

Leader Guide for

Places of Promise:

Finding Strength in Your Congregation's Location

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Places of Promise Leader Guide

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Places of Promise Leader Guide

Introduction

This study guide will help congregational leaders explore your congregation's connection with its God-given location. Building on the insights of *Places of Promise: Finding Strength in Your Congregation's Location*, the guide and exercises provide a framework for understanding how location forms your congregation's identity and ministry.

This leader guide presents materials for a six-session process that will help participants:

- Describe our historical script about the congregation's location.
- Carry out an analysis of the congregation's current community.
- Develop a local theology of place.
- Imagine the next steps in the congregation's incarnation of place.

About 2 hours should be allowed for each session, and sessions should be scheduled at least one week apart. Ideally, all participants should be present at each of the six sessions. The exercises are designed for small group discussion. If the size of the group is large, consider dividing into small groups of 6 to 8 people for discussion. Follow these small group conversations with a time for each small group to report back to the whole group.

This guide is designed to be used together with: (a) the book, *Places of Promise: Finding Strength in Your Congregation's Location* by Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008) and (b) your congregation's results from the *U.S. Congregational Life Survey* (reports based on the answers of worshipers in your congregation). If your congregation has not participated in the survey, you can find information about the survey on the Web site (www.USCongregations.org) or call the survey office for more information (888-728-7228; ext 2040). To order the book, call (800-672-1789) or order online (www.cokesbury.com).

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Preface: Taking Our Place Seriously

This study guide will help congregational leaders explore your congregation's connection with its God-given location. Building on the insights of *Places of Promise*, the guide and exercises provide a framework for understanding how location shapes congregational identity and ministry. One goal is to articulate a theology of place specific to your congregation and community.

Several assumptions guide this study:

- God is the “placer” of our congregations. Where we find ourselves is part of God's intention and providence for us. How closely we feel connected with the surrounding community does not change that this place is God-created, God-given, and God-nurtured. God invites us to take seriously our stewardship in this place.
- As we seek to serve the reign of Christ in a specific context, we are called to love our neighbors, to work for a more just world, and to incarnate community where we are.
- God is at work in the community near our church, beyond the scope of our congregation's work there. As congregations, we are called to be open to what will come our way, as well as what we are called to give. Ministry to place is a two-way street. This approach invites us to see our community as a gift full of possibility rather than a liability we must work around.
- The theological understandings of the Old and New Testaments offer insight into a God-shaped view of place. This vision contrasts with competitive views of land or property prevalent in our consumer culture.
- One of the liberating insights of the book, *Places of Promise*, is that a congregation's location does not determine its vitality or destiny. But we should not conclude that we could ignore our context. Quite the opposite—the more seriously a congregation takes its vocation to place, the more exciting and significant its ministry.

I bring the perspective of 25 years of parish ministry and a strong belief that a church should connect with the community around it. That can happen in many different ways. Sometimes the church fully reflects in its life and ministry the diversity of the community in which it finds itself. In other circumstances, the congregation may find ways to enhance the life of a community that is different from it. However your congregation defines its community and its relationship with the place in which it resides, this study provides an opportunity to explore that relationship more deeply.

Years ago I observed a congregation in New York City that wrestled mightily with its connection to place. In its heyday, it had been a large, vital congregation served by nationally known clergy. Over the years, the demographics of the community around the church changed significantly. The church began to struggle to maintain membership and support upkeep on the building. When a new pastor came, years into the decline, he found a small knot of elderly people in the huge sanctuary on Sunday morning. After that first service, he sat in his office and grieved. Later that day, while eating at a deli across the street, he was struck by the contrast between the incredible vitality of this diverse, ethnic community and the sense of demoralization he found at the church. From the deli he saw the church edifice, which presented to people on the street a high stone wall with no windows or doors. He wasn't sure if it was a vision from God or an intestinal reaction to the pastrami, but he imagined the wall reconfigured in a new way. Windows and doors were wide-open allowing interaction and relationship.

Trey Hammond, *Places of Promise Leader Guide*, 2008

To accompany *Places of Promise: Finding Strength in Your Congregation's Location*, by Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008)

He sensed the vitality of the community flowing into the church and God's love, held fast by that faithful community, pouring out into the neighborhood.

He shared the vision and expressed his hope that the church might become more deeply connected with its neighbors. Though leaders and members had tried other things before, they were open to doing something new to be the body of Christ in that place. They spent time considering what they might offer. The valuable gift they realized they had to share was the many seasoned grandmothers among them. In a community with lots of young mothers, many of whom were immigrants far from their own mothers and grandmothers, this just might be a door. Their grandmothering program became hugely successful and provided a wonderful gift to the community. The love and concern shown by the grandmothers and the vitality of the community began to transform the congregation's sense of a future.

They had not yet seen a large influx of people from the surrounding community come into membership of the church. Yet they still hope that will happen as relationships deepen over time. Nonetheless, they have many new friends and a renewed sense of purpose. They connected with their place in a faithful, incarnational, and transforming way.

May all of our congregations be so connected to their God-given place.

Session I

Our Script of Place: Introduction

- **Welcome and Getting Acquainted Exercise**

Hand each participant a four-by-six-inch index card and a pen or pencil. Give these directions:

1. Write your name in **large** letters in the center of the card.
2. In the upper left-hand corner of the card, write the *year* and the *season* of the year (winter, spring, summer, or fall) when you were born.
3. In the upper right-hand corner of the card, write the name of a significant *geographical place* in your life story.
4. In the lower left-hand corner of the card, write the name of a *person who influenced your life*.
5. In the lower right-hand corner of the card, write the name of a *geographical place* where God was present in your life.

Invite participants to find a person they do not know (or don't know well) and sit beside him or her. Ask each partner to relate the information on the card to the other. Remind them they have no more than ten minutes for both partners to share their answers. When the group reconvenes, have each person introduce his or her new friend to the group, describing how place shaped that friend's life.

- **Defining Your Congregation's Place**

Discuss your congregation's location and help the group come to a consensus about how to define your congregation's geographic community. What are the boundaries that define that place? A boundary could be a street or river, a radius in miles, or a particular community or neighborhood. Draw a rough outline of the map of your community on a flip chart.

- **Exercise 1: Timeline of Place**

Use the exercise on page 16 (Session 1, Exercise 1).

- **Exercise 2: Assumptions about Our Congregation's Place**

Use the exercise on page 17 (Session 1, Exercise 2). Answer the questions together.

- **Prepare for Session 2: Interviewing Key Leaders and Exploring the Church's History**
 1. Brainstorm to identify some thoughtful, long-time members of the congregation. Have someone interview a few of them about the church's history and relationship to its place. In particular, try to find someone with additional information about the church's birth story.
 2. Brainstorm to identify leaders who know the community and its history well. Have someone interview some of them to get their perspective on your church's role as they see it and how it has changed over time.
 3. Assign someone to go through the church's historical records and archives with an eye to better understanding the church's relationship to its location.
 4. Distribute copies of the exercise description, *Creating a Script of Place* (Session 2, Exercise 1 on pages 18-20), for discussion at the next session.
 5. Save the *Timeline of Place* to be used again in Session 2.

Session 2

Our Script of Place: Creating Our Historical Narrative of Place

- ***The Church's Meaning***

Begin the session by asking people to describe how the church, as a place, has had meaning for them. Is there a space in the church that especially comforts or challenges you?

- ***Gather Collected Information***

Ask participants to report to the group the results of their visits, conversations, interviews, and historical research. Summarize their insights on a flip chart.

Revisit the *Timeline of Place*, adding any insights discovered in the previous discussions, and later, in subsequent group reflections.

- ***Exercise 1: Creating a Script of Place***

1. Discuss the essay *Creating a Script of Place*. What were some helpful insights for exploring your congregation's narrative of place?
2. Begin creating your congregation's script by describing some chapters in your congregation's narrative of place. Some might be inclined to have a chapter for each pastor, but try to arrange the story based on how the congregation perceived and interacted with the community. Name and date the chapters as best you can.
3. Take information from the *Timeline of Place*, your interviews, archival study, and your own experiences to begin filling in the details of each chapter.
4. What might this script of place mean for your congregation's current ministry? What new chapter might you want to initiate in relationship to your community?

- ***Prepare for Session 3: Describing Our Ministry Setting***

1. Distribute copies of the demographic exercises that will be prepared for the group to review at the next session. Assign three participants the task of completing one each of the three worksheets (Session 3, Exercise 1; Session 3, Exercise 2; Session 3, Exercise 3 on pages 21-26). Access to the Internet and some familiarity with using online resources is essential.
2. Ask all participants to read chapters 2, 3, and 4 from *Places of Promise*.
3. Ask someone to take the group's notes from the *Creating a Script of Place* exercise and draft a summary for review at the next session.

