

# GOD'S NEIGHBORHOOD - WHERE STRANGERS BECOME FRIENDS ... AND FAMILY: A GUYANESE METAPHOR FOR CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

*"And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29 NIV)*

## Introduction

Mabel woke up to the sounds of the neighborhood. Eloise was trying to get the children off to school. She could hear them. Every morning it was some problem or the other. Those children! Always looking for an excuse to skip school. They could try as hard as they liked. Eloise wasn't going to let them get away with it. Mmm. The Roberts were eating salt fish ... again. She could smell it. And they loved to put a lot of garlic in it. Mabel got out of bed and got ready for the day. She opened up the back door. "Good morning, Eloise. How are you?" she said. "Fine thank you," replied Eloise. "If you have a minute this afternoon, could you talk to Julian for me? He's getting 'out of hand' these days, and I know he will listen to you." "Sure. Just send him over." "Thank you. See you later. And when he's coming, I will send some of that sugar cake that you like so much." "Thanks. And I think I have some extra mangoes. You know, my relatives from the country visited yesterday. I will send some." "I'm sorry I didn't see them. How is Auntie May?" "She is well. She didn't come this time. The time passed so quickly when they were here. It was a short visit. I didn't even get to call out so you could see them. Another time. Well, I will see you later. I have to go into town." "Alright, girl. Later. And thanks again."

The Guyanese concept of neighbor is a potentially effective metaphor for Christian Education. It speaks to our educative space, our method, and our content. It also takes us beyond our space. The concept of neighbor has been chosen because of its centrality in Guyanese life, and its content. As an example of its centrality, in a book of one hundred folk songs<sup>1</sup>, four of them dealt with neighbor in some way<sup>2</sup>. In a study conducted by the author, interviewees noted that the Guyanese understanding of neighbor could contribute to the world because in it a neighbor looked out for the stranger and showed a spirit of care and concern, and community. In the novel *Buxton Spice*<sup>3</sup>, the neighbors play an important role. A statement by Brackette Williams helps to illuminate this understanding of neighbor. Her statement is made about a community she studied in Guyana, but holds true for the concept of neighbor, since in many ways the community is a macro version of the neighborhood: "Yet, humanness represents a bottom-line criterion of equality because, in all places and at all times, human beings are, as

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<sup>1</sup>Compiled and transcribed by Lynette de W. Dolphin, *One Hundred Folk Songs of Guyana* (Georgetown, Guyana: The Department of Culture Ministry of Education and Cultural Development, 1996).

<sup>2</sup>Folk songs have been chosen because they "grow out of the everyday human experience of living and dying, working and playing, as well as the various modalities of sexual bonding." - Compiled and transcribed by Lynette de W. Dolphin, *One Hundred Folk Songs of Guyana*, 5.

<sup>3</sup>Oonya Kempadoo, *Buxton Spice* (New York: Plume, 1998).

human beings, deserving of one another's concern, respect, and some minimum cooperation ...."<sup>4</sup> It needs to be noted that the neighbor relationship is neither perfect nor ripple free. What distinguishes it and holds it together are the principles, values and ways of behaving.

### **The Guyanese Understanding of Neighbor**

In the Guyanese context, the concept of neighbor embraces both physical and relational aspects. The physical aspect is the starting point. It is through the sharing of physical space that the relationship of neighbor commences. However, in terms of the physical aspect, a neighbor is rarely seen simply as the person next door. A neighbor is normally someone living in the general area, that is, in the neighborhood. At the same time, although the physical space is part of the definition of neighbor, critical to the concept of neighbor is the relationship into which one enters. The only interviewee to limit neighbor to the person adjacent to oneself, combined this with "someone who you can call on in times of emergency...."

A neighbor could be "like family", or a close friend, "matty"<sup>5</sup>, a companion, or a "close acquaintance". In the novel, *Buxton Spice*, when the police arrive at the home and take Mums down to the station, it is the ever present neighbor, Mrs DeAbro who steps into a familial role and decides that Mums' son should go with his mother to the Police Station and sends him off. One interviewee spoke of neighbors as persons who enter into close relationships - "neighbours are usually strangers that meet, and cultivate a ... deep friendship." Another spoke of neighbor as "matty" as a "much more deeper ... form of neighbor". These matty, deep friends, would be neighbors with whom one shared just about everything. The children of the two families (the authoress' family and the DeAbro's) in *Buxton Spice* would be what one interviewee termed "grow matty". They do everything together. They are in and out of each other's homes. They go to school together, do leisure activities together and make mischief together. The bond with the neighbor with whom one is very close represents a vital relationship. A common saying is "your neighbor is your family". One interviewee noted the need to be on "as good terms as possible" with one's neighbor. Of course, there is a very practical reason for this. Your neighbor is your first port of call in trouble. A folk song asks "neighba, yuh nah see nobody pass yah?" (Neighbour, did you see anybody pass here?) Someone had stolen food and the neighbor was the most likely person to have noticed something unusual. However, one could not simplify the relationship to this practical reason.

