

# GOD NEXT DOOR

SPIRITUALITY & MISSION  
IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

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## Preface

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It was a mild October night when I knelt on our nature strip in suburban Los Angeles cradling the head of a dying twelve-year-old boy. Along with two of his friends, he was the victim of a drive-by shooting. The boys had been attending a Halloween party and were walking back to their respective homes on the same street. All three of them died that night in what turned out to be a tragic mistake. The young men responsible mistook their prey for members of a rival gang.

Over a decade later, I can still recall the night's sounds and images in more detail than I wish to: the gunfire, the police helicopters hovering overhead, the lights and sirens, the screams of a young girl running the length of the street, and the arrival of the mothers groping desperately and hysterically at the bodies of their sons. They are events I'll never forget. However, it's what happened just two days later that left an even deeper impression.

As evening fell, a spontaneous gathering of people from the neighbourhood filled our street. The police responded quickly by closing the area to traffic. Some two hundred locals met just outside our kitchen window, gathering around a makeshift memorial of flowers, candles, pictures and handwritten tributes. They came to be together, some weeping, others singing or praying, most just standing quietly holding lighted candles or each other. As one of the new arrivals in the neighbourhood, I stood with my neighbours on that dark street feeling paralysed by their desperation, their grief, helplessness, and perhaps most poignantly, their need of each other.

These events took place at the beginning of a research degree in practical theology. My intention was to study spirituality, though I had little idea how one does such a thing. This experience made me rethink my reasons for study and my presuppositions about the nature of the spiritual life. Two questions begged for answers: What has spirituality got to do with events like these? And what does theology have to say to the realities, tragic and otherwise, of life in urban neighbourhoods?

Many years have passed since that night and the streets of Los

Angeles now seem a world away from my present home in Melbourne. Regardless, these events ignited something that spurred this book into existence. While it's not a book directly about the tragedies of urban life, the guiding questions remain the same: What has spirituality got to do with where we live? And what does Christian theology have to say to the realities of life in the neighbourhood?

In preparation for this book, I've listened to the experiences of numerous men and women of faith—people who live in neighbourhoods of all shapes and sizes—and have concluded that though they are a largely forgotten resource when it comes to matters of faith, neighbourhoods are places rich with the most inspiring stories and exciting possibilities for mission.

Every book is a journey, unsustainable without good company. I am indebted to many who have walked with me along the way. First, my sincere thanks to those who agreed to tell me their neighbourhood stories, some of which appear in the text of the book and many more that underlie it. While in the retelling of those stories I've changed identifying information, the stories themselves are real and in many cases a wonderful tribute to those who have lived them. The book would be significantly poorer without them.

I am thankful to my colleagues at Whitley College, Melbourne, most especially Principals past and present, Geoff Pound and Frank Rees. I am privileged to be a part of a community deeply committed to the life and mission of the people of God and one that values the disciplines of research. A semester's study leave in 2005 made the bulk of the writing possible and without which this book would not exist. My thanks also to the Department of Christian Studies at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor in Belton, Texas, where I was given the space and resources to write without interruption for much of that time. The gracious hospitality of Bill Carrell and his staff was a gift.

I am thankful for the company and encouragement of two friends among many. Geoff Broughton, Rector of St John's Anglican Church in Glebe, Sydney, was my good mate back in those Los Angeles days and has remained so ever since. Along the way he has gently prodded me to

get on with it as though I had something worth saying. Similarly, my brother Mark Holt, now State Director of Global InterAction, has been both friend and supporter in my commitment to write. His unwavering love, interest and enthusiasm have enabled me to believe that writing is worth my time and important to my calling.

I owe considerable gratitude to my teacher and mentor Robert Banks. As my doctoral supervisor, he played a significant role in igniting my interest in the transformative possibilities of good theology and in believing in my giftedness for the task. What's more, he supervised my earliest efforts in developing a spirituality of neighbourhood. I count our relationship, unplanned and undeserved, one of the great serendipities of my life.

