Receiving Community: The Church and the Future of the New Urbanist Movement

Eric O. Jacobsen
Associate Pastor
First Presbyterian Church
Missoula, Montana

The ideas behind the New Urbanist movement represent a significant challenge to the reigning orthodoxy, which has held sway within the guild of professional developers and planners over the past fifty years. The town of Seaside, and other successful New Urbanist developments, have demonstrated that this movement represents a viable alternative to post-World War II development practices. For the first twenty years of its existence, the New Urbanist movement has been primarily a secular movement, but it must not remain exclusively so. This article, argues that if the New Urbanist movement aspires to be more than just a short-term economic success or a market correction it is going to have to take the church more seriously as a conversation partner in its cultural project. In particular, the church can help the New Urbanist movement grapple with some of the powers and forces, which have an impact upon communities in ways that are more profound and enduring than economic factors alone. These forces involve such Christian concepts as redemption, interdependence, selfless service, and even right worship. Understanding these forces may not help New Urbanists to build community more efficiently but, rather, may teach us all how to graciously receive community as a gift.

> *"I have no privacy, it's loud…. They're friendly as can be, but I didn't come here to make friends."*
>
> —Overheard at Seaside, March 2002

Eric O. Jacobsen

Disappointment with Seaside

On the Florida panhandle, right in the middle of the Redneck Riviera sits the little town of Seaside. This charming beachfront town was founded by some of the pioneers of the New Urbanist movement as a way to demonstrate that the principles of New Urbanism could work when applied to an entire community and that such a community could withstand the rigorous pressures of the free market. In founding Seaside, its developers broke with much of the reigning orthodoxy, which held sway among commercial developers and included many elements that would be illegal in most contemporary municipal ordinances.

The public spaces of Seaside were given the best locations in the community and they were arranged to take full advantage of the local terrain and to coordinate harmoniously with the street grid. The commercial buildings were concentrated in the center of town, the residential neighborhoods were mixed in use, and apartments were allowed to sit above many of the stores and restaurants. The residential lots were small and dense in their apportionment, and the houses sat near the front of their lots allowing for easy conversation between front porch and street. Each house was individually designed and provided a high degree of visual interest for the pedestrians who were expected to walk to many of their daily destinations.

According to the standard advice given by "market experts," Seaside should have failed miserably—but surprisingly, just the opposite has occurred. Almost all of the lots have been purchased and developed beautifully. Real estate values at Seaside have increased tenfold while the rest of the region has remained relatively stagnant. There is currently only one lot available at Seaside for development. It is a forty-five-foot lot not on the ocean, and it is going for $2,000,000. The success of Seaside has helped give some teeth to the New Urbanist movement and has caused even unsympathetic developers to take notice. Seaside has shown New Urbanism to be a rare example of an ideological movement that looks as good in practice as it does in theory.

Understandably, I was excited to make my first visit to Seaside. I had learned New Urbanism in the somewhat different setting of Missoula, Montana, but wanted to see the shining apex of the movement on the coast of Florida. Missoula might be better described as a paleo-urbanist than a strictly New Urbanist city.[1] It is one of those cities that was developed during a era when we still knew how to design and build habitable human environments but was not rich enough or significant enough to be destroyed by the modernist assault in the 1970s and 1980s. Missoula has gracious public spaces and

Receiving Community:
The Church and the Future
of the New Urbanist Movement

public buildings, a commercial hub of interesting individually designed buildings, and charming neighborhoods built at a human scale.

Missoula has its share of disciples of New Urbanism and is becoming aware of the repository of urban charm that it contains, but for the most part, Missoula holds its urbanism unconsciously and therefore it totters somewhat dangerously close to extinction. The municipal code decidedly favors the single-use model for residential and commercial areas, and every few weeks a new box chain retail store opens and a new standardized housing subdivision is built.

I suppose that I expected to see in Seaside New Urbanism in its pristine form as its developers, architects, and every one of its residents would have been committed to and personally invested in the tenets of the movement. I expected to see what Missoula could be if it could get its act together and commit to the course of development that it had graciously followed before everything was sacrificed around the insatiable needs of the automobile. I wanted Seaside to represent some kind of ideal toward which, Missoula could strive. So, I was surprised when I finally got to Seaside that I was somewhat disappointed with what I saw and experienced there. In visiting Seaside, I found my expectations turned on their head as I began to perceive that Missoula in many ways to be a flawed but viable urban environment and Seaside to be the "work in progress."

I arrived in Seaside on a chilly night in March. After stowing my bags in one of Seaside's "artist's lofts" (which was costing me one hundred dollars per night) I was anxious to walk down to the local pub for a drink and some convivial interaction with the local crowd. I was somewhat surprised, first of all, to find only two places open at 9:30 at night. One was a dance bar with loud music blaring from the door. The other was not so loud and had a charming entrance that made it look a little more hopeful. I went into the second place and was surprised to find it entirely devoid of patrons. Taken aback, I sheepishly made my way to a table that looked as if it should be in the center of the action and resigned myself to a solitary dining experience.

