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THE GEOGRAPHIC PARISH

1 I've told this story before. We lived for four months in Leeds, UK, in 1969, the year of my sabbatical in Europe. I was Interim Pastor of a small Lutheran congregation in Yorkshire, while they awaited a full time pastor. My people were mostly Norwegian refugees from World War II who had fled the continent during the war, married English spouses, and were raising English families. But they still thought of themselves as Lutherans. It was a wonderful match, for me and for them!

2 We lived for those months on the second floor of our church building. Every morning at breakfast we could look out our window and see the local Anglican priest walking to his parish church a few blocks away. Dressed for his walk in black cassock and even, on occasion, black gaiters!

3 We got to know him and his parish. It was everything a church should be. Black and brown faces with white. The apparent rich and the apparent poor. Kids and adults. The handicapped and the able bodied. We got to spend some time in conversation with him.

4 It became clear to us – Kathy and me – that he thought of our little Lutheran congregation as part of his parish.

5 This annoyed me at first. We're not Anglican, we're Lutheran.

6 But it slowly dawned on me: He thought of the Pakistani Muslims in his neighbourhood as part of his parish as well!

7 He had a sense – altogether foreign to me – that this particular piece of real estate in Yorkshire belonged to him and his people, to nurture and to cherish. He was going to see to it that the garbage here got collected each week. That the street lights here were all working. That the streets were safe to walk at night.

8 He had a sense of his parish as geographic.

9 That sense of a geographic parish was altogether new to me. And I came to find it exceedingly attractive.

10 Contrast the story in 1 - 9 above with this. There are at least three Lutheran pastors in Kitchener-Waterloo who live miles from their church buildings.

11 But, I hear you protesting, remember the automobile. There's no way you can prevent congregational members from driving past four other Lutheran churches to reach your own. Shouldn't pastors have the same freedom? To live where they want? We don't live today in a Medieval world, where everyone walks.

12 Further: Shouldn't pastors have the same responsibilities as lay people, in having to pay money for a mortgage every month?

13 Yes yes yes I get your point. But won't you agree with me? Something precious has been lost.

14 I grew up as a pastor's kid in a parsonage, right next door to our church building. My mother hated it. But a parsonage has at least this virtue: It keeps the pastor in the parish.

15 If I could wave a magic wand, I'd have every pastor live within the boundaries of the geographic parish they serve. How can you have skin in the game, so to speak, when you live miles away? How can you make certain that the garbage is collected? That the streets are safe?

16 Are our cities doomed, unless the Christian churches within them can recover a sense of the geographical parish? I'd put it that strongly.

17 A couple of years ago, still in my retirement, I undertook, with two other sympathetic pastors, to divide our twin cities into geographic parishes. We met several times with city maps and Sharpies. The finished maps we distributed to each pastor were altogether unworkable.

18 The Lutheran churches in Kitchener-Waterloo were positioned with no thought of geography. The two largest churches, in this, Canada's Lutheran heartland, were just two or three blocks apart. Did the pastors who built them long ago think of themselves as competitors with one another? So our parish boundaries, in almost every case, were very idiosyncratic.

19 Long story short: Nothing came of our hard work. The present parish pastors simply ignore what we had proposed. No one, it seems, cares today about geographic parishes.

20 Pity.

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