

# Blessed are the Placemakers:

## community engagement for churches.

### Why read this guide?

This small guide outlines the promises and the challenges of ministry when tethered to **placemaking**. It frames our expectations in biblical terms and according to the mission of Jesus as he went from place to place. This guide claims that the health and vitality of a church is ultimately and intimately connected to the art of placemaking – an unlearned or forgotten skill for many of us. We long to attract not-yet and new believers while also deepening discipleship in our existing church community. We cannot offer salvation that we cannot show. We cannot show salvation that isn't right here in our neighbourhoods – where we work, rest, play, serve, and worship. In other words, if the good news is real it will be good news **here** (in my neighbourhood) and **now** (not just in the sweet by and by). **Salvation always has a place.**

**Placemaking** is a phrase that is increasingly being used in the community sector, and gaining traction in our churches as a helpful missional approach to local community engagement. Many of our churches are already busy with programs, events, and initiatives but it is important to understand placemaking is not another stand-alone program. **Placemaking will not compete with your current efforts** but instead enrich relationships with people nearest to you. By providing a broad framework for loving your neighbours, placemaking will enhance and connect the diversity of efforts your church already employs.



### Where are you on the journey?

As a Baptist movement, we have been on a journey with how we understand Community Engagement.

Many of our churches begin with identifying needs in their wider community, and then seek to articulate and meet those needs (the Advocacy and Welfare approach). The next stage is seeing needs and working alongside other locals so that people are empowered to address the issues (Needs-based Community Development).

In more recent years the focus has shifted to recognising assets in the community and how we can partner with people to enhance, celebrate, and add value to the good things that already exist in the neighbourhood (Asset-based Community Development and Appreciative Inquiry). As we move along the spectrum each expression becomes more sustainable, more equitable, and in Kingdom terms, increasingly focused on *Missio Dei* – the belief that God is already at work in the neighbourhood and that our calling as the followers of Jesus is to align ourselves with what God is doing. Placemaking invites us to the next stage of community engagement.



## What are we trying to do?

Through the local church we hope to offer discipleship, teaching, fellowship, worship, and spiritual direction. We create room for people to gather, resources for growth, opportunities for healing, and messages of hope.

At our best, we cultivate a sense of personal and collective identity that empowers people to live out the good news of Jesus Christ. We *declare* the good news and we *demonstrate* what it looks like. These are our God-given aspirations

TO EQUIP GOD'S PEOPLE FOR WORKS OF SERVICE, SO THAT THE BODY OF CHRIST MAY BE BUILT UP

## ...but here's what it feels like.

However, it's not uncommon to feel like we are on a religious treadmill. Perhaps we grasp for the latest worship trends, the newest book on church growth and health, or just resign ourselves to declining influence and dwindling numbers. At worst, we simply provide a religious pit stop in the crowded lives of busy people. Are we really just hosting a detached event in a fragmented culture that has lost interest in the Christian faith? We long to see our churches re-engage in their particular places and to offer life-giving, connected, and practical hope.

THEY KNEW THE TIMES AND THEY KNEW WHAT TO DO

## The Good News.

The good news for us is that we are not the first ones to sense the distance between our aspirations and reality. We can find countless examples in scripture and Christian history where the people of God are caught in the fruitless season between religious obligations and longing for how things should be. Isaiah 58 represents a snapshot of this season. Here we are taught what can go wrong in the life of a religious community when it feels like they (we!) are trying to do everything right. It also offers an alternative story, a hope-filled narrative that is as close to us as our neighbours, and the ground beneath our feet.



FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD

## More Good News.

Here's some more good news. Across the world, in a diversity of churches, in a multiplicity of places there is a pattern emerging. Churches are engaging their communities in creative and fruitful ways. This pattern is best understood in terms of placemaking – to seek the common good, to be a blessing to the whole neighbourhood. (Isaiah 58:9-12)

“If you get rid of unfair practices, quit blaming victims,  
quit gossiping about other people's sins,  
If you are generous with the hungry  
and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out,  
Your lives will begin to glow in the darkness,  
your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight.  
I will always show you where to go.  
I'll give you a full life in the emptiest of places—  
firm muscles, strong bones.  
You'll be like a well-watered garden,  
a gurgling spring that never runs dry.  
You'll use the old rubble of past lives to build anew,  
rebuild the foundations from out of your past.  
You'll be known as those who can fix anything,  
restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate,  
make the community livable again.

