

Soerens, Tim, 2020.

Everywhere You Look: Discovering the Church Right Where You Are

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IN HIS NEWEST BOOK, Tim Soerens makes a compelling case for the theoretical and practical restoration of parish, for Protestants, but with an ecumenical twist. Rather than conceiving of parish as the geographic area in which a local congregation lives and gathers, carrying out its congregational and denominational mission, parish is the geographic locale—the neighborhood—where Christians live. While affirming the gifts of denominational traditions, church buildings and congregations, Soerens pushes beyond these boundaries that divide Christians, to argue for robust, missional networking of Christians in local neighborhoods. In Soerens' view, this kingdom-minded vision must guide the church into the future if the church is to survive, thrive, and fulfill its mission. Written in an accessible voice and filled with examples from everyday

life, the book is grounded in solid research and years of practical experience.

As reflected in the book's title, Soerens wants readers to learn to see differently. Not only does he want the church to embrace a different vision of what constitutes "church," he also wants Christians to wrestle with the most basic question of why the church should exist at all. Drawing from Simon Sinek's work, Soerens urges readers to consider the golden circle, a concentric set of circles with "why" in the centre, "what" in the next ring out, and "how" in the outermost ring.¹ By paying attention to why the church exists—to participate in Christ's work of making all things new (Rev. 21.5)—the church can move with agility through culture shift to discern what to do to engage a given context, and how to carry out that engagement. That is to say, the church can return to being a fruitful movement. Yet even in seeking to be a movement there is danger of co-opting the Holy Spirit for institutional interests, Soerens writes. If a movement is just another way to "make the church great again," the effort is a "profound mistake" (10). The first questions should always be about what God is doing, and what it might mean for Christians to participate in that work.

Soerens' vision for the new parish is oriented toward helping neighborhoods and cities flourish. Like proponents of the nineteenth century social gospel movement, and the Black church from its inception, Soerens sees a primary function of the church being to shape society into one that is more equitable and just:

What's at stake is not simply a spiritual opportunity. Our neighborhoods and cities are at stake too. At stake is the kind of businesses and economies we are going to create. What sorts of places will we design and build? How will we re-create our collective care for our kids? How will we reshape education? How will we confront the most horrific injustices of racism, sexual exploitation, and environmental abuse? (14)

1. Simon Sinek, "How Great Leaders Inspire Action." *Tedx-PugetSound*. 2009. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action?language=en.

I am heartened to see Soerens' unabashed emphasis on social and environmental justice as critical components of what constitutes discipleship in this emerging era, especially since the book is published by Intervarsity Press, an evangelical publisher that is known for practicing injustice toward its own employees.² In our polarized cultural context in which the majority of evangelicals continue to support Trumpism and its attendant racist, homophobic, and xenophobic commitments, it is crucial for evangelical authors like Soerens, who offer a justice-oriented vision for the church, to speak up.

For Soerens, the skill that churches really need to adopt is “the magic of paying attention” (49). By paying attention to the movement of the Spirit in their neighborhood they can join in with what God is doing. The posture for Christians is always to notice what God is doing and then respond. When the church behaves this way, it moves toward and participates in “the word becoming flesh and moving into its neighborhood” (Jn 1.14 MSG), rather than fearfully moving away from and attempting to barricade itself from the surrounding world.

One of the toughest challenges Soerens discusses relative to hindrances to the church living up to its potential in the neighborhood is the fiercely competitive nature of the church shaped by capitalism. The other biggest obstacle is the widespread practice of church as a consumer activity. In order for Christians to properly show up, pay attention, cooperate with God in the neighborhood and release the outcome (the pattern I have taught and written about for many years in my own missional work), they must give up both of these perversions of the gospel: a spirit of competition with one another, and church as a consumer activity.

The parish—a geographic neighborhood—is the best place for these two subversive changes to happen, writes Soerens.

2. For example, Intervarsity Press enacted a policy Nov. 11, 2016, by which any employee who supports gay marriage or disagrees with any other aspect of the company's positions on sexuality will be terminated. Dias, E. “Top Evangelical College Group to Dismiss Employees Who Support Gay Marriage” *Time*. 2016. Retrieved from <https://time.com/4521944/intervarsity-fellowship-gay-marriage/>.

Central to Soerens' vision is a parish in which various congregations decide to work together for the good of the neighborhood, but not by having an annual pulpit exchange. Instead, he argues, Christians in a given neighborhood need to connect intentionally and collaborate for the good of the neighborhood, embracing the truth that they are all on the same team (88).

The path forward begins with asking this simple question: "What could we do together?" (94). As a group of Christians in a neighborhood begin to meet and practice discernment around this question, paying attention to their context, the Holy Spirit will guide them forward. Soerens concludes his book with, "It would be amazing if this work was already happening in denominations, seminaries, and foundations. Someday that will be normal, but right now it's not the case. We need to figure out how to make a big deal out of one another" (125). I could not agree more. The biggest obstacle to living the vision Soerens casts, is cumbersome, bloated, bureaucratic institutionalism riddled with petty jealousy and a scarcity mentality, across Christian organizations broadly.

Everywhere You Look is an inspiring and accessible guide for congregations and small groups of Christians to explore what it will take to truly live into their neighborhoods in step with the Spirit. He draws from a breadth of theological voices as diverse as Willie Jennings, Wendell Berry, Randy Woodley, and Michael Polanyi. Soerens' target audience appears to be evangelicals, but the wisdom here certainly applies to the mainline church as well.