Finally, I thank my family. My children Ali and Nathaniel have watched this book lurch along in fits and starts, and always with patience and a sense of intrigue. As the deadlines approached they have watched over my shoulder, critiqued my grammar, and laughed at my bent to perfectionism. And finally my partner Brenda, the one to whom the book is dedicated. Though it may sound trite, this book is ours. Throughout its evolution she has believed in it without reserve, loved me unceasingly, and daily reminded me that I'm the most gifted writer to ever grace the earth! Not only so, but she so naturally embodies what this book is about.

## INTRODUCTION

# Neighbourhoods Matter

### Jenny

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The sound of the school bell is as comforting as it is predictable. Standing over the kitchen sink with the breakfast dishes, Jenny sometimes imagines it's akin to a monastery's morning call to prayer, even though she's never heard one. She can't see the school, but it's just two streets away and she hears its daily rituals easily: the bells, the muffled announcements over the public address system, and the sounds of children during recess. Until this year, Jenny walked her children to the school each morning; often she would linger to talk to the other parents. Now, at ages eight and ten, the children relish their independence; Mum's presence is an embarrassment they would rather do without.

Jenny lives on Erin Street. She and her husband David bought their small, three-bedroom weatherboard four years ago. 'A renovator's delight,' the agent called it; it has largely remained that way, though Jenny hopes their savings account will soon match their intentions. Located in a pre-war suburban development on what was then the edge of the city—now classified inner-ring—the street is lined with what are commonly described as workers' cottages, each one built in close proximity to the next and to the street. With few driveways or garages, the neighbourhood is constantly cluttered with cars. David travels by tram into the city each day—he works in financial services—while Jenny does some freelance graphic-design work from home.

As she looks through the kitchen window, Jenny diverts her gaze from the neglected vegetable garden; there's also a clothesline and the children's deserted sandpit. It's small as backyards go, but serviceable. As her eyes wander, Jenny notices a head bobbing up repetitively over the back fence; it's her neighbour Frank tending his tomato patch. She reminds herself to delay bringing in the washing for an hour or so. As endearing as her elderly neighbour is, Jenny doesn't have time today for an hour-long conversation. Frank and his wife Josephine have lived in their house ever since migrating from Italy some forty years ago. They still stumble with English and, in their latter years, are lonely. As Jenny has experienced too many times, anyone who lingers long enough will be given the full tour of the tomato beds, the wood-fired bread oven, the vats of home made wine in the back shed, and Josephine's waxed salamis hanging from the patio rafters. A visitor never leaves empty handed.

Directly across the street are Caroline and Steve and their two boys. Caroline is a maternal-care nurse and Steve a musician. The boys play regularly with Jenny's children while the parents swap childminding for special events. In another house down are Dali and Cassandra, a newly married couple from India. Devout Hindus, they value neighbourly relationships and excel at hospitality. Their red-eye curries are an experience Jenny's children will never forget. Apart from these, there's no one else in the street that Jenny knows by name. There are some who politely nod as they walk by, but most she never sees.

A good selection of local shops is close by. Just five minutes walk away there's a milk bar, newsagent, butcher, a greengrocer, and a mini-mart. There used to be a hardware shop, but it's closed now; the owner could no longer compete with the large house-and-garden mega store on the highway. The local branch of the bank closed six months ago too. Jenny has heard a few of the other store-keepers wonder out loud just how much longer they can survive. The convenience and size of the new regional supermarket lures more and more residents. The story of the local churches is much the same. Most are small, some only marginally viable with aging congregations and buildings they can barely maintain.

Jenny's church is no different. The local Catholic church is doing much better and the regional mosque is close by and thriving.

Erin Street itself will never be a contender for the suburb's most desirable. Lined with gnarly old tea-trees, it has a row of factories at one end and a busy, multi-lane highway at the other. The houses are in varying states of re-gentrification and disrepair. There are gardens especially well tended and others neglected and overgrown. Sometimes David talks about moving, but Jenny likes it. It's home.

## Paul

---

When Paul stands at his kitchen window, there's not a sandpit or vegetable patch in sight. From a fifteenth floor apartment in the city's central business district, Paul's vista could not be more dissimilar. Predominantly he looks out at other high-rise buildings, mostly office towers. If he looks carefully, he can see people hunched over computer terminals or in business suits gathered around board tables. Looking straight down he can see a wedge of city parkland and, if he cranes his neck on the balcony, a glimpse of the bay. Certainly, there are more impressive vistas from higher floors, but as Paul routinely reminds his curious suburban friends, this is no penthouse.