Session 3

Our Place of Promise: Describing Our Ministry Setting

- **Review Session 2**

Hand out copies of your congregation's *Script of Place* that was drafted after Session 2. What further thoughts have you had about the narrative of your congregation's place?

- **Exercise 1: The Religious Composition of Our Community**

Distribute copies of the completed Session 3, Exercise 1 worksheet, prepared for the group to review. Discuss the findings and their implications for your congregation using the questions provided. How does your congregation's experience reflect the national research findings described in Chapter 2, "Strength in Religious Geography," in *Places of Promise*?

- **Exercise 2: Our Congregation's Community Type**

Distribute copies of the completed Session 3, Exercise 2 worksheet, for the group to review. Discuss the findings and their implications for your congregation using the questions provided. How does your congregation's experience reflect the national research findings described in Chapter 3, "Strength in the Community," in *Places of Promise*?

- **Exercise 3: Comparing Our Worshipers to Community Members**

Distribute copies of the completed Session 3, Exercise 3 worksheet, prepared for the group to review. Discuss the findings and their implications for your congregation using the questions provided. How does your congregation's experience reflect the national research findings described in Chapter 4, "Strength in a Perfect Match," in *Places of Promise*?

- **Prepare for Session 4: Mapping Our Community**

1. Ask participants to read Session 4 (pages 9-10) so they are ready to participate.
2. Have someone plan a community field trip based on how you defined the congregation's place of ministry. Create a route and arrange for enough vehicles to accommodate everyone. A map for each driver is recommended.
3. Ask participants to drive through the community on their own before the next session and note their impressions. Who lives here? What are the key community institutions? How would they describe the type and quality of the built environment?

Session 4

Our Place of Promise: Mapping Our Community in the Present

“What begins with facts and figures of a contextual analysis must end with the incarnation of this knowledge in poetry and song. If we are to learn what it means to dwell in a place, we have to discover it in the songs and stories that speak of its uniqueness.”

Geoffrey Lilburne, *A Sense of Place*¹

- **Review Session 3**

What do the demographic materials tell you about who lives in the community? What are their lives like? What questions does this information raise for your congregation’s ministry?

How much similarity is there between the demographics of your congregation and the community? If there are differences, how would you describe them?

- **Exercise 1: Taking a Community Tour**

First, get the lay of the land:

1. Begin by driving the boundaries of the congregation’s place as you have defined it. Now tour as much of the interior of the congregation’s community as time allows.
2. Identify major streets, railroads, natural barriers, and gathering places.
3. Identify major land use areas—residential, commercial, industrial, and others.
4. Identify anchor institutions—schools, churches, libraries, police stations, non-profit agencies, government facilities, hospitals and clinics, and banks.
5. Note the general condition of the housing. Is it mostly single-family homes or apartments? Can you determine if houses are owner-occupied or rented? How much housing inventory is on the market? How old are the homes?
6. Note the general condition of the community’s economic infrastructure. What kinds of businesses are in your community? Do they provide needed services? What services seem to be lacking?

Second, get the pulse of the people:

1. Who do you see in the community? What populations and lifestyles can you identify? Are your observations consistent with the demographic data? Are there any surprises?
2. Are there people who would be invisible (in the demographic material), such as persons who are homeless, undocumented, or disabled?
3. Who are the community’s newcomers? Who are the community’s long-time residents? Is a population transition taking place in the community?

Trey Hammond, *Places of Promise Leader Guide*, 2008

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Third, note tangible and intangible forces at work:²

1. Identify the “tangible” economic, political, and social dynamics that appear to be at work in your community.
2. What “intangible” forces are identifiable—those that are more psychosocial in nature (e.g., the community appears healthy, struggling, fearful)?

• Putting it All Together: Create and Analyze Your Community Map

1. Draw a large map of your neighborhood and translate your observations from the tour to the map. Pay special attention to the community’s physical layout. Identify the populations in various parts of the community.
2. Test your assumptions. How did what you saw square with what you had previously assumed about the neighborhood? How did it compare to what you learned in Session 3?
3. Identify some of the community’s assets—physical, social, and human.
4. Describe the kind of relationship the congregation has with the community’s other anchor institutions.
5. What anchor institutions are lacking in your neighborhood?
6. What did you observe about the people who live in the community? Can you name some of the challenges they face?
7. What do you believe are the tangible and intangible forces at work in the community?
8. Taking everything you have studied and seen into consideration, what might be some implications of this new view of your community for your congregation’s ministries?

• Some Further Steps to Consider

1. Get to know community residents and hear their views:
 - a. What do they like most about living there? What do they like least?
 - b. In what direction do they see the community heading?
 - c. Whom do they see as the community’s key leaders and respected voices?
2. Interview some of the key leaders in anchor institutions to:
 - a. Explore their mission.
 - b. Understand their take on the community—its assets and challenges.
 - c. Explore common interests and potential collaboration.
3. Interview people in the schools or on city staff who have responsibilities in the area. They often have the best real-time information about the population and community needs.
4. Meet with the city council representative, state legislative representative, or school board member to assess their take on the community. Ask them what agenda shapes their decision-making.

5. Visit with other congregations in your community to find out more about their concerns and mission. Ask where they see potential for collaboration.
6. Find out if there are community organizing or community development organizations working in your community. If so, interview their leaders about community needs and areas for collaboration.

- **Prepare for Session 5: Creating Our Theology of Place**

1. Distribute copies of the readings for the next session: *Quotes Pertaining to a Theology of Place* (Session 5, Reading 1 on pages 27-30) and *A Theology of Place: Look Out Your Window* (Session 5, Reading 2 on pages 31-36).
2. Note: The leader might look at the biblical themes in the essay *A Theology of Place: Look Out Your Window*. See if one of the biblical themes in particular speaks to your congregation's situation. If so, plan to use those passages as a beginning Bible study for the group's next meeting.

Note

¹ Geoffrey Lilburne, *A Sense of Place: A Christian Theology of the Land* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), p. 130.

² See the description by Carl S. Dudley in *Community Ministry: New Challenges, Proven Steps to Faith-based Initiatives* (Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 2002), pp. 42-50, for more resources related to the “intangible forces” and “invisible people” concepts.

Session 5

Creating Our Theology of Place

- **Bible Study**

Begin with a Bible study based on passages identified from the essay *A Theology of Place: Look Out Your Window*.

- **Quotes Pertaining to a Theology of Place**

Reflect together on *Quotes Pertaining to a Theology of Place*:

1. What quotes did you find helpful? How did they further your reflection on place?
2. What quotes did you find confusing or hard to agree with?

- **A Theology of Place: Look Out Your Window**

Discuss the essay—*A Theology of Place: Look Out Your Window*. Use these questions to get started:

1. If a theology of place begins with looking out the window, what do you see as the theological implications of what you have discovered about your community?
2. The essay suggests that before we can begin to have a theology of place we must answer the question, “Do we claim this place?” How would you respond to that question?
3. Walter Brueggemann’s definition of place is widely quoted. How does it provoke your thinking about place in new ways?
4. The essay offers six biblical themes as starting points for a theology of place. Briefly discuss the ideas in each of those sections and see how they might apply to your ministry setting.
5. What would be some other theological themes you might have chosen?

- **Exercise 3: Create Your Own Theology of Place**

1. Building on all of the work you have done in studying your congregation, the community, and our biblical story, brainstorm about some of the elements of your particular theology of place. Consider biblical stories that might be helpful in shaping your theology.
2. What would some of the implications of this theology be for your congregation and its ministries?

- **Prepare for Session 6**

1. Distribute copies of the readings for next session: *Exploring Models of Congregation and Place* (Session 6, Reading 1 on pages 37-40) and *Exploring Some Myths about Place* (Session 6, Reading 2 on pages 41-42).
2. Ask someone to take the group's insights from this session on creating a theology of place and draft a document capturing the spirit of the discussion.

Session 6

Incarnating Place: Where Is God Leading Our Ministry?

You have done much to take your God-given place seriously. You have created a *Timeline of Place*, a *Script of Place*, explored your current context, and articulated a *Theology of Place*. This last session will focus on how God might be inviting your congregation to incarnate place.

- **Exploring Ways Congregations Relate to Place**

Briefly reflect on the essay *Exploring Models of Congregation and Place*.

1. Barbara Wheeler's typologies describe the interaction of a congregation with a community as passive, cultural, or voluntary. What in her analysis did you find helpful? What did you find hard to make sense of? Which model best describes your congregation's worldview? Or is there another perspective you feel better describes your congregation?
2. Robert Linthicum writes about the posture of a congregation's ministry as "in, to, or with" a community. What did you find helpful in his analysis? What was challenging? How would you describe your congregation's posture toward the community? It may be that different ministries of your congregation reflect different postures.
3. Nancy Ammerman describes a number of ways that congregations deal with change. What did you find useful in her typology? If your congregation is in a changing environment, what path do you see your congregation taking? Do you think it is the best course of action or might there be other options?