This first impression came as somewhat of a shock, but I was not about to let myself be disappointed, yet. The night was unseasonably cold, and it was a little late for some people to be out. Perhaps I was just a bit off on my timing. I woke up the next morning with a renewed resolve to find the local community at Seaside. I left my apartment at a respectable hour and walked along what looked to be the main thoroughfare to the commercial hub. As I walked, I noted the varied and interesting architecture and the clever way that the sight lines along my walking route invariably terminated with an interesting view. I

noticed also that the homes presented an engaging and welcoming face to the passing pedestrian. There were no garages dominating the fronts of the houses but, rather, charming front doors and entries. I could see over the picket fences into well-kept yards and could imagine exchanging pleasantries with the residents who might be passing the morning on their front porches.

There were no residents on the front porches. The only sign of human life that I saw during my walk were the maids and gardeners, who (given the price of my artist's loft) were probably not residing within Seaside. My breakfast was no more encouraging than my dinner had been. I found no informal gathering of locals at the beachside café. The only other people at breakfast with me on this morning were fellow out-of-towners who had come to Seaside for the same conference that had brought me there. And none of the employees who worked at the café were residents of Seaside.

Later that morning, I discovered an explanation for my inability to find any people to enjoy the convivial setting of Seaside with me on that day. There are very few permanent residents of this charming beachside community. Of the five hundred or so houses in Seaside, only about twenty are occupied by permanent residents. The rest are occupied only part of the year or on the vacation rental market. As the day went on and the weather improved, Seaside began to come to life with people filling the restaurants and strolling its pleasant streets. I now understood that these were not people whose lives were being woven together through these rituals of daily life; these were visitors for the day or for the week who would never see each other again.

There was very little community being built and experienced at Seaside, but clearly something was attracting people there. I am convinced that the attraction of Seaside may be of a derived nature. As I walked its streets and enjoy its amenities, I found myself recalling other real communities that took on a similar shape and feel that I found in Seaside. If I did not look too closely, I could have imagined neighbors having their daily walk to the coffee shop, or seeing the woman who sold me gifts for my family, tending her garden later in the day.

Seaside takes the form of real community, but it is really just a vacation resort. There is nothing wrong with a vacation resort and, perhaps, Seaside could be included among the more charming of these types of communities, but Seaside seems to aspire toward being much more. Its developers included a quaint little public school right in the middle of town as if they did anticipate more of a permanent intergenerational community, but there are no children among the permanent residents of Seaside and the school has to bus children in to occupy its classrooms. Too, the developers of Seaside recently included

Receiving Community:
The Church and the Future
of the New Urbanist Movement

a church on the fringe of the community—perhaps again in an attempt to suggest, through a physical structure, a deeper community than actually exists at Seaside.

The Limits of New Urbanism

Perhaps what we see at Seaside is a picture of the prospects for and limits on the New Urbanist movement in its current form. The *medium* of the New Urbanist movement has been rediscovery of a physical form that engenders community and the successful application of that form in a contemporary context. The *power* of the New Urbanist movement is the market. New Urbanism stands apart from the myriad of failed social experiments in that people actually seem to want to buy what they are selling. People do value charm, they do like to walk for many of their daily tasks, and they do not need quite as much privacy as the "market experts" tend to think that they need. And the *wisdom* of the New Urbanist movement lies in its willingness to learn the physical form of community from actual human communities, which have emerged and evolved over a long period of time in a particular place.

The pioneers of the New Urbanist movement have mostly been architects and developers who have been able to present some of the traditional concepts of town planning and architecture in fresh and exciting ways. They have successfully challenged the reigning orthodoxies in their respective fields with an admirable degree of success and have begun to turn the tide toward a more satisfying approach to our built environment. Having the market on their side has been essential to the success of New Urbanism in an American context. There are precious few ideas that get very far in this country if they cannot turn a profit. And further, maintaining the individual consumer as one's primary constituent is politically safe in an increasingly polarized, political environment. It is no wonder, then, that New Urbanism is gaining wide acceptance.

However, these observations also bring to light the weakness inherent in the New Urbanist experiment. True human community does require a coherent physical form that we have somehow misplaced during the course of the past half-century. The New Urbanists must be applauded for rediscovering this form and for reminding us of this important truth. However, human community also requires a certain critical mass of actual human beings who will inhabit and interact within the physical form over a long period of time. Places such as Seaside have developed the physical form of community but have not been able to attract the critical mass of human beings required for true

community. The reason for this particular failure at Seaside shows the limitations of depending on the power of the market for its successes.

The market has made Seaside a lucrative and attractive investment for those with enough resources to take advantage of it, but the market has also prohibited the "artist's lofts" from actually being inhabited by artists and the modest homes from being inhabited by the people who work at Seaside. The market has also restricted the owners of homes at Seaside to the ultra-rich who have a poor record at maintaining a permanent commitment to any particular community. The market has been Seaside's greatest ally, but it has also been its Achilles' heel. To be remembered as more than a significant "market trend," New Urbanism will at some point have to face some of the other (noneconomic) forces that shape and influence our human existence.

