On Sacred/Civic Placemaking: Rooting the Questions of Vocation in Space

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Abstract

This article introduces sacred/civic placemaking, which is the practice of reimagining underutilized religious properties for social impact, as a means of discerning vocation. Drawing on appreciative inquiry and Benedictine stability, the author argues that sacred/civic placemaking reframes the conventional questions of discernment by rooting vocation in space.

Keywords: Vocation, Discernment, Place

This church is in crisis. There is sorrow over a painful history and indecision about the future. Membership is down to thirty. Worship attendance is half that. Tithes and offerings will not sustain the church for much longer. Conflict drove away some members, and those who remain are suspicious of each other's motives for staying. The church is dying.

Pastors, lay leaders, denominational executives, theologians, and seminary students naturally ask the question, "How do we fix it?" The question is the same in secular settings for the dominant cultural pattern is to treat organizations, institutions, and people as problems to be solved. The pattern is based on pathology: There is a disease, and once we determine the disease, we can prescribe treatment. The response is clinical, even if framed as pastoral. The analysis and the prescription are textbook answers, detached from the subject and the subject's experience, detached from the place.

I want to ask a different question. I am curious about the space the church inhabits. I want to know about its building and grounds, its neighborhood, city, and region. I am curious about the history of the church in this place, the yearning that prompted the church's founding, the dream that inspired the construction of a sanctuary, kitchen, classrooms, and offices, and the mission that moved the church out into the community up to the present. I look for another pattern—signs of health, connection, and possibility. I want to understand why the members of the church have chosen to be together and what sustains their commitment in this place. I ask, "What's working?" Or more to the point, "What's working *around here*?"[1]

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Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry, volume 46 (2026)
ISSN 2325-2855 (online)

This question is the basis of appreciative inquiry, an organizational development approach that I have used with churches and nonprofits for more than twenty years. It's a different question—a reminder of how important the framing of questions is for formation and growth, how things shift just by asking questions. "Inquiry is intervention," as David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney put it.[2]

The question "What's working around here?" opens a door. Those who enter leave aside a pathological view of life together and come into a space, literally and figuratively, where energy is available and clarity of purpose is within reach.

FORMING IDENTITIES IN PLACE

For the past six years, I have led the nonprofit Sympara in our mission to help communities reimagine underutilized religious properties for social impact. By "social impact" we mean affordable housing, affordable childcare, accessible healthcare, community gardens, performance space, locations for startup ventures owned by women and people of color, and shared offices for nonprofits. All these activities can be pursued in buildings that sit empty most of the week or on parking lots that are never full.

We call our work sacred/civic placemaking. *Placemaking* is the intentional design or redesign of settings as livable communities, where livable means walkable, equitable, sustainable, and enjoyable. I think of my city's new downtown park, which checks three of the four measures, with equity being a work in progress.[3] Sacred/civic placemaking is also about creating livable communities by repurposing faith properties for uses that help everyone flourish. Fundamentally, the practice is the reimagination of religious space as common space by faith communities and their neighbors.

Sympara's mission emerged in 2019. We had organized ourselves sixteen years earlier as a covenantal community. Three friends and I, all of us recent seminary graduates living in different places in the United States, were trying to figure out our vocation in the world. Our denomination told us we could be pastors or chaplains, both of which are noble callings that we had tested, but we were itching to do something different. So, we concluded we would have to draw our own maps, figure this out on our own. We chose the name Sympara from the longer Greek word *symparalambano*, which means "take along with," as the Apostle Paul took friends with him on his missionary journeys. Sympara is our shorthand for traveling companions.

From the time we founded Sympara and committed to a set of practices, including prayer, common reading, and a regular gathering—a rule of life, as monastics call it—we asked each other the question, "Is there more to our life together than being a support group?" We all had jobs and full lives, but we were discerning something else. Others came into our community, and some left. All along the way, we wondered about our collective vocation, whether there was a public mission we might pursue together.

