



Present where God *has placed us to be his witnesses*

David Thompson ponders whether we have lost the importance of our sense of place in how we bear witness to the gospel as congregations and followers of Jesus.

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I wonder how often we are struck by a sense of place these days.

We spend so much of our time in cyberspace, perhaps it has become a real challenge to notice the physical surroundings we inhabit. Too often, it doesn't seem to matter where we are so long as we can click to connect online. The almost universal wearing of headphones as we commute, run or walk means it is very easy to disconnect from everyday sights and sounds around us and become unaware of others as we retreat into our own little disembodied world. The ease with which we can travel, change job or uproot from the place we once considered home make ours an increasingly rootless generation.

Does any of this matter? Is it simply the outworking of technological advancement, being part of an ever-smaller world and having so many choices?

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One aspect of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland's 'Present' initiative is a call to recover a sense of our place in his world. More particularly, it is an invitation to explore the particular possibilities of where God has placed us as congregations and individuals to bear witness to him.

To do that requires a number of very intentional actions on our part. We need to learn to pay attention to our surroundings. What sort of place is this? What strikes us about it? From there, we can grow in our alertness

as to what is happening and what isn't. Who is around? Who isn't? As we become more attuned, we notice deeper things like where people gather around here, or what symbols suggest what makes this community tick. All of that contributes to our sense of place in these surroundings. Do we belong here or not? What would it take for us to belong? How do others experience my presence among them? Am I a stranger, acquaintance, friend? Am I acting as guest or host, or neither, in this relationship?

In these ways we can move towards being fully present where we find our feet planted.

Sometimes that presence comes with a sense of discomfort. We sense ourselves out of place. We don't feel like we really belong here. At other times, we can feel very much at home. This is our kind of place among our kind of people. There is synergy here.

A place in the neighbourhood: Recovering the witness of the local church

In recent years, it may be that we have lost something of the importance of the local witness of our congregation. This can happen for a number of reasons.

Perhaps an increasing number of our members who used to live in the area round about the church building no longer do so. We have become a drive-in congregation, increasingly disconnected from those who now live in the neighbourhood.

Maybe our community has radically

changed in make up or complexion. That has left us scratching our heads as we find our well-worn ways of connecting in the past no longer seem to work the way they used to do.

Possibly we find ourselves in a centreless suburbia in which there are no local places for the community to gather. In fact, most people seem happy enough to come home from work, park the car in the driveway and retreat into the sanctuary of their living room for the rest of their waking hours.

Could it be that we have bought into some well-meaning Christian jargon of recent years which has convinced us that we only gather for worship in our buildings and then scatter to a thousand different everyday frontlines for the only witness that really matters? This imbalanced view can contribute to the loss of any sense of priority or possibility of the potential of the witness of our church in its immediate locality.

All of this begs the question, would it really matter if our church building wasn't where it was? Would it make any difference to us if it was further up the road or in the next village? Might we even find that more convenient? Would it make any difference to those who live around our buildings if our church wasn't there, in that place it has always occupied?

Being part of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland locates our congregation as one of over 500 church communities which are placed where they are by a mix of historical circumstances and kingdom

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intentionality. Whichever it may be, we quite literally are where we are by God's plan.

The forthcoming denomination-wide reconfiguration of ministry process will ask difficult questions about how many church buildings we have and where we will and won't have them in the future. Perhaps congregational parish reach will need to be much wider, but that possibility has been made practical by our ability to travel further and more quickly by car and public transport than our ancestors ever dreamed conceivable. None of that, though, will negate the fact that we will still need congregations deeply embedded in place.

A place in our network: Recognising the power of relationship in witness

As much as place is a physical reality, it also expresses itself relationally in the networks of people with whom we rub shoulders. Again, we need to stop and take stock of the significance of that if it is not to pass us by.

Think of all the people with whom we regularly rub shoulders with in an ordinary week – where we live, work, study, socialise, or see on our commute. Each little conversation and interaction develops the soft tissue of relationship in which we give more of ourselves away to others and they offer more of themselves to us. They learn more about us, we learn more about them and relationship deepens.

In that exchange, there ought to be an element of who we are as followers

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of Jesus becoming more apparent to others. It should show itself in our actions and reactions, in what we say and what we don't, in the values and virtues that Christ by his Spirit is honing in our lives. Similarly, as those in our circle of influence open up to us about their lives, there comes a gradual granting of permission to speak with the accent of God's love, grace, wisdom, peace, truth and hope. It's like a sharing of life, opens up a sharing of faith, or perhaps the sharing of an invitation to come to worship or something else that is happening in our church.

All of that rests on our intentional awareness of the place we inhabit by God's appointment in the network of people he brings in and around our lives. More than that, it flows from a prayerfulness about opportunities to be a witness for him, not just in theory, but in practice.

Time and place

The reminder to be present where God has placed us to be his witnesses is a timely call because we often feel our place as Christians in community and society in Ireland is ever decreasing. If it is to open up and open out again, it

will not do so by accident. It will only do so by a mix of persevering prayer and positive presence.

What kind of conversation might your congregation need to have about being present in the neighbourhood in which God has placed it? Often that presence doesn't have to require doing some big thing. Rather, it will leave its impression by doing the right thing based on a divinely ordered overlap of apparent local needs and available congregational resources.

What kind of conversation might you have with God about the potential of relational networks in which he has placed you to be bearers of witness to him in the lives of others? Often being more present to others by giving them your time, offering a listening ear, showing kindness and offering a gentle invitation to pray has a greater impact than we might ever imagine.

Let's not miss the moment by making sure we are fully present where God has placed us to be his witnesses.

Rev David Thompson is PCI's Secretary of the Council for Congregational Life and Witness.