

FOREWORD BY MICHAEL FROST

ALAN BRIGGS



STAYING

IS THE NEW

GOING

CHOOSING
TO LOVE
WHERE GOD
PLACES YOU



Simple and on point. The relevance of local churches in the West rests on these principles.

DAVE RUNYON

Coauthor of *The Art of Neighboring* and director of CityUnite

Jesus' response to a question about which neighbors are worthy of our love is to say, in effect, "Just be a neighbor." In *Staying Is the New Going*, Alan Briggs offers us a winsome and practical exploration of an oft-neglected, yet vital component of neighborliness—longevity in place. With insight garnered from experience and listening to others, *Staying Is the New Going* is a welcome addition.

SEAN GLADDING

Author of *The Story of God, the Story of Us* and *TEN: Words of Life for an Addicted, Compulsive, Cynical, Divided and Worn-out Culture*

Jesus plants his people—the people of the Kingdom—in a context. This includes family, workplace, culture, and the places we live. In order to bear fruit in that place, his people must take root. In this wonderful book, we follow Alan as he sets aside wings and learns to put down roots. This book is for learners and is clearly written by a learner. It is challenging, not because the concepts are hard to understand, but because we've somehow drifted far from the timeless truths Jesus told about love for one's neighbor. I long to see God's people rooted both in Christ and in their neighborhoods. In Alan I sense a like-hearted traveler

who helps me see that my greatest journey may simply be a walk around the block.

AL ENGLER

Mission director of Nav Neighbors, The Navigators

Do you have the courage to join in how God is working right around you, in your everyday life? Perhaps more importantly, do we as the church? This timely and energizing new book by Alan Briggs dares you to join a movement that's probably much closer than you imagined.

TIM SOERENS

Cofounding director of Parish Collective and coauthor of *The New Parish*

STAYING IS THE NEW GOING



CHOOSING TO LOVE WHERE GOD PLACES YOU

ALAN BRIGGS

NAVPRESS 

*A NavPress resource published in alliance
with Tynedale House Publishers, Inc.*



NavPress is the publishing ministry of The Navigators, an international Christian organization and leader in personal spiritual development. NavPress is committed to helping people grow spiritually and enjoy lives of meaning and hope through personal and group resources that are biblically rooted, culturally relevant, and highly practical.

For more information, visit www.NavPress.com.

Staying Is the New Going: Choosing to Love Where God Places You

Copyright © 2015 by Alan Briggs. All rights reserved.

A NavPress resource published in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

NAV PRESS and the NAV PRESS logo are registered trademarks of NavPress, The Navigators, Colorado Springs, CO. TYNDALE is a registered trademark of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. Absence of ® in connection with marks of NavPress or other parties does not indicate an absence of registration of those marks.

The Team: Don Pape, Publisher; David Zimmerman, Acquisitions Editor

Cover design by Mark Anthony Lane II

Cover photograph of clouds copyright © Kevin Russ/Stocksy.com. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of houses copyright © Lior Zilberstein/Stocksy.com. All rights reserved.

Cover illustration of sunburst copyright © ThunderPixels/Creative Market. All rights reserved.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked MSG are taken from *THE MESSAGE* by Eugene H. Peterson, copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*,® NIV.® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Some of the anecdotal illustrations in this book are true to life and are included with the permission of the persons involved. All other illustrations are composites of real situations, and any resemblance to people living or dead is coincidental.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Briggs, Alan.

Staying is the new going : choosing to love where God places you / Alan Briggs.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-63146-479-9

1. Witness bearing (Christianity) I. Title.

BV4520.B647 2015

248.5—dc23

2015021903

Printed in the United States of America

21 20 19 18 17 16 15
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Foreword by Michael Frost *xi*

Introduction *xv*

CHAPTER 1:	The Resurrection of Place	<i>1</i>
CHAPTER 2:	Bikes, Gardens, and Forgotten Places	<i>21</i>
CHAPTER 3:	The Story behind Your Place	<i>41</i>
CHAPTER 4:	A Rooted Gospel	<i>59</i>
CHAPTER 5:	The Glory of the Mundane	<i>71</i>
CHAPTER 6:	The Risk of Wings	<i>85</i>
CHAPTER 7:	The Risk of Roots	<i>101</i>
CHAPTER 8:	Salt, Light, and Shovels	<i>121</i>
CHAPTER 9:	Stay Forth!	<i>149</i>

Acknowledgments *171*

Notes *173*

Foreword

THERE WAS A TIME when American readers seemed enamored of novelists for whom the world was their oyster—writers who traveled widely, who crossed frontiers and opened their eyes to worlds readers had never dreamed of. They couldn't get enough of the novels of Jack London or Ernest Hemingway. They thrilled to the exotic stories of Joseph Conrad and James A. Michener. These writers and many like them created the myth that we must leave home and travel far and wide to experience the world and to find our life's work. They infected their readers with wanderlust. They invite us to disregard the mundane and to see home as a launching pad, never a destination.

