

Neighboring in Spring

**A Beginner's Guide to Sowing
God's Kingdom in Our
Neighborhoods**

By Chris and Elizabeth McKinney



The Curse of Winter

Imagine your neighborhood under a curse of an eternal winter. Temperatures remain bitterly cold, gardens go fallow, trees are barren and fruitless, soil sleeps under a perpetual blanket of snow. No birds chattering, no butterflies migrating, no purple or yellow bulbs blooming, no trees budding, no signs of green pushing their way through the dirt, no smell of spring—just dormancy.

In a way, that's what has happened in your neighborhood. As part of God's big story of redemption, he created us in his image to enjoy him and each other and the world he made. But the curse of sin has come like a wintery sleep and left our hearts cold, isolated, hardened, and dead. King Jesus broke the curse at the cross. During his time on earth, he promised to one day restore his creation completely. His friends and followers saw bits of that future kingdom sprouting up as the effects of winter were being undone right before their eyes. But sin and its consequences still linger in the world today. The snow is still melting.

Until the day Jesus makes all things new, he has invited us into this interim chapter in his larger story of redemption to bear his curse-cancelling image wherever we go. That means that in your little corner of your neighborhood, God desires to use ordinary you to make his kingdom flourish in your neighborhood. He is calling you to join with him in pushing back against the effects of sin and death. In short, he wants to use you to bring spring to your neighborhood.



Your Address Tells You Something

It is one thing to think and talk about these great theological concepts. But, by definition, neighboring grounds us in a local place to live these concepts out. Neighboring reminds us that each of us is an actual, limited human being with two feet on the ground in a real place, a real neighborhood. Despite the fact that our technology makes us think that we can be in a hundred places at once, our addresses remind us that we have local boundaries with one mailbox, certain weather patterns, and a handful of people that we are called to love.

Our modern minds find these limits intolerable and we push back against them with neighborly visions that are extraordinarily broad and often disconnected from our everyday lives. Our addresses, however, remind us that we cannot be all things to all people. We cannot love every neighbor, but we can love our actual neighbors.

Ask yourself the following questions:

1. How does it make you feel to think of yourself as a limited human being in one local place? (Fear? Frustration? Relief? Something else?)
2. Fill in the blank: "My neighborhood is too _____ for me."
Why did that specifically come to mind?
3. Circle the response that best describes your reaction to this statement:
"I could stay and put down roots in my current neighborhood."
Reflect on why you answered the way you did.

Absolutely
not

Please,
no

Meh

If I had to,
I would

Tie me down

Placed for a Purpose

As difficult as it is for our independent ears to hear that we are limited human beings in local places, it is even more offensive to hear that we've been placed in these locations. And yet, we have been.

Paul tells us in Acts 17:26 that "[God] marked out appointed times [of the nations] in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us."

Have you ever thought about how you ended up living where you do now? There is undoubtedly a story behind how you got there—your exact lot, your exact house or apartment number. And where there is a story, there is an author. God is the author of your story.

Whether you're renting or buying, whether you're in new digs or old,

whether you see this as a temporary place to crash or you've settled into your dream house—in God's story, it is no mistake where you've landed; you have been placed for a purpose. Your address is not an accident, and neither is your neighbor's.

But what does it look like to bring spring to our neighborhoods? To embrace the boundaries that have been carved out for us and to allow the warming rays of Jesus to thaw and redeem our little corners? How could I even begin to see this happen when I don't know a single one of my neighbor's names?

Removing the Word “Just” From Our Vocabulary

Over the years, we’ve noticed that one of the biggest hindrances for people when it comes to neighboring is summed up in a four-letter word: “just.” We say, “I’ve just prayed.” “It’s just a wave.” “It’s just dinner.” When we use this kind of language, we minimize God’s work. And what we’re really saying is: “What difference could any of this make, anyway?”

Jesus thought small things could make a big difference. In fact, when trying to describe to his followers the impact his kingdom would have, he used the illustration of a mustard seed.

“And he said, ‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.’”

MARK 4:30-32



Neighboring in God's story is like sowing the mustard seed. We sow with certain expectations. We expect to weed, till, and fertilize the soil. We expect to water the plant again and again. We expect it to take a long time to bear fruit, but we hope that, one day, it will grow into something so grand that others will be blessed by its shade. We know that no task is unimportant, and we see purpose in each small step because we have a long-term vision for what is to come. Alternatively, we know that if we do not do these things, we cannot expect growth.

Why then, when it comes to seeing God's kingdom come to our neighborhoods, do we minimize and belittle our efforts by categorizing certain acts as "spiritual" (such as an

invitation to church) and others as "unspiritual" (such as a neighborhood block party)? Do we expect God's kingdom to miraculously appear without the sweat and effort required by sowing, weeding, and watering? May we sow with purpose, patience, and great expectancy, knowing that God is at work through seemingly small seeds.

