Life Together in Our Neighborhood

Nicholas Tangen OblSB

Guten tag! My name is Nicholas Tangen, and I am here representing the Minneapolis Area Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I live in Minneapolis, MN with my wife Kristin, who has traveled with me this week. Kristin and I first visited Germany in 2013 as part of a Reformation Tour, and that time spent in this incredible country had a profound impact on both of our sense of call and vocation. So, we are grateful to have the opportunity to return to Germany together.

At the Minneapolis Area Synod, I am the Director of Faith Practices & Neighboring Practices, which is a two-year learning community for congregations curious about the call to be faithful neighbors in the places where they live and worship. We learn and experiment with those small simple practices that put us in regular contact with our neighbor, that encourage a posture of listening – to neighbor and to God, and which help us focus on accompaniment more than charity.

This project is funded by a grant from the Lilly Endowment – a philanthropic institution in the United States that funds an incredible array of initiatives, religious, educational, and otherwise. These funds have allowed us to walk with twelve congregations in our Synod over the past two years learning and experimenting with the practices that undergird our life together, not just as congregations, but as neighbors. We just completed the first round of this learning community in May and are preparing to launch our second round with 15 more congregations in our Synod.

Now, in this learning community I often warn people that they are going to hear me talk a lot about my most significant theological influence, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It's rare that I don't hear Bonhoeffer's words ringing in my ear as I think about and convene spaces for exploring what it means to be followers of Jesus living in community.

My first encounter with Dietrich Bonhoeffer took place in a small book study at my local congregation, where we read one of the several Bonhoeffer biographies. I was immediately taken with his incredible attention to theological integrity and his own deep sense of call. Bonhoeffer didn't come from a particularly religious family but developed one of the keenest theological minds of the past centuries. And even more than that, he took his theology seriously – it had an actual impact on how he lived his daily life. For someone who grew up among a Christian culture that often says one thing and does another, this conviction and integrity was refreshing and inspiring.

His commitment to the Gospel, his conviction that the church is Christ existing as community, and his refusal to participate in a genocidal theology and national socialism led to his arrest, his imprisonment, and his execution.

When I began my work at the Minneapolis Area Synod, outlining the qualities and the theological grounding of congregations engaged authentically in their neighborhood, I couldn't help but return to Bonhoeffer, and in particular his small but mighty book, "Life Together".

"Life Together" was written out of Bonhoeffer's experience as the teacher and leader of the Confessing Church's underground seminary at Finkewalde. It drew on his experience with monastic communities in England, and it called on Christians to embrace and practice Life Together as an act of obedience and as participation in the divine reality of Christian community. And while Bonhoeffer was largely thinking about what we might call the church – the uniquely Christian community – I was struck by how his words and ideas seemed, at least to me, to reach beyond the walls of our churches and into the very communities and neighborhoods where we live.

I want to say a few things about the churches and the context within which I've spent the last decade working, and name just a few of the things Christian communities are facing in this moment in Minnesota. My experience and the experience of the churches I work with isn't universal in the United States, but I think shares much in common with other Mainline churches across the country.

One of the questions I've heard repeated over the years in congregational community engagement is "Would the neighborhood notice if your church closed it's doors?" which is intended to get churches thinking about their role in the neighborhood where they worship. And, in 2020 churches in the Minneapolis area faced that question very concretely when COVID19 forced many communities to shift worship and ministry online. And, unfortunately when they asked themselves if the neighborhood would notice when their doors shut, the answer was a resounding no. COVID revealed for many churches the depth of disconnection between the worshipping community and the community's residents.

In Minneapolis, while our neighborhoods and churches wrestled with the COVID virus, we were also confronted with the depth of racial injustice and police brutality when a Minneapolis Police Officer murdered George Floyd on Chicago Ave. The trauma of this event and the subsequent uprising fundamentally transformed our city, our state, and the country as a whole. And for congregations in the Minneapolis Area, they found themselves having to ask what role they would play in their own community when, not if, a similar crime and uprising takes place. Congregations near the George Floyd square, the site of this crime, who had already established relationships in the neighborhood were significantly more prepared to navigate those first weeks and the healing work that followed. And congregations across the state began looking to them as examples of meaningful neighboring relationships.

At the same time, many of our communities have experienced a crisis of another, though related kind. This year, the US Surgeon General released an advisory about the public health crisis and epidemic of loneliness and isolation[1]. There is an increasing sense that Americans are more divided and disconnected than ever, and this isn't simply a political inconvenience, it's a public health disaster that has major impacts on the people who live next to us as individuals and congregations.

