals are the norm. Life is rooted not only in relationships with others but also in relationship to place.

About halfway into the film, however, something begins to change. The vibrant colors begin to darken. The mood of the story changes. Three forces are introduced into the life of Avalon that fragment the characters' relational connectedness. At first hardly anyone notices. The changes seem natural—even commendable. But once the family fully embraces the modern American way of living, there is no possibility of holding the pieces together.

The three separate but interconnected themes introduced into the life of the Krichinsky family include the creation of suburbs, the rise of the automobile, and the popularization of television. While each of these issues leads to a similar

outcome, in regards to the fragmentation of their extended family, they each take a slightly different route toward the transformation.

The creation of the suburbs. The second generation of the Krichinsky family is experiencing the upward mobility of a postwar economic boom, with the accompanying (false) promise of a better life. More conveniences. More leisure. More space. In one poignant scene, Sam's grandson Michael (played by a young Elijah Wood) learns that his family will be moving away from the rest of the relatives, out to this new world called the suburbs. "What's a suburb?" he asks.

His mother replies, "It's a nicer place to live."

"That's what it means?" he counters. "A nicer place? Everyone is going to live there too, right? In one house?"

In the mind of this young boy, the thought of moving away from a permanent, familiar place full of relationships cultivated over a lifetime simply didn't make sense.

The rise of the automobile. As automobiles became more affordable and thus more common, fathers were able to relocate their families to the suburbs without giving up their jobs in Avalon. Every day they would drive out of the neighborhood, alone, to work in a place that was no longer home. In some cases, the places they lived were so far away that fathers were late coming home, missing time with their children.

The popularization of television. Just when the family is about to eat dinner together at the dining room table, they realize their favorite television program is about to come on.

They all grab their plates and rush into the living room, where they sit silently, staring at the television. Smaller groups eating off TV trays replace the large, loud family meal. Family conversations about the specifics of the day are left behind.

The final sequence in *Avalon* is heartbreaking. Sam, now in the final years of life, sits by himself, late at night. Asleep in his recliner, alone in the living room with little more than his chair and a television, he sits in a room gone dark except for the dim light that radiates from the television. The broadcast day has ended.

When viewing the film for the first time, I (Brad) recognized the significant similarities the movie had with a book published the same year by sociologist Ray Oldenburg. In *The Great Good Place*, Oldenburg contends that the vast majority of communities in the United States are void of relational vitality—primarily because of the loss of what he calls informal public places. Oldenburg understands the absence of this informal public life as being the result of suburban sprawl and the rise of the automobile culture, both of which foster geographical and relational separation between home and workplace.

Magnifying the problem is the proliferation of home entertainment that often inhibits face-to-face communication. This has, of course, moved far beyond the simple introduction of television as portrayed in the film. Today smartphones, computers, gaming devices, and limitless television viewing options get between us and the people closest to us.

The combination of these factors is pushing individuals toward what Oldenburg calls "pitiable isolation," prohibiting

sufficient opportunities and encouragement for voluntary human interaction. He describes daily life in the typical suburban setting as being like “a grammar school without its recess periods” or “incurring the aches and pains of a softball game without the fun of getting together for a few beers afterwards.”[1] Both the joy of hanging out with people and the social cohesion that comes from it are disappearing; the settings to make them possible are fading away.

> The problem of place in America manifests itself in a sorely deficient informal public life. The structure of shared experience beyond that offered by family, job, and passive consumerism is small and dwindling. The essential group experience is being replaced by the exaggerated self-consciousness of individuals. American life-styles, for all the material acquisition and the seeking after comforts and pleasures, are plagued by boredom, loneliness, alienation, and a high price tag. America can point to many areas where she has made progress, but in the area of informal public life she has lost ground and continues to lose it.[2]

The warning that Oldenburg was sounding more than twenty-five years ago is as pertinent as ever. Today we recognize that his proposal was just the tip of the iceberg. The demise of relational vitality that Oldenburg described is feeble compared to the level of displacement and personal

isolation felt by many today. Even though there has been a deliberate upswing in the establishment of public places (which we will discuss in chapter 8), that trend continues to fight against new forces of relational isolation.