With his wife Christine and teenage daughter Tilly, Paul moved here from a leafy suburban cul-de-sac in the eastern suburbs over seven years ago. Both Paul and Christine work in the city, Paul as a management consultant and Christine as a university lecturer; the daily commute had become a burden. They all say now they'd never go back. It did take some adjusting. Trading an expansive four bedrooms with dedicated living and family areas for two bedrooms with a combined dining-living space meant some changes to lifestyle. But close proximity to all that the city offers has proved more than adequate compensation. The noise levels are different too; you'll hear no school bells from here, just the constant hum of the city below, along with intermittent sirens and those wretched garbage trucks in the early morning. It never stops.

There are about two hundred apartments in the tower. Paul calls it a vertical neighbourhood; he read the term somewhere and likes it. Prior to moving in, Paul didn't know what to expect by way of neighbourly relations. His suburban friends had gloomily warned him that such places would be full of transient international students who spoke no English and self-centred, workaholic yuppies who wanted nothing more than residential anonymity. In part, the warnings proved valid. Over fifty percent of the apartments are rented by overseas students, mostly from Asian countries, some for whom English is a challenge. As hard as Paul tries, the best he can solicit from one or two is a reluctant smile. And of course there are those urbane yuppies who divert their eyes when you pass them in the hallways or grunt dismissively in the elevator. But there are others too. Soon after they moved in, Paul and his family were welcomed warmly by representatives of the residents' association and invited to periodic social gatherings. Through these events Paul and Christine feel more connected to many of their neighbours than they had ever expected.

For Paul, his neighbourhood is more than his building; it's the entire city centre. As he gazes out his window each morning, he feels a strong sense of connection to and ownership of the city, in ways that the commuting office worker will never experience. Of course there are parts of the city where he never goes and other parts that he knows like the back of his hand. Life in the city centre is a self-contained experience; even more so since the city's first full-service supermarket opened. The car is entirely optional and mostly unnecessary; almost everything is within easy reach. Though Tilly has to travel out to the suburbs for school—as does the family for church—and renting a good DVD is a challenge, for the most part daily life is on the doorstep. His closest friends still live elsewhere, but for Paul, it's hard to imagine living anywhere but right here.

## Rose

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Sitting quietly in her living room with an unopened book on her lap, Rose enjoys the morning sun that filters through her window. Occasionally a

bird will fly into the branches of her Japanese maple. Rose planted the tree when she first moved to her new home; a decade later it provides a lovely mottled shade in the early morning. Though notionally a resident of the same city as Paul, Rose finds the idea of city living as repellent as Paul finds it life giving. Rose lives in one of the new housing estates on the city's most northern suburban edge. On a clear day, from a particular high point in the local park, she can see the profile of the city skyline, but her trips into its centre are only occasional. Anything beyond the annual pre-Christmas shopping trip with friends is rare.

Never married and enjoying early retirement, Rose still displays on the dining room sideboard memorabilia from her nursing career. Ten years ago, discontent with the deterioration of her 1950s block of flats and keen to move into a 'real home,' Rose purchased a parcel of land in a new housing development about twenty minutes drive north. She had always longed for more open spaces with lots of trees. When she first came to look at the blocks of land, there wasn't much to see, only the salesman's portable office and several large billboards promising a thriving community, a semi-rural lifestyle and a series of purpose-built lakes and wetlands. As Rose looked out over the paddocks and the network of graded roadways, she decided she needed a better imagination to catch the developer's vision, but she could see the trees and the wide open landscape; that was enough. Rose purchased her block of land and moved into her new home just twelve months later.

Today, Rose's neighbourhood is a thriving community. The engineered wetlands are developing a natural life of their own and, even better, the old eucalyptus trees were kept in place just as the developer promised. For Rose, the only regret is that her semi-rural lifestyle is becoming more congested everyday. She doesn't complain. When she first arrived, there was nothing here. Her home was the first in the street: Kookaburra Drive. Other homes went up quickly, but the provision of local services took much longer; there were no shops, schools, petrol stations or medical services and there was not even a weekly garbage collection. Rose remembers buying her milk from a little truck that did the rounds each morning selling lunch to the builders and bricklayers.

