

Becoming a neighborhood church

The separate spheres of our lives, and the imagination it takes to forge deeper community

by [C. Christopher Smith](#) in the [May 8, 2019](#) issue



The Nature Playspace and Community Garden and an affordable housing development of Englewood Christian Church and [Englewood Community Development Corporation](#). Photo courtesy of Englewood Christian Church – Indianapolis.

There's a difference between a religious community and a real community. While a real community exists and shares life throughout the days and weeks, a religious community exists only during specific windows of time when it gathers for worship or other religious activities. The economy of a religious community is largely focused on growing its membership, sustaining its institution, paying its staff, maintaining its facilities, and keeping its utilities running. The economy of a real community is much broader, encompassing all the resources of its members and concerned with their flourishing.

Most churches exist somewhere on the spectrum between a religious community and a real community. If a phrase like “churches don’t do that” (or “churches can’t do that”) is a common refrain in your conversations, you are probably closer to the religious community end of the spectrum.

For the past three decades, the church to which I belong, Englewood Christian Church in Indianapolis, has been on the journey from being a religious community toward being a real community. In the early years, we heard “churches don’t do that sort of thing” a lot, but eventually and with much conversation, we did many of the things that we once thought were forbidden to churches—buying and selling property, starting businesses, partnering with government agencies and the United Way, educating children, and helping local businesses to launch and grow.

Our journey in this direction began when we had shrunk to our smallest size as a congregation. We discovered that some of our older women were in bad housing arrangements, and we worked to fix up the houses near the church building where they could live affordably and be looked after by people in the church.

Around the same time that we were beginning to care for some of the seniors in our church body, we also began a co-op preschool, in which mothers got together a few mornings a week to do activities with their young children. In the mid-1990s, when the federal government was pushing mothers on welfare to go to work, this co-op was expanded into a daycare that served not only our children but those of our neighbors. This daycare has expanded during the past two decades and now has over 200 children enrolled, from birth to prekindergarten.

Three decades ago, when our church was at its smallest, over three-quarters of our congregation drove to church activities from the suburbs or other parts of the city, and only one-quarter lived in this neighborhood. Today, these numbers have flip-flopped, with more than three-quarters of our church members living in our neighborhood and one-quarter driving from other places.

We haven’t had a program aimed at getting people to move into the neighborhood, nor have we twisted people’s arms to move here. But our neighborhood presence has grown. The largest growth has come from families like mine, people who see the life and activity that flows in and around the church building and want to move to be enfolded into this life. In addition, a number of young people who grew up in our church chose, after going away to college, to settle in the neighborhood and devote

themselves to the life of the church here.

Some neighbors who already live in the neighborhood are also intrigued enough by the church to want to join us. Sometimes these neighbors live in homes that we own; other times their children are enrolled in our daycare, or they meet us through neighborhood work in which we are engaged.

With so many people in close proximity, we have all kinds of formal and informal activities going on. People share meals in a variety of ways. Some people work together, not only in businesses that we own but also informally in gardens and in the various tasks involved in caring for this place. We not only work together but also play together—in sports leagues, in our youth running club, and in a long list of neighborhood festivities that span the calendar.

All the life and activity of this place gives us time to be and to talk together, and it gives us much to talk about. We eventually circle around to questions of what it means to do this work (or recreational activity) in the way of Jesus.

In the early 21st century, we live amid widespread fragmentation—not only political fragmentation (which endlessly fuels the news media) but also fragmentation of our families, schools, neighborhoods, and even fragmentation from the land and the food it provides to sustain us. One of the deepest and most ubiquitous divides that faces most adults in North America is the fragmentation of our days—and indeed our lives—into the distinct spheres of home, work, church, and school.

This fragmentation of our days also manifests itself in the alarming amount of time and energy we use in commuting between spheres: home and work, home and church, and so on.

The 20th century was the age of the automobile. As the increasing prevalence of cars and highways made it possible to live farther away from our work and church communities, the gap between these spheres widened.

Homogenization is another force that contributes to the fragmentation of our days. Journalist Bill Bishop calls this force “the big sort”—that is, the increasing desire during the past half century to live, work, and worship with people who are of similar economic, ethnic, racial, and ideological backgrounds. The accelerating fragmentation of the spheres of our lives is a price we pay in order to live in homogeneous neighborhoods and worship in homogeneous churches.