But we oughtn't forget the marvelous American literary tradition of the distinctly provincial writer. These novelists and poets wrote out of their deep and abiding connection to their place. Many of them never left their home. All of them were profoundly shaped by the topography of their locale, its seasons, its residents, and its sense of place. It's the kind

of regional writing you encounter in Thoreau and Emerson and Twain (although he also traveled widely).

You can start to understand the richness of provincial writing when you read the gorgeous poetry of Emily Dickinson and realize that there could have been no Emily Dickinson without the town of Amherst, Massachusetts. Indeed, Dickinson spent most of the last decade of her life confined to her Amherst house, producing exquisite work that wouldn't be read until after her death.

Likewise, the modernist poet William Carlos Williams was born and raised in Rutherford, New Jersey, in the same house he would move his wife into and in which he would raise his own family. It was from this house he practiced as a local doctor, making house calls to the good folk of Rutherford. It was in this very same house that he spent forty years of his spare time writing the beautifully accessible poems that would later inspire Allen Ginsberg and the Beat poets in the 1950s and '60s.

For Flannery O'Connor it was the small town of Milledgeville, Georgia. For Walker Percy, Covington, Louisiana. And would the poems of Robert Frost be the same without the shaping influence that rural New Hampshire had on him?

In this same vein, contemporary poet Wendell Berry, a native resident and farmer of Henry County, Kentucky, says, "What I stand for is what I stand on." That's something Hemingway could never have said.

Why am I telling you about America's famous provin-

cialist writers? Because it seems to me that when it comes to Christian writing we can be enamored of the missionary adventure literature of David Livingstone or Hudson Taylor or Jim Eliot *at the expense of* those voices whose work is shaped by their devotion to land, home, place, neighborhood. I'm not telling you not to read Hudson Taylor or Ernest Hemingway. I'm not dissuading you from engaging with the ideas of nomadic church-planting consultants. Nor am I suggesting you not listen to the latest *robcast* from the latest cyber-dwelling Rob Bell. However, I am asking you not to engage these translocal voices *at the expense of* the provincial, the local, or the regional. We need to hear the voices of those Christians who have resolved to stay—truly stay—in the places God has planted them. We need Christian versions of Dickinson, O'Connor, Percy, and Berry—which is kind of funny, because all of them were/are deeply committed Christians.

This brings me to *Staying Is the New Going* by Alan Briggs. Acknowledging that the prevailing contemporary ideal has become to “go forth”—to pursue adventure, conquest, and exploration—Alan employs the term “staying forth” to describe the intentional loyalty to place that characterizes truly incarnational expressions of godly mission. He argues passionately for distinctly *placed* forms of ministry, for unique and indigenous forms of Christ-following that grow out of the very soil in which they're planted. And in so doing he tries to countermand all the antsy Hemingway-esque energy that makes you fidgety and tells you there's a better

opportunity somewhere else. That's the jittery energy our contemporary culture promotes. It lives elsewhere. It dreams only of tomorrow. It knows only the current. It's exhausting and fretful and highly agitated.

I don't hear Alan dismissing the importance of following God's call to cross the oceans, to be transplanted in new soil, to make a home in a new locale. What I hear him saying is that wherever God sends us, whether to our own hometown or across the globe, we must learn to do what William Carlos Williams did in Rutherford, New Jersey, and what Wendell Berry says he does in rural Kentucky: "Love your neighbors—not the neighbors you pick out but the ones you have." We need to settle. We need to stay. We need to learn to love, long and loyally. We need to allow our roots to drive down deeply into the soil beneath our feet.

You might be a Jack London or Ernest Hemingway, but pray that you're not. Pray that you can learn the beauty and simplicity and inherent truthfulness of staying forth. Pray that your ministry would be as sublime and as masterful as a Flannery O'Connor short story or an Emily Dickinson poem, shaped by the place from which it emerged.

Read the book you hold in your hands right now. It might change everything by calling you not to change a thing.

Michael Frost
Morling College, Sydney

Introduction

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL spring afternoon, and I was taking the short walk to pick up my kids from school. Parents who walk the same route every day to scoop up their kids walked hurriedly by me with their heads down. No hello, not even the customary head nod, just the classic American silent treatment.