The neighbor relationship can be seen as a continuum ranging from those with whom one is very close to those with whom one is not very close. This could be compared to the family. Within every family, one is closer to some persons than to others. Nevertheless, with

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<sup>4</sup>Brackette F. Williams, *Stains on My Name, War in My Veins: Guyana and the Politics of Cultural Struggle* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991), 100.

<sup>5</sup>A matty is "a close friend". See Richard Allsopp, ed., *Dictionary of Caribbean Usage; with a French and Spanish Supplement Edited by Jeannette Allsopp* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

any neighbor there is some form of relationship that would have some of the same features as that of the matty neighbor. Neighbors who are less close would still be expected to perform the roles of neighbor, though to a lesser degree.

The basis of the neighbor relationship, regardless of the degree of closeness, is the physical space occupied. Often, there is no prior relationship. However, upon entering the space of neighbor expectations follow based on the understanding of neighbor as a person with whom one enters into relationship, and based on the understanding of the roles of a neighbor. The relationship grows over time. Even in difficult times, this instinct to neighborliness is so great, that the roles persist. Persons might imply as Mrs DeAbro did in *Buxton Spice*, that you can't look out for each other because you will be betrayed.<sup>6</sup> However, the reality is often different. One interviewee said "Everyone (almost) looks out for his neighbor despite the present situation in our country." This situation refers to an unprecedented increase in crime. The interviewee just quoted noted that one needed to be careful now, not knowing who was who, but one still had to be neighborly. The following comment is apt: "And yet however much we learn about the effort to be of help, we can never protect ourselves from the risks of caring, which separate real help from advice, reassurance, or consolation. In running these risks we preserve the connections between us. We enhance the life we share, or perhaps better put, we enhance the life that shares us."<sup>7</sup>

There comes a point at which neighbor transcends the present habitation, the physical space. A person on an extended visit with a relative or friend in the neighborhood becomes a neighbor. The neighbor's relatives and friends could become as one's own relatives and friends and vice versa. "Sometimes is not even your neighbor. Sometimes it's your family, their neighbor, but they call them neighbor, so it's all of our neighbors." Furthermore, one retains a relationship with those who were once neighbors even when they no longer occupy the physical space of neighbor. For example a person residing abroad upon returning to Guyana even when only for a brief stay would go to visit 'the neighbors'. An interviewee noted that when her neighbor migrated, this neighbor sent home a parcel for the interviewee's family every year at Christmas time. Neighbor begins with the physical but transcends it, becoming long lasting - "for life", one interviewee said. In a Guyanese folk song entitled "Small Days", the neighbor's children are part of the songwriter's reminiscence about childhood, so strong is the tie of neighbor. Related to this transcendence of the physical, another interviewee saw the high rate of remittances sent to Guyana by Guyanese residing overseas as indicative of the spirit of neighbor. This can be said because the neighborly spirit permeates life. According to an interviewee, "our understanding of the term neighbor is exhibited in our hospitable nature." Physical boundaries, therefore, are fluid in defining neighbor. The tie of neighbor is never broken and the concept of neighbor embraces the neighbor's relational connections, and becomes a spirit that translates into everyday life.

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<sup>6</sup>Kempadoo, *Buxton Spice*, 63.

<sup>7</sup>Kegan, *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982), 20.

