

New Urbanism offers antidote for isolation, proponents say

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PASADENA, Calif. (RNS)—Eric Jacobsen speaks passionately about things like sidewalks and storefronts. But he's not an architect or developer. He's a pastor.

As Jacobsen sees it, city planning has an important influence on religious experience. He is an advocate for New Urbanism, the architecture movement that calls for interdependence among residents, with neighborhoods where shops and homes coexist, streets that are pedestrian-friendly and parks that are gathering places for residents.

New Urbanism has become a mantra for people interested in restoring urban centers and reconfiguring suburban sprawl. Its designs have sprouted across the country, from new towns like Seaside, Fla., to redevelopment in places like Gaithersburg, Md., or West Palm Beach, Fla. The Congress for the New Urbanism started small 12 years ago and now has more than 2,300 architects, developers, planners and urban designers.

Now Christian leaders are adopting the movement. They say the philosophy

behind New Urbanism is a possible antidote to the isolation experienced by many churches and Christians. Across the country, influential Christians are thinking theologically about urban design and applying its principles to the church. They advocate for New Urbanist concepts because they force people to share with one another, dwell among their neighbors and allow for a healthy exchange of ideas.

The national advocates for New Urbanism include Randy Frazee, a teaching pastor at Willow Creek Community Church, a trend-setting Illinois megachurch attended by more than 20,000 people. Frazee says there's a "movement brewing" where Christians are striving to capture the values of New Urbanism because of an urgent need.

Frazee compared mega-churches to castles surrounded by moats. A few times a year the drawbridge is lowered to let people in, where they become a subculture separate from the outside world. They become so involved in church life that they are not involved in their neighborhoods, he said.

"You have to disengage from your community to be involved in the church," Frazee said, describing the problem. "Now the church has become irrelevant to the community."

Willow Creek is a laboratory for new ideas in the evangelical world.

Frazee said the push for New Urbanism will include the 10,500 churches in the Willow Creek Association, which links smaller congregations that share the megachurch's philosophy of ministry.

Jacobsen, 38, was associate pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Missoula, Mont., when he became interested in urban design. He wrote the book *Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith*, and now is earning a doctorate in theology of the built environment at Fuller Theological Seminary, one of the nation's largest seminaries.

On a recent weekday, Jacobsen wore a blue dress shirt and tucked the cuff of his gray slacks into his sock, so it wouldn't snag the chain of his bicycle. He rode to the Zona Rosa Caffè—a cozy coffee house located a half block from Colorado Boulevard, where the sun-drenched city holds its annual New Year's Day parade.

Over a cup of coffee, Jacobsen extolled the virtues of the location, which bustled with passers-by. The shop's entrance abuts the wide sidewalk instead of being separated from it by a parking lot. And only a pedestrian could appreciate the stained-glass artistry of a neighboring building, he said. Someone in a car would miss its beauty.

Jacobsen said places like Zona Rosa might make an ideal “third place,” the term New Urbanists use for a location where a person spends time that is not his home or place of employment. The third place is an important part of a community, he said. It's where people from diverse backgrounds learn to interact.

For Christians, the third place also provides opportunity for spontaneous ministry, he said. Jesus did much of his ministry in the context of everyday life. Jacobsen notes in one Bible story, Jesus was on his way to heal the daughter of a synagogue ruler named Jarius when a sick woman touched his cloak and was healed.

Today's ministers may not have noticed the sick woman because their ministry is too structured, Jacobsen said.

“She's not going to call for an appointment,” he said.

Christians must see their ministry “as not just supporting the programs inside your church, but also caring about the whole neighborhood,” Jacobsen said.

Christian advocates of New Urbanism are not in the majority. In fact,

Jacobsen said many Christians resist or ignore his appeals to architecture and design. But that doesn't dampen his evangelistic fervor. He says part of the challenge is the historical propensity of Protestants to dismiss architecture. The saying is: "The church is the people, not the building."

"That slogan obscures the fact that the building influences how people relate," Jacobsen said.

Christian advocates of New Urbanism cite suburban sprawl as an isolating factor for many churches. The sprawl began in part because of federal subsidies after World War II, said Philip Bess, professor of architecture at the University of Notre Dame.

Bess, who has a master's degree in church history, is a Catholic and New Urbanist. The low-interest housing loans the government provided GIs returning from the war applied only to new houses.

Meanwhile, the government was funding the interstate highway system, and zoning laws separated communities into their commercial, industrial and residential uses.

The suburbs were born, neatly dividing people by economic class and forcing them to drive everywhere—to the market, to work and to church.

Churches followed people into the suburbs. Bess said they also adapted suburban development patterns, buying sizable plots of land, erecting a church and surrounding it with a surface parking lot. Churches then offered multiple programs to draw members, who drove to the site, leaving neighborhoods behind.

Sprawl makes it more difficult for churches to achieve their objectives, Bess said. For example, anyone who can't operate a vehicle—the young, old or disabled—are disenfranchised, he said.

“Just as a matter of social justice, it's arguably better to make mixed-use, walkable environments,” Bess said.

Curt Gibson, director of neighborhood ministries at Lake Avenue Church, an evangelical megachurch in Pasadena, said New Urbanism is a hot term in the world of Christian community development. Lake Avenue has shifted focus in recent years in a way that illustrates the philosophical connection between the architectural movement and ministry, he said.

Several years ago, a survey at Lake Avenue found few of the children in the youth programs were from the low-income neighborhood surrounding the church campus. Instead, the children mostly were white-collar types who arrived and departed by the carload from nearby cities. Most attended private schools. The smallest group of students was from the struggling Pasadena Unified School District.

The church poured resources into the Lake Avenue Community Foundation, which expanded its neighborhood outreach and tutoring programs.

Now, Pasadena Unified has the largest representation of any district in the youth program, Gibson said.

“There's been a heart change at Lake Avenue,” Gibson said. “A subtle transition has happened where they recognize they need to be an active participant in the local community.”

First Presbyterian Church of Spokane, Wash., is another urban church where leaders realized low-income neighbors almost were absent from the congregation, said Kevin Finch, the church's associate pastor of mission and evangelism.

A few families from the church took the radical step of moving into Felony Flats, a crime-prone area within a mile of the church. While Felony Flats is

a rough neighborhood, Finch said, it also promotes community interaction. There are sidewalks, and the homes face the street. One of the families that moved to the area hung a hammock in front of its house, and the home soon became a gathering spot for neighborhood children, Finch said.

Now the church is planning to form a nonprofit organization to create New Urbanist-style affordable housing throughout the area, Finch said.

“I see some of the principles of New Urbanism as a perfect parallel for what I think the church should be involved in,” Finch said. “And not just the church, but anyone with a heart for the city.”

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