And finally, as New Urbanism has borrowed many of its forms and expressions from actual cities and towns that grew up in history, it will need to grapple with the vision and the values that undergird those places if it hopes to truly appropriate the wisdom to be found there. Most historic American towns (especially in the north and southeast) were founded on a Christian vision and the churches in those places have played a central and formative role throughout their development.

New Urbanism has been, up to this point, a decidedly secular movement and perhaps it should remain that way. However, if the New Urbanist movement hopes to have a deep and lasting impact in this country it will have to figure out a way to bring those distinctively Christian voices back into the conversation that has been initiated. And the New Urban vision for new developments (such as Seaside) will have to figure out a way to incorporate churches in a more central way than they do so now.

As I mentioned above, Missoula is inconsistent in its urban expression and charm. It has some delightful streets, buildings, neighborhoods, and public spaces, but it lacks the consistency and overall coherence of Seaside. However, Missoula has the advantage over Seaside of a permanent community of residents who can use whatever urban amenities are available as a loom upon which they can weave the fabric of the community together. And Missoula has the advantage of having, interspersed throughout the city, a number of significant churches with active congregations who help to anchor and give depth to the urban texture.

Missoula is a typical Western city in that the churches were a little late on the scene and have not been afforded a central role in the city either physically or culturally. Nonetheless, the churches in Missoula are among the city's oldest structures and are decidedly the oldest institutions of continuous use. The

Receiving Community:
The Church and the Future
of the New Urbanist Movement

churches in Missoula (and the people in their congregations) represent a significant voice in the public square. It is as a pastor of one of these historic churches in the paleo-urbanist city of Missoula, Montana, that I want to offer a few observations about faith, relationships, and how urbanism looks from a Christian perspective.

Communities of Sinners

In the *Geography of Nowhere*, James Howard Kunstler declares "community is not something that you can have like a pizza."[2] He is right, of course, but why? Why can we not buy community as we do other kinds of commodities? Many people claim to want community and communities; while somewhat rare, they do seem to exist in certain parts of this country. What is to stop someone from finding one of these authentic communities, purchase a home in its midst, and secure for him/herself a communal life? The answer, I believe, has less to do with supply and demand than it does with the sin nature of human beings.

Money represents personal power. The more money that we have at our disposal, the more freedom we have to do whatever we want. This is wonderful if we believe that we will use this freedom in healthy and fulfilling ways. It can be perilous if we understand the potentially destructive power of sin. Sin, according to Luther, is a turning inward—away from God and away from others. We sin when we rebel against our Creator and try to make ourselves the lord of our own lives. *Sin against God leads to sin against others.* The first sin recorded in the Bible was the sin of Adam and Eve against God. The second was Cain's sin against his brother, which resulted in Cain's exile from community. It is the destructive power of sin, not the design blunders, that has ultimately fragmented our communities, and if we hope to redeem and/or build healthy communities we must begin with an honest look at our sin nature.

Since the Christian Church has retained a vocabulary adequate to handle this particular aspect of our human existence, it has the capability to track more precisely the impact that sin can have on our communities. A popular caricature of the church is that of a community of people who see themselves as righteous while viewing everyone on the outside as sinners. However, a more accurate portrayal of the Christian Church is, first of all, a community of sinners. The church is not a hall of fame for the most holy people in our society, nor is it a museum celebrating greatness in our past, but it is a hospital where broken people gather to be healed by grace. People who encounter the church on this basis—as sinners in need of grace—tend to find what they are

looking for. People unwilling to acknowledge their own sin invariably miss the very thing that the church has to offer.

In *Life Together*, the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer has poignantly described the process by which people cheat themselves out of a true experience of community. He uses the term, *serious Christian*, ironically to describe persons who are more serious than truly Christian because they come to the church, trying to realize some kind of idealized vision of human community rather than trying first of all to find grace for themselves.

"The serious Christian," Bonhoeffer declares "set down for the first time in a Christian community is likely to bring with him a very definite idea of what Christian life together should be and to try to realize it."[3] However, in the actual experience of Christian community, that ideal is quickly shattered. The Christian community never lives up to the expectations that people bring to it.

This presents the person seeking Christian community with a crisis. Will she choose to love this actual human community into which she has found herself or will she choose to love her ideal vision? The difference depends upon whether she can see in this imperfect community sinners like herself in need of grace. If she does so, she will find, first of all the reality of grace as the foundation of this community, and this foundation will hold her up as she encounters her own sinfulness in the particularities of her day-to-day life.

On the other hand, if the Christian decides to love her ideal of Christian community more than the actual Christian community in which he or she has been placed, a predictable cycle of rejection ensues. First, the Christian becomes "the despising accuser of his brethren, then of God and finally of himself."[4] In my experience, this does happen in the lives of many people. Often they will reject not one but a number of Christian communities before they start accusing God and then self, but in time, the result is the same. In fact, when people come to join our church because of perceived shortcomings of their former church, I have come to expect that such people will be rejecting us in the near future as well.