Our family was in the throes of grief and loss from the sudden and tragic loss of my mother-in-law. My wife's closest mentor, a grandma, an anchor in our community, and the best mother-in-law a guy could imagine had been ripped away from us during the joy and frenzy of Thanksgiving. I recognized in my neighbors that day the same pain we were feeling. I saw parents and neighbors who were broken and hurting, isolated, never navigating past the surface with the people around them. They were physically present but emotionally distant. They were half-decent players in the pretending game.

The neighborhood itself reflected this emotional distance.

Front porches were empty; garages were closed. Something was strangely wrong about the whole thing—but also strangely normal. Our neighborhood was lacking neighborliness. Someone needed to introduce connection into the equation.

That day God gave me missionary lenses, and I started to see the cracks: cracks in my neighborhood, cracks in my current relationships, even cracks in my city.

If you've ever seen an optometrist, you know adjusting to clear vision isn't an easy task. Seeing things you've not seen before, seeing a little too clearly, can give you a headache. I started to imagine how our neighbors longed to see these cracks filled. As I combed Scripture the next few weeks, I was reminded that the gospel can fill all of the cracks in my neighborhood. The broken people in our neighborhood weren't waiting for a government program; they were waiting for relationships. These hurting people, so uncomfortably close to us, weren't looking for handouts; they were looking for hope. We realized it was no accident God had placed us in our home. He had planted us there—not as tenants, but as missionaries.

Now, all I had to do was actually do something.

I don't mean to brag, but as a pastor and a neighbor I am extremely gifted at finding excuses. I pulled out all the best ones:

- “We won't live in this house very long.”
- “They won't live here very long.”

- “They’ll think we’re weird.”
- “We have nothing in common.”
- “I don’t have time to add one more thing.”
- “They don’t have time to hang with us.”
- “I will scare them off when I talk about Jesus.”
- And my favorite: “Everyone in the world is my neighbor. Why should I focus on my *actual* neighbor?”

I couldn’t possibly spend the precious effort to love those right in front of my face.

Perhaps you’re a master of these excuses too. Where do they come from? My excuses were motivated by three things: fear of failure, a life that was far too busy, and a consumeristic view of the place I occupied.

We began to offer our lives to our neighbors, beyond the incidental encounters while taking out the trash can or picking up our kids from school. Today our parties are different. Our days off are different. Those we call friends are different. How we measure ministry is different. Our lives are different. Our family is different.

The journey into the heart of our neighborhood has been both exhilarating and routine. Both of those have been gifts from God. My fears of failure tug at me less now than they did at the beginning. My aversion to “wasting time in the neighborhood” still rears its ugly head sometimes, but more often I see my neighborhood as a valuable space.

I have led a lot of mission trips, planned a lot of events, and led a lot of ministries, but I have never experienced anything like this—what’s often called “incarnational living.” It’s even different from starting and leading a “missional” community. I have had many chances to involve my kids in sharing our lives and our stuff with others. I have never experienced this many “holy interruptions” that yielded spiritual fruit. Prior to this paradigm shift, my heart had never truly broken for people—my neighbors and my longtime friends alike—who did not know Jesus. Previously I grabbed ministry opportunities, but now I can truly say ministry opportunities are grabbing me. More important, Jesus has gently grabbed me in a way I have never experienced.

Since God opened my eyes to my neighborhood, my family has walked with our neighbors through death and depression, shed tears and belly-laughed with school parents, and become friends with those we have next to nothing in common with. We have given gifts and received them. We have celebrated birthdays and enjoyed neighborhood game nights. For the first time I am not drawn to living in another city, moving to another neighborhood across our city, or drifting away from those I am in relationship with. For the first time my wife and I can say, “We want to stay!”

I wish it hadn’t taken this long for our home to become a hub *for* ministry instead of a refuge *from* ministry. It’s been a spiritual road trip, and we didn’t arrive here suddenly. We’ve put the gospel to a test I’ve always wanted to take: *If we live our lives for Jesus—simply, right where we are—will we taste*

salty and give off a glow? Growing roots has been, in some ways, a massive risk, but this is a vision I can't walk away from. I am voluntarily stuck. I want to refine the art of staying, of "dwelling well," as my family gives glimpses of Jesus to a city, a neighborhood, and a gaggle of friends who want hope running through their veins again.

THE NEXT FRONTIER

People everywhere are feeling this gravitational staying force. People seeking to live a Jesus life and those who don't know him alike are feeling the tug to put down roots in places and spaces again. I happen to think Christians need to hear this message the most, however, because cities are quickly becoming the lifeblood of mission. Our current places are becoming the next frontier, and neighborhoods are becoming parishes again, where churches anchor their communities and every Christian can live out our first vocation as a follower of Jesus eyeball to eyeball.