Everything is in place now; the schools are numerous; there's a milk bar not too far away, a medical centre, and a large supermarket on the main road surrounded by a Shell service station, a Blockbuster video outlet, a McDonalds, Burger King and KFC. Ten minutes drive away is the brand new Bunning's Warehouse with a garden section that Rose loves to browse. Just beyond that is a large regional shopping mall that never seems to be finished; the latest addition is a ten-screen cinema complex and a brand new food court. The parking is always easy, except on the weekends when Rose stays away; the angst of prowling endlessly for a spot is more than she can bear.

Rose walks a lot. Walkways abound around the lakes and there are many others who jog or walk with strollers. Public transport is poor. The active residents' association has been calling for an extension of the railway line out this way, but nothing seems to happen. There are buses but Rose never uses them. When she drives past the makeshift bus stops out on the main road, she notices that those waiting are mostly from the Middle Eastern community that has more recently settled here. The women's distinctive head coverings are the telltale sign.

Sometimes Kookaburra Drive is a lonely place for Rose. As an older single woman, she doesn't fit the standard demographic for a new housing estate like this. It's a family place, but that's partly why she moved here. Having no children of her own, she delights in the presence of the neighbourhood children. But when the children are at school, in most homes both parents are out at work. There is a single mum, Jill, just two doors up who occasionally drops in for a coffee with Rose, but she works part-time too and her life is busy.

Despite the intermittent loneliness, Rose enjoys her life. She's active in her church, though that's quite a drive away, and she keeps up with friends in other suburbs. Life with her neighbours is mostly pleasant. She knows many of them by name, especially those on her end of the street. And every year they have a Christmas barbecue together, something Rose initiated when she first arrived. One older couple across the street causes her concern as she hears him shouting a lot and wonders if he's violent. Rose hardly ever sees the woman and when she does the woman

barely looks at her. Sometimes Rose talks about this with Jill, her coffee partner, but mostly they just chat about the garden and Jill's kids.

+ + +

While the stories you've just read are not riveting, they are real. With no exciting plot lines or cliffhanger endings, they are nothing more than simple descriptions of everyday living. They are what I call *neighbourhood stories*: ordinary accounts of ordinary people in one of the most taken-for-granted places of daily life. I begin with them because they embody what this book is about. It's about neighbours and neighbourhoods. More importantly, it's a book about you and your neighbourhood. The street where you live and its immediate surrounds is one of the most routine venues of your life. In fact, it's so 'everyday' that once you've moved in, chances are you don't notice it much. You probably enter and exit it more times than you can count, even on a daily basis. But noticed or unnoticed, liked or disliked, it's yours. It's where you live.

We all live in neighbourhoods. Yours may be as different to mine as the proverbial chalk is to cheese. Your closest neighbour may be far away, hidden behind a high wooden fence, or close enough to hear as she walks overhead. Just like those of Jenny, Paul and Rose, every neighbourhood is unique. Yours will have a look and feel of its own; they all do. No matter where it's located or how old it is, each neighbourhood has its own history, atmosphere and personality; each one its distinctive blend of housing types, commercial and community facilities, and public places. Yet every neighbourhood—from the trendy city high-rise to the ever expanding housing estate on the urban fringe and anything else in between—is a variation on the same basic principle: people living in close proximity to other people.

Just as your neighbourhood is unique, so is your neighbourhood story. As you think back, you may well have changed neighbourhoods so many times it's hard to distinguish one from the next. Then again, you may have stayed in the same town or suburb—even the same house—your whole life. Most likely, your story is a more complex mix of this staying and going. It may contain experiences of heart-felt connection

and sense of belonging; on the other hand, it may hold deeper feelings of discontentment or simple indifference. No matter how transient or stable your neighbourhood story, how emotionally charged or vacant, the truth is it's one full of the most domestic and often quirky details of your life; those that gather cobwebs in the neglected corners of your memory but sometimes turn out to be more seminal than you realised.

