

Along the track

Joining God in the Neighbourhood 1

Missional: Joining God in the Neighbourhood by Alan J. Roxburgh is a very timely book. It should be required reading for any Parish Council or anyone trying to build community intent on mission. To do this book justice in a few hundred words is impossible but there are a couple of thoughts worth considering.

Parishes are shrinking, being amalgamated, struggling to find a purpose in today's environment. Despite studies and research, strategies and innovative schemes at times, people are still drifting away. If we look at the parish newsletters, they are very much about maintenance rather than mission. They offer formation for becoming aware of God at work at critical stages of life – in other words sacramental formation. But do we ever ask where is God at work in our town or neighbourhood? Is God only at our beck and call, at work in our churches or do we need to go out and find where God is already at work in ways we never even imagined? It is true that the church, the local parish is designed to make the presence and activity of God present in this time and place. But it is not the only organisation that does that, nor is it the only place where that happens. The church shares in God's mission - it is not the only way God's mission takes shape or makes itself present. Dwindling numbers remind us starkly that many find parishes no longer relevant. Many find God elsewhere. Some assume those who have drifted away are no longer searching for God. That simply isn't true.

The question for many church groups is how can we go out into the world and join God who is already at work out there? It requires quite a different mindset. Roxburgh's book is not just another program but a challenge to that mindset.

Joining God in the neighbourhood means going back into our neighbourhoods and discovering what the Spirit is doing there - to start with God's mission rather than our own. Today it's about being open and trusting enough to go out and join with what God is doing in the world. That's not easy especially when we think we already know what God's mission is and where it is.

It sounds easy enough. It is not a simple, painless change and just another strategy or new pastoral plan. I remember some years ago talking to a newly ordained Bishop about his plan to establish a pastoral plan. So what sort of needs analysis will you do? What do you mean? Well, how will you know what your communities need, what are their strengths, what are they doing? The bottom line was, his pastoral plan was about

resources, amalgamation of parishes etc. To be fair, he was consultative and encouraging of others, but he already knew what to do and how it should be done!

So do we have the courage to trust in God, to go out and see where God is already at work where we live? We live in challenging times but, as Roxburgh writes, those late-first-century Gentile Christians were being challenged to let go of a deeply entrenched imagination and trust that God was up to something radically outside anything they had come to expect. It was a big challenge. So are we up to it? We simply can't keep doing what we are doing but are we willing to think differently, to be courageous, to take the road less travelled?

So how do we connect with the stories of our neighbourhood? Or do we in our churches think that God is with us and not out there among the people God loves? Roxburgh uses Luke 10 as an example – do you remember it where Jesus sends out the seventy two to every town and place where he was about to go. The hardest part of joining God in mission in your neighbourhood is to let go of preconceived notions and learning to see again with fresh eyes. How might you learn to see your neighbourhood through God's eyes? So how do we do that today? Start by practising naming what you believe God might be up to in your neighbourhood. And do that regularly.

Sometimes we need to upend our thinking. Whenever I used this quote from *Water of Life*, people struggled. Nice thought but not one we were brought up with. *Authentic spirituality is not so much about our search for God but God's search for us*, *Water of Life* 3.3. But the Hebrew Scriptures are full of stories where God takes the initiative. Jesus tells the story of the Prodigal Son which is really a story about the father who goes out to meet his wayward son and again to the other son who was angry and felt betrayed. It is an image of God, going out, seeking us out.

So where is God doing that in our town or suburb or community today? How is God inviting us to join in God's mission?

First, listen to the stories in our neighbourhood. Don't take our baggage with us, our preconceived notions, our judgemental attitudes, our notion that God is only at work in our church. We might be surprised.

Regards

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