This is a return to something people understood before the global and digital age distracted us. Something in all of us wants to be connected to a place and the people who live in it. Those in our neighborhood and city are longing for it. Those I have long conversations with in the café spend much of their week chasing it. Those fully entrenched in civic clubs have invested in it. There's a collision of something beautiful happening in our world that we, as followers of Jesus, cannot afford to miss.

I write this book from the posture of a learner and a

storyteller, not an expert. If I had written a book on fleshing out Jesus in place and space five years ago, it would have had the tone of a failing cynic. In North America, ministry that could be called incarnational seems countercultural (or at least optional). Other cultures are far more communal, far more rooted. A friend of mine, who grew up as a child of missionaries in Russia, taught me a word that has shaped his view of communities and ministry: *sotrudnichestvo*, which translates roughly to “Let us do work together in our space.” We have no such word in English, but what if we did? What if we invited people regularly to work for the good of our places? What if the church was again known for being the people who loved their cities and the people in them the most?

God has taken our family on a surprising and exciting journey. We have gotten serious about loving our neighbors—our literal neighbors. We’ve gotten serious about loving our city, a place I had previously looked for opportunities to escape. We’ve gotten serious about loving friends who orbit around our lives, friends whom I had once been content to abandon. This book is a call to come back home, a call to recover from farsightedness of heart. It’s time for the people of Jesus to live for Jesus right where we are.

I believe in being straightforward, so here are my intentions:

I want you to examine your life and make changes that render you more local and relationally accessible.

I want you to grow spiritual roots in your current realities instead of living under a fantasy of wings.

I want you to follow Jesus into the mundane, ordinary, everyday moments of life and relationships.

I want to challenge “the success of flight” and share how people are instead choosing the faithfulness of being fully present.

I want to challenge you to rethink the exclusivity of pilgrimage. We love escaping the daily grind and retreating to euphoric and beautiful places. We seem to find God there in the mystery, but we must not find him *only* there. In his striking memoir, Eugene Peterson describes his family’s annual Montana trip and the beauty and respite they experienced. One particular year the trip sparked questions in him: “Why wait for August, why wait for Montana? What’s wrong with September through July, what’s wrong with Maryland?”¹ I want us to ask similar questions: *What’s wrong with right now in the guts of life? What’s wrong with the ground you are walking on? What’s wrong with the people you are already around?*

This book might frustrate you. It may bore you. It may even fall short of giving you a grand plan for changing your community and the world. I’m okay with that. I believe God is drawing his church back to ordinary, local relationships among real neighbors, whole persons in a real context, not just far-off missionary conquests. This is not a book about devoting your conquest to God; this is a book about devoting your context to him.

THE RESURRECTION OF PLACE

“The same restlessness that sends us searching for community also keeps us from settling down wherever we are.”

JONATHAN WILSON-HARTGROVE, *THE WISDOM OF STABILITY*

*A year from now we'll all be gone
All our friends will move away
And they're going to better places*

THE HEAD AND THE HEART, "RIVERS AND ROADS"

SOMEHOW I THOUGHT possessing a Colorado driver's license would quench all my desires for adventure. Colorado has some of the best mountains, streams, adventure spots, and mountain towns one state could offer. But after exploring some of the mountain towns, bagging several peaks, and catching more than a few trout, I still wasn't content. So I began to scratch out a bucket list. My top three spots were Antarctica, New Zealand, and Kauai.

By a twist of fate I was offered a job working a "summer" in Antarctica. It was the coldest summer of my life. I worked long hours with the other crazies, people just like me who dreamed of traveling around the world. Some had been to

every continent. Their exotic stories over hot cider in the evenings only compounded my desire to travel.

After my work season was finished I planned two adventure-packed trips, first to New Zealand and then to Kauai, exploring the mountains and coasts and surfing the breaks. Those few months were beyond my wildest dreams. I seemed to catch all the breaks in New Zealand, including the only weather window of the season to traverse ice fields and climb a world-class peak. I camped on glaciers, climbed sheer walls, kayaked past seals in crystal-clear water, stayed up late talking to other travelers in hostels, hitchhiked with generous people, watched rugby with the locals, and backpacked sites that looked more pristine than a scene from *The Lord of the Rings*. It was absolutely epic.

But just a few weeks before leaving New Zealand, I had experienced enough. I came. I saw. I took pictures. And I was done. I was feeling discontent and disconnected. I longed for something I had never longed for: home.

Then again, I had no idea where home was. My family no longer lived where I had grown up. My stuff was stored in Colorado, and I had quickly made a large pool of relational connections and developed a handful of close friendships there. But I was not invested there.

There I was, on one of the most beautiful spots on the globe, longing to belong to some place, any place, even a very ordinary place. It's as if God had given me exactly what I wanted, and I had gotten to the end of my adventure dreams. It was time to ask, "What's next?" I was even asking, "Where's

next?” I was craving a basic human need, the answer to which the God of relationship has sown deep into the threads of the human soul: I needed to find rich soil and put down some roots.