In 2019 I was serving as the interim pastor of a church across the street from the University of Texas in Austin. Three things became clear to me there. First, the church

had little connection to the university, though the church had been founded as a ministry to the university 111 years before. Second, the church had lots of underutilized space. These two things were true of the other six houses of worship near the university. And then, third, as I crossed the street and talked to faculty, staff, and students, I learned the university was bursting at the seams. It didn't have enough space for student clubs, new ventures, rehearsals, and performances. And I thought: If the faith communities would share their spaces, we might restore their historic relationship with the university and, even more significant, create positive change in the neighborhood and the city at large. Once I saw this opportunity there, I started seeing it everywhere.

ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS

Today, Sympara works with faith communities, judicatories, and their neighbors across the United States through education, consulting, and cohorts. Our work is about discernment. We help congregations get clear about their identity—who they are and why they are in a particular place. Once we gain clarity on these matters, we begin to explore how the congregation might live more fully into its identity or calling in and through the reimagination of its property. We use a variety of spiritual practices and narrative methods, such as appreciative inquiry, to draw out visions of what's possible and to notice energy that is already moving in a desired direction. We dive into more technical practices, such as asset mapping (to make visible the resources of a faith community and its neighborhood), design sprints (to engage neighbors in ideation and experimentation), and conduct feasibility studies (to figure out if an idea for reuse of faith property is viable), and then we return to the question of discernment: "What's clearer now?"

My favorite question is a variation on this. After time away from friends, the poet T. S. Eliot reportedly would ask, "What has become clear to you since last we spoke?" I like the question because we have no taped response for it. Ask me how I am doing, and I might automatically reply, "Busy." That's a taped response. Ask me what's clearer, and I have to pause and reflect. That's because the inquiry is a "generous question," to use Krista Tippett's phrase.[4] The question evokes something more. So, in Sympara's work we are intentional about framing good questions —because we want to be in a mental and spiritual space where we are surprised, moved, and guided by the responses.

We also want to be fully in physical space. Good questions help us notice our surroundings. They help us see nature and man-made structures; they help us take in the meaning of places; and they help us look beyond immediate appearances to question what we think we see and to notice both the whole and the parts, the forest and the trees, as it were. Finally, good questions draw us out of a narrow focus on self to see others in the places we share. The expert in the law asks Jesus a good question, though he asks it to trip him up: "Who is my neighbor?"[5] Once we have some clarity about the space we inhabit and those who dwell with us plus some inkling of why we might be in this place

together—a vocation in place that we might share—we employ the time-honored practice of piggybacking by asking the question "Who or what is already moving in the direction we want to go?" That question flows from a fresh take on Jesus' instruction to "seek first the kingdom of God"[6]: We invite people to "notice first the movement of God," which includes the activities of others who might be unknown to us.

TRANSFORMING SACRED PLACES FOR OUR COMMON LIFE

Faith communities have made their spaces available to others for decades. AA groups, scout troops, yoga classes, basketball leagues, neighborhood associations, and election boards are frequent users of faith spaces. But something has shifted in recent years. Faith communities need revenue sources beyond the offering plate. At the same time, there is a noticeable change in how congregations are moving from sharing space to creating partnerships that align with the faith community's mission to the surrounding community. Faith communities are shifting from transactional uses of space to habitations that are transformational. For example, an Asheville, North Carolina, church that wants to address food insecurity leases its commercial kitchen to a nonprofit that prepares and delivers healthy meals across the city.[7] A Charlotte, North Carolina, congregation that asks "How might we serve the unhoused?" finds a novel way: it partners with a nonprofit developer to convert a 1920s-era education building into twenty-one beautiful studio apartments where residents receive supportive services via a partnership with another nonprofit.[8]

The attention to space and place is inspiring some congregations to form new kinds of spiritual community with neighbors of other faiths or no religious affiliation but who share the human yearning for identity, purpose, and belonging. Indeed, the participatory nature of sacred/civic placemaking brings people together across divides of not just belief but of age, race, economics, and politics. In the process of reimagining physical infrastructure, we create new social infrastructure that is vital for combatting loneliness, strengthening neighborhoods, and sustaining democracy.[9] Confronted by dehumanizing systems, living amid economic uncertainty, and watching neighbors and local businesses be displaced by gentrification, faith communities are asking, "How might we create a site for an alternative economy where everyone flourishes?" That question is both generous and bounded, recognizing that "powers and principalities" constrain faith communities yet can be disrupted here and there. A faith community can create on its property an "outpost for the Kin-dom of God," as the late Baptist theologian and pastor David Gregg put it.[10]