Undergirding the relationship of neighbor are loyalty and genuineness or authenticity, mingled with respect. One interviewee said that she would expect from a neighbor “loyalty and respect.” In *Stains on my Name* it is noted that “More specifically, when threatened by an external agent or when a choice must be made between “countryman” and “stranger”, they should act in a solidary fashion.”<sup>8</sup> This highlights the importance of loyalty. Of course, loyalty to neighbor can be taken to a negative extreme. Nevertheless, loyalty is often an important and positive quality, acting as a lubricant among neighbors. Often, the tensions which exist in the wider society among various groups are absent or greatly reduced in a diverse neighborhood. In relation to genuineness, a Guyanese folk song highlights its importance in the neighbor relationship. An interviewee pointed out that the singer says to the neighbor, “ah don’ want yuh conniving manin .”” (I do not want your conniving “Good morning.”) This is said because the first person neighbor perceived that the other neighbor who had made money in the gold field felt him/herself to be better than the first person neighbor as long as the money lasted and only acknowledged the other when the money was finished. Thus, the greeting was seen as insincere. This interviewee pointed out that “Neighborhoods, were, you know, were about genuineness, and it is in that, out of that genuineness we got the pride.” In other words, there must be authenticity in the neighborhood relationship. Where there is respect, there is authenticity. The interviewee, in speaking of the genuineness and pride, indirectly alluded to the identity that is created in neighborhoods. “What you will expect from me as a neighbor would be am, a joint sense of pride in our, in our space, ... and that pride is a big ... pride. ... you could expect from me situational loyalty... you could expect from me an interest ... in you the individual ... and the group.” Identity was also created by joint expectations - “and those neighbours, helped to create this identity”.

A neighbor plays various roles in a person’s life. These roles can be described under the overarching roles of showing concern and being involved in the neighbors’ well being. One interviewee notes that “for a neighbor to demonstrate ... no interest in you, is like a great social death.” This is akin to Robert Kegan’s statement that “Our survival and development depend on our capacity to recruit the invested attention of others to us.... The need to be seen, to be recognized, however it changes in the complexity of its form, may never change in its intensity.”<sup>9</sup> Brackette Williams says of the community’s self-understanding, “... each person should express and demonstrate a concern for others’ welfare and should be willing to respect and cooperate with them.”<sup>10</sup> These roles of concern and involvement can be broken down into communicative, behavioral, parental, and helpful/supportive roles. It should be noted that these roles are intertwined.

As part of the communicative role, neighbors function as advisers, and counselors.

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<sup>8</sup>Williams, *Stains on My Name*, 98.

<sup>9</sup>Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self*, 17-19.

<sup>10</sup>Williams, *Stains on My Name*, 98.

A neighbor offers solace and a listening ear in times of crisis. A neighbor gives advice regarding the children and other matters. Moreover, they are the ones with whom one discusses issues and current affairs. ““Oh me LAWD! What dem fellars do?” Mrs DeAbro was tirading to Mums next morning. ‘Since de Pastor wife get rape and murder - you see what t’ings reach to, Rose? You ‘ave to stay in you house. You can’t even go outside. Wait till I see dat Adams! People ain’t do nuthing, an’ police just locking dem up! Is money dey want! Tomorrow is court day. Dat’s what Mrs Sampson say ....”<sup>11</sup>

Another time, Mrs DeAbro comments, “watch wha happening in de country - I don’t understand it nuh! People can’t even say boo in dey house - dey hearing it all de way in Parliament.”<sup>12</sup> Neighbors are therefore, expected to be confidential as part of their communicative role. An interviewee said, “if information is shared, it must be kept confidential”.

As part of the behavioral role, neighbors influence behavior. They set standards and motivate towards reaching them. They help to shape the world view. An often used term which shows this clearly is “what would the neighbors say?” This is used with regard to seeking to control behavior and bring it in line with perceived established norms in the neighborhood, or the standard the neighborhood expects from a particular family. In terms of parenting, neighbors look out for and look after each other’s children. One interviewee said herself and her neighbor took turns caring for each other’s children when one had to be out. Another spoke of the men in the neighborhood speaking to him about life as he matured. He was from a single parent family - mother only. This is akin to the mentors referred to in *Common Fire*. There it says “Mentors challenge, support, and inspire... We restrict the term to mean a somewhat more experienced person of either gender who enables young adults to make the transition from the adolescent’s dependence upon (and resistance to) authority, to the adult’s ability to include him or herself in the arena of authority and responsibility.”<sup>13</sup>

With regard to the helpful/supportive role, neighbors provide emotional support as well as goods and services. One interviewee spoke of the neighbor being there as a “support base” - “... those are the two main things - support and help, assistance, whatever way I can give it, you know”. Another spoke about neighbors celebrating the achievement of one member of the neighborhood. Neighbors gather in good times. Neighbors rally around during crises. They visit and provide counsel. They also provide material goods. Neighbors share meals. Neighbors borrow from each other. One interviewee noted “Sometimes you’re cooking, and, you find you don’t have certain ingredients to put in the ... pot, you send over your child to the neighbor ....” One of the Guyanese folk songs says “Neighba neighba, len’ me yuh mahta, mih plantian get

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<sup>11</sup>Kempadoo, *Buxton Spice*, 142.