## My Story

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My own neighbourhood story is a chequered one. The first neighbourhood I remember frames nearly all my childhood memories. Just a month after my first birthday, my parents moved from a rural dairy farm to what historian Graeme Davison calls 'the cream brick frontier' of 1960s suburban Melbourne.<sup>1</sup> To leave the farm behind must have been a grief to my parents, but it was owned by my grandfather who decided it was no longer viable. My father found work in the factories of Dandenong—a busy town established to service the agricultural communities of southern Victoria, with both cattle and produce markets. By the time we arrived it was a booming industrial centre, home to sprawling factories mixed in with new housing developments and government subsidised estates for low-income families. While my father was at work, my mother's role was to keep house and care for her five young boys, soon to be six.

No. 4 Mulgoa Avenue was our place: a small, three-bedroom house of just eleven squares, where I lived until adulthood and my parents for thirty-five years. Standard cream brick veneer and triple fronted, it had a low brick fence at the front and matching garage at the side. The house grew a little, decade by decade—a room added here, a wall pushed out there; a few extra squares in all but nothing too glamorous. Our street was a collection of very similar homes, mostly brick like ours with a few weatherboards mixed in. My father tells me ours was the last to be built, though the vacant lot next door remained so into the seventies. Two years after our arrival the road was finally sealed. Each household was

billed £300 for its portion, a sum that had to be paid before work would begin. It was the same with the footpaths just six months before.

Our neighbours were a gathering of cultures: recent immigrants mainly—English, Scottish, Dutch, German and Swiss, and a large number of Italians all related one way or another, or so it seemed. Next door were the-neighbours-from-hell, an older English couple—Mr and Mrs Freshny—cantankerous on good days, downright mean on others. Not long after we arrived my oldest brother Mark accidentally kicked his football over their back fence. Trying to do the right thing, he went to their front door to ask politely if he could retrieve it. The Freshnys were both small and round in stature, and when aggravated resembled a pair of pit bull terriers, overfed. Mark was nearly knocked from the porch as they pounced together through the doorway, enraged, threatening to cut up into pieces any ball that ever came over their fence again. Looking flushed, he told us later he was lucky to escape with his life let alone his footy.

Directly across the road were the Turnbulls, Lydia and Davey and their two boys. With broad Scottish accents, they were private people but always friendly. I remember sitting in their living room watching my mother drink tea from the most beautiful bone china cup as she chatted with Lydia. There was always a little plate of scotch-finger biscuits and sometimes fruitcake cut into the smallest pieces, that I devoured as discreetly as I could. They moved into their home in the December of 1963, just five months after we did. On the first New Year's Day, Davey, a tall and austere looking man, came over with a piece of coal in one hand and a tin of biscuits in the other, handing it to my father with the words, 'Coal for your fire and food for your larder.' They remain my parents' dear friends to this day.

There was a larger house on the nearest corner, the home of Mario Lattore and his family. An extraverted Italian with big hands, Mario owned the local greengrocer's shop. He and his wife had two sons while his sisters, both unmarried, lived at the other end of the street. Their backyard vegetable gardens were a sight to behold, often spilling over into their front yards as well. Little concrete pathways wound through

bed after well-tended bed of every vegetable imaginable. I recall being invited in from time to time and being fed with some strange-tasting foods with exotic but unpronounceable names. The house always smelled funny, I thought, but I liked it.

I remember the neighbourhood as a pleasant and secure place. It was never a place of close friendships for me, though a little brunette called Lyn—she lived just around the corner—and I shared our first kiss sitting in a makeshift cubby house in my backyard. I walked alone to and from school every day, first to primary and then to high school. I don't ever remember feeling afraid, though the dog three doors down terrorised me almost daily. Internal trips included those to the milk bar to get bread and milk or to neighbourhood butcher to pick up some meat for dinner. On each of these trips there would be a constant review of each home in its detail, with my personal critique of its aesthetic qualities or, more often, its lack thereof.

For so long those few blocks—including the school, the local shops and the busy road that bordered my neighbourhood on one side—were my world. I never imagined anywhere else. Very occasionally, we would load into the car and make the trip across town and then on the car ferry to visit my Auntie Lorna in a far away neighbourhood called Altona, but I never longed for anywhere else. This was home.