So, what would it take for our churches to be life-giving agents of renewal as described in this passage from Isaiah? How can we employ our church resources and everything in our church's story for the sake of restoration, rebuilding, renovation, and the livability of our neighbourhoods?

A livable community has clean water, air, and soil. It also has grace, hope, and resources for assisting those in need. A livable community offers company for the lonely, healing for the wounded, and forgiveness for those who do the wounding. It also offers employment, education, and commerce. A livable community cultivates meaning and connection instead of hopelessness and isolation.

*What role does your church have to play in creating a community like this?*



## Some Difficult Questions.

- Do you know the names of your neighbours?
- Are you engaged with your neighbours?
- Does the community around you express gratitude for your existence?
- Would your neighbourhood miss you if your church closed tomorrow?
- What do people say about you in the neighbourhood?

Salvation may well involve heaven and eternity, but if the ministry of Jesus is anything to go by, it most certainly involves the here and now. We need to return to the basics and ask why God has us in our particular places. It is time to cultivate a curiosity and affection for our neighbourhoods so that our lives can glow in the darkness and that we might be known as restorers.

## Placemakers: Examples from our own story.

For a hint about how the people of God best inhabit their places we recall Jeremiah 29. In this time and place, God's people are trapped in hostile territory. They have every reason to want a way out. They have hunkered down and turned inward. The word of the Lord comes to them via the prophet and it turns them inside-out. They are told to seek the welfare (SHALOM) of their place. This is always God's way (Jeremiah 29:4-7).

*"Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:  
Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce.  
Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.  
But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile,  
and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."*

It's important to notice that the word for welfare here is in fact SHALOM. It is fair to say that Shalom is the biggest word in the bible. That is, it contains the fullness of God's love, grace, forgiveness, blessing, and power. Shalom is such an expansive word it contains all our best hopes for salvation, justice, and peace...on earth as it is in heaven! Jesus is no stranger to this idea and his words recorded in the conclusion of John's gospel are key to the significance of this concept. Jesus' very first words to his followers as a resurrected person (John 20:20-21):

*"Shalom be with you...  
Shalom be with you.  
As the Father has sent me, so I send you."*

Jesus was sent "into the neighbourhood." He was sent to a specific place: to love neighbours, to identify and challenge injustice, to enact healing and hospitality. Jesus was a placemaker. He recognized the cultural, political, environmental, and relational issues of his specific place. He calls us to be students and stewards of our places that we might follow in his steps.

THE WORD BECAME FLESH AND BLOOD, & MOVED INTO THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

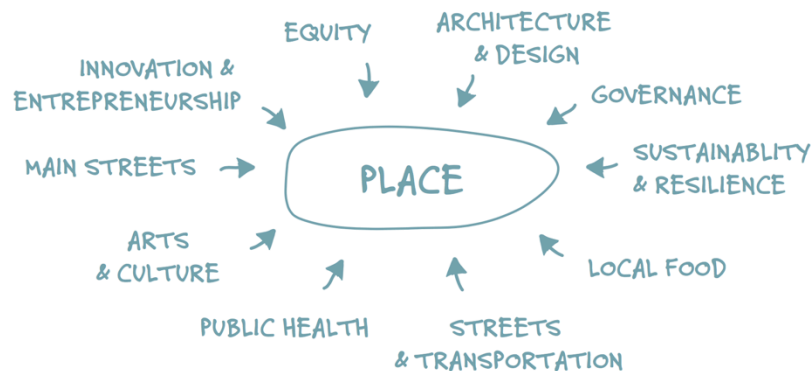
# What is Place?

**Place** is simply the created world around us. It includes streets, parks, buildings and architecture, art and culture, homes and businesses. It begins with the “natural world” and continues with our human constructions and modifications. Place is always particular and distinct. To be in the world – to exist – is to be placed. As the Psalmist reminds us, “The boundaries have fallen for me in pleasant places.” This is to also acknowledge we are limited beings – hemmed in by time and geography. The incarnation is an affirmation and celebration of being “in place.”

**Jesus** comes in to our experience of the world in a very specific and localised way. He is of a place (“Jesus of Nazareth”) and immersed in a historical moment (“In the days of King Herod of Judah...”). His friends are involved in the local food systems (fishermen), politics and economics (tax collectors), and he tells stories about roadways, byways,

farmers, and tourists. He also hangs around with politicians, bureaucrats, religious types, and folk on the margins of society. All these relationships with land, food, built structures, and people are an example for us now.