Many of us are in serious need of roots. Maybe you’ve been in your city for years, but you’ve never made it your home. Maybe you are currently scheming your escape plan. I hope you will stop for long enough to consider what the impact would be if you decided to take a risk and stay. In our upwardly mobile and frenetically busy society, the joy of flight has rarely been challenged. The assumption that life is inherently better somewhere else has rarely been challenged. I think it’s time we take a hard look at how our rootlessness has affected our lives and the lives around us. As followers of Jesus, what influence do we miss as our minds, hearts, and bodies whiz by on our way to other places?

ROCKS WITH NO MOSS

I remember exactly where I was sitting. I had come for a pick-me-up, not a smack in the face. “No one is more transient than American pastors, like rocks with no moss.” The room was still. We all knew it was true. Michael Frost wasn’t just an Aussie speaking to Americans that day; he was a prophet confronting the church.

If we were looking for the means to destroy the impact of the local church, I believe we’d place transience and disconnection high on the list. They’re not spectacular, washing away our influence like a flood of scandal. They’re more

like a steady erosion: the church's disconnection from our communities, both in our readiness as individuals to leave one context for another and by our corporate withdrawal from direct engagement of our community, has stifled our influence and limited our capacity for relational evangelism, leaving our churches with little to no reputation in our communities, settling for occupancy.

This is a departure from the parish mentality of the past, where the church took responsibility for its context, and the people inhabiting its place. Futurist Alvin Toffler writes:

Never in history has distance meant less. . . .
Figuratively we “use up” places and dispose of them much in the same way we dispose of Kleenex or beer cans. We are witnessing a historic decline in the significance of place to human life. We are breeding a new race of nomads, and few suspect quite how massive, widespread and significant their migrations are.¹

We need to ponder what message we send when we migrate—either physically, when we exit neighborhoods and cities, or emotionally, when we disengage from the real issues unfolding around us. If we never see the real issues around us, we will never see real Kingdom opportunities either. We must “dwell well” as God's people, something that “may very well be,” according to the authors of *The New Parish*, “the leadership challenge of the twenty-first century.”²

BECOMING LOCALS

“I got here as fast as I could.” This is my answer when people ask if I’m a Colorado native. This is a state where being born here gives you bragging rights. Drive around and you’ll see bumper stickers laying claim to the label. Even the term *native* doesn’t take into account the people who were truly native to this ground, long before the railroad put this city on the map.

I originally moved to Colorado for a “work vacation.” (I didn’t call it “seasonal work,” but I had no long-term plans to stay.) I moved here to consume what the mountains offered me. I wanted connection without commitment, like an emotional fling. Ten years after moving to this city, I can honestly say that, God willing, I’m staying. I can’t slap the “Native” bumper sticker on my car, but I’ve become a local. You can’t control whether you’re a native, but you can control whether you’re a local.

Locals are known. Locals are committed. Locals have found home. You find locals at cafés, at their kids’ elementary school, in civic organizations, in neighborhoods—all over the place, actually. A few weeks back I was drinking a good cup of fresh roasted coffee at a local café, waiting for a friend to arrive. I watched the folks at the bar, who obviously frequent the place. They were sharing about a friend having health problems, passing around a card for him. They were organizing meals and getting the word out to visit him. The folks who frequent that café have developed into a caring community. They’re locals.

Perhaps our churches need to take a lesson from the locals.

You might be tempted to upgrade to a better place, to trade in your friends, to move as far away from family dysfunction as possible. You might dream of a sexy place somewhere, where your problems are gone and people are impressed by your stories. Those are common thoughts. They just aren't realistic.

For a long time now mission has been framed as a far-off endeavor, a trip requiring a passport, a plane ticket, and a lot of packing. But God's mission is active everywhere, which means God's mission is active among your family, friends, and community. For God's work to become tangible, it must first become local, invading our everyday thinking and the places we inhabit. The ideas and dreams you have are good; they just need to be connected to actual living, breathing people with souls. This is why we pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth [read: in this place] as it is in heaven."

God's mission of drawing wanderers into his family always takes place in the midst of ordinary places and relationships. This can take just as much energy, finances, and careful planning as a trip across the ocean. In some ways it might be more uncomfortable than sleeping on a dirt floor and eating strange food. Our mission trip started the day we were born; it ends when God calls us home. Our mission with God plays out in how we walk, talk, eat, commute, party, pray, participate, communicate, spend money, make money, and invest our time wherever we are.

This localized understanding of our God-given mission is often referred to as “faithful presence.”

FAITHFUL PRESENCE

There are three key aspects to a life of faithful presence.