Since departing my family home, my neighbourhood story has ranged far and wide. I've lived on three continents and in five different states. I've lived in a semi-rural religious community in Brisbane, a new housing estate on the fringes of suburban Melbourne and a leafy enclave of Sydney's inner north. I've lived in the never-ending apartment heartland of Los Angeles and in an anonymous condominium village in a regional city of Texas. I've lived briefly in a multicultural and working-class neighbourhood in London and another much like it back in Melbourne. Until recently, I lived and worked in an inner-city neighbourhood immediately surrounding a university; a beautiful place, bordered by parks and playing fields, with a regal, tree-lined boulevard running down its centre. It couldn't have been more different to the neighbourhoods of my past, but then every neighbourhood has been its

very own world: some memorable and others forgettable; some in which I felt connected, others that felt lonely or nothing much at all.

## Changing Places

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As you can see, my own neighbourhood story is no more riveting than that of any other. Perhaps your one resonates in parts; perhaps not. The truth is, our neighbourhood stories are as diverse as we are and the neighbourhoods we inhabit. What is consistent to every story and place is change. Change is a constant in all aspects of life, no less so when it comes to where we live. No matter how many or few neighbourhoods your story entails, your present experiences will be different to those of the past. Grandparent-types often reminisce fondly about old neighbourhoods where doors were always open and neighbours were friends. But times have changed. Perhaps you still celebrate an experience like this; perhaps you crave it. The fact is that for most of us the reality is different. Increasingly, some of us struggle to simply name those who live next door, let alone know the details of their lives. My own stay in suburban California included three years living adjacent to an exclusive neighbourhood with small metal signs displayed prominently in front yards warning of an armed response to unwanted intrusions. In the complete absence of footpaths, my nightly walks along its streets were eyed with suspicion by those who peered out their windows to stare but never smile. For every contemporary neighbourhood where there is some experience of community and friendship, there's bound to be another marked more by the values of anonymity and seclusion; and still others where residents actually live in fear of their surrounds.

Indeed, neighbourhood life has changed. Many of these changes have crept up on us. Others we've intentionally fostered. My suspicion is that the majority of us harbour an awkward ambivalence about the neighbourhood. I do. For many contemporary suburbanites, the idea of a place where everyone knows everyone certainly has its romantic appeal. At the same time, it's uncomfortable. Images of Mrs Smith from next-door peering over the back fence every time I lose my temper with

the children or light up the barbecue with friends is not one I relish; as the saying goes, the best neighbour is one who leaves you alone. Then again, my longing for a living environment of safety, security and some level of community is strong. Perhaps it's a desire to recreate for my children some utopian interpretation of my own neighbourhood history. Undoubtedly, the marketers who create the billboards fronting the new housing estates understand this desire and play on it to great effect.

While it's easy to name my ambivalence, it's a harder to 'unpack'. The American commentator Faith Popcorn<sup>2</sup> has described the current urban phenomenon of *cocooning*: that is, in an increasingly uncertain and alienating social environment, we've become preoccupied with creating warm and safe home environments in which the realities and challenges of the outside world are kept out. The desire to close the door on the world and create a haven of self-sufficiency, identity and security is strong. Certainly, the current proliferation of homeware stores and house-and-garden mega marts is extraordinary, not to mention the spate of popular home and garden renovation programmes on our televisions. On the other hand, Australian social commentator Hugh Mackay observed in the 1990s that in the midst of an increasingly de-personalised and isolating urban environment, there was a distinct movement back to the nurturing of local associations and communities, a longing for connection.<sup>3</sup> And the movement continues. We don't want to live in anonymity and seclusion all of the time, Mackay says, and so we struggle to find appropriate expressions of intimacy on the most local levels. Certainly, neighbourhood arts festivals, book reading circles and hobby groups have found new life. I resonate with both longings.