Look at All the Lonely People

God created us as social, relational beings. We are made to be in relationship both with the Creator and with other people. We have been formed with an innate need to know and be known. Yet the current way of life in developed countries is greatly reducing the quantity and quality of our relationships. The majority of people no longer live among or even near their extended families. Instead, people often live on the other side of the country or even across the world from their relatives. When you add the high degree of mobility, the strong sense of individualism, and the decreased opportunities for informal public life, isolation and loneliness become increasingly common.

Studies show that we are now actually "connected" to a larger and more diverse circle of people. Even so, nearly a quarter of Americans say they have nobody to talk to, up from 8 percent in 1985.[3] And this is not simply a picture of solitary retirees. The middle-aged are the loneliest group of all in the United States. According to one recent study, 40 percent of adults between the ages of forty-five and forty-nine said they were lonely, a rate of loneliness that has doubled since the 1980s.[4]

The National Science Foundation has discovered that the number of Americans' quality connections had taken a dive

in the past two decades. They asked thousands of people of all ages, "Who are the people with whom you discussed important matters over the last six months?" In 1985 Americans had an average of three confidants. By 2004 they had fewer than two.[5] One in four said that they had *no one* whom they could talk to about personal "troubles or triumphs."[6] If family members were not counted, that number doubled: More than half of those surveyed had no one outside their immediate family with whom they could share important issues. In short, we have fewer people to lean on.

Let's make this more personal. Stop for a moment and reflect on the people you come in contact with on a regular basis. Almost half of them have, at best, one person they can talk to about important topics. Do you get the sense that the researchers are right? What about the divorced man who lives across the street? Or the widow in the apartment next door? The young single mom who works behind the checkout counter? The college student, far from home, who waits tables at your favorite restaurant? In nearly every American setting, people are indeed living relationally impoverished lives marked by a sense of isolation. Far too many people are alone and lonely.

The issue of isolation is compounded by a sense of detachment from place. In a highly mobile society, people rarely feel rooted geographically. We live as nomads, both figuratively and literally. The authors of *Beyond Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement* are concerned about a "culture-wide attitude" characterized by the phrase "This world is not my home—I'm just passing through":

> Whether we are talking about the upwardly mobile who view each place as a rung in the ladder that goes up to who knows where, or the postmodern nomad with no roots in any place or any tradition of place, or the average consumer who doesn't know anything about the place where she lives or the places her food comes from, the reality is the same—we are a culture of displacement. . . .
>
> Wanderer, expatriate, exile, diaspora, stranger, migrancy, displacement—all ways to describe the homelessness of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century.[7]

In his book *Incarnate*, author Michael Frost uses the term *excarnation* to describe this idea of displacement. Excarnation, meaning "to deflesh," is the opposite of the theological term *incarnation* ("to take on flesh"; see John 1:14). Frost compares the modern Western experience of life to that of a tourist, someone who is always moving, never belonging. Always interested in collecting experiences, but remaining superficial and disconnected from permanency. Moreover, when the physical places we inhabit—our homes, offices, shopping malls, highways, airports, cities—all look alike, place seems to matter even less. We end up with what James Howard Kunstler calls "the geography of nowhere."[8] Our culture becomes rootless and disengaged, both relationally and in regard to corporal place.[9]

This lack of meaningful social interaction and sense of

displacement is not only heartbreaking—because we were created for so much more—but astoundingly harmful to our way of life. It is literally killing us. According to the volume of evidence Susan Pinker assembles in her book *The Village Effect*, persistent loneliness alters the genes in every cell of our bodies. And not in a good way.

Presenting data from numerous studies, Pinker offers a compelling argument that the strength of our social relationships is comparable to well-established risk factors for mortality such as smoking and alcohol consumption. Weak social relationships are a more significant risk factor than physical inactivity and obesity. Simply playing cards once a week or meeting friends every Wednesday night at Starbucks, she shows, adds as many years to our lives as taking beta-blockers or quitting a pack-a-day smoking habit. The subtitle of Pinker's book, *How Face-to-Face Contact Can Make Us Healthier, Happier, and Smarter*, gets the point across: If we don't interact regularly with people face-to-face, the odds are that we won't live as long, remember information as well, or be as happy as we otherwise could have been.

Word Became Flesh and Blood

What is the appropriate response to a culture of increasing displacement? Can something really be done to turn the tide of isolation? Are there practical actions that can be taken to help mend the broken pieces? To restore people *and* places back to a point where they can once again flourish?