A few points of data about the health impacts of isolation from this report; people experiencing a lack of connection face:

- …a 29% increased risk of heart disease
- …a 32% increased risk of stroke
- …a 50% increased risk of dementia in older adults
- …and a 60% increased risk of premature death

It is clear that in the US, our diminished connection with family, community, and our neighbors is contributing to a public health crisis.

Additionally, practitioners of asset-based community development, which I'll say more about in a moment, have shown that neighborhoods and neighbors are the primary contexts for some essential community functions that have largely been outsourced to service professionals and institutions, contributing to the social isolation that the surgeon general is warning us about. These functions include the raising of children, public safety, health and wellbeing, and social care. These are local functions that flourish when family, community members, and neighbors are connected in deep and authentic ways.

[1] New Surgeon General Advisory Raises Alarm about the Devastating Impact of the Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation in the United States | HHS.gov

But in a culture and a country experiencing an epidemic of loneliness and isolation, these essential functions get left by the wayside. This leaves neighborhoods vulnerable to gentrification, economic hardship, and conflict.

That is just a small taste of what is happening in the neighborhoods where our churches gather to worship. And for many years, churches were able to take it for granted that the folks sitting in the pews on Sunday were also the folks living in the houses and apartments nearby, shopping at the local grocers and farmers markets, and comprising the PTA. But years of hyper-mobility, gentrification, and white flight have left many of our churches fundamentally disconnected from the neighborhoods where they gather for worship every Sunday.

In the Minneapolis Area Synod, many of our churches draw membership from a broad geographic range, some members driving as far as 45 minutes to attend the church they grew up in or the church that speaks to their liturgical or theological convictions. Folks will pass several Lutheran Churches on their way to their own congregation and will worship in neighborhoods where they have little natural self-interest. They don't shop there. They don't vote there. Their kids don't go to school there. This means that our churches have to be exceptionally intentional about building relationships and connections in the surrounding community, because they can no longer count on the organic and integrated life together of a neighborhood that lives AND worships in their shared community.

While the disconnection and the isolation are very real, it is also real that Christ has called on churches to be Gospel communities in particular places. We are not church in our particular neighborhoods by accident. And one of my most powerful curiosities is what does it mean for churches to BE the neighbor, to embrace the call to neighboring, in a particular place at a particular time.

In some ways, this is getting at a very similar question that Bonhoeffer was wrestling with as he was writing many of his most important works – what does it mean to be church with a particular people, in a particular place and time? For Bonhoeffer this was about naming and identifying the call to be Christian community amid the Nazi regime. In Minneapolis, it's about naming the call to be Christian community amid consumer culture, racial and economic injustice, and the dissolution of community life. What does it mean to be obedient to Christ, to love God and neighbor, amid a culture and a society that seems at best to ignore the neighbor and at worst to target and oppress the neighbor?

In my context in the US, my observation is that as churches, especially middle-class white churches (of which the ELCA is one) have become disconnected from their immediate neighborhoods they have increasingly focused on charity and service as a primary relationship with the neighbor. And this is an important part of what it means to love our neighbor! We are called to attend to immediate and material needs, and to provide essential services as we are able. But, as is often the case, I fear we've lost balance and have too often thought of our neighborhoods and our communities only as contexts for our good deeds and objects for our service. Out of genuine care and concern we have too often centered ourselves, our need to serve, to do good, and to tell the story of our own good work.

And, in that process, we have we have missed out on the Christ present in our neighbor, in the whole and beloved person empowered by God to contribute to the common good and the community. We have centered our action and have convinced ourselves that our task is to bring the holy spirit and the Gospel to the neighborhood, rather than noticing and celebrating where Jesus is already at work in the people and the places in our community.

This is one area where I think Bonhoeffer's wisdom about Christian community extends to the neighborhood. In his book "Life Together", Bonhoeffer writes that "Christian community is not an ideal we

have to realize, but rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate"[2]. In the US, when we focus all our energy for the neighbor on charity, and service – on attending to needs and deficiencies – we bring with us our sense of what the ideal community ought to look like. This is especially true when dominant culture churches go into the neighborhood with an eye towards problem solving and development ON BEHALF of the neighbor– all in a community where they have little or no immediate self-interest or experience.

Our ideal neighborhood, the one our churches try to encourage or create through our good works, is often borne only of our own experience, our own cultural or economic background, and our own biases. It's often imagined without our neighbors' input, gifts and strengths, and self-interest in mind and at the table. But, when we remind ourselves that Christ goes ahead of us into the neighborhood – that Jesus is already present, already at work in the lives and gifts of our neighbors – and that we have been invited to participate in the good and holy work of God alongside our neighbors, I am convinced that we will find something far more meaningful than charity and service.