<sup>12</sup>Kempadoo, *Buxton Spice*, 63.

<sup>13</sup>Daloz, Laurent A. Park et al., *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 44.

col' a'ready". (One neighbor is asking another neighbor to lend her the mortar to pound the plantain so that she can make the foo foo<sup>14</sup>. The plantain with which she is making the foo foo is already cold.) Some people regularly call on neighbors, some occasionally, for loans of various kinds. Sometimes a neighbor knowing of the need of another, would send to fill that need without being asked. Neighbors share when they have a surplus or when they have something that is special. Neighbors share their skills. A midwife in the area uses her expertise in the neighborhood. One interviewee said "you could expect from me a tendency to share". A neighbor whose profession allows it is sometimes asked to give a recommendation. These are also some of the things that are expected to be kept confidentially.

What are the elements therefore, which make the Guyanese concept of neighbor a potentially effective metaphor for Christian Education in Guyana and transculturally? The first element is that one enters into a shared physical space, often with strangers. There is a level at which one does not choose one's neighbors. One may exercise some control over the socio-economic aspect of the space, but in Guyana, this control is never total. Thus, the neighborhood is rarely homogenous. The second element is its capacity to include the stranger and to go to those beyond the physical space. Observation has shown that on the rare occasion, a stranger may address another as "neighb", addressing that person on the basis of a common humanity. The third element is an identity that arises out of expectations within the shared space. The fourth element is that this space becomes what one interviewee terms a "communicative space" of relating in ever deepening ways. The fifth element follows from this. Having entered this space, one enters into a long-lasting relationship that transcends time and place. The sixth element is that certain roles and concomitant expectations follow - concern, involvement, communication, behavioral influence, parenting and help/support. This is a good point at which to return to the contributions interviewees saw arising from the Guyanese understanding of neighbor. All spoke of it contributing to a spirit of community. Thus, the seventh element is identified as the spirit of community. An interviewee said it can "reaffirm, the sense of community". Another spoke of sharing "the spirit of care and concern ... with the world." Another expressed it very eloquently:

"... you are to live well with everyone. Because, if we are going to see ... your neighbor as someone who is there, you know, to give you that help and that support, maybe when your family can't, you know,.... we are all part of this world,.... I think that we can transfer that kind of a relationship to other people who might not be living right next door to us, you see, but, so that we should know that everyone, everyone is important, and ... we treat them well.... But we have to learn to live loving with everyone.... But we should take that same neighborly kind of a feeling, neighborly kind of a concern, you know, to others, wherever they might be, wherever we might find them, wherever we might be placed. You know, people should know that, you care for them. People should

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<sup>14</sup>"A food made by pounding boiled, green plantains ... into a dough-like mass in a wooden mortar, shaping the same into a ball with a wet spoon, to be served with soup." See Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean Usage; with a French and*.

know that you, you know, you look out ... that they can have your assistance and your support if they need it....

This speaks to the ability “to engage with people of other tribes as full human beings... [to recognize] a shared resonance of spirit in our common life which both transcends and permeates one’s own and the other’s distinctiveness, a spirit that is at the heart of what it means to dwell together on earth.”<sup>15</sup> An interviewee added a dimension related to community with respect to the contribution of neighbor to the world - efficacy. The interviewee said “Efficacy simply means ... I or we have the internal fortitude to face the challenge, and mobilize resources, wherever ... to deal with it.” In the common sharing, sense of achievement, celebration, the collective is affirmed, and individuals are able to rise above their circumstances. Brackette Williams notes that Jayawardena speaks of those “whose success ... could be applauded with pride as local success stories. Their success was an example for others to follow, a support for the hope that others could succeed.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Neighbor as a Metaphor for Christian Education**

These six elements of the Guyanese concept of neighbor can be likened to the sepals of a flower out of which the petals of the metaphor for Christian education emerge. The petals are the educative space, educative goals, the educative method and the transcending neighborhood—beyond the educative space.