The solution is no doubt multifaceted. It will involve a variety of tactics, including the themes spelled out in the remaining pages of this book: the art of neighboring, restoring genuine community, sharing meals with others, welcoming the stranger, and opening our lives to those who are disconnected. But we are convinced that every practical action—the "how"—must be rooted in the "why" of *incarnational presence.* The journey of restoring the relational fabric of our communities must begin with our tangible presence in *real time* and *real space*.

When we use the language of incarnational presence we are referring to the incarnation of Jesus. The word *incarnation* refers to the act whereby God took it upon himself to enter into the depths of our world, for the purpose of reconciling humanity back to himself. The incarnation is thus God's ultimate missional participation in creation (John 3:16-17).

It is interesting to note the integral part that public spaces of first-century Palestine played in Jesus' ministry on earth. When God entered into our world, in and through the person of Jesus, he came to live among us (*eskenosen*—literally, "set up a tent"). As Eugene Peterson renders John 1:14 in *The Message*, "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood." As Eric Jacobsen writes:

> Certainly, Jesus spent time in the private spaces of other people's homes. He also ministered in the semiprivate realm of temple and synagogue. But by

> and large, most of his ministry took place in public spaces, where he risked relationship with people he didn't know and interacted with them on neutral territory.[10]

The incarnation of Jesus should inform our activity in the world. Alan Hirsch reminds us that "if God's central way of reaching his world was to incarnate himself in Jesus, then our way of reaching the world should likewise be incarnational."[11] The Christian faith is a faith that is always *placed*—in creation, in history, in time. And it continues to be a faith of embodied presence.

Simon Carey Holt, in his excellent book *God Next Door: Spirituality and Mission in the Neighbourhood*, roots the Incarnation in the Christian story of place.

> The truth is we are not created to be placeless wanderers. The Garden of Eden, the promised land, the city on a hill, the house with many rooms, the streets of gold: the Christian story is a story of places—the most tangible places—from beginning to end. We are made to inhabit. Even the missionary who treks half way around the world does so to settle somewhere in particular and there to dwell for the sake of the gospel. The story of the incarnation is the story of God en-fleshed in a particular place at a particular time and within a very specific community. So too for us, the call of God is to be in

> a particular place and there to embody the presence and grace of God. It's a call to locality.[12]

Both presence and place matter. If there is any possibility for human flourishing in a dislocated, isolated world, it begins when God's love is embodied in us and enacted through us. Just as God took on flesh in the person of Jesus in order to dwell among us and to identify with us, we as the body of Christ are to incarnate into the places we live.

Going below the Surface

Our friend Jon Huckins cowrote a book titled *Thin Places*, in which he uses the language of *submerging* to describe our incarnational posture toward the places we live. Growing up on the West Coast, Jon shares his lifelong love for the ocean. As much as he loves the view of the expansive body of water, his favorite aspect of the ocean is stepping into it. Whether he is surfing, snorkeling, or simply swimming, the ocean tells a completely different story when he steps into it and allows it to surround him.

> A body of water that appears tamed by the constructs of the surrounding shorelines becomes a mysterious and vibrant playground for forms of life that I otherwise would never know existed. It is as though I see the ocean for the very first time once I submerge. And ultimately, what I see from below is much more true

> of its identity than what I see from above as a passive observer. . . . Much of the same realities are true in our submerging posture. . . . When we submerge into our context, we see that the story we have been told to believe about our neighbors, politics, and economy is far from reality.[13]

Submerging is a good metaphor for incarnational living. Only when we go below the surface of our neighborhoods are we able to move from being disengaged observers to active citizens.

Seeking the Welfare of *Your* City

There is a fascinating passage in the Old Testament that provides a picture of what it looks like to live out incarnational presence. It actually gives practical instructions for digging into the places we live. It is especially helpful when Christians sense they are living in a world that is hostile toward their beliefs, or perhaps when we find ourselves living in a place that doesn't really feel like home.

In the prophetic book of Jeremiah, we read how the nation of Israel had forsaken God's law and, as a result, found themselves taken into captivity and exiled far from their Jerusalem homeland. God had sent the Babylonian empire to discipline his people. As they were relocated to a foreign, idolatrous land, they began to hear that their time there would be short. False prophets were telling the nation

of Israel that God would soon deliver them and that settling into this new, strange land was foolish. God's Word through the prophet Jeremiah to the exiles was quite different.

> Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But 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.
>
> JEREMIAH 29:4-7, ESV

The words of Jeremiah were shocking. The premise of his message was that the exiles would be in Babylon for several generations—at least seventy years, a time period that included not only the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar but of his son and grandson (Jeremiah 25:11; 27:7; 29:10), and that the Israelites would simply need to come to terms with this fact. God was telling them to settle down and get used to being in this hostile, ungodly place.

> It was toward this end that Jeremiah counseled his community not to be nostalgic for the past, for the past could not be recovered. Nor did he advise them

> to plan for insurrection, for there was no promise of their restoration in Jerusalem, at least not any time soon. Nor yet was the community's survival tied to the remnant that remained in Jerusalem (Jer. 24:5-10). For Jeremiah, exile did not mean that God had abandoned Israel. Rather, exile was the place where God was at work. God's purposes with Israel, in other words, were served by the Babylonian invasion.[14]

Jeremiah's instructions were more counterintuitive than they might at first seem. Jeremiah tells the Jews in exile to "seek the welfare" of their captors, to pray for the very people who destroyed their homeland, because the welfare of the exiles and the captors were bound together.[15] If God's purposes with Israel were really being fulfilled through their captivity, then as the exiles pursued the shalom of the home of their captors—Babylon—God would provide shalom for those in exile.

It would have seemed reasonable for the Jews to be hostile to their captors.[16] It also would have been natural for them to withdraw from the world around them. By the same token, it would have been easy for them to simply assimilate with the culture that surrounded them. Any of these three options would have made sense in human terms. However, God was calling the Israelites to something radically different—not to be defensive *against*, isolated *from*, or absorbed *into* the dominant culture, but instead to be incarnated *within* it.[17] He was calling them to dig into the place that he had sent

them, to stay where they would be doing life for a long time. He was calling them to submerge.

Furthermore, what God instructed the exiles to *do* is actually rather ordinary. Consider the list from Jeremiah 29:

- Build houses and live in them
- Plant gardens and eat their produce
- Have children
- Marry off your children so they have children
- Seek the welfare of the city
- Pray for the welfare of the city

There is nothing in this list that is dramatic or miraculous. It is a list of normal, everyday activities. It could represent any person, regardless of income, social status, education, vocation, or geographical location. The way the kingdom of God takes root in the lives of people and ultimately changes a city is by exiles living normal, everyday lives as citizens of the King in every neighborhood and public place that makes up a city. We build houses. We plant gardens. We have children. We seek the welfare of our city. Far more often than not, the ways of Jesus are indeed local and ordinary.

Jeremiah 29 coheres well with what we read throughout the New Testament. Peter speaks of Christians as "elect exiles of the Dispersion" (1 Peter 1:1, ESV) and "as aliens" (2:11, NASB). He encourages his readers to live "in reverent fear" during "your time as foreigners" (1:17). He urges believers repeatedly to do good (3:17) and for each person to use

their gifts "to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace" (4:10). This also aligns with Paul's admonitions to "never tire of doing what is good" (2 Thessalonians 3:13), to "let your gentleness be evident to all" (Philippians 4:5), and to look to each other's interests and not merely to their own (Philippians 2:4). As Paul writes elsewhere, "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). James Davison Hunter sees each of these New Testament instructions as being "in keeping with the instruction that the people of God are to be committed to the welfare of the cities in which they reside in exile, even when the city is indifferent, hostile, or ungrateful."[18]

Are you willing to commit to the welfare of *your* city? Will you allow your imagination to see a movement that begins with the local and ordinary but over time becomes global and extraordinary? If your answer is yes, then together let's seek the welfare of our neighborhoods, and then let us strive for it to spill over into every nook and cranny of our city. Let's dig in, incarnate into the places we are already doing life, and display to a fragmented and isolated world a new way to be human.

Reflection and Preparation

Immerse. Read Jeremiah 29:4-7. Reflect on the list of actions God was telling the exiles to do: build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their produce, have children, marry off your children so they have children, seek the

welfare of the city, and pray for the welfare of the city. How do you see each of these instructions fitting the theme of incarnational presence shared in this chapter?

Consider others. What are the implications of each of these in regards to daily living? How does each of these actions apply to you today? In what practical ways can you seek the welfare of your city? How can you lead others to do the same?

Pray. Begin by praying for the welfare of your city. Where are the broken places that need to be restored? Pray for those places. Who are the people who are most affected by the broken systems in your city? Pray for those systems. Pray for those people.