In the project I lead with the Minneapolis Area Synod, we have tried to embrace this divine reality through two disciplines: contemplative spiritual practice and asset-based community development. Bonhoeffer writes that the first duty we owe our neighbor is to listen, and both of these disciplines embrace a posture of listening at their center.

Contemplative spiritual practices – meditation, lectio divina, the Ignatian Examen, and others, remind us that our prayer need not be dominated by our own speaking, but can be a practice of listening for God's word and direction – and simply reveling in the Divine presence. Bonhoeffer's "Life Together" also encourages this attention to contemplative practice. He writes in the chapter "The Day Alone" "The Word comes not to the noisemakers but to those who are silent. The stillness of the temple is the sign of God's holy presence in the Word."

Bonhoeffer encouraged his seminarians to begin every day with intentional silence, to practice a daily period of mediation, which included mediation on Scripture, prayer, and intercession. He saw this "listening silence" as an essential part of the life together as it forms us to be listeners in our relationship to the neighbor, confronts our vanity and depravity, and prepares us in solitude to be full participants in community.

Contemplative practice also attunes our senses and faculties to notice the small but powerful ways that God is showing up in the lives of our neighbors. Community relationships that are dominated by charity and services too often get stuck in demanding measurable outcomes and whatever we happen to mean by success that day. But a contemplative mind takes notice of the immeasurable connections, the depth of relationships, and the beauty of small simple encounters with Christ as community. The service industry hasn't figured out how to measure the simple welcome of one neighbor to another which fosters a sense of belonging. Or the interaction between an elder and the children on their street that gives the elder a sense of purpose and playfulness, and the children another trusted adult in their lives. Or the myriad of small ways that neighbors accompany one another amid joy, grief, fear, and accomplishment. This is about attention, not outcomes.

On the neighboring side of the coin, we have focused on asset-based community development which is a discipline of attention that focuses our work for the common good on what is strong in a community, rather than what is wrong. It's a practice of mapping, celebrating, and connecting the gifts and strengths of neighbors, the physical, social, and institutional assets of a neighborhood, all in service of the common good.

---

[2] Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible: 5 (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works) (p. 38). Fortress Press. Kindle Edition.

Instead of outsourcing essential community functions to professionals and organizations, asset-based community development asks us to find ways as neighbors to co-create a community that is responsible for their own well-being.

Asset-based community development rejects the idea that our neighborhoods are identified by their deficiencies. Asset-based community development says that our neighborhoods have everything they need in the people and the associations already present in the community. Our task is to find ways to make connections that draw these assets to the surface and contribute to the flourishing of our neighborhood by returning the essential functions I mentioned earlier to the responsibility of citizens. We and our neighbors are not consumers or providers of services, but citizens responsible for our own well-being.

In his Chapter on Service, Bonhoeffer names the great diversity of a community as the gift that it is, consistent with the ethic of asset-based community development. He says that when we practice a posture of listening and refrain from judgement, "…other people, in the freedom with which they were created, become an occasion for me to rejoice…". Again, he says, "this diversity is a reason for rejoicing in one another and serving one another." While Bonhoeffer is speaking here about the uniquely Christian community, I have found it to be just as true beyond the walls of our churches.

Jesus is not contained by our creeds and our buildings, and in the communities where our congregations live and worship, Christ is present and active – in and through the lives of our neighbors of all backgrounds and experiences. When we embrace this reality, and set down our idealized images, we are free to rejoice and to revel in the activity of God all around us, and to find our own unique ways to participate in God's work. We are free to listen, truly listen, to our neighbors – to develop authentic relationships not bound by transaction or barter, but by genuine care and affection.

And we find that we are free from the burden of creating our idealized images and dreamy eyed visions – which Bonhoeffer argues will only ever lead to judgement and accusation. Instead, we are free to pay attention to the small things that actually contribute to the flourishing of community – table fellowship, prayer, mutuality, sharing, intentional conversations, - loving our neighbor as Christ.

In his book, "Having Nothing, Possessing Everything", Pastor Mike Mather says, "What makes communities healthier, stronger, and better? Growing the gifts of people who care about their neighbors, who visit each other when they're sick and offer healing, who throw good parties to celebrate life and joy, who are talented carpenters, cooks, gardeners, administrators, organizers, and artists."[3]

This is the imagination we've been exploring at the Minneapolis Area Synod. Instead of thinking of ourselves as service providers, or charitable organizations, what might be possible if we embrace the call to BE faithful neighbors – celebrating and animating our neighbor's gifts, telling the story of God's already present activity in the community, and leaning into the immense power of authentic and mutual relationships?