Incarnation. Jesus’ ministry plan was to move “into the neighborhood” (John 1:14, MSG), to move from being “above” us to being “among” us. Jesus became a local among humanity; he locked into people’s lives, stories, and fears when he ministered to them. He was completely present, walking, conversing, and performing life’s most basic tasks with others. As Jesus exited the scene, God sent the Holy Spirit to live within his church. Our ministry plan, consequently, emulates God’s. Incarnational ministry moves us from “above” our places (where we have no meaningful connection) to “among” the people, within the community.

Presence is not just physical; it’s also emotional and spiritual. It has never been easier to be among people physically while remaining disconnected from them, reading e-mails on our phones or entertaining ourselves on a tablet. Living incarnational lives requires us not just to stay physically but to remain patiently, locally, and personally engaged in the spaces, opportunities, and lives around us.

Longevity. Faithfulness involves sticking something out. People are wary of “supernova ministry” that burns bright and then burns out, people who go door to door only to leave behind nothing but a prayer and a brochure. The longer you are active in relationships with people who are far from

God, the more they will believe you truly care about them, and the more they will open their lives to you. Your care can remind them that God is relational, drawing people into eternal relationship. To some extent, everyone joining Jesus in his mission is asking the question, “Is simple faithfulness enough?” I believe it is. Certainly fruitfulness is a secondary desire, and love will be our identifier (John 13:35), but yes, *faithfulness is enough*. Longevity will reveal faithfulness.

Like incarnation, longevity is not passive. I’m not just talking about existing in a place or relationship for a long time; longevity entails fighting through obstacles and road blocks to be the presence of Jesus to those around you because that is what God desires of us.

Ground-level connection. By its nature incarnation takes place in the trenches. Humans are designed for ground-level connection, and this is how we must minister on Jesus’ behalf. There are no incarnational strategists, only practitioners. We can talk about incarnation and longevity all we want, but if we are avoiding the pain, joy, questions, and doubt of those around us, we fall short of faithfulness. The ordinary nature of the ground level is nearly the opposite of our culture of emotional highs and glorified social media updates. Living for Jesus in the trenches will lead you to some messy life situations, like the trench foot many soldiers acquired during World War I.

Ground-level connection is the hardest aspect of faithful presence to measure. We have all had seasons where we were disconnected from our neighbors, distracted from our mission, enamored of strategies when we should have been

loving people. We often mistake busyness in ministry for joining the mission of God, and we equate much surface-level interaction with ministry success. But we see in Jesus' example—a firm commitment to be among rather than above, a lifelong connection to the same general area, and an authentic concern for the ground-level struggles of the people around him—that the soil where faith grows is richer in the trenches. The soil only gets richer the deeper we go.

There are no shortcuts to faithful presence. Eugene Peterson, a man I deeply respect, has lived decades of faithful presence among needy and ordinary people in local congregations. Late in his ministry he came to three realizations of how he would live the gospel patiently, locally, and personally.

Patiently: I would stay with these people; there are no quick or easy ways to do this. Locally: I would embrace the conditions of this place—economics, weather, culture, schools, whatever—so that there would be nothing abstract or piously idealized about what I was doing. Personally: I would know them, know their names, know their homes, know their families, know their work.³

We must embrace these three if we are to live a faithful gospel.

Unfortunately, church leaders often communicate a value not of faithful presence but of its opposite. Jamie Arpin-Ricci, author of *Vulnerable Faith*, says that transience in church leaders

communicates that place is inconsequential or unimportant. Even if lip service says otherwise, our actions speak louder. It might also communicate that the “goal” is to achieve the “suburban dream,” feeding into the upwardly mobile culture.⁴

That’s a good warning. I often hear about “carousel churches” that have a different lead pastor every year or two. In every case I have encountered, this has contributed to stagnancy and decline. How can sheep enjoy the pastures if their shepherds are distracted? Eugene Peterson grew up with a similar impression of pastors being disembodied from their places: “Pastor was an interim position on their way to some more celebrated work or exotic location.”⁵

There are plenty of encouraging stories on the other side of the coin. My friend Scott returned to his hometown in the Denver metro area to plant a new church. He and his wife made the commitment to “stay when the cash runs out,” to continue to minister to his hometown even if it leads him into undesirable work and unforeseen hardships. God has blessed their commitment to stay with deep trust among those in their church and lots of lost people giving their lives to Jesus.

I recently entered into a dialogue on hard topics with three other leaders who have made a commitment to our city. We want to be part of God’s Kingdom breaking through right here in the midst of the challenges and wrongs of our city, and we want to do this together.

The notion of faithful presence sounds romantic at first.