- **Place as Shaping Your Congregational Identity and Ministry**

1. Consider the relationship of place to two aspects of your congregation's life—its identity and its ministry. Identity is *who you understand yourself to be*. Ministry is *what you feel called to do*.
2. Does your church have a mission statement? This is often your understanding of your congregational identity. Is there anything in your mission statement that is connected to place? In light of all that we have considered, is there a sentence you could craft that captures how your congregation's identity takes into account its theology of place?
3. How do you see your congregation's ministry as shaped by your location? How does it shape your mission efforts, the view of your property, evangelism, worship, educational activities, or other aspects of congregational life?

- **Incarnating Place**

1. Where do you sense God is leading your congregation in relationship to place? Have these exercises opened up some new ways for you to think about your ministry? What might be the next chapter in your *Script of Place*?

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2. Brainstorm some ideas about how you might move ahead in ministry. Strategize about how to move these ideas forward with your congregation's leadership and membership as a whole. Are there ways to share your *Script of Place* and your *Theology of Place* with the rest of the congregation? Has this study series opened up new ways for you to think about the place of your ministry?

- **A Final Bonus Activity—Exploring Some Myths About Place**

Read the essay *Exploring Some Myths About Place*.

1. What in this essay did you find helpful? What did you disagree with? Are any of these myths operating in your setting?
2. What might be some other myths of place that characterize your context?

Timeline of Place

Time needed: One or more hours. (Be generous—people like to keep going!)

Items needed: Butcher paper (about 20 feet long), markers of different colors, masking tape, a volunteer to record events and lead discussion.

How to use: Hang the butcher paper on a smooth wall. Draw a dark horizontal line from one end of the paper to the other, about half way down from the top of the paper. The line represents the years in the congregation's life. At the far left, label the line with the year the congregation was organized. At the far right, label the line with the current year. Mark off years on the line. For example, every yard could represent 10 years. If the congregation is very old, you may wish to have the first 100 years or so represented by a single foot of wall space, with more space to the right dedicated to more recent years.

The space below the line will be used to record people or events *internal* to the congregation. The space above the line will record people or events *external* to the congregation. For example, World War II or the closing of a local plant would appear above the central line, but the start of a new community ministry would be below the central line.

Make three additional lines above the central line: One to stand for events in the local community, one for events in your city or town, and a final line for events in the region or nation. Try to note instances where the congregation interacted with the community. Consider naming chapters of your congregation's history with respect to the relationship the congregation had with the community. It also helps to use a marker of one color for people or events internal to the congregation and a different color marker for people or events external to the congregation.

Items to mark on the Timeline of Place: Explain the purpose for the project—to explore the connections between the congregation's ministry and history and its location. Ask each person to come forward to put his or her name or initials on the line at the point that represents the year he or she became a part of the congregation. (Or have a volunteer do all the markings.) Ask people to share memories of the congregation as you work through the decades of time. Above the horizontal line, write about events happening outside the congregation that had an impact on the congregation (war, plant closings, new neighbors).

How to process: After the exercise is completed (or you run out of time!), ask people to make some initial observations about what they have produced. Continuities in congregational priorities and identity will be discovered.

Adapted from: *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), edited by Nancy T. Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney.

Assumptions about Our Congregation's Place

Review two of the central assumptions about place that guide this study:

- God is the “placer” of our congregations. Where we find ourselves is part of God’s intention and providence for us. How closely we feel connected with the surrounding community does not change that this place is God-created, God-given, and God-nurtured. God invites us to take seriously our stewardship in this place.
- God is at work in the community near our church, beyond the scope of our congregation’s work there. As congregations, we are called to be open to what will come our way, as well as what we are called to give. Ministry to place is a two-way street. This approach invites us to see our community as a gift full of possibility rather than a liability we must work around.

Discuss the following:

- What are some of your reactions to these assumptions? Do they fit with how you think about your congregation’s location or do they challenge current operating assumptions?
- As you reflect on the *Timeline of Place* exercise, do you see any evidence (perhaps a specific event) that points to God’s intention and providence for our congregation in this place? Where do you see evidence that God is at work in the community near our church?
- What are the key assumptions that guide our congregation’s understanding of place?

Creating a Script of Place: A Historical Narrative

“All places belong to God. Only for a time are places entrusted to us. In the most fundamental sense, a congregation’s location is their birthright.”

Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Places of Promise*

In *Places of Promise*, the authors write about congregational place scripts—a way of thinking about location. These “scripts are necessary for a congregation’s identity . . . it identifies the congregation’s goals, helps cement a sense of purpose, and supplies a feeling of security. Yet the congregation’s location script can either fit or be at odds with the congregation’s present core values.”¹ The script can shape the congregation’s perception of its place in a positive and energizing way. Or the script can be negative and limiting. Sometimes the scripts of place are well articulated, but often they are implicit, even unconscious. Articulating our script means we can learn from our history, see if our current worldview is consistent with our understanding of God’s purposes, and imagine moving into a new ministry chapter.

The script is a narrative telling how the congregation relates to the many circles of place in which it resides—from the national level to the local community. This script will focus largely on the area the congregation defines as its local community. Congregations and their places co-evolve, influencing each other over time. Local communities may change quickly and remain fluid. On the other hand, congregations are by nature very stable places where change happens more slowly and deliberately. Congregations located in a specific place for any length of time experience how the changing community presents them with new challenges and opportunities.

In developing your congregation’s script of place, divide the congregation’s narrative into chapters that relate to the congregation’s relationship with its context. In congregational timeline exercises like the *Timeline of Place*, a congregation’s chapters often follow the tenure of clergy or periods of crisis. In this effort, please create a narrative grounded in *place*. If your congregation is relatively young, your script will have fewer chapters and you’ll have time to explore your context in depth. However, most congregations have been in existence long enough, and the communities around them have been dynamic enough, that several chapters can be identified that relate to location decision-making. These chapters about place may not be completely discrete or linear in time. In some periods, several things are happening at once, so do not worry if there is overlap.

Consider some of these examples as possible “chapters” of your congregation’s life:

I. Birth Narrative – What were the circumstances that lead to the founding of your congregation in that place? Who were the key players? What was the community surrounding the congregation like at that time?

II. Time of Congruity – Did the congregation reflect the community in which it was born? How did the place shape the identity and mission of the congregation as it developed?

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Session 2, Exercise 1

III. Community Changes – Was there a time when the community went through a significant change—demographically, physically (like a highway bisecting the community), or economically? How would you characterize the community after that change?

IV. Time of Incongruity – Was the congregation able to change its identity, mission, or membership to absorb or address the community change, or did a social distance develop between the congregation and community? In that time, did the congregation change its ministry to reach communities other than the geographic one, such as affinity communities with particular interests?

V. Discernment/Decision – Was there a time when the congregation had to wrestle with the possibility of moving to another location, merging with another congregation, or even closing the congregation? How was this resolved and what were the arguments posed? If the congregation moved, what drove that decision and what kind of location was chosen? If the congregation merged, what was the rationale for that decision and the hope on which it was based? If the congregation remained, what drove that decision? How did the identity and ministry of the congregation change in the process?

VI. Time of Engagement – After a move, merger, or a decision to remain, how did the congregation view its location? Did things change? If so, how and why? Were the membership and life of the congregation transformed over time? Did the congregation have a renewed sense of purpose and passion?

The following is a sample *Script of Place* for the La Mesa Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

La Mesa Presbyterian Church's Script of Place

I. Birth Narrative

La Mesa Presbyterian Church began as a mission church in 1942
Edge of the city
Bedroom community for Sandia Labs, a weapons complex that grew up after World War II
Post-war boom in the church
Located not on a major street, but in the heart of a neighborhood

II. Time of Congruity

Neighborhood grew up around the church
The church boomed in the 1950s and 1960s, with strong youth programs, two worship services
Church reflected the demographics of the community:
 Scientist, engineers, technical people, support staff from the labs
 Other professional people
Maximum size in 1960, some 600 people strong

III. Community in Transition

In the 1960s, the community went through a radical transition
Large number of homes converted into small apartment complexes
Demographic change—more people of color, lower income households

IV. Time of Incongruity

Older members moved farther and farther from the church
Fewer and fewer people from the immediate neighborhood joining
Church strives to serve the needs of those in the neighborhood through a variety of programs, including a quality, affordable day care center, first run by the church and later by partner non-profit agencies
Building in need of repair
Long decline in membership
Financial struggles

V. Time of Discernment/Decision

Long pastorate provided stability for congregation to examine its future
Pastor a leader in community issues
Options explored for the congregation's future—move into growing neighborhood closer to current membership or stay in the community and be committed to its welfare
Decision made to build new wing, including a fellowship hall to serve as community space
Funds raised to renovate and expand the facility

VI. Time of Engagement

Building strong relationships with partner institutions, especially the elementary school
Involvement with community organizing effort to strengthen community and church and to engage effectively in public issues
Additional renovation of the building for use by the community and the church
Theology of abundance begins to shape congregation's view of money
Building becomes a community center, providing a safe place to meet seven days a week
Not simply a "landlord" to groups using the building but an effort to build vital, mutually supportive partnerships
Community viewed as an asset
Calling of a Native American associate pastor
Increasing diversity in the membership and leadership of the church
Membership decline stopped and gradual growth in membership and worship attendance began

Note

¹ Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Places of Promise: Finding Strength in Your Congregation's Location* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 90.

