

Finding Jesus in the Suburbs

Mike Buwalda

From sea to shining sea, a familiar scene has emerged. A “soccer mom” scurries from a near-by strip mall to music lessons with her two children in the minivan (sporting a “My Child Made the Honor Roll” bumper sticker) - with cell phone and Starbuck’s coffee in hand. Meanwhile, dad is back home in the family’s tidy subdivision after a quick trip to Home Depot, working on the lawn and washing the SUV while the golden retriever looks on from the fenced-in back yard.

A deep longing

More Americans now live in suburbs than cities and rural areas combined. But behind this popular choice lays “a deep spiritual longing,” suggests Albert Hsu, author of *The Suburban Christian*, who contends that suburbia may be the most important mission field of the twenty-first century. “People come to the suburbs because they are looking for something - a job or affordable housing or good schools...a good place to have kids and raise a family. In other words, it's the place of their hopes and dreams for their futures. These are spiritual longings.”

Spiritual longings, of course, can be very good and God-honoring. The challenge, though, for the growing ranks of Christians living in the suburbs is that the environment itself can misdirect those longings. Kenneth Jackson, author of *Crabgrass Frontier: the Suburbanization of the United States* agrees: “The physical organization of neighborhoods, roads, yards, houses, and apartments sets up living patterns that condition our behavior.” That means *where* people live impacts *what* people long for. And the reality today facing the body of Christ in American suburbs is a subtle, toxic pressure to long for the wrong things.

Longing for a nice, “normal” life

A subdivision full of polite, upwardly neighbors may reflect “a good morality for building a decent society,” *New York Times* columnist David Brooks points out, “but maybe not one for people interested in things in the next world, like eternal salvation.” Pastor John Piper of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis agrees and laments, “Oh, how many lives are wasted by people who believe that the Christian life means simply avoiding badness and providing for the family. So there is no adultery, no stealing, no killing, no embezzlement, no fraud - just lots of hard work during the day, and lots of TV and PG-13 videos in the evening..., and lots of fun stuff on the weekend...this is life for millions of people. Wasted life. We were created for more.”

Longing for a safe, risk-free life

Jesus assured us that daily Christian living is daily Christian dying (Luke 9:23). Followers of Jesus experience pain whether they live in the suburbs, cities, or rural areas. But *Death by Suburb* author David Goetz wonders if, “perhaps we struggle more [in the suburbs] to deny suffering's reality....there seems to be an unchallenged assumption,” he adds, that “with more effort and organization, life can become sure.” But is life really more “safe” in a subdivision? When parents ask popular Christian author and ministry leader Tony Campolo if it’s too dangerous to send their kids to his inner-city ministry in Philadelphia, Tony responds with a question: “Don’t you think it’s even more dangerous for your child to spend the summer

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out there in [the affluent suburb] where you live?"

Longing for a full, busy life

The average suburban household generates as many as 13 car trips per day and spends the equivalent of three weeks per year commuting, according to an InterVarsity Press. An unintended consequence of the "commuter culture," notes Hsu, is that people live, work, and go to church in different suburbs. As a result, people's lives are fragmented into different communities, with virtually no overlap. A recent study suggests that Americans invite people into their homes only half as much as they did a generation ago.

Longing to impress people

Suburban life is described as a competition, built around what Goetz calls "immortality symbols": *Better Homes & Garden* décor, families dressed in the latest fashions, SUVs in the driveways, family pilgrimages to Disney World, and college-bound freshmen adorned with athletic and academic scholarships. "To admit to a less than perfect life," Goetz concludes, "is to betray the tacit code of honor that we all agree to when we buy our house [in a subdivision]."

Longing for more and better

John Wesley, founder of the Methodist church, observed that the more successful his new converts became, the less they cared about following Jesus. More than 200 years later, Goetz concludes that not much has changed. The prevalence in suburban life of instant gratification and a desire for greener pastures runs so strong that "the Christian life aimed at crucifying the old man of sin is handicapped, perhaps fatally...the covert pressure is to move upward in housing, friends, educational opportunities, and vacations."

Addressing our spiritual longing

Here are a few practical suggestions to help us find Jesus in the suburbs:

1. Give more money to lost and suffering people.

Treasure Principle author Randy Alcorn pointed out that "giving is the only antidote to materialism." Sacrificial giving not only frees up funds for the Lord's work here and around the world, it also frees up hearts from the powerful pull of the suburban culture. Campolo noted, "We think we're going to make [people] into disciples by starting Bible study groups and prayer groups. Not so. Let me quote Jesus: 'You tell me where your money is, and I will tell you where your heart is.' If we had [people's] money, we would have their hearts."

2. Spend time with hurting people.

Urban ministry advocate Shane Claiborne adds, "Most Christians care about poor folks - they just don't know any." Why? Because suburban living, Goetz says, is "a busy avoidance of reality." Voluntarily entering into the pain of others requires new priorities. But "as Scripture and church history teach," Goetz points out, "wherever there is suffering, there is God. And by not avoiding or ignoring it, we embrace it—and live life in full color."

3. Redirect our eyes towards eternal things.

Psalm 37:4 says, "Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart." In other

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words, the more our hearts are in tune with God's heart, the more the things that bring us joy will change. "Nothing can wholly satisfy the life of Christ within his followers except the adoption of Christ's purpose toward the world," wrote Layman's Missionary Movement founder J. Campbell White in the early 1900's. "Fame, pleasure, and riches are but husks and ashes in contrast with the boundless and abiding joy of working with God for the fulfillment of his eternal plans."

May God give us a passion for missions and mercy at home and abroad in the cause of Christ for the eternal joy of the world and the glory of God.

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