Refounding God’s People

– Parish Ministry and God’s Agency

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Acts 16: 6-15 Russell Mitchell-Walker

At the Inhabit Conference as part of my Leadership in the New Parish program in Seattle, there was a pre-event day workshop on Refounding God’s People: Beyond the Missional Conversation. Alan Roxburgh and Martin Robinson were the leaders who have been on the forefront of working with churches to be missional. I want to share with you much of my learnings from that day. Bear with me as this includes more information about the changing culture and its meaning for the church, but I also invite you to engagement and spiritual practice by the end. They began the session with this reading from Acts and asking us the questions:

Where did your imagination get stopped?

What question(s) emerge for you?

Many of us were stopped by the message that the Holy Spirit stopped the apostles from going into Asia. It seemed foreign to many of us. What is clear in the story however, is that the apostles are being led by God, in fact, by the Trinity, because throughout the story they have experiences with God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. They are open to the ways God is leading them and directing them. It is that God’s is the primary agent that is important, not our own agenda. Having visions and messages in whatever form from God, may seem pretty unusual to us. However, it is more likely that we don’t talk about our spiritual experiences or pay attention to them. I bet if we gathered a group of us and talked about our experiences of God, the Spirit or what we might call the unexplained, that there would be many stories and experiences people could share. Maybe it is time we are more open to talking and paying attention to these ways God moves in our lives. There may be, probably are times, that God is trying to tell us something.

In our session, Alan spoke about their involvement in the missional conversation over the years, which significant parts of the church have been involved in. To be missional in this context meant to be a community of God’s people organized around living out God’s mission in the world. It was intended to take the church out into the world to do mission in the community but after 15-20 years of working with churches in this area, Alan says it has not made one bit of difference. He says the problem as he now understands it, is that that it was internal focused, it was a church centred conversation. It didn’t work because it did not look outward to the culture. So now they are turning to parish, rootedness, local inhabiting. It’s a focus on the neighbourhood and culture and what is happening there.

What is happening is an unravelling of what is known as the late modern story. The story now is that we can live life well without God – human agency shapes what we do. Modernity replaced God with three things:

1. The Nation State
2. Capitalism
3. Self

So the belief has become if you put your trust and confidence in the nation state, climb consumer capitalism you will discover for your self all that you need. This is the cultural myth we live in today. Modernity has been unravelling and replaced with this Postmodern, post-Christian thinking.

This has had a huge impact on us and the church – we see it in congregations – in our congregation. We see the decline in the church, and we are anxious. We look for places where there is growth and success and out of our anxiety try to adopt it where we are. An example of this is the success of gatherings of Theology on Tap in England. It was very popular and successful at gathering people in pubs for conversations about theology. We see that here and bring it in our communities without realizing the context is different. We do not have the same pub culture so it does not work. The church has people coming to church without the kind of church history many long time churchgoers have grown up with, which includes a sense of stewardship. As a result our givings are down because the later generations give much less than our grandparents or great grandparents. Here at Eastside we have struggled to have good stewardship campaigns with fewer people to help out. So we try to do the same with less and this contributes to the decline. This contributes to an anxiety and we function out of anxiety. Much of the new attempts in the church to do things differently have been out of anxiety –including church planting, which is newer to us, the missional movement, and developing new programs.

So what do we do? Roxburgh and Robinson invite us into practices for seeing God as the primary agent in what we are doing, and what we are called to do. Can we cultivate with each other the practices and habits which keep us in touch with God’s guidance, the Spirit and what Christ is calling us to do in our community? Alan says

God is already bubbling and fermenting a new future. The critical vocation of those in leadership is about cultivating the space, the tables for people with whom I dwell to go on a journey together to learn what God is doing and join in with what God is doing.

He says we have to be on a massive learning curve ourselves as leaders if we are going to do this. He encourages clergy to gather together in a learning circle using an action-reflection model over a year to explore this change and mission, keep one another accountable and develop spiritual practices for engaging with God and in the community. The Canadian United Church clergy in the course are exploring this possibility of forming a learning circle with Alan as our coach and I have an opportunity to be a part of it. The group covenants together to take care of themselves, walk the neighbourbood, begin conversations and listen, and dwell on the word each day. Many of you know I have begun to do some of this. It is hard to do it alone and to stick with it. A learning circle is importantfor support and accountability, spiritual practice and learning.

