

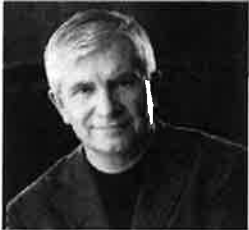
# EQUIP

ALONG READ

## A QUESTION OF PLACE

### MISSIONAL ISSUES CONCERNING LOCATION

by Dr Alan Roxburgh, leader of The Missional Network. Alan is a pastor, teacher, writer and consultant with more than 30 years experience in church leadership, consulting and seminary education. This article is curated from the online [Journal of Missional Practice](#), Winter 2018 edition.



**W**e are witnessing a resurgence of interest in questions of place – it comes in multiple forms, such as rediscovering the local, or asking what does the Christian life have to do with presence?

This is quite a significant shift in which many of us are trying to sort out what it means to be located, to have our lives shaped by the notion of neighbourhood. It's a tricky question because since the early 60s modern western life has been characterized by mobility. The highway, the high-rise, the automobile and the plane became the structured shape of our living. Coupled with notions of progress and upward mobility the aim of life was moving up and this usually meant moving away.

Place was a placeholder on the way to somewhere else; it was real estate to be bought and sold as we sought the next level of success.

The Euro-tribal churches built all their congregational and denominational systems into this created imagination so that for some four generations this has been the only model of Christian life within the once dominant churches of Europe and North America.

All of this is changing. What, therefore, is the meaning of place for Christian life in (our contemporary) West? I'm discovering this is not as easy a question to answer as I first imagined. I thought I had this one figured out from the perspective of Christian life. Now I'm not so sure. There is a complexity here that I had not imagined and my lack of imagination came from having

conversations limited to my own tribal group (the Euro-tribal) rather than listening to the others in our midst.

It's one thing to be a 71-year-old, white, middle class Euro-tribal who owns real-estate and talk about place; it's another to be a Hispanic person who has lived all his/her life in the US, who now can never be sure when the place where they dwell will be taken away, with a knock at the door and deportation. It's another thing to be an African or Syrian immigrant/refugee torn from one's place and relocated in a strange land. It is an entirely other thing to be an indigenous person living with a profoundly different relationship to land than the dominant culture.

A young, educated millennial often sees place (with its connotations of neighbourhood and belonging) as something of an outmoded notion in a digital world where the geographies of modern cities and their relationships are more determined by technology and social media than by physical space.

For a young person living in many parts of North America there may be a deep desire to stay rooted in generations of family location, but find it impossible as a globalised economy makes finding work impossible.

My grandchildren, like a majority of their contemporaries across North America, are deeply anxious about whether they will have a place to live and be when they grow up. In major cities, such as Vancouver where I live, they know that the price of housing means there is no place for them.

This complicated question of place presses into often taken-for-granted assumptions we carry around inside of us. I listen to many Euro-tribal Christians for whom space and place are given meaning through the lenses of "real-estate" (property to be owned, bought and sold for the purpose of maximizing one's social and economic life) or the lenses of career development where place is a moment in time, where I happen to be somewhere, but then will be moving on to somewhere else at some point. I listen to the leaders of these Christians talk about purchasing real estate for their "church buildings", so that people can drive many miles to be together as affinity groups. Place is unimportant compared to ease of location (highways) and the costs of owning.

Then I listen to Hispanic, Asian, African and First Nations peoples across North America. I realize how limited and out of tune is the Euro-tribal church's relationship to place. The language of real estate and the primacy of the economic value of land as a resource, is for indigenous peoples, for example, not just foreign but abhorrent and destructive—a significant source of the disease of the modern West. For these people, land is neither object nor commodity. It is alive with story and it indwells us as much we indwell it.

I listen to the African-American theologian Willie James Jennings declare that Christian life can only be lived as a radically reconciling gift to the world, when Christians are rooted in the soil where they live. He, too, tells

us that soil is alive, the earth (creation) is alive and we have to sit in it (dwelling in it deeply) if we are to have any clue about what God is doing in the world today. This is a radically different understanding of place that cannot be framed in terms of social media, transportation, cost-benefit analysis or generational preference.

How do we square the circle between these radically different narratives? Each carry within them their own "theologies", their own framing of God, creation and what it means to be human. **Place is a big deal. Whatever else we may want to say, it is a critical issue that challenges us to the core of our identities as Christians in the West today.**

Each of us, as we read this, are situated in some place—our home, work place, local coffee shop, etc., that locates and gives shape to our everyday lives. Places where we dwell are complicated geographies that in our contemporary contexts, raise complex questions about the shape of Christian life. Lesslie Newbigin's still critical question about the nature of a missiological engagement with the modern West<sup>1</sup>, could be explored simply by looking at our changing understanding of place over the last half century.