#### **Educative Space - God’s Neighborhood**

The educative space is very important because the way in which we understand and shape this space will impact and determine our attitudes, ways of relating, roles, goals, content, and method. Therefore, it needs careful attention. This educative space arising out of the Guyanese understanding of neighbor is reminiscent of the space we share with God. As Christians, we have entered into a space with the community of God the Parent, Son and Holy Spirit, and the community of believers. We did not choose this space. God chose us. In entering into this space, we enter into relationship with the God who loves the world and who showed this care and concern in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit empowers and guides us. We who were “strangers and aliens” have become part of “the household of God” (Ephesians 2:19 NRSV). Because of this, there can be no longer strangers. All belong. All differences are encompassed. Letty Russell notes that “*koinonia*, or partnership among Christians, is a gift of the Spirit in which there is a new focus of relationship in Jesus Christ that sets us free for others.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, God is continually bringing others into this space. The space in which we educate needs to reflect this.

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<sup>15</sup>Daloz, Laurent A. Park et al., *Common Fire*, 77.

<sup>16</sup>Williams, *Stains on My Name*, 95.

<sup>17</sup>Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 178.

Our educative space is, in part, a physical one. Often as educators we have no control concerning where this space is located and some of its dimensions. Moreover, normally we do not choose the people who enter it. Frequently, in the initial stage strangers enter into the educative space. Charles Foster comments that “our neighbors ... include anyone who is different from or strange to us. A stranger is someone who is not known to us; someone we have not seen or heard before; a newcomer; someone who is not usually in this place or does not fit the situation.”<sup>18</sup> It is possible by our attitudes and actions to maintain a space of strangers; to communicate that some belong and some don’t; to keep the space closed, once it has been established. We do have some powers of delimitation. Consequently, this educative space needs to be much more than a physical space. It needs to become a space that is a neighborhood shaped more by our relations, attitudes and roles than by the physical boundaries—one that reflects God.

In this space, all persons should relate as friends, and even as family, moving toward a deepening of the ties among them. The attitudes to each other will be loyalty, respect and sincerity. There will be care and concern, involvement and communication, help and support and behavioral influence. Persons will therefore be confidential in this space. As a result, persons will be freed to be true to themselves and to each other. They will be freed to be honest and to participate to their fullest extent. They will be assured of each other’s support and interest. This support will be both emotional and material. Persons will celebrate with each other, sympathize with each other, listen to each other, counsel each other and share their material resources out of their superfluity and generosity with each other. In short, persons will be the body of Christ, the community of Christ. What happens in the present, in and out of the space, will be discussed. Thus, it is not a competitive space. This space will be a liberating one in which all can learn from each other. Parker Palmer speaks of cognitive and emotional space. This is the type of space of which we speak. At the same time, within the space, persons will set standards for each other not only for the quality of relations and attitudes but also for the quality of work produced and lovingly hold each other accountable for seeking to reach these standards. Consequently, they will challenge each other. This ties in with Parker Palmer’s view of the learning space as paradoxical. He gives six paradoxes of this space. It should be “bounded and open ... hospitable and ‘charged’ ... invite the voice of the individual and the voice of the group ... honor the ‘little’ stories of the individual and the ‘big’ stories of the disciplines and tradition ... support solitude and surround it with resources of community ... welcome both silence and speech.”<sup>19</sup>

Because community is central in Palmer’s understanding of teaching and learning, he contributes greatly to our understanding of the concept of the educative space as God’s

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<sup>18</sup>Charles R. Foster, *Embracing Diversity: Leadership in Multicultural Congregations* (The Alban Institute, 1997), 51.

<sup>19</sup>Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), 74-77.



neighborhood. He notes that “community is the essential form of reality, the matrix of all being.... *we know reality only by being in community ourselves.*”<sup>20</sup> Within his framework, teaching and hospitality go together. “Good teaching is an act of hospitality toward the young...”<sup>21</sup> Hospitality is important in neighbourliness. One of the interviewees made this explicit and although quoted above, I will repeat the statement - “our understanding of the term neighbor is exhibited in our hospitable nature.” Implicit in the educative space as a neighborhood, therefore, is that it needs to be a hospitable space that mirrors God’s hospitality. Letty Russell notes that “Hospitality is an expression of unity without uniformity, because unity in Christ has as its purpose the sharing of God’s hospitality with the stranger, the one who is ‘other’. As Jesus points out in the parable of the Good Samaritan, the neighbor whom we are to love is the person in need, not just someone like ourselves (Luke 10:25-37).”<sup>22</sup> She draws the term ‘other’ from Thomas W. Ogletree’s *Hospitality to the Stranger*. This is a reminder that this space comprises persons with an identity. It comprises people created in God by Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:10), for whom the Bible is a guide. For Parker Palmer, the learning space can be painful and so hospitality should be one of its characteristics. “Hospitality means receiving each other, our struggles, our newborn ideas with openness and care. It means creating an ethos in which the community of truth can form, the pain of truth’s transformations be borne.”<sup>23</sup> He sees hospitality as central in the Bible. In discussing hospitality, both Letty Russell and Parker Palmer draw on Henri Nouwen’s *Reaching Out*. In *Reaching Out*, Henri Nouwen identifies hospitality as more than an act. It is “a fundamental attitude toward our fellow human being.”<sup>24</sup> He continues on to define it as “primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become friend instead of an enemy.”<sup>25</sup>