Religious Composition of Our Community

1. **Decide which area is most relevant for your congregation—the county or the metro area?**
Your decision should be guided by considering the geographic area served by your ministry and/or where your worshippers live.

2. **Gather information about the religious composition of your county or metro area** to complete the following table:

Predominant Religious Affiliations of Residents of _____ County/Metro Area

Information to complete this table is found on the Association of Religion Data Archives Web site (<http://www.thearda.com/mapsReports>, under “U.S. Congregational Membership Reports”); data come from the Religious Congregations and Membership Survey. (Note that the reports on this Web site will print better in landscape mode.)

Denomination (Ten largest based on numbers of adherents in 2000) ¹	Number of Adherents in the County/Metro Area ¹	Adherents as % of County/Metro Population ²
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		
8.		
9.		
10.		
Total Adherents (all groups)		
Unclaimed ³		

¹ From <http://www.thearda.com/mapsReports>

² Divide the number of adherents in each of the top ten denominations by the county/metro population (county/metro population is also shown on the printout from www.thearda.com).

³ From <http://www.thearda.com>—Unclaimed are people who are not adherents of any of the 188 denominations included in the Religious Congregations and Membership data.

Session 3, Exercise 1

3. What Does it Mean?

- a. Nationwide about 50% (unadjusted) to 63% (adjusted) of the population are adherents of a religious group. How does this compare to your county or metro area?

- b. What implications does this have for your congregation?

- c. What are the five largest denominations or faith groups in your county or metro area? Are they in the same denominational family (e.g., evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, etc.)?

- d. Is your congregation in one of these denominations? Is your congregation in the same denominational family? What implications does this have for your congregation?

- e. Click on the tab for “1990-2000 Change.” Use the information there to complete the following table. Which denominations experienced the greatest membership increases in your county/metro area in that period? Which experienced the greatest membership declines?

Denominations with Greatest Increases			Denominations with Greatest Decreases		
Name of Denomination	% Increase in Members	Number of New Churches	Name of Denomination	% Decrease in Members	Number of Lost Churches

Note: The population in _____ County/Metro area grew/declined ___% from 1990 to 2000.

- f. Is your congregation in one of these categories? What implications does this have for your congregation?

Our Congregation's Community Type

1. Define Your Congregation's Location:

We are located in _____ Zip code.

The population in our Zipcode was _____ in 2008 (or most recent year available).

We are located in _____ city or town.

The population in our city was _____ in 2008 (or most recent year available).

We are located in _____ County.

The population in our county was _____ in 2008 (or most recent year available).

2. Which location describes our congregation's community best—Zipcode, city/metro area, or county? (Your decision should be guided by considering the geographic area served by your ministry and/or where your worshipers live.)

3. Gather U.S. Census information about the people who live in this area. Complete the last column in the Our Community table on the next page. Sources of Census data are listed on the next page. (Some figures will need to be calculated from Census data.)

4. Compare the figures for Our Community to those from each community type in the table.

First, examine the table line by line, circling the community type percentage in each line that is *closest* to the percentage in your community. Second, count the number of circled percentages for each community type. Which community type did you circle most often? Does this seem like the community type our congregation's area is most like?

Are there any circles in other columns for other community types? If so, in what ways do our congregation's community percentages differ from its dominant community type profile (for example, lower percentages of households in poverty)? In what ways is our community different from that community type?

5. What surprises us about the Census information for our community?

6. What are some of the needs in our community that are not currently being met?

7. What can our congregation do to meet those needs?

Our Community

	Community Types:					Your Community
	Rural	Growing Suburban	Small Cities & Stable Suburban	Econ. Distressed Urban	High Mobility Urban	
Population, Housing, and Households:						
Percent mobility (moved in past 5 years)	38%	46%	45%	46%	64%	
Percent minority	12%	20%	17%	58%	32%	
Percent foreign born	2%	11%	4%	7%	12%	
Average household size	2.62	2.63	2.37	2.64	2.24	
Percent owner-occupied housing	80%	75%	64%	56%	40%	
Percent new housing	14%	16%	6%	5%	10%	
Population growth in past 5 years	14%	26%	2%	1%	15%	
Families:						
Percent married with kids at home	26%	28%	20%	18%	14%	
Percent married; no kids at home	34%	32%	28%	21%	19%	
Percent female headed households	5%	5%	8%	12%	5%	
Education:						
Percent college degree	13%	36%	20%	16%	40%	
Percent some college	25%	29%	28%	28%	27%	
Percent no high school degree	22%	10%	19%	27%	14%	
Employment and Income:						
Average household income	\$44,841	\$72,412	\$44,065	\$40,091	\$50,370	
Percent working professionals	25%	42%	30%	26%	39%	
Percent working service or sales	36%	40%	43%	46%	45%	
Percent working farming, construction	37%	18%	26%	28%	16%	
Percent unemployed	4%	3%	6%	9%	8%	
Percent in poverty	10%	5%	13%	21%	21%	
Age:						
Percent under age 18	26%	25%	24%	28%	17%	
Percent 18-29	13%	13%	16%	19%	38%	
Percent 30-44	23%	24%	22%	22%	20%	
Percent 45-64	24%	24%	22%	20%	16%	
Percent age 65 or older	13%	13%	16%	12%	9%	

Sources for Community Information:

- U.S. Census (<http://quickfacts.census.gov> provides information for counties and cities/towns with more than 25,000 people; <http://factfinder.census.gov> provides information on cities/towns, counties, or zipcodes—use the “show more” links for additional information)
- Your denomination’s Web site may offer community or demographic information.
- The Association of Religion Data Archives provides community data and other tools (<http://www.thearda.com/DemographicMap> and <http://www.thearda.com/profile>).

Trey Hammond, *Places of Promise Leader Guide*, 2008

To accompany *Places of Promise: Finding Strength in Your Congregation’s Location*, by Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008)

Comparing Our Worshipers to Community Members

1. Gather Information About Your Worshipers and the People Living in Your Location:

Information about your community is the same as the table in Session 3, Exercise 2. Information about your worshipers will come from a variety of sources, including results from the U.S. Congregational Life Survey (or another congregational survey), from congregational records, and from key leaders' estimates based on their knowledge of your worshipers.

	Your Community	Your Worshipers
Population, Housing, and Households:		
Percent mobility (moved in past 5 years)		
Percent minority		
Percent foreign-born		
Average household size		
Percent owner-occupied housing		
Families:		
Percent married with kids at home		
Percent married; no kids at home		
Percent female-headed households		
Education:		
Percent college degree		
Percent some college		
Percent no high school degree		
Employment and Income:		
Average household income		
Percent working professionals		
Percent working service or sales		
Percent working farming, construction		
Percent unemployed		
Percent in poverty		
Age:		
Percent under age 18		
Percent 18-44		
Percent 45-64		
Percent age 65 or older		

Quotes Pertaining to a Theology of Place

Walter Brueggemann—*The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*¹

“Land will be used to refer to actual earthly turf where people can be safe and secure, where meaning and well-being are enjoyed without pressure or coercion. Land will also be used in a symbolic sense, as the Bible itself uses it, to express the wholeness of joy and well-being characterized by social coherence and personal ease in prosperity, security, and freedom.

