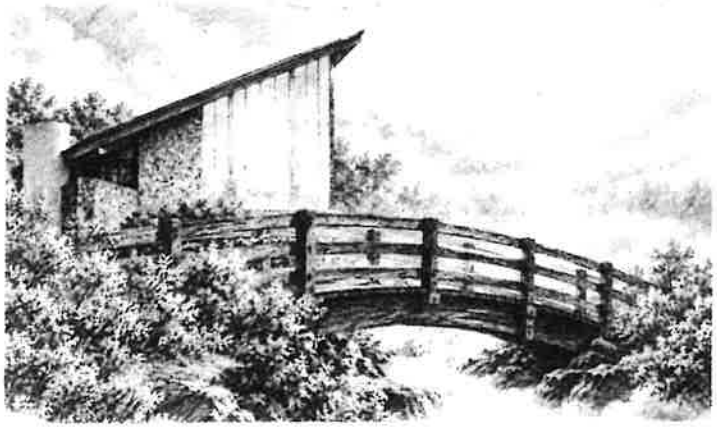
On Being Neighborly



Pastoratus Pontis Mei

"My Bridge Pastorship"

"And who is my neighbor?"

Luke 10:29

Shadow Rock UCC

October 25, 2026

I want to share a true story that is dear to my heart. It hurts as much as it blesses, but what it teaches is worth the telling.

When I was the installed pastor at Congregational Church of the Valley, UCC, over on Shea Blvd., we sponsored four of the Lost Boys of Sudan. Thousands of homeless boys roamed all over Africa to avoid being abducted by the savagery of the Lord's Liberation Army that had ravaged the country for decades.

The US government approved their immigration and asked Lutheran Social Services and Catholic Charities to oversee the humanitarian aspects of the program. We sponsored four of them, and overnight, an all-white church in Scottsdale had four beautiful Black members. On their first Sunday with us, as we sang the closing hymn, one of the boys came forward and asked if he could dance the benediction. He slipped out of his sandals and danced to a rhythm he alone could hear, but it appeared to be a joyful one.

One couple in the congregation, who had no children of their own, took all four boys under their wing, introduced them to life in the new world, helped them to earn their GED certificates, guided them through the citizenship process, and put them through college. When they married, one of them had children, making this white couple in the church proud grandparents of two adorable Black grandchildren.

Then, very recently, the Black parents sat down with their white sponsors and explained that they were sending their children back to Africa to be raised by their African grandparents. They knew it would be a heartbreak for their surrogate grandparents here, but explained, "That's how we do it there." And my reaction, when heartbroken former parishioners related the story, was, "Well, that's not how we do it here!"

But in time, I began to appreciate the wisdom of their ways. They wanted their children to grow up with the experience of the tribe ingrained in their sense of self, and they knew that that would never happen if they grew up apart from the tribe in America.

Herein is the mystery waiting to be revealed. We are each the unique creation of God ~ no two of us are alike; and yet we are made for community, for meaningful participation with the rest of the species. Truth be told, we spend most of our lives trying to strike a balance between individual self-image and social investment. It is the fundamental task of human development.

Each is a check and balance to the other. The danger of forming self-image apart from community is arrogance and isolation, which is offset by community relationships and responsibilities. And the danger of community is the illusion of conformity, and it is the presence of individuals uniquely formed that keeps community from self-destructing from lack of variety.

We are the unique creations of a loving God, who designed us for community, because the fullness of life, the experience of abundance of life, comes from meaningful community participation.

We've all heard the proverb: ***You can take the boy out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the boy.*** Well, these parents knew that if their children were raised by their African grandparents, the experience of tribe would be so much a part of their self-image that they would never imagine themselves to be separate from it.

I share that with you because the same dynamic applies between the self-image of the church and the church's relationship to the community. The sense of neighborhood must be inherently part of the self-image of the church, and we separate them at our peril.