The move to sacred/civic placemaking invites congregations to loosen their grip on property and to the emotional and social attachments rooted in history, race, and class. A growing number of faith communities are responding. "It's the people, not the building" is the adage we heard repeated during COVID-19 as congregations gathered in virtual spaces. That maxim is becoming truer for more communities, but now with a

twist: There *is* a building, and it is in a place that once called people and may be calling again—a neighborhood, a city, a region. Only this time around, the congregation regards the building as a resource for others. The fundamental shift underway for congregations and their leaders is to let go of ownership, which means letting go of control —if not through a new legal structure then at least by relinquishing some emotional or social control. The shift is to live into stewardship, which means caring for a place with, and on behalf of, others.

STEWARDING AS DISCERNING

Stewardship is a helpful frame for individuals and congregations to understand vocation because the concept is rooted in place. Natural places and built spaces require care; thus, they invite us to pay attention to their needs and then to consider our duty of care. Stewardship is concrete, practical. As the poet Gary Snyder writes,

> No transformation without our feet on the ground. Stewardship means . . . find your place on the planet, dig in, and take responsibility from there—the tiresome but tangible work of school boards, county supervisors, local foresters, local politics, even while holding in mind the largest scale of potential change. Get a sense of workable territory, learn about it, and start acting point by point.[11]

Stewardship does not permit a spiritualizing or etherealizing of vocation, as if it can be separated from materiality or embodiment. Stewardship calls us to be fully present in place.

Years ago, when my friend the late Jim Lowder and his wife, Jerene, relocated from the San Francisco Bay Area to Asheville, North Carolina, he shared how his new home was shaping his sense of vocation. Instead of asking "What am I called to do?"—a question that a big move would naturally evoke—he started asking "What might this place call me to?" He cited the Benedictines as his source for the reframe. In that tradition, monastics take a vow of stability, which is a lifelong commitment to a community living in a specific place. The Benedictine monastery St. Martin's Abbey in Lacey, Washington, makes this claim:

> Contentment and fulfillment do not exist in constant change; true happiness cannot necessarily be found anywhere other than in this place and this time. For Benedictines, the vow of stability proclaims rootedness, at-homeness, that this place and this monastic family will endure.[12]

Jim's calling to be a lover of the world, which he expressed throughout his life in traveling, making friends, sharing movies, talking theology, eating good food, and helping organizations do good work, now found focus in the flourishing of a place: Asheville and nearby Black Mountain. He discovered that commitment to a place and a people, stewardship of this place for that people's thriving, is vocation.

This reframe contrasts with the dominant cultural view of vocation as "finding your passion" or "following your bliss." In this view, vocation has no location. We go

wherever our purpose takes us. For much of my early adulthood, this is how I understood vocation. Like many people of faith, I was "living above place," as Jonathan Brooks puts it. In *Church Forsaken: Practicing Presence in Neglected Neighborhoods*, Brooks writes, "Somehow our society and our theology have made us believe that we have the right to live wherever we want. . . . We pray about 'what' and then we feel we have the freedom to decide 'where.'"[13]

DISCOVERING PURPOSE IN PLACE

Yet there is another way to contemplate vocation. We just have to ask a different question. My friend and colleague Steve Monti, a Catholic impact investor, is working with a Raleigh, North Carolina, congregation to create a mixed-used development on ten acres around the church. The vision is of a dynamic village where Black enterprise flourishes and families have affordable housing and access to healthcare. The vision flows from the question, "What does this land next want to be to serve this community?" Steve says that "when you listen both contemplatively (in the presence of God) and actively (by engaging the community)," and bring your professional skills to bear, "the land will reveal its purpose and guide you to what to do to accomplish that."[14]