I like to think Bonhoeffer would appreciate this work, and I hope in some small way we are honoring his memory by celebrating the gift of Christian community. Bonhoeffer understood that the call to be Christian community is always particular, unique to the context and the experience of people in a particular place and time. He understood and challenged us to remember that we are not self-justifying – but that we are what we are only in and through Jesus Christ. A short story that solidified this divine reality for me.

---

[3] Mather, Michael. Having Nothing, Possessing Everything: Finding Abundant Communities in Unexpected Places (p. 132). Eerdmans. Kindle Edition.

In 2020, I was working at a congregation in Minneapolis near the University of MN. COVID was a few months strong, and George Floyd had just been murdered as my congregation began the process of transitioning to worship and ministry online. We knew that our community was hurting and confused, and we were reticent to just close the doors. So, we opted to create a space for prayer and reflection on our outdoor patio. We set up a small table with some flowers, prayer prompts, candles, and other materials. We posted invitations to the community to participate and let our neighbors know that the space was available.

Just before we closed our doors, a member of the congregation let us know that they had secured a large canvas print of a painting titled "Jesus of the People" by the artist Janet McKenzie. This painting depicts Jesus as an African American woman, with eyes that look out at the viewer asking, demanding to be seen. It's a powerful image, and we hung it on the wall above the prayer station we had put together. And then, we closed the doors. Staff began working from home, worship moved to Zoom, and in person ministry was halted as we discerned what the next steps would be amid a pandemic.

It was over three weeks before I returned to the building – but I needed something from my office, and so I drove to the church. And when I got there, I was floored by what I found. On the patio where we had set up a prayer station was a small but significant encampment of neighbors without shelter. There were tents and tarps set up across the patio, a makeshift grill cooking hot dogs, and over a dozen individuals talking and resting.

My initial reaction was fear – I thought "This is not what this space was intended for." I wondered what our members would say, what our neighbors would say. I wondered how to tell this to my pastor and council president. I knew that this was untenable and that it was going to be my job as the community engagement coordinator to ask them to leave. We couldn't have people living on the church patio, obviously.

So, I walked back to my office and tried to work up the courage and the right and compassionate words I would need to ask them to move along and find another place to stay. I rehearsed this all the way to the patio, but when I stepped towards the encampment, I was stopped dead in my tracks. The image of Jesus of the People stared out at me from the center of the patio, as if to say, "I dare you."

I almost broke down right there. Jesus was visibly present there in the midst of our neighbors without shelter, demanding to be seen – demanding that I see the face of Christ in the face of these neighbors. I turned around and I called my pastor and said that we needed to do something different. We needed to listen to this call, in this particular time and place, to be the neighbor alongside our neighbors who had sought shelter under the awning of our church – their very presence a stronger prayer than any of the printed materials we could have provided.

So, we entered into a month's long relationship with about a dozen individuals, mostly men, who had become increasingly vulnerable in the midst of COVID and the uprisings. We met together to create a shared covenant, we had conversations with each of the residents and got to know their own unique gifts and strengths and found ways to invite them to share them with the community. We used the church's resources and connections to ensure our neighbors had food, clothing, and access to a washroom. And we made ourselves available and accountable to our neighbors – just as we had asked them to be accountable to us.

The encampment remained for several months until a new site had to be found. The relationships we built and the community we practiced were messy, imperfect, and certainly not the idealized image our congregation had of how we'd like to be neighbors. But it was the call God had presented us with at that time. And when we realized that Christ was speaking a word of Gospel to us in the face of our unsheltered neighbor, we felt free to engage and connect with them as neighbors first – not as their perceived needs. We learned something about paying attention to where Christ shows up in the community, not as a result of our good work, but as the fulfillment of God's promises.

Bonhoeffer wrote in "Life Together", "Wherever the service of listening, active helpfulness, and bearing with others is being faithfully performed, the ultimate and highest ministry can also be offered, the service of the Word of God." Leaning into the call to BE the neighbor empowers us to share the Gospel in word and deed.

These are just some small reflections from a small part of the experience of churches in the US – in the Minneapolis area. Part of my excitement at being here this week is the opportunity to learn from each of you what it means in your context to be the neighbor – what it means for churches in your community to love God and neighbor in the places where you live and worship. I'm grateful for the opportunity, and in the words of our friend Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the presence of this gathering of Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength. Thank you.