But eventually the honeymoon stage ends, and just as in marriage, realities arise that you didn't read about in the books. Missiologist Paul Hiebert describes the process of a new place turning into our home.

The realization dawns that this is now our home. Here our children will grow up as natives. And we must become one with these people with their unintelligible tongues and foreign ways before we can effectively share with them the Good News of the gospel. Suddenly, things that seemed romantic and exciting become strange and threatening.⁶

Hiebert calls this “the problem of cultural differences.”⁷ Cultural differences are present everywhere we go, but we adapt to them over time, and they shape our expectations for our next cross-cultural encounter. You may have already overcome some barriers to living in your community. You may have already learned the native tongue and rituals. You may have a hard time seeing past the cultural differences still in front of you. But you might be closer to breakthrough with people around you than you'd ever imagine.

OUTWARD MOBILITY

The draw away from place is largely rooted in consumption and illusion. We consume places and relationships as long as they are good for us: giving us a fuzzy feeling, making us happy, helping us live our dreams. We somehow believe

in a kind of urban utopia, a hip, affordable, cultured, safe, neighborly place to live, requiring no sacrifice of us. Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove says, “Intimacy without commitment is what society has traditionally called ‘infidelity.’”⁸ We must learn to battle through our infidelity to the places we reside and the people around us.

It’s subtle, but it’s pervasive. In the mid-twentieth century, large numbers of people moved out of urban areas to find their utopia—more square feet of property, less congestion, a greater feeling of safety, less traffic, and a better view of the horizon of the American Dream. In a culture where staying had been the norm, going became the new staying.

This suburban exodus had a broad cultural impact: communities where everyone looked alike (the phrase “white flight” is often used to describe the racial aspects of this phenomenon), longer commutes, more bills to pay, and less time with the family.

I live in one of those once-desirable, fifty-year-old suburban neighborhoods. People are no longer flocking to move to this once-dreamy section of the city. Today’s moving patterns seem to be from ordinary places to notable places, but they are driven by eerily similar motivations to the “outward mobility” of that earlier era. Yesterday’s suburban Shangri-las are today’s forgotten neighborhoods. They aren’t new enough to accommodate modern desires, but neither are they urban enough to be hip. Most cities I’ve observed are dotted with many such forgotten areas.

Think about the unintended consequences of these waves of relocation. We tend to think of commute time, but what about commute space? Interstate highways (which began construction in the midst of the suburban exodus) allow people to drive longer distances to work and recreation without thinking twice. Even if you drive fifteen minutes to work, you probably drive past whole neighborhoods, towns or cultural centers without even noticing. We become somehow numb when we cross that much space and pass through that many communities on the way to our places of work or play.

One consequence is that places no longer have their own significance; they are often thought of as just stops along the way. Hyper-mobility and addiction to technology are major factors that have led us to a feeling of placelessness and what Eugene Peterson calls “inhospitality.” Genuine rooted community gets sacrificed on the altar of upward and outward mobility. Friends might tell you, “Just gut it out for a few years, do your time, and see where the company will send you next.” While it’s certainly not sinful to move from one place to another, every rest stop on our journey makes us shout the question louder: “When will we be able to stop, unpack our bags, and settle in?”

I serve on a team that strategizes how to help improve some of the hard realities of my kids’ school. The things elementary students are facing today are immense, but they can all be traced back to neglect. The school administration is wondering how they can get parents to nurture their kids,

help them with homework, provide breakfast in the morning, pay attention to their relational needs, and encourage them to invest energy in school. Most of the problems schools are facing could be largely improved through simple nurture and investment. We can say the same thing of our communities.

THE OUTWARDLY MOBILE CHURCH

This distance from work, play, and friendships has not only affected North America's secular society; it's also affected the church. A pastor friend refers to the suburban communities between an urban core and its sprawling exurbs as "the donut." Most people focused on starting churches overlook these areas and the people dwelling in them. Many of the church buildings in these forgotten areas were built in the 1950s and 1960s; they were once bursting with possibilities, but those congregations have ceased to be a significant part of their neighborhoods. They could be incredibly strategic hubs to serve neighborhoods and deploy missionaries, if the church weren't so enthralled with the outward mobility of the age. Popular advice is to locate a new church near an interstate so people can quickly get in and get out, like they do at a stadium or a concert venue; such churches can effectively draw in many commuters, but their nearest neighbors are often an afterthought.

I like this idea from an older leader who launched new churches in my city for over fifty years: "For every church we are part of starting in a growing suburban area we should

start one in an older urban area.” This could bring a lot of balance to new churches in our cities instead of everyone heading to the same piece of ground. This man largely targeted the donut as a place to start new churches and practice faithful presence. He’s asked the tough questions we all need to ask: how distance has accidentally disconnected us from one another and how our place factors into how we restore meaningful connection to our neighbors.