Land is never simply physical dirt, but is always physical dirt freighted with social meanings derived from historical experience.”²

Philip Sheldrake—*Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity*³

“The concept of space refers not simply to geographical location, but to a dialectical relationship between environment and human narrative. Place is space that has the capacity to be remembered and to evoke what is most precious.”⁴

“The meaning of places unfolds in stories, myths, rituals, and in naming. The social significance of places finds expressions in music, art, and architecture.”⁵

“Unlike non-place, place has three essential characteristics—it engages with our identity, with our relationships, and with our history.”⁶

“To put matters theologically, God is not revealed to us in the immediacy of raw nature. The only spirituality that is accessible is incarnational—that is mediated through the cultural and contextual overlays we inevitably bring to nature and to our understanding of the sacred. If place is, first of all landscape, it is also memory.”⁷

John Inge—*A Christian Theology of Place*⁸

“When we think of space, most of us will tend to think of “outer space” and “infinity,” but when we think of place, on the other hand, we tend to think of locality, a particular spot. What is undifferentiated space becomes for us a significant place by virtue of our familiarity with it. The two terms might be thought of as tending towards opposite ends of a spectrum, which has the local at one end and the infinite at the other. Spaces are what are filled with places.”⁹

In this chapter, “Place in Western Thought and Practice,” Inge argues that unlike older cultures where place was fundamentally important, in the “modern” period, beginning in the 16th century, place was less valued. Societies became less rooted in place, while science and philosophy turned their attention to space and time as defining categories. He even sees theological reflection in the modern period largely mirroring this neglect of place. He notes a strand of protest to this worldview by thinkers in the

Trey Hammond, *Places of Promise Leader Guide*, 2008

To accompany *Places of Promise: Finding Strength in Your Congregation’s Location*, by Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008)

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past century who have taken a renewed interest in the significance of place for individuals and communities. He notes:

“Much of this protest thinking . . . fits loosely into what might be termed ‘postmodern.’ A consequence of the postmodern suspicion of grand narratives is an attempt to recover a sense of the importance of the particular. One aspect of the particular is place, and much postmodern writing recognizes the significance of spatial factors in human experience which was lost in modernity.”¹⁰

In discussing the importance of “neighborliness,” Inge quotes Daniel Kemmis, who writes:

“Places have a way of claiming people. When they claim very diverse types of people, those people eventually have to learn to live with each other; they must learn to inhabit their place together, which they can only do through the development of certain habits of inhabitation which both rely upon and nurture the old fashioned civic virtues of trust, honesty, justice, tolerance, cooperation, hope and remembrance. Neighborliness of this sort is something which is central to what being Christian is all about, and as such Christians should be able to give a lead in its recovery in order to assist what Kemmis terms ‘inhabitation.’ If members of Christian communities could learn to be good neighbors to one another and to the larger communities of which they are apart, they would have something infinitely worthwhile to offer to the world. And it would be the very best form of evangelization.”¹¹

Geoffrey Lilburne—*A Sense of Place: A Christian Theology of the Land*¹²

“What lay behind the seemingly irreconcilable differences (between an aboriginal Australian community and an oil company contesting over sacred tribal land) was a clash in understanding of the land: between land as economic resource and land as sacred heritage, between land as commodity and land as repository of religious meaning.”¹³

“In the (Old Testament’s) covenantal view of land tenure we see a set of relationships which define the nature of the possessions. The relationships exhibit a threefold pattern. There is first the relationship between human persons and their God; second, the relationships between the various members of their community; and the third, the relation of the human persons to the land itself. Each of these relationships is regulated by the covenanted understanding and its radical sense of the sovereignty of God which gives land to the faithful people.”¹⁴

“This Hebrew understanding can richly inform a Christian theology of the land. The land, as God’s creation and gift, is valued for its own sake. It has meaning and value far beyond its mere economic value. It is not a blank space upon which we write our history of dominance; rather, it is a religious space upon which is written the story of God’s dealings with us and our dealing with God. These dealings provide the enduring marks of our history on the land. Land is not held for purely personal gain; it is held in trust. This means that the inherent qualities, the limitations, and the capabilities of the

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land must be respected. As property held in trust must be passed on intact to those members of the community who will follow us in possession.”¹⁵

From the chapter, “Incarnation and the Land”:

“If God became human in Jesus Christ, as Christianity has always maintained, then God became human in a particular time and a particular place. In seeking a theology which is local, that is, a theology which develops the images of a local context, we are doing no more than calling for a truly incarnational theology.”¹⁶

“The assurance that Jesus Christ is here, and that God chooses to dwell with this community in this place, is the basis for a local incarnational lifestyle. God has entrusted to those redeemed by Christ the task of fashioning the dwelling place of God. That this should involve at least the loving care of the environment is obvious. That it should encompass the work of justice and peace, the building of security and plenty for the human community on an inclusive and universal scale, flows directly from the table ministry of Jesus.”¹⁷

“In like manner, then, the Christian communities were to find their place in the communities in which God had established them. If in his life Jesus sanctified places by his presence and loving relationships, so too the community was to sanctify and care for the places of their life.”¹⁸

From the chapter, “Defining Incarnational Praxis”:

“If our whole lives are bound up with the land, and if our physical, spiritual, emotional, and communal life flows out of the relationship with the locality we inhabit, then issues of the locality need to become the focus of our corporate and religious life. This insight is in line with the implications of the Incarnation for our understanding of place. As much as anything that churches may *do*, there is a far more significant ministry in what churches *are*. Their reality is to be the local expression of the kingdom of God, and their calling is to incarnate in this locality the love and care with which God loves all of the creation. If the task of the local congregation is to love the place with the love that God has for all creation, what does it mean to love a place? To love a place is to seek its well-being and the well-being of the creatures it supports.”¹⁹

Robert M. Hamma—*Landscapes of the Soul: A Spirituality of Place*²⁰

“Thus in Jesus’ view, every place has the potential to be a holy place because the reign of God can come anywhere. For Jesus, the holiness of the place is dependent not on how beautiful it is, on whether it has been dedicated as a place of prayer, or even on what has happened in the past there. It is dependent on whether the signs of the kingdom’s presence are there.”²¹

Trey Hammond, *Places of Promise Leader Guide*, 2008

To accompany *Places of Promise: Finding Strength in Your Congregation’s Location*, by Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008)

Tim J. Gorringer—*A Theology of the Built Environment: Justice, Empowerment, Redemption*²²

“To be human is to be placed: to be born in this house, hospital, or stable (according to Luke). It is to live in a house, apartment, or mansion. It is to go to school through this street or lane; to shop in this market, that mall; to work in this factory, office, farm. These facts are banal, but they form the fabric of our everyday lives, structuring our memories, determining our attitudes. How, as Christians, should we think of them, great theologians have glimpsed in this direction, but the built environment forms no locus in theological reflection except as it has dealt with land and property, and with the city as a metaphor of community, or our final destination . . . Form follows function; buildings serve a purpose. For good or ill buildings, from the humblest garden shed to the noblest cathedral, make moral statements.”²³

“In relationship to the built environment we can say that God the Creator is the one who brings order out of chaos, and is therefore the source of all order and of the planning which gives form to our world. God the Reconciler is the one who ‘breaks down the walls of partition’ between God and humans and between humans themselves. God is therefore the source of all attempts to realize community and of the justice without which community cannot survive. God the redeemer is the author of all dreams and visions, the author of the imagination which seeks the New Jerusalem and anticipates it in structures here and now.”²⁴

Notes

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002).

² Brueggemann, p. 2.

³ Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001).

⁴ Sheldrake, p. 1.

⁵ Sheldrake, p. 6.

⁶ Sheldrake, p. 9.

⁷ Sheldrake, p. 16.

⁸ John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003).

⁹ Inge, p. 2.

¹⁰ Inge, p. 24.

¹¹ Inge, p. 135 and Daniel Kemmis, *Community and the Politics of Place* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), p. 119.

¹² Geoffrey Lilburne, *A Sense of Place: A Christian Theology of the Land* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989).

¹³ Lilburne, p. 13.

¹⁴ Lilburne, p. 60.

¹⁵ Lilburne, pp. 50-51.

¹⁶ Lilburne, p. 87.

¹⁷ Lilburne, pp. 102-104.

¹⁸ Lilburne, p. 105.

¹⁹ Lilburne, p. 123.

²⁰ Robert M. Hamma, *Landscapes of the Soul: A Spirituality of Place* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1999).

²¹ Hamma, p. 84.

²² Tim J. Gorringer, *A Theology of the Built Environment: Justice, Empowerment, Redemption* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

²³ Gorringer, p. 1.

²⁴ Gorringer, p. 5.

²⁵ Gorringer, p. 40.

A Theology of Place: Look Out Your Window

I talked to a friend about the challenge of expressing “a theology of place.” He caught me off guard by saying, “That’s not so hard. You look out the window. You see the school across the street. You think about the children there—how beautiful and full of life they are, what challenges they face, the hope God has for them. You think about the families, many of them immigrants trying to make it in a new land. You consider how your congregation might be a good neighbor. Just do that and you’re well on your way to a theology of place.”¹

He’s right. You look out the window. My friend knows something about our context. Our congregation’s neighbor is an elementary school. That institution, along with the children, families, and teachers who comprise the school’s lifeblood, are our neighbors. God has given us this unique place, this particular corner, this La Mesa neighborhood, to take seriously. Our place provides ample opportunities to love and serve our neighbors. Justice issues and greater societal concerns find unique expression in this community. Our urban neighborhood’s natural beauty and vitality reveal God’s handiwork.