Through a series of grounded interviews across the UK and North America that crossed racial and ethnic boundaries we offered a picture of Christian communities wrestling with this question of place. We're witnessing a resurgence of interest in place as the primary locus of God's activities. There is now a myriad of calls to go local, church plant in the neighbourhood and inhabit a new parish and many of us are trying to sort out what this means. We have only begun to scratch the surface of the meaning of place and how we practice a faithful presence in the places where we dwell. Here are some further reflections...

**1. We have only begun to understand what's at stake when we ask about the meaning of place and Christian practice.**

After engaging in interviews with people from African, Latino, First Nations and other traditions, one is left with new and disturbing questions. Which groups are engaging questions of place and 'the local' right now and which aren't asking these questions?

Are these questions about the meaning of place shaped primarily by white, middle-class Christians? If so, why? Are the African, Latino, Asian and First Nation peoples who have shared their stories, theologies, reflections and understandings of place asking the same questions or naming the same issues as the white Euro-tribals?

An honest response would seem to suggest that they are not. The grounded interviews suggest there are massively different realities and experiences at stake across these groups from those of middle class, Euro-tribal Christians in their new desire to connect in their neighbourhoods, condominiums and suburbs.

First Nation people embody a radically different story and experience about the meaning of place. They have a different understanding and practice of dwelling in the land with God, than anything in the Euro-tribal imagination.<sup>2</sup> Even language becomes difficult here since the words we use give us perspective on how we see ourselves and others around us. **(Indigenous) peoples are quite clear in their descriptions of the Euro-tribals, they are the colonizers and, secondarily, settlers—those who came and took land for themselves, turning it from the living space within which all of life is shaped, into real estate to be possessed then sold as a commodity.** How do we have conversations as Christians across these language worlds?

The meaning of place for Christian practice for many immigrant peoples is very different to that of white, middle-class Christians desiring to 'meet the neighbourhood'. Here, one engages communities of God's people who are already grounded in practices of belonging and expectation to encounter God in the local.

For many Latino peoples in the United States, place for these brothers and sisters is tenuous at best. Place is a dream, a utopia, when set beside the reality of so many who sleep unsure what the next day might bring in terms of deportation or hardship. Economic disparities bar any hope of dwelling well in a place.

Our cities are increasingly populated with young adults with no expectation they'll ever be able to afford a place of their own. Even the construction of this sentence reveals assumptions, a

whole economic colonization of place, that makes it almost impossible to address the more fundamental issues of Christian discipleship.

The Western notions of the single-family home and the nuclear family may be, deservedly, outdated, but the point remains. The generations emerging into leadership in our societies have less and less sense that they can shape their life in a place of stability and continuity.

Without this kind of hope and imagination it is impossible to have thriving communities. We are finding that our children and teenagers are beset by an increasing anxiety that they'll have nowhere to live when they become adults. For their parents, the call to be Christian by committing to a place was a wonderful ideal before family responsibility, work and aspiration shaped their lives in another direction.

What is a theology of place in the midst of all these distinct and interrelated realities? What kind of social communities of God's people are we nurturing in response to these situations?

**2. There are stories of hope and stability.**

Our interviews revealed Christian communities testing and experimenting with ways to re-engage the places where they live and where they have been called to put down roots. They show us that when one dwells in a community over a long period of time, connections are woven that enable us to see how to be God's people in a place.

What we learn is that time is no small element in this question of place. Some in the stories we heard have chosen to live in the same place over several generations<sup>3</sup>, others have moved to a place as a form of 'ministry' and, in arriving, recognized that the attitude of 'ministry' (serving others, finding and meeting needs) as important a part of Christian life as that may be, is woefully inadequate for any genuine engagement with the people of a place.<sup>4</sup>

**Something far more than 'ministry' is being called for, that gets close to the older, Benedictine, commitment to the vow of stability.**

It is in the midst of this practice that communities of God's people have discovered that out ahead of them, in their neighbourhoods, God's Spirit is already at work in so many unexpected ways. Stability is the ground from which God's people finally begin to listen

to the people in their communities and attend to the stories the Spirit is gestating ahead of them.

### 3. There are big issues to address

In the edition of our journal that this article is taken from we continued to get clearer about the questions that confront Christian life and witness in a West undergoing a huge unravelling. Here are some issues that arose...