**However**, we 21<sup>st</sup> century humans have devised many ways to bend the limits of place and to trick ourselves into thinking we can do anything anywhere at anytime. We also kid ourselves by thinking we can remain independent of the world around us. We travel at high speeds across huge distances, communicating via social media through countless time zones. At the same time there is good news for those of us who recognize the truth that our Shalom is caught up in the Shalom of the world around us. A movement that honors the local is growing. It recognises that humans are healthier creatures when we embrace our limits and acknowledge that we are placed beings.



## Why does Place matter?

It matters because we are being saved **WITH** our places not **FROM** our places! Salvation always has a place. The story of God begins in a specific, created place. A garden. God reveals God’s-self as a placemaker! Then the Creator invites creation into the art of placemaking. Humans are given the vocation of tending (cultivating) and keeping (protecting) the world God has made. We are even given the creative honor of naming other creatures. This is the first account of human placemaking. Accelerating through the biblical story, through time and places, we are taught that the story of God ends with heaven and earth coming together (Revelation 21). Both are renewed. They interlock and overlap. A beautiful place is described in Revelation 22. It’s a garden city with a river running through it and a spectacular tree with healing properties. This work of heaven and earth being renewed and sewn together finds its axis in the birth of Jesus and continues with our work in the places where we rest, work, minister, and play. Places flourish because of

God's creative presence through other creatures, rivers, trees, streets, and buildings. This is the new world Habakkuk described, "the earth fills up with awareness of God's glory as the waters cover the sea" (2:14).

## So, what is Placemaking?

Placemaking is the playful and serious work of cultivating room for relationships. These relationships will always include humans and the created world (architecture, urban design, town planning, etc.) and will also involve other creatures and living things (animals, plants, insect life, etc.) As Christians we would also say these relationships naturally include the triune God – Father, Son, and Spirit. Placemaking can involve hosting a street party, building a community garden, serving on the local council, volunteering at your neighbourhood school, commissioning a public mural, or even hosting a men's shed or other regular community gathering. Placemaking is always best when it is inclusive, equitable, and diverse.

We cannot bring in a pre-fabricated solution to a place we don't know.

To love your place you need to know it.

To know it you need to learn it.

*"In the end, we won't save places we don't love; we can't love places we don't know, and we don't know places we haven't learned."*

*— Baba Dioum, Senegalese educator*

## Love your neighbour?

To love your neighbour is to be responsible for your neighbour. Are we taking responsibility for our neighbours? Are we paying attention to the struggles and victories of our fellow residents? If we are to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep we will need to be in relationship with them and share life alongside them.

*"I do not think that the geographical parish can ever become irrelevant or marginal. There is a sense in which the primary sense of neighbourhood must remain primary, because it is here that men and women relate to each other simply as human beings and not in respect of their functions in society."*

*— Lesslie Newbigin*

## In Summary...

When we live as placemakers, we inhabit the good news of Jesus. We also follow in the footsteps of the first humans in the first garden. When we join with God to love our neighbourhoods in tangible ways, we are echoing the way Jesus loved his neighbourhood and all the places he dwelled.

Remember the way John tells us the story of Jesus' resurrection? See John 20:11-18. It's quite a scene. A man and a woman, in a garden, on the first day of the week. John is re-telling the Genesis story for us and reminding us that because of Jesus, everything begins again - new creation! Salvation has come to this graveyard-garden. Salvation has come to Mary Magdalene and the disciples. Salvation has come to a city in the Middle East.

*Salvation has come to your neighbourhood. Can you see it? Do you experience Shalom?*

# THINGS TO DO...

**Reflect on the village well as metaphor...a place of gathering and encounter. Read John 4:1-6**

- Draw a simple map of your neighbourhood (birds-eye-view).
- What are the wells you see in your neighbourhood?
- Who gathers there?
- What do people do there?
- What time of the day would you go there?
- When is it busy/empty?
- What kinds of people frequent that place at different times?
- Where are the boundaries in your neighbourhood? - be sure to include rivers, bushland, mountains or hills, highways, railway tracks, bridges, freeways, bicycle and walking trails, etc.
- Is there an important local organisation, sports club, or entity to join in your community?
- Is there a business that has a high profile or special prestige?
- What barriers are there (relational, geographical) for you to get to know your neighbours?
- Who are the influencers in your neighbourhood? – think about who has power and resources.
- Take it further...your city council is a good place to start...be sure to look up their web page and investigate their strategic goals and values. Consider how these might overlap with your Kingdom imagination and the hopes of your church community.