We begin a theology of place by “looking out our window.” This is contextual theology. We may think we know what is around us, but there is always more going on than meets the eye. Neighborhoods are always changing, incredibly dynamic by nature. If our congregation had not done an in-depth community assessment in the last three years, we might be unaware of new trends and populations. Also, we always see through lenses that capture less than everything there is to see. We have to push past our self-interested view, shaped by our institutional concerns, and try to see our community on its own terms. Then, maybe, we can begin to imagine that place through the eyes of God, who is seeking to create a “new heaven and a new earth” in the places we inhabit.

Why might a theology of place be important? Beneath our congregation’s genesis story—about the how and why our congregation was located at its present site—divine intentionality is at work. This is the central question: What is God’s on-going relationship to this place we claim and the human communities, built environment, and natural systems that inhabit it? This question puts a different trajectory on thinking about the community around us than simply asking: “How does our location impact our congregation?” Our location is a God-created, God-shaped, and God-given place. This divine purpose may be hidden behind urban squalor, rural out-migration, or suburban sprawl, but it is still there. How does God’s on-going incarnation in this place shape the congregation’s identity and ministry? This theology is not academic or systematic, but biblical, contextual, and concrete.

Another question we must answer before we consider God’s purpose for our community: *Do we really claim this place?* Do we value this context? Are we interested in its people and in seeking relationships with them? Do we know the community’s concerns and problems? Do we value its human and material assets? Are we committed to shaping its future? How we answer these questions will shape the way we theologize on place. These questions are important if your congregation is currently in sync with the community. But the questions take on greater importance if the neighborhood has changed. Perhaps your congregation feels that some distance needs to be overcome to reconnect with your neighbors.

Trey Hammond, *Places of Promise Leader Guide*, 2008

To accompany *Places of Promise: Finding Strength in Your Congregation’s Location*, by Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008)

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Having made the case for a “theology of place,” let me confess that I do not have a full-blown one to offer, only some starting points to stir your imagination. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann helps frame the discussion through his evocative definition of place:

“Place is space that has historical meaning, where some things have happened that are now remembered and that provide continuity and identity across generations. Place is space in which important words have been spoken that have established identity, defined vocation, and envisioned destiny. Place is space where vows have been exchanged, promises have been made and demands have been issued.”²

Many biblical themes offer insight about God’s relationship to place, but consider these six—three from the Old Testament and three from the New Testament:

1. Place as the land we are called to steward (Genesis 1:1–2:4a; Genesis 2:4b–2:25)
2. Place as gift and birthright (Deuteronomy 8:7–10; Genesis 25:19–35, Jeremiah 32:6–15)
3. Place as the fulfillment of prophetic vision (Mark 1:9–20; Luke 4:14–24)
4. Place as the locus of incarnation (John 1:1–14)
5. Place as a community of neighbors (Luke 10:25–37)
6. Place as the tangible expression of the reign of God (Luke 4:16–21, Mark 1:14–15)

Place As the Land We Are Called to Steward

A congregation generally calls some part of creation its home—a street address, a plat in the city’s register, a portion of God’s good earth. The creation stories in Genesis place human kind in relationship with God-given place as stewards. Stewardship involves the enjoyment of the good benefits that are given, as well as responsibility for the well-being of that habitat. In a similar way, we are placed in a portion of God’s creation as a faith community. The place where we live lays claim to us just as we lay claim to it by a legal title. The Old Testament’s covenantal theology is predicated on negotiated promises and commitments: between God and humanity, between human beings, and between human communities and the created order. Therefore, we are called in our congregation’s place to be a good steward. This involves discerning what God would have us do, relating to those who share the place with us, and being attentive to that part of creation’s well-being.

The Genesis stories pose a series of questions about the well-being of our given portion of creation—the land and the built environment. Is this place ecologically healthy? Are environmental justice issues at stake in our community (perhaps related to land use, environmental degradation, or economic exploitation)? Is there natural and human-crafted beauty in this place that is valued? Does the built environment contribute to a sense of community or does it detract from it? Given the Genesis story insights and our calling as stewards, what do you sense God desires to make this place a healthy part of creation?

Place As Gift and Birthright

Walter Brueggemann claims “land is the central theme in the Old Testament.”³ Land is a tangible expression of God’s concern for humanity. To have some place to call our own seems innate to the well-being of human beings and human communities. God promised a land to the Jewish sojourners. The Promised Land they inhabited provided for stability and a place to call home. As a gift from God, this land was to be treated with respect and responsibility. Our congregation’s place is similarly a gift from God.

In *A Christian Theology of Place*, John Inge argues that place, deeply valued in older cultures like Israel, became less important as an anchoring reality in a modern worldview. As economies shifted from agricultural to industrial and scientific, the colonizing world lost place as a philosophical and theological concept. The modern era’s devaluing of place, in conjunction with a rising capitalist economy, aided the transition from viewing place as an inherited birthright to seeing it as a financial commodity.⁴ If the modern worldview devalued place, then it is not surprising that in postmodern thinking there is a decided re-claiming of the importance of place.

Thinking about land as a commodity is different from thinking about land as birthright. The *Places of Promise* authors recount the Esau and Jacob story as an example of a contractual posture towards the land. Esau makes “the tragic choice to give up his priceless inheritance in exchange for satisfying a momentary hunger.”⁵ Birthrights come as inherited identities with “an obligation to use it, take care of it, pass it on, and hopefully improve it.”⁶ A contractual posture contrasts with one that is covenantal, expressing itself in the idea of birthright. Birthrights are not easily traded, nor should our place be viewed as a commodity to be sold.

If the Esau story is a birthright-squandered story, then Jeremiah’s story is a birthright-honored one. In Jeremiah 32, the prophet purchased the plot of land his family was about to lose, just as the real estate market was collapsing with the Assyrian invasion.⁷ Certainly it was not a good business investment, yet he nonetheless acted out of faith and birthright. Jeremiah affirmed that God had not abandoned this place and neither would he. A gift-and-birthright understanding of place positions congregations as catalysts in a societal re-valuing of place, as one of the few institutions still rooted in communities.

Place as the Fulfillment of Prophetic Vision

The land given to Israel was never fully realized as “the promised land” because they failed to live on it justly, steward it faithfully, and be in covenant with God. The prophets remind us of the promise and responsibility we have to the places we inhabit. Isaiah articulates a vision of “a new heaven and a new earth,” and envisions “the world as it should be,” as God created it to be. A new earth is a place where young and old are treated with respect, where all have the possibility of a home, where work is satisfying and one gets a fair reward, where the things you work for are not taken by another, and where equity and justice define public life.

In the meantime, in “the world as it is,” these just relationships are not yet realized. The principalities and powers do not serve humanity in the ways God intended. Congregations live in the community “as it is” with a commitment to see that place become as God intended. We are invited to help in building that new earth where we live.

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Congregations can be catalysts for God’s desired vision for a community in several ways. Congregations function as “mediating institutions,” helping mitigate the impact of larger social realities on individuals in a sheltering and empowering way.⁸ In the sheltering role, the congregation provides a safe community of support for people buffeted by difficult circumstances. However, this sheltering function alone will not address the circumstances that cause the hurt. In linking compassion with justice, the congregation works with people to find their voice and build power to act on their own behalf in the public arena. The congregation’s role as an empowering community offers the place for people to envision what is possible and then work to realize that vision.

Place as the Locus of Incarnation

Incarnation is the remarkable beginning place of the New Testament—God with us. God comes into the human experience, in the Christ moment and in all moments, to love and redeem. In his book, *A Sense of Place*, Geoffrey Lilburne observes,

“Incarnation reconstitutes place. Place is the location in time and space in which God becomes incarnate. In the person of Jesus Christ, God chose to become human. In the life of the communities that draw their identity from Jesus, this becoming human in space and time continues . . . as they love and care for the place as the very dwelling place of God.”⁹

God is still incarnating God’s reality in the communities where we live and in the congregations we call our spiritual home. If we truly believed that God was being incarnated in the community around us, we would have new eyes to see what was happening there and be blessed by it. In the Celtic Christian tradition, “thin places” happen where we catch a glimpse of the divine in the everyday. Where are the thin places in the community—where we glimpse God’s incarnating work?

Tim Gorringer, who reflects on the built environment’s significance to the incarnation, says “to be human is to be placed: to be born in a house, hospital, or stable (according to Luke).” He points out that our built environment is part of God’s intention to house us, to place us in buildings and places that nurture our humanity.¹⁰ How do we fashion in our congregation’s built environment an incarnation of Christ’s love, that it might be a thin place for the community? How might we work at the built community in our location so that it serves as a place of worthy habitations for human beings?