As I have mentioned above, the Christian Church has been especially attuned to this phenomenon because we have retained the language of sin and grace in our lexicon, but some aspect of this basic reality affects every manifestation of human community. A man and a woman who commit to the miniscule community of marriage must choose to love the person that they have married rather than some ideal partner that they might be tempted to project onto their husband or wife—and residents of Missoula or Seaside must come to know and accept their actual neighbors in these communities if it is community that they hope to experience. Of course, not every community is

Receiving Community:
The Church and the Future
of the New Urbanist Movement

explicitly offering grace to its participants as the church does, but every healthy community will require its members to be more committed to the actual people who make up their community than they are to some abstract ideal that exists nowhere except in their own imaginations.

Askesis and Limitations on Space and Time

If sin is as universal and pervasive as the church claims it to be, we might expect that no one would be able to truly experience community. It takes a great deal of self-awareness and patience to maintain a commitment to a flawed community. We might also expect every human community to be so flawed by the collective shortcomings of its participants that the very idea of community would cease to be an attractive idea. A crowd is a kind of community that often manifests far worse behavior than any of the individuals within it, yet we do find many ordinary, nonremarkable people who do experience community. And we do find in all sorts of human communities surprising examples of beauty, eloquence, and wisdom that seem to be beyond the scope of that particular collection of people *en masse*.

How is it, then, that individuals who are not particularly self-aware or patient do discover and enjoy true community? And how is it that such commendable achievements arise out of gathered groups of flawed people? One possible explanation for this phenomenon may have to do with what is known in the church as *askesis*.

Askesis evokes a long-standing practice within the church, but it is reintroduced in a more general way by Eugene Peterson in *Under the Unpredictable Plant*. According to Peterson, askesis has to do with limitations or a beneficial confinement. The word *ascetic* is derived from this same root, but askesis is not limited to the ascetic practices. Askesis, according to Peterson, "is a calculated and deliberate interference with this god-lust, this god-presumption,"[5] that besets us as fallen humans. Askesis can be involuntary such as a medical crisis or imprisonment. And askesis can be voluntary such as joining a monastery, but askesis does not need to be so dramatic and explicit as taking monastic vows. Askesis can be discovered often by simply taking account of the particular conditions of one's local context.

The way that this concept might be applied to an urban context is to think of askesis as descriptive of the kinds of good limits that contribute to a lively urban environment. A city in Montana is a good place to talk about askesis because we have one of the lowest per capita income earnings in the nation. Many people experience community in Missoula for the simple reason that

they cannot afford *not* to. They cannot afford to take long vacations at exotic destinations and so, for a significant portion of the year, they are forced to make do with the amenities of the local setting in the company of their ordinary neighbors and fellow Missoulans. This limit, often quite unconsciously, builds intimacy with the city, the land, and their neighbors, and this limit ultimately builds community.

An important point for the New Urbanists to keep in mind is that historically one of the foundational reasons for the lively urban environment has been peoples' lack of resources. The lords and country squires could afford to place some distance between themselves and the commoners, but everyone else used (and ultimately enlivened) the urban settings because they had some need that they could not afford to meet in any other way.

I live in a neighborhood that meets many of the conditions of the Traditional Neighborhood Design (TND) extolled by the New Urbanists. The buildings are laid out at a relatively high density, there is a good network of sidewalks for walking, and there are some lovely, public spaces and charming coffee shops within easy walking distance from my front door. I do love to walk to the park and the coffee shops and go there when I have time or money to spare. Where I really take advantage of the good sidewalks and the proximity of our houses is when I pop over to a neighbor's to borrow a tool or an ingredient or to ask for help with picking up and moving some furniture. As much as I enjoy these little exchanges with my neighbors, if I had more disposable income, I would probably keep a better stock of food on hand, purchase all the tools that I need, and not worry about the twenty-five dollar delivery fee for furniture. I have come to realize that one of the things that makes Missoula a hospitable urban environment is that it is made up of people who have to get along because they need each other.

Another place where Missoula has benefited from the askesis of her poverty has been in the preservation and development of the downtown. Missoula has a charming and vibrant downtown. There are interesting local stores that inhabit beautifully restored buildings representing a variety of architectural styles and periods. Our downtown is a popular destination for visitors as well as for locals and makes a significant contribution to our local economy.

However, the charm that we enjoy in downtown Missoula is the result, in part, of a period of economic distress. Missoula has never had a strong economy, but in the 1980s we were in a serious recession. Whereas other, more economically viable, cities were modernizing their downtowns, we were just barely surviving. Cities that could afford to were tearing down the "outdated" buildings of their downtown areas and replacing them with modernist build-

Receiving Community:
The Church and the Future
of the New Urbanist Movement

ings replete with mirrored glass, featureless design, and oppressive scale. In Missoula we had to keep our outmoded buildings because we could not afford to tear them down. These old buildings had the advantage of relatively cheap rent for tenants and so, during the 1980s, they began to be occupied by an eclectic mix of local businesses.

If nothing else, these local businesses were able to maintain these downtown buildings and keep them clean. As they began to turn a profit, they were able to make minor repairs and upgrade their buildings for commercial use. By the time that the modernizing trend of the 1980s had run its course and people were once again interested in historic architecture, Missoula found itself with a gold mine of historic buildings as well as a strong core of businesses to use them. Over the next decade, these local businesses began to undertake serious reconstruction of many of the downtown buildings. Other cities, which had poured money into their downtowns in the 1980s, now find themselves with business cores made up of unattractive high-rent buildings. Even if they wanted to return to historic architectural styles, they cannot afford to. In the meantime, Missoula enjoys a vibrant and interesting downtown.

