

DISCERNMENT

Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Volume 6 | Issue 1

Article 3

Book Review: Neighborhood Church: Transforming Your Congregation into a Powerhouse for Mission

Brandon Pierce

Stamford Church of Christ, bpierce04a@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/discernment>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#), [Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons](#), and the [Practical Theology Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Pierce, Brandon () "Book Review: Neighborhood Church: Transforming Your Congregation into a Powerhouse for Mission," *Discernment: Theology and the Practice of Ministry*. Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 3. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/discernment/vol6/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons @ ACU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Discernment: Theology and the Practice of Ministry* by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ ACU.

DISCERNMENT

Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Book Review

Neighborhood Church: Transforming Your Congregation into a Powerhouse for Mission, by Krin van Tatenhove and Rob Mueller. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2019. 146 pages, \$20.00.

Reviewer: Brandon Pierce

An oft-cited problem in church budgets is that the lion's share is devoted to building upkeep and maintenance. If a budget is, as is often said, a theological document, then it is clear that a church's building is one of its more sacred priorities. And if we consider that the greatest commands—to love God and one's neighbor—are just as much an ecclesial ethic as they are an individual one, it is also clear that a church loves God through the liturgical use of its sacred spaces. It is less intuitive how the neighbor is served by these spaces. Now in an age of decline in institutional church models, sacred spaces from the sanctuary to the fellowship hall go increasingly un- or under-used while still occupying the same (tax-free) footprint in the community. It takes a little perspective to see how declining churches can rethink how their spaces and other resources can become major catalysts for learning to love one's neighbor(hood) and rejuvenating a sense of value and purpose for both church and community.

Krin van Tatenhove and Rob Mueller are seasoned pastors in their own right and draw upon their significant training and experience in parish revitalization and church redevelopment in their new book *Neighborhood Church: Transforming Your Congregation into a Powerhouse for Mission*. The aim of this small book is practical, interweaving theological grounding with community organizing tools and illustrating examples of this kind of work in churches around the country. The first two chapters deal with the essential "conversions" a church must undergo: from a mindset of scarcity to abundance and from a mindset centered on the church to one centered on the neighborhood (chapter 1). These conversions are accomplished through patient and intentional practices of *listening*; listening to Scripture,

the people within the church, and the surrounding neighborhood (chapter 2).

The next two chapters form the practical heart of the book, focusing on how a church can implement and grow from partnering with other organizations through the use of their resources, especially the church building itself. These partnerships should be understood as transforming partnerships for both the church and the community as they open up to one another (chapter 3) and work toward deeper integration through active partnering (chapter 4). The last chapter examines two practices that help to sustain a church through the transition to a more mission-oriented model, namely spirit-filled worship and leadership mentoring. Four appendices at the end provide helpful tools for implementing these ideas such as resources for asset mapping and practical considerations for partnering with community organizations.

As the nature of the chapters suggests, this is a book for churches that have yet to integrate meaningfully with their communities. It functions as an exemplary starting point for reorientation, offering a solid mix of theological framing and practical guidance from seasoned practitioners. It is also a short book, making it even more realistic as the basis for a conversation among church leadership or the church itself. For the church or minister that would like to think through these ideas at a deeper theological or practical level it still serves as a great compliment to more in-depth studies, many of which are cited in this book.

If the book has a weakness it would be in its tendency to craft a theological framework around organizational principles or to uncritically read theological depth into them. For instance, Van Tatenhove and Mueller unapologetically hold up the ‘power of positive thinking’ as an essential element in communal transformation (11). As true as that may be, their refusal to engage the critics of Norman Vincent Peale’s principles or to develop a more nuanced account of this method—instead simply couching it in the language of a “conversion from scarcity to abundance” mentalities—leaves the reader with misgivings about whether this is just a technique designed to achieve results or a meaningful theological reorientation.

As times change for the institutional church, new light is shed on places in our practice and polity that help us to see things clearer. One of these areas concerns how our spaces can be meaningful extensions of our call to love God and neighbor. The great temptation is to initiate changes purely as a function of corporate survival. Of course, motives are always mixed and survival is not offensive in itself, but if ‘serving the

neighborhood' actually means 'ensuring that the budget gets met' we are doing it wrong. *Neighborhood Church* provides a measure of both theological reorientation and practical tools that help churches make mutually beneficial partnerships with their community that stem first out of a sense of love and care for the local community in which the church belongs and of which the church can increasingly become a meaningful part.

Brandon Pierce is the Senior Minister at the Stamford Church of Christ in Stamford, CT. He previously served as a youth minister in Austin, TX, and preaching minister in Junction, TX. He holds a B.A. in Bible, Missions, and Ministry and an M.A. in Theology from Abilene Christian University.