My understanding of incarnation as the starting place of ministry came from a seminary experience. I worked in a tenant-organizing effort in a run-down tenement on the south side of Chicago. The heat was out. The pipes were busted. Management ignored the renters’ complaints. We planned a protest action to get the owner’s attention and hold him accountable to his lease obligations. The time came for the protest. Only a few people were willing to risk the owner’s threat of eviction if they participated. I was saddened that so few stood up for their rights and felt frustrated after my hard work as the action’s organizer. The tenants’ powerful matriarch comforted me with a big hug, and then she spoke the truth to me. “Honey, you got to understand, that you don’t know what it’s like to live here, because you go home to seminary housing every night. If you want to be a truly effective organizer, you just might consider moving in.” She wisely spoke a theology of incarnation, as the very word from John 1:14, that God dwelt with us, literally means, “God moved in with us.”

Trey Hammond, *Places of Promise Leader Guide*, 2008

To accompany *Places of Promise: Finding Strength in Your Congregation’s Location*, by Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008)

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If in some way, we have “moved out” of our community, by not perceiving it as central to God’s purpose for us, we might consider moving back in. Our calling as congregation is to truly dwell in that place, just as God dwells in the world in the person and work of Christ.

Place as a Community of Neighbors

For Jesus, the love of neighbor was a part of the great double commandment, a caring that flows from our love of God. When pressed about who was a neighbor, the Good Samaritan story teaches that we do not in fact choose neighbors, they lay claim to us. The Samaritan man responded to the real need of someone who laid claim to him. It is obvious enough that our neighborhood is a place full of neighbors. All kinds of interesting people live in the communities we serve, and being a good neighbor means being aware of their claim on us. At the very least, a response to the Samaritan story would be to get out, meet people where they are, and seek a relationship with them.

One of the key insights of community organizing for congregational ministry is the importance of building relationships and having intentional conversations with people. By taking the time to engage we receive the privilege of knowing others deepest aspirations and what motivates them in their private and public lives. In organizing, the occasion for getting to know people is called the individual meeting. In the course of a year, a congregation might consider an intentional campaign to initiate individual meetings with people in the community. Remarkable things happen out of knowing each other. A congregation that works at creating a relational culture seems consistent with what H. Richard Niebuhr says is the church’s purpose—to “increase the love of God and neighbor.”¹¹

Place as the Tangible Expression of the Reign of God

His understanding of the kingdom or reign of God centered Christ’s ministry. Although we do not see that reign fully realized, we catch glimpses of it every now and then. Sometimes we are swept up in Christ’s work expressing itself.

Jesus begins his ministry in Luke speaking of the Jubilee, the acceptable year of the Lord. Deep in their collective conscience, the Hebrews believed that God would intervene in Israel’s life every fifty years—to address the inevitable injustice and inequity, returning the land to the original owners, and redistributing the resources so that all would share in the prosperity. Israel never fully enacted the Jubilee, but it was a compelling vision of God’s intention. That Jesus connected Jubilee with his reign has both ethical and symbolic consequences. The ethical dimensions shape the congregation’s work as a mediating community, providing shelter and empowering people, as discussed in the prophetic calling.

A congregation’s second important role is as a celebratory community of Christ’s reign in that place. In this celebratory role, the congregation holds up human existence, individually and collectively, to God. Here our lives are revealed in their God-given purpose, hallowing both place and time. In this joyful work, the congregation invites people to see their lives in a divine sweep—as we baptize the young and recognize their created uniqueness, as we provide places for marriage to be celebrated and nourished, and as we work to see that people experience their lives’ end with purpose and dignity. At the Lord’s Table we anticipate the Messianic banquet when all that divides humanity is broken down and we truly sit down together. At such times, we celebrate in one sacramental moment or event what

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we wish was true in all moments. This celebratory work includes our ritual sacraments, but the scope includes all moments in life when God's power and purpose are evident. Why might this be important? It's important because we so easily forget to see our lives and world as hopefully, lovingly, and creatively as God would have us. One important gift the congregation offers the community is that perspective as well. We can help the place around us celebrate and see what God might be intending.

In partnership with the elementary school across the street, our church hosts a school-year-end event—the La Mesa Street Festival. We celebrate the neighborhood's cultural diversity. We feature the food, music, and dance of the Hispanic, Native American, African American, Asian, and Anglo cultures that share our community. In the past, people called this community “the war zone” because of high crime and social dysfunction. The community wants to change that label. Every year at the Street Festival, when the kids are dancing and good ethnic food is being savored, the neighborhood residents stand shoulder to shoulder in laughter and a common sense of community. The neighborhood receives a divine reminder of this place's gifts and the possibility of our diversity. It is not yet Jubilee, but there is something akin to the spirit of Pentecost present with us that day.

These biblical and theological examples can help us think about place. If we look out the window and explore the scriptures, we discover ample resources to create a theology of place. We begin to see the vision for that God-given place, this portion of creation that is our birthright and gift, a thin place of God's incarnating reality.

Notes

¹ George Todd, phone conversation, November 17, 2007.

² Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), p. 4.

³ Brueggemann, p. 3.

⁴ John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 6-8.

⁵ Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Places of Promise: Finding Strength in Your Congregation's Location* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 8-9.

⁶ Sheldon Wolin, *The Presence of the Past: Essays on the State and the Constitution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 138.

⁷ Jeremiah 32:6-15.

⁸ Peter L. Berger and Richard J. Neuhaus, *To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1977).

⁹ Geoffrey Lilburne, *A Sense of Place: A Christian Theology of the Land* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), p. 108.

¹⁰ Tim Gorrige, *A Theology of the Built Environment: Justice, Empowerment, Redemption* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 1.

¹¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956), p. 31.

Exploring Models of Congregation and Place

In *Places of Promise* the authors consider the relationship of a congregation's location to its well-being. Their data lead them to the conclusion that "congregational vitality is not captive to location."¹ They explore several levels of locale by moving from the macro level (region of the country) to the community type (urban, suburban, rural) to the congregation's actual neighborhood.

Complementing their analyses, three different typologies of congregational life add to our thinking about a congregation and its relationship to place.

1. *Passive, Cultural, or Voluntary?*

The first typology comes from Barbara Wheeler in an essay, "Uncharted Territory: Congregational Identity and Mainline Protestantism."² Wheeler reviews current theories about how a congregation relates to its context. She describes three possible viewpoints as passive, cultural, and voluntary. The following paragraphs outline how her models relate directly to an understanding of congregations and their locations.

The first posture she styles as a "passive" or "wineskin" theory of congregations. In this view a particular congregation's identity is created not by what it does, but by what is done to it.³ Here the congregation's vitality and future are shaped by the social reality in which it exists, including both larger social trends and the local community's dynamics. Though the congregation has some internal strength in this model, it does not have enough to rise above the larger forces shaping its environment. So, if the neighborhood around the congregation is growing and vital, the congregation will naturally enjoy the benefit. On the other hand, if the local community is in decline or undergoing great upheaval, the congregation will mirror those trends in its own life. In this model, the congregation is captive to its environment, as the place itself dictates its destiny.

James Hopewell's book, *Congregation*, presents the second theory, which Wheeler called the "cultural" viewpoint.⁴ Here the congregation's posture is almost at the other extreme from the passive approach. The congregation has such a strong internal life, that it is nearly impervious to external forces. Wheeler notes of this theory, "congregations are richly idiomatic subcultures that construct narratives from their history that provide coherence and identity."⁵ In this framework, a congregation maintains a largely impermeable boundary between itself and the community around it. Thus, the congregation is largely unaffected by its location. According to this model, if a congregation's identity is strong but not aligned with what is happening around it, it may remain small even as the surrounding community experiences exploding growth. On the other hand, a congregation with a strong sense of identity can flourish, even as the community is in decline.

The third model, which Wheeler calls "voluntary," finds a balance between these two extreme views. In this model the congregation lives in a dynamic relationship with both its identity and place. The congregation has sufficient internal strength that it can choose how to respond to the social forces around it. Unlike the passive model, the congregation is not seen as inert, but negotiates with the context. Unlike the cultural model, the issues shaping its location affect the congregation, but how it fares in that contest is not pre-determined. The congregation is both acted upon by its context and in turn acts upon the context. In this view the congregation is described as "an open system." The

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congregation's identity is determined by the interplay of external forces and an internal capacity to negotiate with the context. The key word to characterize this dynamic between congregation and location would be "negotiated." Those who view the congregation through this lens believe that such a negotiation with location or place is vital in shaping the congregation's ministry.

2. *In, To, or With the Community?*

The second typology describing a congregation's relationship to its community derives from Robert Linthicum's essay, "The Urban Church: In, To, or With the City."⁶ He writes about a congregation's posture with reference to the city and its surrounding communities. Linthicum uses three prepositions to depict how a congregation relates to location—in, to, or with.