Besides being an interesting example of a fortunate accident of history, this account makes an important point about how community is built. A rich and varied-built environment must be built over generations because any one generation will have only a limited contribution that it can make to the environment. Each generation will also have blind spots (stemming from their own sin nature) and must not be allowed to have too much influence on the built environment. Money, as we have seen, empowers the individual to pursue his interests and passions but also can exacerbate the consequences of sin. On a communal scale, money allows a particular generation to express its insight and even wisdom, but it can also glaringly show its blind spots. Community that is built slowly over the generations provides a kind of check and balance between the generations, and the limit of time seems to soften the destructive impact of collective sin.

Money is a mixed blessing when it comes to urbanism. Certainly it takes a good deal of money to build and sustain many urban amenities. One visit to a former lumber town is sufficient to demonstrate that point, but money can also act as a kind of prophylactic against the very amenities available in an urban setting. The urban life provides a kind of askesis for those who live in the city. Limitations on space force people in the city to live near each other and share public space throughout the year and thus build intimacy. Limitations on time mean that the people of one generation can only exert so much influence on their physical environment—they have to learn to accept and even value what

has preceded them through the built legacy of previous generations. Those individuals and communities with too much money can obliterate the healthy limits of space and time. They can spend money to put distance between themselves and their neighbors, and they can change the face of their built environments too quickly. As John Updike puts it, "The super-rich make lousy neighbors":

> They buy a house and tear it down
> And build another, twice as big, and leave.
> They're never there; they own so many
> Other houses, each demands a visit.
> Entire neighborhoods called fashionable,
> Bustling with servants and masters, such as
> Louisburg Square in Boston or Bel Air in L.A.
>   are districts now like Wall Street after dark?
> Or Tombstone once the silver boom went bust.
> The essence of the super-rich is absence.
> They're always demonstrating they can afford to be
>   somewhere else.
> Don't let them in.
> Their money is a kind of poverty.[6]

The members of the Christian community are by no means exemplary in their respect of the limits of money or time. We are just as likely to have the absentee super-rich in our ranks as any other voluntary society. However, the church can have a kind of anchoring influence on its community through its sanctifying of time in a particular place. In a culture where everything, from worldwide financial markets to grocery stores, is open twenty-four hours a day seven days a week throughout the year, time becomes irrelevant. The church, by setting one day a week apart as sacred time and by marking the year with its calendar, can be one of the only places in a neighborhood where time and season have any meaning. The church also, in the midst of a fluid culture, represents a living tradition that goes back much further than just one generation. Even a new church in a new residential area can tie the neighborhood into a tradition that is thousands of years old and can bring much-needed depth and perspective into a community.

A local congregation can also provide a witness of permanence and connection among the disparate individuals within community. The church not only provides a place for the community to gather week by week and deepen the bonds of their relationships, but it continues to gather even as members of the community come and go. The church gathers on my behalf, as it were,

Receiving Community:
The Church and the Future
of the New Urbanist Movement

when I cannot be present in my local community. And I can achieve some degree of connection with my local congregation by gathering with the local church in whatever town I happen to find myself on a particular Sunday. The church can pray for members when they are out of town and it often will visit its shut-in members on a regular basis. The church ties major life events (birth, death, marriage) to the ordinary Sunday by Sunday, in-season and out-of-season life of a local congregation. I will not marry a couple in my church if they are not members of the church—not because they are not "in the club" but, rather, because we want a wedding ceremony to be an affirmation (or a beginning of) a long-term relationship with a community that will support the marriage.

Love, Idolatry, and Worship

As part of my job, I counsel couples as they prepare to get married. In this process, I routinely ask each person why he or she wants to get married. I have heard all kinds of answers to this question over the years, and I must admit that most of the responses have made me smile. When I discern one or both partners wanting to get married because they want to have a "happy marriage," then I get concerned. It has been my observation that anyone who strives for a happy marriage will not only fail to achieve this goal for himself or herself but will deprive their spouse of a happy marriage as well. *An indispensable ingredient for a happy marriage is love.* Love, by definition, puts the needs and wants of the other above one's own needs and wants. Anyone who hopes to obtain a "happy marriage" for himself or herself by some kind of a contractual agreement with another person has not even begun to understand the concept of love.

Truly happy marriages only come about when both partners put aside their own needs and purposes and concentrate their efforts on serving their spouse and meeting his or her needs. While it is true that in most cases, this approach to marriage does lead to a happy and stable marriage, *ends can never be the goal*. This is, in fact, one of the main reasons that I am a strong advocate for abstinence before marriage and against cohabitation before marriage. Both living together and having sex before marriage suggest to me the notion of a "try-out" before the commitment of marriage. Both actions seem to imply a cost-benefit approach to the sacred covenant of marriage. The message of both premarital sex and cohabitation is, "I will marry you only if I can be convinced that you will bring me maximum pleasure and minimum inconvenience."