**Get to know your neighbours through a neighbourhood questionnaire:**

**Questions to ask...**

- Where do you feel like you are “a local”?
- Where do you see good things happening in your neighbourhood?
- How would you describe your neighbourhood to a friend visiting from out of town?
- What places would you take your visitor?
- What do you love about our neighbourhood?
- What are your hopes for our neighbourhood?
- What would you like to see more of in our neighbourhood?
- Do you know about our church?
- What are your impressions?
- What would you like our church to do as a good neighbour?

## **Practices of Placemaking.**

While each neighbourhood deserves its own careful and contextualized consideration, we can find common ground in the following twelve practices. These ordinary examples are widely accessible across cultures and urban settings.

- **Walk** – when possible, choose to walk as your mode of transport. Walk daily as a spiritual discipline to participate in the life of the neighbourhood – as a time to socialize, observe and pray.
- **Communicate** – get to know local government representatives, city officials, religious leaders, and decision-makers that impact the neighbourhood. Stay in touch with them and hold them accountable. Build partnerships and demonstrate grass-root support of civic initiatives within the neighbourhood and serve as an

advocate on behalf of the neighbourhood.

- **Share** – tools, supplies, skills such as home repair, knitting, or sewing.
- **Care** – initiate and invite others to join in with caring for the most vulnerable in your midst (elderly, sick or infirm, children, orphans, single-parent families). Relationships and bonds will be strengthened immensely when neighbours serve together for a common cause.
- **Plant trees** – a spiritual, environmental, quality-of-life practice of beautification.
- **Bake or cook** – loaves of bread, preserves, divide meals you are already preparing to take to neighbours in need, share recipes.
- **Garden** – the generosity and fecundity of the garden will always provide produce to share. Garden together with neighbours in community gardens. Urban farming and agriculture serves both community and economic development.
- **Eat together** – practice an open kitchen table by inviting neighbours to share meals in your home. Plan community meals like potlucks and picnics. Participate with special events, festivals, and seasonal celebrations.
- **Beautify** – participate with or create public art projects, involve youth, adopt a corner of a street or an intersection and plant flowers, build and maintain raised bed gardens on top of car parks and footpaths. Cement and asphalt shouldn't prohibit cultivating beautiful spaces.
- **Start mini-projects** in the neighbourhood. These can be micro-actions of hope. Ideas include civic improvements, neighbourhood clean up, painting a fence or a mural, installing a historic marker, or celebrating something.
- **Join or participate** in neighbourhood associations or local civic organizations. Attend the neighbourhood church instead of commuting across the city.
- **Dwell** in neighbourhood “third spaces” – spend time in area parks, plazas, markets, or public libraries in the neighbourhood where people encounter each other and socialize. Patronize local businesses and shop as locally as possible as an effort to build up multiplex relationships. Waste time wandering and lingering in your neighbourhood.

- **Watch: Get together as a church and watch this video:**

“How Wolves Change Rivers” (a 4-minute video)

You will hear the term, “Ecosystem Engineer.” This is a great way to frame the calling of the placemaker.

<https://youtu.be/ysa5OBhXz-Q>



**Further reading:**

*A Christian Theology of Place* by John Inge (Philosophical and Historical)

*No Home Like Place* by Leonard E. Hjalmarson (Missional communities)

*The New Parish* by Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens, and Dwight J. Friesen (The church in the neighbourhood)

*Where Mortals Dwell* by Craig G. Bartholomew (Biblical and theological foundations)

*God Next Door* by Simon Carey Holt (Neighbourhood mission and spirituality)

*Sidewalks in the Kingdom* by Eric O. Jacobsen (Urban design and placemaking)

**Key sources for information about your neighbourhood and placemaking:**

The Art of Neighboring - <http://www.artofneighboring.com/resources/>

Australian Bureau of Statistics - <http://www.abs.gov.au/census>

Your local city council page (eg. <http://www.whitehorse.vic.gov.au> )

National Church Life Survey - <http://www.ncls.org.au>

Project for Public Spaces - <https://www.pps.org>

Village Well - <http://www.villagewell.org>

CoDesign - <https://codesignstudio.com.au>

**For more information and consultation, contact us at the BUV. We would love go come and see your place and help you flourish as a church while serving your wider community!**

<https://www.buv.com.au> : [Geoff.Maddock@buu.com.au](mailto:Geoff.Maddock@buu.com.au) : 0436470535