Congregations that are "in" their context have no particular attachment to that place. The congregation "just happens to be where its bricks and mortar meet the ground." It usually has little or no connection with the people who live in that community. He notes that some congregations with this worldview may have once been aligned closely with the community. However, when the context changed, the congregation became disconnected from it. Such congregations often become commuter congregations, with no psychological ownership of or connection to their community.

Linthicum's second posture for a congregation's ministry is to be directed "to" its context. Such congregations understand that they have a responsibility to the community in which they reside, even if it has changed dramatically. For example, a congregation that sees hunger might initiate a food pantry. One that sees children who are unsupervised after school might decide to launch a youth program. The common element rests with the congregation deciding what is best for the community. The problem here is that the response is often programmatic and rarely relational. Decision-making lacks input from the community about the best approach or solution. Ministry "to" a community may inadvertently reinforce the social distance between the congregation and the community it seeks to help.

The third approach is evidenced by congregations that do ministry "with" their community. Linthicum notes that here "a church incarnates itself in that community . . . it enters into the life of that community and becomes partners with the community to address the need."⁷ In this case, the work is not primarily programmatic in nature, but relational. Trust and understanding emerge from meaningful relationships. The congregation engages the people of the community in creating solutions and exploring new possibilities. The congregation brings "social capital" to the table—human and fiscal resources, a facility that can nurture community efforts, and a community committed to God's purposes. Linthicum suggests that a congregation ministering "with" its community tends to move beyond charitable efforts to those of development, empowerment, and organizing. This strategy can narrow the social divide that often happens when a community has experienced demographic transition with which the congregation has not kept pace. Congregational members and community residents find that they have much in common. This develops from their truly knowing one another rather than knowing just the surface differences that divide them.

3. Response to Community Change?

The third model of congregations and their relationship to context comes from Nancy Ammerman's book, *Congregation and Community*.⁸ She explores how congregations deal with community change. Typically these changes stem from demographic transitions in the community surrounding the congregation. She indicates that congregations can respond to those changes in a number of ways. The first type of response is persistence in the face of change. Some might characterize this response as **denial**. The usual outcome of this response is decline in numbers and vitality. A declining congregation can hang on for many years, becoming something of a hospice to its members, with little connection to the community.

The second response to community change is to **relocate**, either physically or practically. "They either move to a new location or highlight their existing identity in such a way that allows them to draw from beyond their immediate locale."⁹ These congregations essentially do not change their identity or ministry. They just move to a location better suited to their ministry style or stay where they are and draw from a much larger area. This second strategy is often referred to as a "niche ministry." The congregation views its ministry as metro in nature, focusing their efforts on a particular affinity group—singles, senior citizens, or artists, for example.

Congregations seriously choosing to **adapt** to a changed environment represent the third strategy Ammerman found in her study. They understand that they will need to change their identity and ministry to relate to a community with different residents and interests. They choose to enter into this process understanding that worship, their current slate of programs and activities, and even decision-making processes are likely to be on the negotiating table. This response inevitably involves conflict. However, as differing needs are expressed, an authentic reweaving of the congregation's life and the community is possible.

The final response to community transition Ammerman mentions is **transformation**. In this type of response, a congregation looks altogether different than it did in the past. Generally, those congregations that successfully adapt to a changing context maintain some historic connection to what came before. This may not be the case at all in a congregation that is transformed or "born anew." For example, the congregation may leave its building and become a house church. Their future becomes a radical departure from their past.

Summary

These models of ministry, along with insights from *Places of Promise*, provide some glimpses of how a congregation might relate to its place. The models explore the dynamic between a congregation and its community, the posture of the church towards its context, and the possible strategies a congregation may employ in responding creatively to place. In analyzing your situation through these various lenses you are invited to name what is both present and possible in your relationship to your place.

Notes

¹ Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Places of Promise: Finding Strength in Your Congregation's Location* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 87.

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² Barbara Wheeler, "Uncharted Territory: Congregational Identity and Mainline Protestantism," in *The Presbyterian Predicament: Six Perspectives*, edited by Milton J. Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), pp. 67-89.

³ Wheeler, p. 75.

⁴ James F. Hopewell, *Congregation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

⁵ Wheeler, p. 77.

⁶ Robert C. Linthicum, "The Urban Church: In, To, or With the City," *Theology, News and Notes of Fuller Seminary*, November 1991, pp. 18-22.

⁷ Linthicum, p. 19.

⁸ Nancy T. Ammerman, *Congregation and Community* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

⁹ Ammerman, p. 107.

Exploring Some Myths About Place and Surprising Outcomes

Places of Promise examines some myths congregations might believe about their relationship to place. Some of the research results puzzled me and seem useful to explore in more depth.

Myth: Congregations in growing communities thrive, and in declining communities they falter.

One of the study's interesting results is that place is not determinative of a congregation's well-being. Congregations in growing communities are not always successful in attracting new people. The failure of many new church developments—almost all of which are sited in growing communities—provides evidence of a weak link between congregation and community growth. If congregations do not find a way to connect with and serve the needs of their community, they are not likely to benefit from changing local dynamics.

By the same token, a numerically declining community does not mean that the local congregation is destined to decline. If a strong congregation connects with new people, either in their geographic community or in an affinity community, they can grow numerically.

Myth: If we do ministry to our community, it will open the door for new members.

This may be true, but it really depends on the kind of community ministry we undertake. The survey data indicates that many numerically declining congregations see as one of their strengths a “focus on community.” This finding seems somewhat counterintuitive. It may indicate that some congregations employ mission strategies that do not overcome the social distance they hope to reduce. Or they may not focus on the community until they are very late in the change cycle, near the place of sheer survival. At this point, mission is often directed “to” people they see as different from themselves rather than ministry “with” a community with whom they feel some connection. So, a congregation might wonder why people who come to the soup kitchen or food pantry never come back to worship services. Sometimes the programs we create to “help” people result in reinforcing social distance and unequal power relationships. An outreach program without an intentional relationship building or empowerment component may actually serve to deepen the social distance. This may be what the data indicates. By the time many congregations begin to focus on their community, they unknowingly choose strategies or programs that do not build bridges, but more barriers.

On the flip side, if a congregation seeks to relate to its community authentically, there are many ways to open the door and diminish any social divide. It often begins with getting to know people and having conversations. Before we start any programs, we first need to know what people really want and need. Building friendships is an important marker for congregational vitality. Maybe the critical question is not how many members did we add, but how many friendships did we begin? Building energizing relationships transforms our vitality and ministry's purpose. The introduction of the “grandmothering” outreach of the New York congregation serves as one example. Deepen those relationships enough and membership will likely follow.

Myth: Studying demographics will tell us what we need to do in ministry.

Demographic information is an important starting place in considering our context. Yet such information only takes us so far. Sometimes we assume such statistics tell us more about our situation and chart our future course more than they really can.

On the positive side, demographic data help us face the reality of our changing neighborhood. Data can lead us to ask the right kinds of questions about the people and trends they describe. However, we should never assume from reading statistics that we know what the people in our community actually want or need.

Whatever you begin to conclude from the data, test it out in the real world. Go visit people in the community, door to door. Set up interviews with leaders in key institutions in the community—the schools, city government, local businesses, and non-profit organizations. Demographics are useful as they direct us out into the community, but the most important jump is from data to conversation.

Myth: If we just create the right program or mission, we will turn around our numerical decline.

No “canned program” helps a congregation thrive and be vitally connected to its place. In fact, sometimes our “programmatic” thinking gets in the way of effective ministry. We must remember that ministry emerges primarily out of relationships, not programs. To engage with our community we first need to make a commitment to take our place seriously. Along with that, we should commit to building deeper relationships within the congregation and out in the community. We explore the community with an emphasis on its assets and challenges. We try to assess what things we have to offer as a community of faith. Then we move out—not waiting for the community to come to us, but initiating the interaction. We trust that God is already at work in that place. We expect to discover gifts for us as well. A signpost along the way is when your place connection begins to shape your identity as well as your ministry.

Myth: If our congregation moves or merges, we have failed.

Moving and merging may be indications that the incongruity between the congregation and the community was too much to overcome. They represent failure only if the congregation learns nothing in the process about itself or how to conceive of ministry in its new place. If a merger means two congregations, disconnected from their community, join forces to persist in resisting change, success is unlikely. If in the process of envisioning a renewed sense of purpose and ministry, the merged congregation takes seriously its place, then the merger serves God’s incarnating purpose in that new reality. Likewise, if a congregation moves closer to its membership base, then it should be more intentional in getting to know and connect with its new location. The move can provide an opportunity to be claimed by a new God-given place.

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