

## As Goes the Neighborhood

Russell L. Meyer

John's reputation continues to this day in parts of central Florida, though the passing of the generations is causing it to fade. He was known as Mr. Mission in the '50's – that statistical anomaly of widespread church attendance across the population. John's vision was to put a mission in every new neighborhood in Florida so that every Floridian could walk to church.

A contractor by profession, John was head of the mission's board by passion. Along with shopping malls, schools, and phosphate plants, he also built church sanctuaries. As he traveled Florida looking for new business, his eye always looked for a site for planting a new start.

By the time I was called to pastor his home congregation, he had long passed. His construction company went the way of Israel after the death of Solomon – divided among brothers who lost the ability to welcome each other. Eventually the company was disbanded.

John's legacy lived on – a vision for mission: a congregation in every neighborhood so that every family could walk to church. Ozzie and Harriet. Leave it to Beaver. Black and white television. But visions and realities don't always overlap. When we surveyed the congregation in my first years, you could count on one hand the number of member families that lived within walking distance. Fifty-five years later, John's vision persists to this day as the organizing thought for congregational outreach. And it's not working. The children of the first families have left for other, lively churches.

The best attendance from the neighborhood was the Xers and pre-Xers running their skateboards across its concrete walks and brick walls, jumping its six-step porch, even flying off its flat roof. Sometimes the ushers would have to ask them to leave around 11:00 a.m. on Sunday mornings. At one point, we tried to accept the boarders as God's gift to our evangelism and youth programs. Not to bore you with the details; it just didn't work. Our suburban youth simply said, "Those are the kids we try to avoid at school." And their parents supported that position.

Flip ahead a few years. We relocated to the metro area. My call changed to an ecumenical organization. Our family church roots were no longer fixed by who was paying me to perform. We tried different congregations in the area, though none really clicked for our youngest son, now finishing high school. A few friends took him to the Methodist youth program, big, bold and rocking. They even had a Friday night coffee shop for a while. That was a hit while it lasted. Then there was the new Pentecostal (excuse me, "community") church. His girlfriend made it interesting for him. It really got wild for him at the Sunday evening speaking in tongues prayer service. They gave him books on creationism and challenging the biology teachers at school. At least we got to do some real spiritual development when he came home asking, "What's up with that?"

I caught him up late at his computer several nights. He's chatting on My Space with a set of regulars. I don't know who they are, and he doesn't talk much about them. One's from Indiana, others are from across the state. He went away for the summer as a camp counselor. He's home again ready for college. His My Space friends are still there. It's his neighborhood.

Anyone who says they have the answers for outreach in these post-colonial days (that's the phrase Brian McLaren uses, and I think it merits more attention than post-modern, post-Christendom, or whatever else) is just peddling wares. There are a lot of things to try and trying them is the thing to do. Not because they themselves work – no ritual makes God happen. But along the way, sometimes they give public witness to the work of God in, with, and through us. Sometimes the gimmicks bring people together so that the Spirit can breathe between them. I've just learned this much. The neighborhood has changed. I think Mr. Rodgers in his Cardigan sweater would recognize that. He'd see the truth behind "let your fingers do the walking." People have ways of connecting today that did not exist in the '50's. It's not a black and white, cathode ray tube, Chevy world anymore. In fact, many young people don't want to drive. It distracts them from texting their friends and staying in touch with the Real.

As I'm writing this, the 60+ treasurer of my congregation sends me an AOL news article that church attendance drives up student GPA's. As though we didn't believe that already? But how do we get that news of the effect of the Good News out?

In John's day (remember, John from the beginning of this story? -- yes of course you do), you built a neighborhood church by knocking on front doors. The concept of the neighborhood has gone virtual and the doors have become Windows. Our mission concepts need to adapt. After 25 years in parish ministry I've developed one gut feeling: if we go all-digital on the world and then prepare an Ozzie and Harriet world as the welcome mat, most of those who come the first time won't come back a second time. Why? It's just all outside their field of references. Our real spaces have to become more virtual savvy, so that the virtual can become more real -- in, with and through Christ Jesus.

Addendum: Upon reading this article, my son said, "Yeah. I've been thinking about going back to the Sunday evening thing -- but I've moved to Facebook; it offer so much more, video and all. My Space is old school and lame."

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