## Why They Matter

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Change acknowledged and ambivalence confessed, I return to my neighbourhood's inevitability. Whatever I might expect of it, hope for it, or avoid in it, it's a fact of my life. It's a fact of your life; you're a neighbour; you live in a neighbourhood. It's inevitable, commonplace and no matter how prone to change, it's here to stay. The invitation of

this book is to take a closer look at your neighbourhood and at yourself in it; to step back from it and see it with new eyes. Because where you live is so commonplace, an invitation like this may be initially mystifying. It's true that the local living area is as about as domestic and immediate as life gets; what's there to think about? But it's this very fact of its immediacy and daily impact upon our lives that makes it important. It's why it matters. Through this book, I want to raise some questions about the contemporary experience of neighbourhood living. I call them theological questions; questions that arise out of a belief in the sacredness of life—all of life; questions that have a particular relevance for those committed to religious faith and its values.

At the heart of the Christian story lie the two commands Jesus identified as the essence of living, the heart of spirituality: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength;' and 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' As I struggle with these two directives and how to make them alive in my everyday experience, there are some questions that beg for answers, questions like these: What does it mean to love God where I live? What does the command, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' mean for the people who live next door? How do the realities of contemporary urban and suburban life impact upon my experience of faith and community? What has my spirituality got to do with the neighbours?

No doubt, a book about neighbourhood will have its critics. There are those who say that as far as community is concerned, neighbourhood is an idea of the past, an outdated concept of little continuing relevance, particularly for those who live in an urban context. In an age of feverish mobility, e-mails and far-flung social networks, the need for neighbourhood as a community experience is judged to be a romantic infatuation with a by-gone era. Others might argue that in an age of globalisation, regionalism, multi-nationals and big pictures, focussing on the 'local' and 'immediate' is small-minded and trivial. Don't we need to be about more important issues? Still others may protest that spirituality and neighbourhood simply don't mix. To trivialise spirituality—concerned with the great deeps of human-divine interaction—by

joining it with the temporality of a few houses on a suburban street, does nothing but detract from the profundity of religious meaning.

Of course, on all counts I disagree. I believe the neighbourhood remains a fundamentally important context of urban life and deserves to be taken more seriously by those who live in one. I believe that in ignoring the health and wellbeing of our local neighbourhood, we're ignoring the glue that binds the wider city together and makes it a genuinely human environment. And perhaps most importantly, I believe a spirituality that does not nurture our connections with the daily places of life fails to reflect the life-transforming nature of the Christian faith.

The subtitle of this book reads *Spirituality and Mission in the Neighbourhood*. Granted, in your daily experience the link between the words *spirituality* and *neighbourhood* might be tenuous. The fact is, the majority of the places and experiences we naturally associate with spirituality—the churches we attend, sacred places of retreat, and experiences of solitude—are most often away from the humdrum of neighbourhood life. For the majority of church attenders today, the commute *out* of the neighbourhood is an essential part of the weekly pilgrimage. Regardless, while the neighbourhood may not be a primary place of spirituality, I believe the connection is still worth exploring. More than that, I think it's essential. Similarly, associations in your mind between the words *mission* and *neighbourhood* might be slim. Perhaps you more easily link the word *mission* with other more exotic and distant places, or with particular activities of the church. Perhaps *mission* seems simply too grand and important to tie to the ordinariness of your own street. But again, forging a greater connection between mission and the daily task of loving our neighbours is a task worthy of our time. More than that, I think it's crucial.

With these convictions in mind, my hope is to challenge you to think in a new way about where you live. I do not offer you a comprehensive programme for neighbourhood mission, nor is this a handbook for local evangelism. It's more an encouragement: an encouragement for you to think afresh about your city and its implications for faith; an encouragement to see one of the most immediate contexts of your daily life with new eyes. In the course of this book, I'll argue that

neighbourhood is still an important place of community, one that continues to play a vital, even irreplaceable role in the well being of the wider city. I'll propose that neighbourliness is fundamental to spirituality and that concern for the places—the local places—of our daily lives is foundational to our Christian concerns for people, the revelation of God in the world, and the character and mission of the church. In all of this, I'll suggest ways that you can more intentionally embrace your local neighbourhood as a place of mission and community.

In a fresh paraphrase of John 1:14, writer Eugene Peterson renders it, 'and the Word became flesh and moved into the neighbourhood.' As the followers of Jesus, perhaps we can discover new ways of inhabiting our neighbourhoods too.