I greatly prefer maintaining an element of risk and trust in the marriage covenant. It seems to me that couples who are willing to make a commitment to one another without knowing all of the pertinent details concerning pleasure and inconvenience, are more likely to stay together when those particular details change over the course of a normal human life. The question that I want to hear a young person ask is, "Is this a person whom I can fruitfully celebrate and serve?" rather than "Is this a person who will allow me to get what I want?"

Now, as a Christian, I believe that one must be willing to go even further than this to discover the full potential of the sacred covenant of marriage. I tell Christian couples that they cannot even make the happiness of their spouse or family their highest goal but must make their relationship with God a higher goal still. As Christians, we are commanded to have no other gods before the God that we meet in the Bible. Idolatry is the condition in which we put something (or someone) in a higher place than God. Certainly, we can make some of the standard temptations of humanity (money, sex, and power) into idols, and people do this all the time, but we are just as susceptible to making more benign objects (family, church, and nation) into idols. We are just as guilty when we put our love of money over our love of God as when we put our love of our family over our love of God.

This prohibition against idolatry protects the integrity of our worship of God, but it also protects us as well as the object that we may be tempted to worship. Money can be very freeing and bring us many comforts when it is kept in its proper place, but money destroys us when we worship it by making it our highest aspiration and the object to which everything else is sacrificed. A happy marriage and a healthy family can be one of life's greatest joys. However, our families and our spouses will get suffocated by overattention or crushed by pressure if we try to make them our gods and place all of our hopes and expectations upon them.

These final points, I believe, provide the most plausible explanation for why we "cannot have community like we have a pizza." Perhaps the notion of "community" is one of those elusive ends that cannot be pursued directly. Those who plunk down a couple of million for a home at Seaside may be trying to secure for themselves community, but they will never find it until they are willing to make a commitment to one place and to be good neighbors. And perhaps even a dedicated New Urbanist cannot create community, no matter how hard he tries, because even urbanism cannot withstand the pressure of being the highest aspiration in an individual's life.

Receiving Community:
The Church and the Future
of the New Urbanist Movement

The Church at the Center

Seaside in economic terms is a shining success. Seaside as a practical example of many of the truths behind the New Urbanist theory is an invaluable asset, but Seaside does not provide the kind of real community that is experienced in many "inferior" paleo-urbanist settings such as Missoula. In this sense, Seaside shows some of the possibilities as well as some of the limitations of the New Urbanist movement in its current state. Insofar as New Urbanism is about getting the physical components of community life right so that people will want to seek out this life in their consumer choices, New Urbanism can be declared a success and can expect many years of enjoying the fruit of that success. However, insofar as true community (or the lack thereof) is dependent on nonmarket forces such as redemption, interdependence, and selfless service; the New Urbanist movement lacks the insight as well as the experience necessary to deal with such realities.

To understand these inhibitors to and incubators for human community, the New Urbanist movement will have to look beyond its vanguard of architects, builders, and government workers. New Urbanism will have to begin to listen to the voices of teachers, psychologists, and yes—even pastors if it ever hopes to become more than a market correction and instead be the long-term cultural project to which it aspires.[7] While it is true that over the past half-century, we have hamstrung most of our efforts at community through poor physical design; we cannot fix the problem by focusing our efforts only at the physical level. A community is a living organism of human relationships and must be built and maintained through human interaction.

More important, New Urbanism is going to have to figure out a meaningful way to include the church and the Christian community in its vision for a restored urban life. The inclusion of a church at Seaside represents a significant step in that direction, but the church in Seaside also represents some of the potential missteps that can be made when the proper role between church and community is not rightly understood.

The church in Seaside is beautifully designed, carefully crafted, and in many ways an impressive building. It is the tallest building in Seaside and terminates the view from a major boulevard. The church is set back on a generous lot to distinguish it from the private buildings in the vicinity. It is significant that the developers of Seaside devoted so much attention and so many resources to create a space for the religious needs of the community.

The particular form that this church in Seaside has taken also demonstrates some of the shortcomings that the New Urbanist practitioners have had in

understanding the Christian Church and in incorporating the church in mean-ingful ways into the community. I see at least three areas of concern. The church in Seaside is *naked*—it is designed in a town-hall style and does not contain any explicit religious symbolism. It is *anonymous*—it is not connected to any particular denomination. And the church in Seaside is *marginal*. It has not been afforded a spot in the center of town but is relegated to the fringes. We will examine each of these shortcomings in some detail.

There are a number of Christian churches that have consciously avoided religious symbolism in their buildings to avoid any temptation toward idola-try. However, I suspect that the church in Seaside has not left the cross out of the church for such theological reasons. Insofar as the church represents a human attempt to encourage people to be good and to celebrate beauty and rit-ual, it can be easily accepted by the secular culture. The cross is not so easy to swallow. The cross disturbs us because it reminds us that all is not well in the world. And the cross reminds us that we are sinners in need of salvation. Perhaps the designers of the church at Seaside left out the cross because they wanted to highlight the human aspiration theme of the religious impulse while playing down the sin and salvation theme of the church.