Homogenization has been at work in the history of North American suburbs since World War II. I suspect that the desire for homogeneous communities expresses our longing for some semblance of familiarity and stability in a rapidly fragmenting world. The irony is that these desires likely do more to destabilize us and to accelerate fragmentation by widening the scope of the spheres of our daily life.

The fragmentation of our daily lives into the spheres of home, work, and church also inhibits our capacity for conversation. Each sphere has its own language, specialized terms and phrases that fit the work to be done in that sphere. The greater the fragmentation between spheres, the more we will struggle to communicate well in one or more of the spheres.

Often the sphere that ends up suffering most in this regard is the church, since the spheres of home and work take priority culturally. When we bring the members of our churches together for conversation—members who work diligently to be successful at home and at work—they generally have little capacity to talk about their faith and their life together in the church.

This is the situation we found ourselves in when our church began Sunday night conversations over two decades ago. We rapidly came to realize the diversity of our convictions and even the varied meanings that we gave to shared terms like “gospel” and “salvation” and “the kingdom of God.” Having little sense of how to hold on and work through this diversity, our early conversations were extraordinarily volatile as we tried to convert one another to our own particular understandings.

For almost a decade, our Sunday evening conversations were devoted to working through these beliefs and learning to trust one another in spite of our differing convictions and terminologies. Today we still often struggle with differing convictions. But the regular practice of conversation, together with a rich community life in which the spheres of our lives are gradually starting to overlap, give us hope that God will continue to transform us.

The goal, I believe, should not be for the spheres to coincide completely, as that would create a largely insular community that has few bonds with neighbors and the outside world. Rather, our hope should be to begin to see some overlap among the spheres. Creating a meaningful sense of proximity in our congregations can be a vital force that pulls the spheres toward one another.

When trying to cultivate proximity, perhaps the first place to start is the simple task of mapping where church members live and work. After doing the mapping, people who are in close proximity can be encouraged to get to know one another and to explore what it means to be an expression of God's people in the place where they are. They might share meals with one another and with neighbors, or they may do social or recreational activities together. That can lead to the question: What kind of work can we do together? This work might be an expression of care for our neighbors or our place, or it might generate some income, or perhaps some of both. It might take the form of immersing ourselves in local youth sports programs (coaching, refereeing, groundskeeping, or selling concessions) or in crafting a high-quality product that members or neighbors will want to buy—freshly baked bread or locally roasted coffee, for example.

Regardless of the scale on which it is done—from a handful of hours each month to daily work that employs many people—there are thousands (if not millions) of possibilities for what churches could do together. Start small, with things that people are gifted to do and that they can get excited about. Having fun doing this work together not only takes the dread out of working, but it also makes the work attractive for others to want to join in and stick with it.

Ultimately, the work of bringing the spheres of our lives closer together requires imagination. It requires asking how we can participate in our home or work life in a way that is more deeply connected with our church life and with the members of our church community. Although asking this question may take us out of our comfort zones, the answers do not have to be burdensome—especially when we find things we are already doing at home or work that could be done with others from our church.

Are you going out to eat? Invite others from your church to come along. Are your kids in youth sports? Sign them up in leagues with other children from church. Do your work responsibilities include hiring employees? Hire qualified people from your church when possible.

Moving toward a more integrated life is not without its challenges. Every challenge presents us with a real situation in which we can practice conversation. What do you do when you hire people from church, but they aren't doing the work well? Or when someone in your carpool is consistently late in getting the kids to school? All of these awkward situations beg for conversation. Conversation may not resolve these

situations, but if the issue and conversation about it persists, we just might come to know that other person—and his or her struggles—a bit better. Having difficult conversations like these about the daily stuff of our lives also prepares us to work through difficult conversations in our churches.

The pressing question is this: How do we orchestrate the gifts and skills that God has provided in our community to bear witness to God's love and reconciling work to our neighbors? This question will immerse us in a sea of conversations as we seek to discover the shape of our life together. It will also open for us a wealth of opportunities to talk together as we live out this dance together.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Cultivating proximity." It was excerpted from C. Christopher Smith's book How the Body of Christ Talks: Recovering the Practice of Conversation in the Church, © April 2019 by Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group. Used by permission.