#### 3.1 Place is a new concern for white, Euro-tribal Christians who are trying to understand something that is no longer a normal part of the social life of Christians

In his seminal book on place, John Inge provides a summary account of the demise of our understanding of and relationship to place across the West<sup>5</sup>. The concreteness and everydayness of place has been displaced by two other categories—space and time.

For many Euro-tribal Christians, local, embodied relations are to be transcended and left behind. If one wants to catch a glimpse of the effects of this, through the eyes of, for example, Indigenous peoples, see books by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* and the excellent reflection on how many Euro-tribals have lost their sense of place in Heather Menzies', *Reclaiming the Commons for the Common Good: A Memoir & Manifest*.

While place (the local, the neighbourhood) is now the new flavour of the time for Euro-tribal Christians (after the 'missional' conversation, it's the 'neighbourhood' conversation) we need to be clear about what is at stake or 'place' will become one more tactic (like missional) for being a groovy kind of church.

In the challenge of understanding how to be God's people in place, we confront a deeply embedded way of life (*habitus*) built into our structures, stories and social life. We need go no further than the churches many of us attend to see this—they're often comprised of people who get in a car to travel some spacial distance to meet with others in a building that is largely disconnected from both its neighbourhood and the people who gather in it. As one North American pastor stated in response to a JMP article (The End of Liberalism):

My church has struggled greatly

as the neoliberal narrative and missional/neighbourly narrative have begun competing with one another. When we were younger (not married, married with no kids, and in entry level jobs) we could operate in both streams. But **as our marginal time has been chewed up, many of our people have determined that a missional/neighbourly narrative is unrealistic.**

These kinds of on-the-ground realizations from committed and articulate leaders cannot be dismissed with simplistic answers. Embedded habits and imaginations have displaced place; they are not going away with a conference, a few courses on being local, a seminary program on neighbourhood or innovation, or a new workbook on how to do asset mapping of a neighbourhood. This is about a fundamental conversion of Christian imagination that most Euro-tribals haven't begun to confront.

#### 3.2 There are complexities and histories to be embraced before we can discern the preventing and calling of the Spirit of Jesus (Acts 16).

While the UK 'enclosure displacements' of the eighteenth century created massively disruptive change in terms of migrations into new industrial cities and emigrations of poor, agrarian-based peoples to the colonies and US, the reality was that until the early part of the twentieth century most people in Europe and North America continued to live in a social imagination within which place was predominant.

This imagination persisted even though in science, technology and social theory time and space were becoming the dominant modes for interpreting the world.

As John Inge points out, most people remained bound to place until well into the period between the two twentieth century World Wars even while notions of place were moving to the edges of western social, political, technological and scientific thought<sup>6</sup>. Space became the dominant imagination in these fields, a space that was unbounded, limitless and infinitely extending.

This was a very different imagination than that of place, the local, the boundedness of the everyday. The social revolutions that began after the end of WWII and exploded into the cultures of the West in the 1960s were

ripe for this transformation in social imaginary. Space was the perfect companion to new movements of emancipation, seeking to break what was now seen as the stifling demands of traditions that kept the individual chained to a specific location.

The social revolutions of the twentieth century were about this fundamental shift in social imaginary from place to space. When these kinds of shifts in culture occur, it means that another way of life has already become embedded and embodied in the habits and folkways of a whole culture.

This is why the re-engagement with place is going to require far more than some tactics for learning to read a neighbourhood. The grounds for this shift had already been prepared for by the massive population shifts resulting from the enclosure laws more than a century before.

#### The forced removal of agrarian workers into the new social spaces of the emerging industrial cities was hugely disruptive to these peoples as they were remade from agrarian peoples to an industrial proletariat.

The emerging new forms of social life (the clubs, churches, neighbourhoods, 'societies' and 'nuclear families') would have evolved from the attempts of several generations to recreate place in these new industrial cities. But lying just beneath the surface would be the collective memories and anxieties of disruption and dispossession that would never go away.

What contributed to an emerging solidarity around the meaning of place in these industrial cities would have been,

1. the solidarity of a close-knit group with a common story of loss,
2. the insecurities of wage-earning labour with,
3. the awareness that there were power groups of class and authority (managers and owners) who could disrupt them at any moment (which must be the contemporary experience of many Latinos in the US).

Within these realities Euro-tribal working-class people constructed a different sense of place within the industrial cities. Such places (neighbourhoods and parishes) would have been bounded communities. Within such bounded communities there would have been rules, codes of

social life, specific local dialects which, collectively, created social cohesion—ways of living together that produced security and managed anxieties, but all of it dependent on a government or owner who provided wages. This was the context of social life that re-framed the experience of place so central to life right up to the 1950s. It was the reality around which churches shaped a new way of being the church.