However, a naked church—without a cross—is going to have a hard time communicating the reality of sin and the stronger reality of grace to a commu-nity that needs constant reminders of these vital themes. A church that tries to "clean up" the symbolism of its faith in this way would be subject to H. Richard Niebuhr's stinging critique of liberal Christianity: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."[8]

What places such as Seaside need, as we have seen, are clear reminders of sin and grace so that the limits on and prospects for genuine human commu-nity can be more clearly understood. A naked church can too easily be seen as representing no more than human aspiration and potential in some kind of vague spiritual realm.

The fact that the church in Seaside is not associated with any specific denomination is also problematic. This is not to say that I would want to put forward my Presbyterian denomination as the ideal ecclesiastical body for places such as Seaside. I will be the first to admit that the very idea of denom-inations is counterproductive for the unity of the Christian Church. However, given the fact that the Christian Church currently finds its expression in a multitude of specific denominations and has not yet figured out how to reunite under one major umbrella, simply not affiliating with a specific denomination is not a viable solution.

Receiving Community:
The Church and the Future
of the New Urbanist Movement

A church not tied to a particular denomination is not rooted in history. At first this seems like a cleaner place to start; but, like the failed experiment with modernist architecture has taught us, to reject history is to reject ordinary human beings who inhabit history. Modernist architects failed to make a connection with the people who were to use and enjoy their creations, because they ignored thousands of years of collected wisdom in favor of their own original ideas. In the same way, a church that tries to transcend the contingencies (and, yes, even irrelevancies) of a specific denominational affiliation will find that it will fail to gather a viable human community.

I have found that I can worship and be nurtured in my faith in almost any denominational setting where the basic tenets of the Christian faith are upheld. I have had meaningful worship experiences in Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, Calvary Chapel, and Baptist churches. Ironically, there are a number of "nondenominational" churches that have taken on most of the characteristics of historic denominations except explicit identification. I find the denominational character of these nondenominational churches a positive development. Where I have the hardest time making a connection is in the anonymous chapels that are found sometimes in hospitals and hotel grounds where I am "free" to tailor some kind of worship experience that suits my particular needs. In these settings, freedom seems to mean isolation from any wider community that might sustain me from the richness of their traditions.

When it comes to the issue of a church in a neighborhood, its association with a particular denomination can be seen as a kind of positive askesis. The denominational affiliation represents a limit with respect to inflexible traditions, theological boundaries, and the eclectic personalities that have gathered around the particular church. It is precisely through these kinds of limits that we can ever have a true, flesh-and-blood experience of community. Every attempt to clean up the messiness of a particular denominational tradition is a move toward abstraction and away from real human community.

The final problem with the church in Seaside has to do with its location. The church is the tallest building in Seaside, it is set apart from the other buildings in its immediate area, and a view of the church terminates a major commercial boulevard. However, the church is not anywhere near the center of town as it might have been in a traditional American town, but is at the very edge of Seaside. This issue represents perhaps the thorniest question with regard to the role of a church in a neighborhood. On the one hand, separation of church and state requires that a particular church not be given preferential treatment in the public realm. On the other hand, true freedom of religion

must allow for the fact that for some people, their religion is more than just a fringe activity, but it plays a central role in all of life.

The issue of church and state relations is complex, unfortunately, there is no "objective" and "value-neutral" way to address this problem. Any approach to the placement of the church implies a set of theological assumptions—spoken or unspoken. One area where differing theological assumptions can lead to radically different understandings has to do with the meaning of the word *spiritual*. A common understanding of this term involves the assumption that human life can be divided between the physical and the spiritual. The physical realm of life has to do with those things that can be seen or touched—our bodies, the work of our hands, and our sexual relationships. The spiritual realm has to do with those areas that cannot be directly touched—our abstract thoughts, our emotions, and the nonsexual aspects of our relationships.

In this bifurcated understanding of human existence, God is only relevant to the spiritual side of our humanity. With regard to the physical aspects of our humanity, we are left to our own devices. According to this approach to spirituality, God comforts our minds and our emotions in church on Sunday, but has nothing to do with our daily work or our sex life.

A more elaborate version of this same basic idea is implied in the popular notion of the "well-balanced" human being that we see routinely displayed on the walls of student health centers. This concept is usually illustrated with a picture of a human being in the center of a circle divided into four parts. The parts of the circle are labeled *physical*, *emotional*, *intellectual*, and *spiritual*. According to this scheme, the "well-balanced" human being is one who has cultivated health in each of these four areas.

These kinds of approaches to human spirituality are not at all new and find their origin in ancient Greek understandings of the human personality and their corresponding dualistic religious systems. However, the Christian affirmation that God took on human flesh and was born in human history cannot be reconciled with either of those two approaches to spirituality. The Gospel of John tells us that the Word (Jesus) became flesh and dwelt among us. If physical human flesh can contain God and if God can live an ordinary human life and work as a carpenter, no longer can we easily divide human existence between the physical and the spiritual.