PRICED OUT OF GOD’S MISSION

Money is a real barrier to staying in your place. Financial stress attracts pastors to new, better-paying opportunities. They often feel they *can’t* turn down a better salary in order to take better care of their family. Most pastors I meet have a desire to focus their efforts on leading a church full-time, but seminary debt pulls many people away from vocational ministry to better-paying opportunities.¹⁰ I talk to a lot of young folks who want to go into the foreign mission field but are strapped with college debt. They sense any kind of ministry work will have to wait till midlife or the fourth quarter of their lives. We all know that vocation changes become harder later in our career, so these deferred plans for missions are likely taking people permanently out of the game. Many young leaders in my city are realizing mission can happen at home and are starting to kindle local, incarnational missions.

Jesus put on flesh and walked on dusty roads alongside sinful people, slowly building the first Christian community

with no regular income and no place to lay his head (Luke 9:58). Incarnational mission involves becoming advocates, friends, listeners, caretakers, and shepherds of our communities. All these postures take time to germinate, and none of them is a direct path to prosperity. They all entail sacrifice. But all followers of Jesus are called to come and die with him if we are to experience true life with him. Can we reasonably expect to ascend to thrones of influence and impact without first descending to the cross with Jesus?

How would it change our churches if Christians committed to putting down roots in a community and staying? How would the influence of the local church change if we could honestly say we have no plan of leaving? If we lean hard into the promise that God will take care of his sheep—however untraditional, multi-vocational, or hard it might be?

Our places are suffering from the church's neglect. Many sectors and slices of our communities are untended, as the church seeks out greener pastures and its leaders struggle to keep up with an outwardly mobile lifestyle. As we Christians have kept pace with the cultural neglect of place, we have too often neglected our communities—the urgent conversations and harsh realities around us. Physical neglect is easy to spot in a community, but spiritual neglect can hollow out a place. We cannot leave our communities as orphans to fend for themselves; to embrace God's mission is to offer our place the love, nurture, respect, and direction it so desperately needs.

WHERE IS HOME?

I am a former model. Believe it or not, this statement is true. My mom signed me up for a few shows at a local J.C. Penney store when I was a kid so I could get free school clothes. I still can't believe she made me do that. So, technically it's true that I have had a modeling career. But that one truth could never be considered the full truth about me.

"Home isn't a place," I hear people say. "Home can be a person, a journey, or memories you take with you." This is true in a way, similar to how "everyone is my neighbor" is true. But it's not the full truth. Even as we wax eloquent about how we can go anywhere in a global society, we wonder at our feelings of lostness, our growing sense of disconnection. There's still a longing for home deep within us.

I missed the boat on the importance of home for years. Colorado Springs was where I lived, but it wasn't my home. I had an address where my mail arrived, but I carried no local weight that drew me into responsibility. I had an escape plan; I even tried to carry it out a few times. For a season my wife and I investigated planting a church in Boulder, Colorado. It seemed more desirable, more noble, weirder (in a good way) than where we were. But as we walked the ground and prayed we knew God was calling Colorado Springs home for us.

It's okay to be homeless, rootless, for a while. It's okay to not have a thirty-year plan. But Christ-followers should be a gift to their neighborhood, and a church should be a gift to its city.¹¹ And maintaining an escape plan makes that impossible. In his book *Incarnate* Michael Frost says, "Christians

should be the most rooted people in their community; their loyalty and devotion to a particular geographical area and everyone who lives there should be legendary.”¹² I dream of a day when churches regain legendary status in their cities.

A friend of mine is a pastor in Colorado Springs. He’s bivocational; his primary job is as a firefighter. That work led him into the sphere of public health, where he noticed a crack in our city: many ill people could not obtain crucial prescription drugs. My friend’s church decided to start a pharmacy and a health clinic, something that had never been attempted by a church here. They have helped countless people obtain expensive meds and have helped other churches start similar hubs of hope in their cities. I would call this type of ministry legendary.

Earlier this year my family had a huge rollaway dumpster delivered to our driveway. We had accumulated a well-hidden stash of junk on the side of our home we referred to as “our dirty secret,” and it was finally time to do something about it. Twice during that week neighbors stopped me; they were concerned that we were moving. I took it as a compliment: *They actually care if we stay! They don’t want us to move!* We were no longer a rock with no moss. We were locals. We were incarnational. We were faithfully present.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Would anyone care if you put a For Sale sign in your yard?

Would the businesses, residents, and organizations around your church building care if your church relocated?

How can you work to gain a winsome reputation in your community? How might a commitment to place lead to more opportunities for gospel witness?

What simple acts of care could you regularly undertake to bring wholeness back to your community?