

also have to consider both as society and as individuals how we wield the power that this knowledge gives us. But that is a debate for another day.

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SPIRITUALITY IN SUBURBIA

Chris Skilton

Faith in suburbia?

In the 1980s the Church of England examined life in the inner city and produced the report *Faith in the City*. It followed this some years later by putting the rural church under the microscope and discovered that there was *Faith in the Countryside*. It has not yet discovered faith in suburbia!

Yet faith is there and is often vibrant and strong, although not always understood by those who have not lived there. I have lived and ministered in suburbia for nearly all my life and whilst in church terms that has been exclusively as an Anglican, I believe that many of the characteristics and values that shape suburban spiritual life are shared across most denominations.

What is suburbia?

Suburbia is extraordinarily varied and diverse and so this article can only deal in broad brush strokes and sweeping generalisations. Some of these may even be mutually contradictory, but that is the nature (and the problem) of suburbia. If you are a member of a suburban church, I hope that you recognise some of these traits. If you are not, then be assured that no church manifests all of these characteristics. Suburbia defies neat definition. Peter Brierley, for all his statistical wizardry never defines it, although he assures us that 60% of all suburban churches have toilets to which the whole congregation have access!

So what marks out the suburban church?

The church is often relatively strong but there is pressure on it to succeed and to pay its way. The church, it is felt, ought to do well

in the suburbs if it is going to be strong anywhere. The Church of England (at least in the last fifty years) has, by and large, been run by and for suburbia and these people understand and know how the church 'works' in its committees, structures and hierarchy. There can be a sense at times that 'real' Christians live, work and minister in the inner city, the new estates and amidst rural hardship. Suburban churches need not be paralysed by guilt for who they are or where they are, but do need to acknowledge that where much has been given, much will be required. The church may be numerically large on paper, but that does not necessarily speak of commitment to Christ or to the local church. With relatively large numbers, some who attend may more easily feel that it won't matter if they are not there at times nor that their absence will be noticed.

Those who do go will probably have made a conscious choice to attend that particular church rather than another one. Churches in the area will have been visited to see where "we feel most at home", whether that's because of the style of worship, churchmanship, type of music, provision for children or young people - or whatever matters to me. There is still a real measure of choice between Anglican churches and other denominations, which are also stronger here than anywhere else. If the nearest church doesn't suit, there's another one not far away. It is supremely in suburbia that the like-minded have the opportunity to gather together for worship. Because other denominations are stronger too, there is no 'need' for ecumenism and for working together, and relationships can exist safely at arms length. The tendency towards an associational model of church is attractive to those who are gathered, but may isolate those who do not 'belong', even though in the Church of England the parochial system places them there.

Time and work - the driving forces of life

For most people in suburbia, time is the precious commodity (more than money) and church activities and committees can place what feels like a huge extra pressure on those who worship there. For example, 7.00am may be far too late to hold an early morning service and 8.00pm far too early to start a church meeting. Work is an all-consuming affair for those under 60 years of age and a main source of personal identity, which the church ignores at its peril. The church faces a serious dilemma here. People want church to be

relevant to their lives (and work is where life counts), but want church to provide a sense of 'otherness' too. Professional people are probably in the majority, but many want to leave their professional skills at the workplace. A church may have eight people who are over-qualified to be a Church Treasurer, but none of them have the time and energy to take on the responsibility. Hardly anyone in the suburban church 'makes' an artefact in the course of their work and few are in touch with the creative areas of life (in one large church, only one member of the congregation 'made' anything in his professional life - and he was a carpenter at Buckingham Palace!).

For many, a real sense of community exists in the workplace rather than where they happen to live. A senior executive may spend up to fifty hours a week with three close colleagues, but the four of them live in four different suburbs at four different points of the compass around the city. The suburban church needs to speak to these individuals, not only in the issues they confront at work, but also in the close relationships they make there.

But there's plenty going on!