Christian spirituality, therefore, must oppose both of these popular understandings of spirituality. According to Christian theology, there are no particularly "spiritual" areas of life. "Spiritual" means simply all areas of life that we have yielded to God's care and direction. Singing hymns in church is spiritual, but so is working in our gardens, or having sex with our spouses if we have

Receiving Community:
The Church and the Future
of the New Urbanist Movement

invited God into those areas of our lives. Similarly, for the Christian, the prob-
lem with the "balanced human" concept is that it puts the human being in the
center of the diagram. This is precisely how orthodox Christian theology por-
trays sin—as me and my needs in the center of my existence with everything
else (including God) relegated to the fringes. Christian conversion can be
understood as allowing Jesus Christ to resume his rightful place in the center
of our lives and allow the other aspects of our human personality to be shaped
and directed around his will.

We can see how—for someone who thinks of spirituality as a contrasting
notion to physicality, or for someone who takes a "balanced human" approach
to spirituality—a church set apart, on the fringe of a community makes perfect
sense. It is there for those who are "into that sort of thing" as the need arises
for a "spiritual" experience. For the Christian with a more incarnational under-
standing of spirituality, it makes more sense for the church to be right in the
center of the activity where people live and work. Or, if that is not possible,
the church should be an integrated part of the neighborhood in which it is
located. For the Christian who is concerned not to let money, entertainment,
or family become idols; the church must remain a visible counterpoint to these
seductive counterfeit gods. We need to be reminded that God alone is worthy
of our worship and that all other aspects of human existence will be enhanced
if we get this one basic relationship right.

Receiving Community

I have come to the conclusion that "community" is a very elusive concept.
The way that we even use this word in our contemporary culture is confusing.
At one time, "community" meant the people living near us. Currently, "com-
munity" seems to mean people with whom we share an interest or an advo-
cacy with no expectation that we live near or even have met anyone in our
"community." We mostly hear the word *community* in phrases such as "gay
community" or "Christian community." To talk about community as a physi-
cal place or a setting for real human relationships, as the New Urbanists have
taught us to do, is revolutionary.

Even with this restored understanding of the physical aspect of community,
we find it elusive. I think that Kunstler is right in his notion that we cannot
buy community, but I would even take his idea one step further in saying that
we cannot *buy* or even *build* community, either. True community requires wis-
dom, grace, and time. We can acquire wisdom simply by paying attention to
the collective experience of humankind as humans have tried to hammer out

strategies and settings for living harmonious lives in proximity to one another. This collective repository of human wisdom took a major blow in the past century because of the influence of the modernist movement, which tried to ignore history. New Urbanism has been one of the positive forces that have helped us move beyond this dark period of the twentieth century, but still we see many mistakes being made all across the country as we continue to build inhospitable, human environments based on modernist errors.

Community also requires grace. We humans are too self-referential and too impatient to willingly put aside our personal desires and agendas for the sake of the greater good. We need the limits that financial and geographical restraints put upon us in order to discover the joys of community life. Sadly, those who can transcend those limits because of an excess of financial resources can miss out on many blessings of community. We also need forgiveness from our neighbors whom we will invariably offend in the course of living in close proximity to one another. And, as it is nearly impossible to offer grace until we have experienced grace, therefore, the theological promise that God provides grace freely is foundational to many communities.

Finally, community requires time. The shortcomings of Seaside are not surprising or even deplorable. One would be hard-pressed to find any examples of a thriving human community that was "developed" in the span of two decades. Most utopian experiments in creating ideal human communities in a short period of time have been abject failures. I think that Seaside actually has good possibilities of becoming a viable human community, but it will take time. True, human community takes generations to form, to draw out the wisdom from each generation, and to soften the blind spots.

It is for these reasons that I have become convinced that we (meaning any collection of living human beings) cannot build community. I believe that community must be received as a gracious gift. All community must be received as a gift from our Creator and Redeemer, from those who have preceded us and, to some extent, from the neighbors who live near us. Building community means, first of all, to recognize it where it exists and to cultivate a sense of gratitude for it. Out of this gratitude we can begin to encourage what is good in our communities and to oppose that which is destructive. What we cannot do, however, is to reject our communities in order to pursue some kind of abstract and idealized community that is devoid of human messiness.

Wherever there are people, there is community. We must start there. Our particular community may need a major overhaul of its zoning codes or it may need some more visiting among neighbors. If it is a place in this country, it

Receiving Community:
The Church and the Future
of the New Urbanist Movement

probably needs both. In either case, the church and the Christians in that community have a distinct and vital role to play. I know from experience that this is true in Missoula, and I suspect that it is true in Seaside as well.

Notes

1. This term is based upon the term *paleo-new urbanism*, which I first heard from Howard Ahmanson of Fieldstead & Company. Ahmanson defines *paleo-new urbanists* as "people who live in towns that were built by the principles that the New Urbanists espoused long before there were New Urbanists."

2. James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape* (New York: Touchstone, 1993), 186.

3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), 26.

4. Ibid.

5. Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration of Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 89.

6. John Updike, "The Super-Rich Make Lousy Neighbors," *American Scholar* 67, 4 (Fall 1998), 52.

7. Philip Bess described New Urbanism as a "long-term cultural project" in a lecture delivered at the New Urbanism and Communities of Faith conference at Seaside in March 2002.

8. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1937), 193.