There are no insignificant tasks. It's never "just" a prayer, "just" a wave, "just" an Easter Egg Hunt, or "just" learning a neighbor's name. Removing the word "just" from our neighboring vocabulary is imperative if we are going to engage in the low and slow process of seeing the Kingdom of God shoot up in our neighborhoods and flourish in our neighbors' lives.

Where To Begin

When we moved into our house eight years ago, “neighboring” wasn’t even on our radar. We were stressed to the max in every area of our lives, barely keeping our heads above water, and certainly not looking for more to do. And yet, we had a growing sense that we needed our neighbors and that it could be fun to get to know the people who lived around us. Without thinking too much about it, we threw a fish fry with the few families

next door. It was a blast, and the rest is history. God has used our neighbors in our lives in a thousand different ways to encourage, teach, bless, and provide for us. We’ve also had a front row seat as some have come to Christ, some have grown in their faith, and some who might have considered themselves indifferent to Jesus are reconsidering what they think of him.

Ask yourself the following questions:

1. How did you end up in your current neighborhood? How might God have been at work behind the scenes to place you there?
2. How have you fallen into the trap of using the word “just” when it comes to neighboring? What seemingly small steps have you overlooked when it comes to loving your neighbor?
3. What are some of your fears when it comes to neighboring?

As you begin to see yourself in God's big story of redemption, where you value each and every step of the process as you see that God wants to use you—your personality, your gifts, and even your limits—in unique ways, here are three beginning categories for trusting God to reverse the curse of sin and make his kingdom blossom like spring:

1. Initiate

Taking initiative is one of the simplest, most powerful things you can do as a neighbor. It doesn't have to be anything mind-blowing. Consider these suggestions:

- Pray for your neighbors, for your neighborhood, and for yourself as you neighbor.
- Wave to neighbors as you walk and drive through your neighborhood.
- Say "hello" to your neighbors as you're walking, driving, or in your yard.
- Print (from Google Maps) or draw a map of your neighborhood, then write names on the map of who lives where.
- Introduce yourself to neighbors and learn their names. Jot down names and facts in a note on your phone to help you remember them.
- Reintroduce yourself to a neighbor whose name you've forgotten or to someone you've lived by for a while. It might feel awkward or "too late" to ask, but it's a powerful step to take and worth it to reestablish a relationship with them.
- If you have neighbors who are from a different country or who have names that are difficult for you to pronounce, ask them to help you say their names correctly and then use their names next time you see them.
- If you see a neighbor outside when you get home, instead of pulling into your driveway and going straight inside or into your garage and closing the door, try coming out, saying "hi," and asking a question that could lead to a short touchpoint.
- If you see someone moving into your neighborhood, drop off a simple welcome basket (Google "Housewarming Basket" for easy ideas).
- Engage on your neighborhood's social media pages or create one.

2. Serve

Another way to think about serving is: doing something to better your neighborhood. Ask yourself, "If I were to move, would I have left my neighborhood better than I found it?" Why is this important? Because whatever our context—whether we live downtown or out-of-town, whether we're urbanites or suburbanites—our neighborhoods have real needs. Serving is one of the most important things we can do as neighbors because, when we serve, we push back against the effects of the curse of winter, both externally (bringing repair where there has been disrepair) and internally (bringing connection where there has been isolation). This is where snow melts, where hearts are thawed, and where death is turned to life in spring. Try one or two of these suggestions as a way to serve your neighbors:

- Pick up trash as you walk.
- Bake cookies for neighbors.
- Ask a couple of neighbors about scheduling a yardwork day and then help each other.
- Partner with a "clean up your city" event or plan an Arbor Day party.
- Coordinate a food, coat, or backpack drive (or partner with a school or church to do so).
- Organize a neighborhood community garden or tree planting.
- Start or participate in a Neighborhood Watch Program.
- Offer to organize meals for neighbors in need (for those who've had surgery, lost a loved one, had a baby, etc.).
- Look for ways to serve the vulnerable in your apartment building or neighborhood.
- Volunteer to serve on the Homeowner's Association.
- Create a tool-sharing list (snow & leaf blowers, extension ladders, carpet cleaners, etc.)
- Host a book exchange or toy swap.
- Help with graffiti removal.
- Participate in neighborhood trail repair.
- Share fresh produce with other neighbors.