The suburban church has a great deal of activity on offer and a wide range of enthusiasms and interests can be catered for, especially for the retired, if not for the employed. If the Kingdom of God could come in courses, it would be manifest in suburbia in all its fullness. But this can also produce a feeling of church as one more hobby to be fitted into a busy life along with the Bowls Club, the Townswomens' Guild and the Art Class (all of which still proliferate in many parts of suburbia). Many aged over 60 have good health and sufficient resources to lead a full, busy and satisfying life, partly catered for at church. It is only when health fails and a partner dies that deep loneliness sets in - and it can be very deep indeed. In the past twenty years, the trade off for working ridiculously long hours has been the possibility of retiring on a full pension at 55. With the dramatic new uncertainties about pension provision, the early retirement side of the deal may no longer be an option. The seventy-hour working week might have been survived for 25 years, but the possibility of it having to go on for 40 is another matter. Something will have to give.

A heritage of faith -for one more generation

In its evangelistic task the suburban church still has some opportunities to appeal to a past heritage of faith which can be rekindled. Perhaps for one more generation the faith that was held as a teenager and which lapsed at around 18 can be appealed to and rediscovered, most typically at the request to baptise the first child, at bereavement, at publicity surrounding Alpha courses. This is a sign that the church in suburbia is on the threshold of transitions to new ways of being and doing which the rural and urban churches have already started to experience (but will it learn from them?)

Private lives

Life in suburbia is intensely private and must be successful - which means that faith is all too often intensely private too. The church office-holder who failed to tell anyone in the congregation for three months that he had been made redundant is sadly not untypical. Admission of vulnerability comes only with a struggle. The prevalence of less interactive behaviour in society (evidenced by a marked increase in on-line shopping and internet banking) is having its effect on spirituality too. In the 1980s and 1990s, the suburban church often made a virtue of 'belonging before believing' (to use Grace Davie's phrase), seeking to welcome people to church as a place to explore Christian faith and practice. Life now is increasingly being characterised by a believing (in all sorts of things!) which does not require belonging. Neither is it shaped, moulded and honed by that belonging. Commitment is a fearsome thing and many are happy to have a toe in the water, but fear being dragged or tempted in any further. "Regular" churchgoing may now mean twice a month at best, with only a small proportion of those taking part in any midweek activity.

The God of suburbia?

If this so far has been a pen-picture of the people who live and worship in suburbia, what then is the God whom they worship like? Perhaps (slightly but only slightly tongue-in-cheek) he can be summed up as a God who

- * rewards hard work and wants things done well (expecting a high level of professionalism)...
- * affirms the status quo (even when that is for constant change).
- * often needs to be fitted into an extremely busy life...
- * blesses countless activities

- * is encountered in plenty of words although increasingly invites people to stillness and space
- * refreshes the weary at the end of a demanding week and sets people up for the week ahead
- * is often defined in a particular tradition (or against a number of other traditions)
- * is particularly concerned with personal morality, sometimes at the expense of wider issues of justice.

And the congregation...

The suburban congregation feels affirmed by the Parables of the Good Samaritan and the Talents, but is less keen on the Prodigal Son. They study the books of Nehemiah and Daniel (and admire these two men as role models), but are more wary of the messages of Amos and Micah. The congregation sings “Christ triumphant” and “Lord of all hopefulness” with feeling, but “Brother, sister, let me serve you” and “Hark, the glad sound! The Saviour comes” with less certainty.

A salutary parallel

This brief survey of suburban life has been written out of a great love for suburbia and suburban people and ministry in the suburbs. There is much that all churches need to address in the years to come to keep faith in the suburbs varied and vibrant. The strengths that I have identified must be harnessed afresh to address the weaknesses that threaten to diminish the place of the suburban church in our society and nation.

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FEARLESS FOR TRUTH: A PERSONAL PORTRAIT OF THE LIFE OF GEORGE BEASLEY-MURRAY

By Brian Haymes

Author Paul Beasley-Murray (Paternoster Press, Carlisle 2002)

There are obvious difficulties for a son when it comes to writing about his father. These difficulties, such as those of objectivity, are compounded when the son’s relationship to the father is