The neighborhood that is created here, therefore, is a loving community. This is the type of community that can withstand the pain that often accompanies learning. Moreover, this is a community that can withstand the passage of time and place. This community is God’s neighborhood. Care needs to be taken however, to have fluid boundaries in this space. “For the church, our neighbors are not only those within the household, but also those along the way, and for these we must be an inclusive community.”<sup>26</sup> This means that others who are not part of the

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<sup>20</sup>Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, 97.

<sup>21</sup>Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, 50.

<sup>22</sup>Russell, *Church in the Round*, 173.

<sup>23</sup>Palmer, *To Know as We are Known*, 73-74.

<sup>24</sup>Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1975), 48.

<sup>25</sup>Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 51.

<sup>26</sup>Jean Bozeman, “The Learning Community,” in *Education for Christian Living: Strategies for Nurture Based on Biblical and Historical Foundations*, Marvin L. Roloff ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987), 66.

educative core may enter and become a part of it, and those who are part of the educative core will reach beyond themselves. More will be said of the latter later on.

### Educative Goals

The Guyanese concept of neighbor suggests some overarching, interrelated goals. One of these goals will be to create a neighborhood type of educative community, where people enter into authentic relationship with God and each other. This is important because it is when we are real that true learning takes place—learning that touches us at the deepest places of our selves and that connects to our most vital needs and desire for knowledge. Another goal will be to create a sense that together, persons in the educative space can achieve whatever specific goals are set and accomplish the various tasks ahead. This means that no one gets left behind. It means that all will work to ensure that all learn. Consequently, persons are motivated and encouraged by this support to find their own level, create their own space within the general space within which they can best learn. A further goal will be to empower persons to relate authentically within and without the educative space. This goes beyond the first goal. It recognizes that relating authentically is not automatic for all. It will be foreign to some. However, it is essential in God's neighborhood. As a result, persons will need to be helped, to be empowered to do this. Moreover, authentic relations are desirable not only within the educative space, but also beyond it, in the extended neighborhood so to speak. Consequently, another goal will be to enable persons to recognize a common humanity in which each person in God's creation is deserving of their care and concern. This is grounded in God's love and care toward all persons. It is also grounded in our identity as Christians, people called and chosen by God to represent God as God has revealed Godself in Jesus Christ. This is reminiscent of the way in which persons in Guyana often identify themselves with their neighborhood because of their common humanity and are able to use this to go beyond the neighborhood to the common humanity of all persons. In the Guyanese neighborhood, people often take on the characteristics of the neighborhood. In many ways, these goals are an invitation to allow Christ to be formed in us (Galatians 4:19). The following chapter in Galatians, chapter 5, outlines the fruit of the Spirit, all virtues essential in a true neighborhood. Thus, the last overarching goal to be offered will be to foster a sense of Christian identity.

These goals are necessary if we are indeed going to create God's neighborhood. In addition, they are necessary if we are going to respond to the deepest needs of the students, which will further the educational venture.. Persons, knowingly or unknowingly, long for neighborhoods. They long for community and connectivity. Henri Nouwen says that "In our world full of strangers, estranged from their own past, culture and country, from their neighbors, friends and family, from their deepest self and their God, we witness a painful search for a hospitable place where life can be lived without fear and where community can be found... it is possible for men and women and obligatory for Christians to offer an open and hospitable space where strangers can cast off their strangeness and become our fellow human beings."<sup>27</sup> Maria Harris shares a similar insight when she says that "Most of the students I have taught, however,

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<sup>27</sup>Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 46.

even if they do not articulate it, come because they have a desire for space: personal, religious, psychological, geographical, as well as outer and inner space Mary Tully addressed so well.<sup>28</sup> This is implicit in the interviewees' belief that the Guyanese concept can contribute to a sense of community in the world. It needs to be noted that there will be goals that are specifically related to the content and context of the educational moment.