Steve's conviction that a place has purpose does not mean, of course, that the purpose is fixed for all time. Thus, we need discernment as an ongoing practice. And thus, we need stability—to stay put in a place long enough to hear what it is saying and how it expresses itself over time through our response. A faith community that takes up the questions of sacred/civic placemaking might land upon a property reuse idea that's just for a season, and that's OK. A space can be made flexible to respond to changing conditions, needs, and aspirations. Donna Schaper advises a flexibility of spirit and space: "Remove the pews from your head, then your heart, and then your sanctuary."[15]

Faith communities are invited to follow the example of the One who became flesh and "moved into the neighborhood," as Eugene Peterson so wonderfully translates the gospel.[16] Faith communities are called to seek the welfare of their place. That means appreciating what makes the place tick—cherishing the streets, loving the parks, valuing the schools, stores, and government—and being curious about how the place might become stronger through a variety of efforts, including reuse of faith property. Attention to place benefits us individually and collectively. The prophet Jeremiah connects care of place to care of self—for in the place's well-being we find our own well-being.[17]

The question of vocation is the heart of what it means to be human. "Who am I"? leads to "Why am I here?" By discerning vocation in and through place, we might come upon a clarity that has previously eluded us. And with that clarity, we might deepen our line of inquiry:

"Where do I belong?"

"To whom do we belong?"

"What does this place need from me?"

"How does this place gift us?"
"What is my dream for this place?"
"What dreams does this place draw out of us?"

The promise of sacred/civic placemaking is that the place will answer as we abide.

NOTES

[1] Sue Annis Hammond, *The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry* (Thin Book Publishing Co., 1998), 6. Hammond's short guide references David Cooperrider's pioneering work with appreciative inquiry beginning in the mid-1970s with colleagues at Case Western Reserve University.

[2] David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change* (Berrett-Koehler, 2005), 50.

[3] Downtown Cary Park, "Another World within Yours," https://downtowncarypark.com.

[4] Tippett says, "I have learned that questions elicit answers in their likeness—that answers rise or fall to the questions they meet. . . . It's very hard to respond to a combative question with anything but a combative answer. It's almost impossible to transcend a simplistic question with anything but a simplistic answer. But the opposite is also true: it's hard to resist a generous question. This is a skill that needs relearning, but I believe that we all have it in us to ask questions that invite, that draw forth searching in dignity and revelation. There is something redemptive and lifegiving about asking a better question." Krista Tippett, host, *On Being With Krista Tippett*, podcast, "Living the Questions," The On Being Project, October 20, 2022, https://onbeing.org/programs/living-the-questions/.

[5] Luke 10:29.

[6] Matthew 6:33.

[7] The Equal Plates Project (https://equalplatesproject.org) works out of the kitchen at Central United Methodist Church, Asheville, North Carolina.

[8] Easter's Home at Caldwell Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, offers permanent supportive housing. The developer is DreamKey Partners, and case management is provided by Roof Above. See https://www.caldwellpresby.org/easter/.

[9] The role of place in shaping civic life is underscored by the American Academy of Arts & Sciences: "Civic places are sites where people can come together. What they do when they are together is up to them, but a place is 'civic' when it offers chances for people to participate in activities, tell stories, and bond with one another." American Academy of Arts & Sciences, *Habits of Heart and Mind: How to Fortify Civic Culture* (2024), 27.

[10] David Gregg, "Death Is an Invitation for the Church," Sympara, March 24, 2024, https://www.sympara.org/post/death-is-an-invitation-for-the-church.

[11] Gary Snyder, "Four Changes, with a Postscript," in *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Watersheds* (Counterpoint, 1996), 43–44.

[12] Saint Martin's Abbey, "Benedictine Vows," https://stmartinsabbey.org/our-monastery/benedictine-vows/.

[13] Jonathan Brooks, *Church Forsaken: Practicing Presence in Neglected Neighborhoods* (InterVarsity Press, 2018), 117.

[14] Steve Monti, email to author, November 6, 2025. The Raleigh congregation is Lincoln Park Holiness Church.
[15] Donna Schaper, "5 Do's and 5 Don'ts for Using Your Church Building Well," *The Christian Century*, April 25, 2018, https://www.christiancentury.org/opinion/5-do-s-and-5-don-ts-using-your-church-building-well.
[16] John 1:14 MSG.
[17] Jeremiah 29:7.