3. Cultivate

When we first started, I (Elizabeth) wanted to get to know our neighbors but I felt like we needed an excuse. That first fish fry was our chance to begin building some relationships. From there, we posted on our neighborhood Facebook page that we were going to host an Easter Egg Hunt. I think there were only six or seven kids there (and we have four of our own so what does that tell you about humble beginnings?) and yet, that is where we met Nathan and Cathy, who would become some of our dearest neighbors. I remember Cathy saying to me that day, "Well hey, if you ever want to do some more neighboring things I'd love to help." I looked at her blankly and asked, "Like what?" She suggested a block party and from there we became a dynamic duo. It would've been easy at the time to consider our little Easter Egg Hunt insignificant, but looking back, it was one of the most important things we've ever done. It wasn't "just an Easter Egg Hunt," it was the first step in the development of a vibrant community. More importantly, it was the beginning of the snow melting and our first glimpse of God's curse-cancelling power at work in the lives of so many people, including our own.

What could you try? What little barbeque or porch party or other occasion could give you an excuse to meet your neighbors? What's something that fits your season of life and your neighboring context? Here are a few ideas for you to try for yourselves or translate to your neighborhood:

- Host a dinner or dessert. Keep it simple and ask/allow people to bring something. This helps everyone feel a sense of ownership and participation in the get-together.
- Walk with a neighbor or set up a walking group that meets at specific times during the week. Invite other neighbors to join.
- Do a monthly coffee and donuts gathering outside your house 30 minutes before people leave to take kids to school.
- Organize or participate in a walking school bus.
- Ask for help with physical needs (borrowing yard, home, or kitchen tools, landscaping, moving furniture, needing sugar or eggs, etc.).
- Ask for neighbors' expertise (for example, if your neighbor is good at gardening, ask him for advice or help. If she's good at making pies, ask her if she'd be willing to come over and teach you how once you bought all the supplies, etc.).

- Ask for recommendations (local plumber, electrician, mechanic, etc.).
- Suggest a “dog playdate.”
- Get an inexpensive, portable fire pit and invite some neighbors to hang out and make s’mores.
- Host a game night, watch or go to a movie together, or set up an outdoor movie.
- Plan an Easter Egg Hunt.
- Help neighborhood kids do a lemonade stand.
- Organize a neighborhood Block Party
- Participate in a yard sale. Co-host it with neighbors on either side of you.
- Host a spaghetti night or a pancake breakfast.
- Organize a neighborhood book discussion.



A Springtime of Faith

In his widely known hymn “Joy to the World,” Isaac Watts wrote of that coming day when King Jesus would completely reverse the curse:

No more let sins and sorrows grow,

Nor thorns infest the ground;

He comes to make His blessings flow

Far as the curse is found.

Every time we pray or wave or pick up trash, every time we host neighbors for dinner or organize an Easter Egg Hunt or check on a lonely neighbor or host a book discussion, we declare with Jesus, “No more! No more may sin, sorrow, and thorns grow here!” And we join Jesus in making his blessings flow until the day when he will fully restore every square inch of every neighborhood around the world.

It’s worth saying that if we want our neighbors to know Jesus, we must also grow in our listening skills and in our abilities to have gospel-motivated conversations that match their spiritual pace. But the reality is that those opportunities will never come if we don’t begin somewhere. So, start with a wave and say “hello.” Start by doing something to better your neighborhood. Start by organizing an Easter Egg Hunt or a Block Party or a dinner party or a small fish fry. And maybe you’ll get to see winter give way to a springtime of faith in your neighborhood.

A Neighboring Prayer

Jesus, thank you for coming and breaking the power of the curse of sin and death. Thank you that you are already at work in our neighbors' lives. Give us eyes to see how we can join with you in the low and slow process of seeing your kingdom shoot up in our neighborhoods.

Remind us that we have been placed for a purpose. Help us to embrace the boundaries that have been carved out for us. Allow the warming rays of Jesus to thaw and redeem our little corner of the world.

Help us to remove the word "just" from our vocabularies and to see ourselves as sowers of your kingdom as we till, weed, and water the soil of our neighborhoods. May we sow with purpose, patience, and great expectancy, knowing that the smallest of seeds can grow into something great that provides refuge and shade for others.

Show us our next step—whether to initiate, serve, or cultivate. Use our efforts to bring repair where there has been disrepair and connection where there has been loneliness and isolation. Make us ready for opportunities to talk about you and your work in our lives. May we get to see your kingdom grow and expand, giving way to a springtime of faith in our neighborhoods. Amen.

Additional Resources

- Heart of Evangelism by Jerram Barrs (2005)
- Finding Common Ground by Tim Downs (1999)
- The Vanishing Neighbor by Marc J. Dunkelman (2014)
- “The Secret to Living Longer May be Your Social Life” by Susan Pinker (April 2017 TED Talk)
- Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition, by Christine D. Pohl (1999)
- As Far As The Curse Is Found by Michael D. Williams (2005)
- The Simplest Way to Change the World: Biblical Hospitality as a Way of Life by Dustin Willis (2017)