### Educative Method

Using neighbor as a metaphor for Christian Education requires a collaborative method. Each has to work together for the goals to be accomplished. To use a Guyanese proverb, "han' wash han' mek han' come clean" (one hand washing the other makes the hand clean). The educator is partner with all persons in the educative space, even as they are partners with each other. In describing the learning community, Jean Bozeman writes, "The learning community will enter into a relationship with one another that promotes a partnership of mutual learners and teachers who are faith sharers."<sup>29</sup> Put another way, the educative space comprises of co-educators. Jean Bozeman continues, "Partnership learning encourages us to be mentors or midwives for one another in giving birth to those concepts, beliefs and experiences that are a part of the faith journey."<sup>30</sup>

It needs to be noted that in most cases one person will have more resources than others at one point or the other. Often, it will be the educator. Notwithstanding, resources in the community are given for the common uplift of all so that all are empowered. God gives gifts for the uplift of the community, not for the individual. Ephesians 4:7-13, Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:1-7 make this clear. Additionally, inherent in the role/job of educator is a certain amount of authority. This means that careful attention needs to be paid to ensure that collaboration in partnership is a central method. Parker Palmer takes a realistic and helpful approach to this issue. He acknowledges that there is inequality in community. It is the nature of life, the "real-world principle."<sup>31</sup> He sees this as an inequality of role more than anything else. The teacher will have some amount of authority that the student will not. However, for Palmer this is not the greatest danger to community. "The real threat to community in the classroom is not power and status differences between teachers and students but the lack of interdependence that those differences encourage."<sup>32</sup> Thus, teachers need to recognize their dependence on the students. Teachers need the students. It is not a one-way stream.

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<sup>28</sup>Maria Harris, *Teaching and Religious Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987), 147.

<sup>29</sup>Jean Bozeman, "The Learning Community," 65.

<sup>30</sup>Jean Bozeman, "The Learning Community," 65.

<sup>31</sup>Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, 138.

<sup>32</sup>Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, 139.

The educative method based on the neighborhood, therefore, goes beyond the simple passing on of skills and knowledge to a partnership of a common humanity sharing space with God by God's gracious invitation, in which all are entitled to respect, access to resources and each other, and all have the capacity to learn and grow. Letty Russell roots partnership as a method in God. She calls it "*partnering*", pointing out that one learns to be a partner by experiencing it. "From this perspective God's initiative in becoming partner with us in Jesus Christ takes on additional meaning. Not only is God the source of the gifts of partnership but also God's actions provide the model of partnering. In teaching us to become what God intends, God has chosen to join us in Jesus Christ and to make possible a new focus of relationship that sets us free for others."<sup>33</sup> This is an important observation. It enhances and extends what we learn from the Guyanese neighborhood, as well as reminds us of our foundation in Christian education. In the educational method in God's neighborhood, there will be a respectful sharing and offering which affirms and deepens that which is already there, and adds new things. Moreover, there will be ongoing participation and engagement in activities taking place in and out of the educative neighborhood that relate to the goals specific to the content and context, that enlarge boundaries. "Most typically, successive experiences over time create a way of being in the world which is continually open to rediscovering that 'we' and 'they' share common bonds."<sup>34</sup>

While this section does not focus on the designated educator, it still recognizes the pivotal role of this person in the educative method. As Elizabeth Caldwell puts it in looking at religious instruction as homemaking, "The teacher of adults in the church is, first of all, responsible for building a space that values the integrity of the content, the learner, and the praxis—the implications of the Christian faith for faithful living."<sup>35</sup> This is true for all ages, and it is true for education in the neighborhood. The designated educator will need to understand neighborliness and possess neighborly qualities. Such a person needs to be a neighbor par excellence. The educator will need to understand that it is God's neighborhood and that God has graciously allowed her/him to partner with God and God's people. Consequently, she/he needs to mirror God's love and compassion, showing respect for all. She/he will be ever willing to gather in those who 'do not belong' and to go out to those who 'do not belong.' Moreover, she/he will spend time in sharing space with God in prayer learning from God about God's neighborhood.

