

Rooted in Christ, grounded in neighbourhoods  
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Introduction

- Andrew Murray's theology is aptly described in the conference theme Rooted in Christ.
- Evangelical passion and revivalist theology.
- But... does this mean spirituality is nothing more than a state of mind, an inner experience of faith?
- The thesis of this paper is that Christian theology and Christian churches need to embrace their places and must be grounded in the surrounding context – the neighbourhood.

Grounded in neighbourhoods

- Contextual realities.
- Not a single neighbourhood resembles the neighbourhoods of twenty-five years ago.

Places of the heart

- Place raises deep and probing questions, because our relationship with land and place is complex.
- Land shapes our identity and destiny.
- The entanglement of place and identity impacts on faith. Faith is grounded and life plays in the many spaces we find ourselves in. "Jou geloofshart klop ook in jou hartsplek."

The theological importance of place

- Places are important from a theological and spiritual perspective, because it is part and parcel of our reality. Conradie (2009:3) says that a theology of place – an appreciation for the theological significance of specific geographic locations – has deep roots in the Jewish-Christian tradition.
- The core themes of the Christian faith are closely tied up with a theology of place.
- God is present in creation. God is the creator of all places. We need places to be fully human. If we want to accomplish God's mission, to the glory of God, we cannot settle for an abstract life in general. We live and flourish in particular conditions – the same where God works, namely time and place. We are not disembodied angels. We have a street address where God can find us.

Incarnation and place

- The concept of incarnation is especially helpful in the reflection on a theology of place. This also impacts on ecclesiology. The life of the church as life in the Trinity, and the fundamental importance of the incarnation as a movement towards where people are (place), forms the basis of a missional ecclesiology.
- An important step in the establishment of the theological importance of place is a rediscovery of the "commons".

Faithful presence

- The church needs to establish a faithful presence in the commons.

- Fitch (2016) argues that faithful presence names the reality that God is present in the world and that God uses people faithful to his presence to make himself concrete and real in the world.
- Faithful presence implies a specific kind of presence in all the places that Christians find themselves – and in such a way that it affirms the integrity of Christian faith. The church is a hermeneutic of the gospel – it brings the gospel story but is also, in its life and witness, the gospel.

#### Milestones on the development of a theology of place

The development of a theology of place, the restoration of the commons and attention to the implications of being faithfully present suggest attention to various aspects of place (see Niemandt 2018):

- Storied places - there is no timeless space and no spaceless time. Place is a space filled with meaning because of the narrative(s) connected to the particular space.
- Beautiful places - tourism industry. Places of beauty can act as natural cathedrals that facilitate reflection on creation and the creator. It creates space and places to be aware of God's goodness, creativity and care.
- Ugly places - A theology that addresses ugly places refers to places that are destroyed or damaged by mankind. Place and land are never neutral. The soil is the first victim of human evil. God is present where we least expect God, and more so where the least and marginalised cry out for help and comfort.
- Holy places - Places linked to a special perception or experience of God's presence are well-known. Theologically speaking, God is omnipresent. God is even present where we least expect to find God. But God is also a mystery and hidden. A balanced approach between God being in holy places and God being everywhere, understanding that we encounter God in some places in order that we might find God everywhere. Heterotopia. Places are consecrated and holy, not instead of the whole, but on behalf of the whole.
- Unfamiliar places of discomfort (places of exile) - strange and unfamiliar places. God's people regularly ended up in places of exile and discomfort. Contemporary Christians' experience is one of dislocation, uncertainty, and irrelevance, and that Christians might find many parallels between their life and the Old Testament Jewish exiles in Babylon
- Places of healing and restoration - The health industry is burgeoning. The restoration has as much to do with living waters flowing as with the presence of the living God. Place becomes a place of restoration and healing. Relationship between place, spirituality and healing continues today. Places of quiet reflection - Spirituality must embody the gospel. The embodying of the gospel certainly happens in a real place. Common threads among spiritual experiences are the recognition of some greater meaning or dimension to life, emotional engagement at some deeper level, even if momentary, a sense of purpose and the connection of all of these elements with well-being, whether physical, emotional or both. That such experiences are often connected to place and indeed, particular places, are of interest to a spatially sensitive medical humanities.
- A Christian spirituality needs a place of quiet reflection. Christians need places of reflection to stay rooted in Christ.