As we engage these possibilities, and work to learn about the neighbourhood, and find out what God is up to, I have an invitation for you. Over the summer, as part of this work toward refounding God’s people and finding out what God is up to in the neighbourhood, I invite you to meet with your neighbours with the goal of getting to know them or if you know them, get to know them differently. Gather a group of your neighbours and have conversation. It may include exploring the following questions:

* Who is your neighbour? Who are the people in your neighbourhood? Are the demographics changing?
* What are the assets of your neighbourhood? What do people love about it?
* What are the hurts of the neighbourhood? What are the issues or concerns?
* What would you like to see happen in the community? What is happening that you like or is exciting?

We will put these questions in our announcements as well as the summer newsletter which will go out in June. Be creative in how you gather. In September we will have a Parish Sunday where we will share some of the stories of our experiences.

At my course in Seattle in January, we visited a Mega church that had an auditorium worship space that seated 5000 people. We met at a house with some Parish ministers that two young men had trained after taking the Leadership in the New Parish course a few years ago. One of the members of the community talked about putting up a bench in the edge of his garden on the front corner of his house. People gathered and conversation happens. He said, as a member of this more conservative mega-church, ‘we don’t care if they come to church, they are experiencing the gospel here’. This is an example of what God is up to in the neighbourhood.

Finally as part of this proposal Alan and Martin are presenting, they offered three Refounding Practices that they see as core about living and being in community. I note that many of these points are challenging to me, so I understand if they are challenging to you too.

1. Recovery of Place; return to the parish
   1. if you have to get in a car to drive to church, we are not able to be about God's work
   2. Space is boundless and endless. When space gets substantiated in hiways and cars, it redefines space and place
   3. Synagogue, parish is about walking and meeting together
   4. we cannot go on this journey without the recovery of the parish and the local and the dwelling in the local
   5. There can be no refounding in the church without the church becoming this. This is how the early church formed and functioned.
2. The communities we are forming have to be Eucharistic at the core
   1. what gathers us is this unambiguous sense that our identity is formed at that table in the elements where we meet Jesus
   2. It constantly practices us in the utter materiality of the Christian story, which is critical to the parish
   3. What’s the core identity around which we gather? It may not be communion but could be a common meal.
3. At the core of the community is keeping something like the daily office, morning, midday and evening prayers.
   1. keeping of the hours – at the Seattle School where we meet for Leadership in the New Parish there is a bell at 9am, 12pm 3pm and 6pm to remind us to pause and pray.
   2. It is a daily rhythm – There are online suggestions in the announcements and an printed resource at the back to take home if you wish to begin a daily practice of prayer.
   3. It helps us learn as a community that you are not being shaped by regular time but by God's time
   4. in keeping daily office, you are learning that the future of the world does not depend on you.
   5. You have to stop to keep the daily office. We live into - this is God's world, not my world
   6. Not making the time to stop to do it, lays bare a fundamental layer of human agency, not God's agency. We are not putting God first in our lives.

As we look to engage in these practices, we are invited to work toward dwelling in Parish where we live. How do we listen to the stories of the people in the context of where we live? It was a real real challenge to me, when Alan said,

It is clear that there are people that have needs. To the extent that we go into the neighbourhood looking to meet the needs we are in control and will never meet a Lydia. We need to become guests of the other in the neighbourhood and be open to the Spirit.

Much of what we have been about in church and community development is seeking to meet needs. What this is saying is that it is about relationship and being open to the Spirit. It is a good reminder. Lydia offered generous hospitality to the apostles and is an example to us of how to live our faith. Sharing the gospel, evokes hospitality and hospitality is an important part of sharing the gospel. It is a good reminder on this Mothers’ Day as many of us celebrate mothers who were masters of offering hospitality.

We were also encouraged by Alan to be open to the invitation to test and experiment what God is calling you to do. Roxburgh shared with us that in the Jewish tradition the Sabbath starts at sundown because that is when we go to sleep and God is in control at that point. It is not about getting up and doing our own thing to start the Sabbath. It starts with God. Everything needs to start with God. We were also told that in our congregations God has already given visions and messages on what God wants in the community. Do we know what they are?

May we be open to the Spirit guiding and directing us into our community, our neighbours, and speaking to us in new ways and may we listen. May we embrace the invitation to gather our neighbours and learn from one another. May we engage in daily practices to deepen our spirituality and connection with God as we walk on this journey together.