It was this sense of place that was clear cut and then burnt over by the revolutions of the 60s when space and time with all their promise of unbounded freedom for the individual finally emerged. The result was the irruption into the West of open-ended space as the primary metaphor for social life with the rapid diminishment of place as a socially constructive imagination.

This massive transformation was resourced by what was called the Golden Age—that post-war period from the 50s to the 70s of economic growth that produced a new, suburban-based middle class. Linked to this conceptuality of space are notions of emancipation and individualization inside a narrative of the open-ended, the unbounded, the limitless.

**What was birthed was a radically new social imaginary that has little need for such limiting, bounded and tradition-imposing notions as place. Place was now a place holder on the way to somewhere else; it was real estate to be bought and sold on the way to the next level of success.** Stark, but now almost unrecognisable, structural examples of this changed imaginary across the West are the highways and motorways that take people anywhere and the suburbs that could be anywhere, these now shape our time. Along with these radical cultural transformations there came into full bloom after the wars a consumer capitalism designed for the unbounded space of newly emancipated individuals. The Euro-tribal churches built their congregational and denominational systems into this created imagination. For over four generations this has been practically the only model of Christian life within these once dominant churches of Europe and North America. This complex social history is now the habitus of almost all Euro-tribal Christians. It is also the reality that stands in the background

for all other groups seeking to embrace and engage the contemporary West.

**Claims and calls to re-engage the local must reflect carefully about what all this means for a missiological engagement with the West.** Rather than naively proposing tactics for engaging neighbourhoods, the direction of hope lies in a journey that cannot be 'mapped'.

It will involve the patient taking on of the practice of listening with and being directed by the 'other'. This is where the most significant learning has come from in terms of this conversation about place.<sup>7</sup>

### 3.3 The Other and the Euro-tribals

In our research we have been listening to the stories and experiences of Hispanic, Asian, African and First Nations peoples. Among these people the language of real estate and the primacy of the economic value of land as a resource is absent.

For some, place is a desired presence always threatened by other powers so that it's hard to see how place can have any meaning beyond an idea.

**For indigenous people place is powerfully alive, filled with and shaping the stories of who they are—place is identity rather than an idea or doctrine.** I write these words aware that right now many indigenous people of the Pacific North West and the Vancouver area are standing in protest against Kinder Morgan completing a pipeline that will transport highly poisonous bitumen from the province of Alberta to Vancouver ports for export to US oil refineries. These pipelines must cross sovereign First Nation lands but the Canadian federal government calls meetings with the Premiers of Alberta and British Columbia to discuss the question of the pipeline with no consultation with First Nation's peoples.

They are not a part of decisions and negotiations because they hold a fundamentally different understanding of place. Place indwells them as much as they indwell it. At the same time, here in Vancouver, I listen to generations of younger adults recognizing that, in the current economics of 'real estate' they will never have the chance to dwell in place. I then wonder how we can even begin to frame a Christian response to our time? If Christian life can only be lived as a radically reconciling gift to the

world when Christians are rooted in the soil where they live, then how will there be a Christian witness?

These are profoundly disorienting perspectives on Christian life and witness. They call us to recover a commitment to place but many of us are starting to realize that **there is no easy, well-paved road along which to travel. We are being disturbed by the Spirit to enter a journey, like pilgrims, that is going to require us to make the paths as we walk on them. The gift of the Spirit for us in this is the amazingly patient, faith filled 'others'—the Indigenous, and those from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and elsewhere beyond the West.**

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks* (London: SPCK, 1986), p1.

<sup>2</sup> The immensely important book by the African American theologian Willie James Jennings, *Christian Imagination* (Yale University Press, 2010), is a critical text in understanding why this is the case. See also Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017) and Heather Menzies, *Reclaiming the Commons for the Common Good* (New Society, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Sally Mann and Angie Allgood share this story in 'A Deeply Rooted Missional Community in Bonny Downs,' *Journal of Missional Practice*, Issue 7, Spring 2016.

<sup>4</sup> See these three stories in the current issue: Chris Smith's story in 'A Church in Englewood and Place in our Culture,' Danny Fong's story in 'The Bayview Webinar: The Long Journey into Neighborhood,' and finally John Bradbury's story in 'Building Trust: How Come you Guys don't Give up on us?'

<sup>5</sup> John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Inge, *Christian Theology of Place*, 9-11.

<sup>7</sup> See the new book: Alan J. Roxburgh and Martin Robinson, *Practices for the Refounding of God's People* (Atlanta GA: Church Publishing, 2018).