### The Transcending Neighborhood— Beyond the Educative Space

Christian Education does not occur in a vacuum. Neither should its ends be directed

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<sup>33</sup>Letty M. Russell, *Growth in Partnership* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), 40.

<sup>34</sup>Daloz, *Common Fire*, 71.

<sup>35</sup>Elizabeth Caldwell, "Religious Instruction: Homemaking," chap. in *Mapping Christian Education: Approaches to Congregational Learning* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 81.

toward itself. An important aspect of Christian Education is facilitating the connection between persons in the educative space and the wider world. This connection is two-fold: how we live in the world and how we represent in the world the God with whom we share space and who not only chooses us but also sends us out into the world.

The neighborhood of the educative space needs to be presented as a way of living in the world. The content of what is learnt needs to be shared in such a way that the context of the participants becomes part of the text. Thus the text becomes three-fold. It is the written text, the text of living in God's educative neighborhood and the text of living in the wider world. In this way, the learning that takes place will be oriented toward the wider world. Jane Bozeman notes, "In daily life, the learning community meets the world of everyday people and everyday situations and experiences. The persons in the community encounter the people.... They reach out.... The learning community needs to be taught in a way that enables people to take the cross into their daily encounters...."<sup>36</sup> It is a bringing in and a taking out. Consequently, there will be no disconnect which makes it difficult for persons to take their learning out of the educative space. Furthermore, because of the basis of our common humanity in the God of love, there can be no sense of being superior to others who did not share this educative space and therefore being unable to relate to them. We can avoid the "kind of knowing that begins and ends in human pride and power."<sup>37</sup> In this same chapter Palmer speaks of a knowledge that begins in "compassion, or love"<sup>38</sup>. As we seek to enlarge the neighborhood and to present it as a way of living in the world, we are able to represent God to the world in love and humility.

We represent God in the world in three ways. We represent God in the world by our attitudes, our words and our actions - our way of being. All of these point to our identity as members of God's neighborhood. Critical to our identity as Christians is witness. "Witness ... is the whole life and work of the Christian church, encompassing the life and work of each Christian individual as a witness."<sup>39</sup> For Letty Russell, Christ shapes us and gives us a style of life, the purpose of which is God's mission.<sup>40</sup> Through participation within and without God's neighborhood, persons are strengthened to witness to God's saving love and grace and to invite others to share in the reconciliation that God offers in Jesus Christ. "Enacting the *mission* of the church in the midst of history is the primary way we grow in the vocation of the Spirit. In sum, we become 'more human' by participating in the ongoing creative, liberating, and renewing

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<sup>36</sup>Jean Bozeman, "The Learning Community," 66.

<sup>37</sup>Palmer, *To Know as We are Known*, 5.

<sup>38</sup>Palmer, *To Know as We are Known*, 8.

<sup>39</sup>Guder, Darrell L., *Be My Witnesses: The Church's Mission, Message, and Messengers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 43.

<sup>40</sup>Letty M. Russell, *Christian Education in Mission* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), 114, 117.

work of God in the world.”<sup>41</sup>

### Conclusion

Neighborhood education helps us to be true to our calling in God. As a result, we can build God’s neighborhood in which those who enter are empowered to learn in authentic, collaborative, affirming yet challenging, and life changing ways in which they are empowered to live for God in the world as God’s witnesses. Neighborhood education recognizes a common humanity because of the Creator God. It begins and ends with God. It is therefore fitting to conclude by quoting Henri Nouwen on community and prayer - “Prayer is the language of the Christian community. In prayer the nature of community becomes visible because in prayer we direct ourselves to the one who forms community. We do not pray to each other, but together we pray to God, who calls us and makes us into a new people... it is [the community’s] very being... By prayer, community is created as well as expressed.”<sup>42</sup> We constantly need to remember whose we are and all that God has called us to be in the living of Christian education.

### Note

This paper does not address the content of neighborhood education. Suffice it to say that there are some topics which the concept of neighbor lends itself to teaching about. Examples of these are the related topics of “Community”, “The Biblical Concept of Neighbor”, and “Relating to Difference”. These are particularly important in these times when people recognize the lack of homogeneity in the world and desire to be equipped to live with this diversity.

*“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”* Mark 12:30-31

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<sup>41</sup>Daniel S. Schipani, “Educating for Social Transformation,” chap. in *Mapping Christian Education: Approaches to Congregational Learning* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 32.

<sup>42</sup>Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 112.

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