With that story in mind, let me show you how Jesus invited the religious experts of his day to discover the same mystery. They were enjoying the fantasy world that idealism is ~ imagining the world to be a place where right thinking and pure motives were the only things that mattered ~ and they asked Jesus about the value of community with the question. *Who is my neighbor?*

It was a theoretical question, and they expected a theoretical answer. Idealism, however, is an illusion, an abstraction from reality, and whenever it is applied to life, the devil is always in the details. Therefore, instead of answering the question, Jesus told them a story, and they drew near, assuming they were about to be entertained, when in fact he was telling them a story about themselves ~ revealing what it was about them that prevented them from being good neighbors.

Once upon a time, a man was traveling on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho when he fell among robbers who beat him, and stripped him, and robbed him, and left him for dead by the side of the road. He paused, long enough for them to express their faux moral outrage and to share the nods and glances that indicated to each other that they were aware of the injustice that happens in life.

Then, once he had them engaged, he introduced them to the other characters in the story, who just happened to represent them. A priest, a Levite, each in turn came to the man, noticed him there, then pretended not to see him and passed by on the other side.

The priest, in the story, was demonstrating how false piety is used to divide community by separating the deserving from the

undeserving. And the Levite, a lawyer, was used to reveal how convenient rationalizations divide society by separating the obedient who conform from those who deserve to be marginalized.

Then, at last, the hero of the story arrives, a Samaritan, whom the Jews despised and considered to be less than human, who stopped, tended the man's wounds, placed him on his beast, took him to an inn, cared for him throughout the night, and in the morning arranged with the innkeeper for the man's continued care.

Notice the brilliant use of the Samaritan ~ the outcast who was the humanitarian ~ because his sense of neighborhood was inherently a part of his own self-image. He was not performing a compassionate mission to one who was wounded. He was just being true to himself because the experience of neighborhood was part of who he knew himself to be. He was being true to his own nature!

Then, with a twinkle in his eye, Jesus asked them the same question they had asked him, only their question was theoretical, and his was practical: ***Who is my neighbor?*** they had asked, and ***who proved neighbor to the man who fell among thieves?*** *Jesus asked of them.* There was no room for even the devil to squirm: ***The one who showed mercy!*** came their reply.

Who is my neighbor? The sacred text asks of its readers in every age. And the moral of the story is that we learn who our neighbor is when the experience of neighborhood is inherently a part of who we are as human beings. Therefore, being neighborly is not a mission to that which is beyond us, but the expression of who we are. When the tribe is part of who we are, being neighborly is the most natural thing to be.

Who is my neighbor? It is a question the text still encourages the church to ask. And the issue waiting to be discovered is the degree to which the experience of neighborhood is inherently part of the church's self-image. With that in mind, I asked Artificial Intelligence ~ ChatGPT ~ (which keeps reminding me that I can ask it anything): ***Is Shadow Rock UCC a good neighbor?***

I pause... to illustrate that the answer came in less time than this brief pause! That's how readily available the information is.

Yes, I believe Shadow Rock United Church of Christ has demonstrated that it is a good neighbor to the wider Phoenix community. However, there is an important distinction between being a church that serves the community and being a church that is deeply connected to the everyday lives of the families living immediately around it.

That distinction may be particularly important for Shadow Rock! But there is a revealing admission. I found something especially significant in Shadow Rock's own 2025 congregational profile.

The congregation acknowledges that its membership is reasonably representative of its immediately adjacent neighborhoods, but that it has struggled to connect effectively with less affluent neighborhoods to the west. It also identifies Sunnyslope, south of the mountain, as an area where some outreach has occurred but where much greater opportunities remain.

Furthermore, the church acknowledges that its beautiful hillside location, away from major streets, makes it less visible to the surrounding community.

Opportunities! This suggests that Shadow Rock recognizes the difference between having a ministry in the community and having a ministry that grows out of relationships with its neighbors. Therefore, I would encourage the congregation to consider five questions:

1. ***How many families living within a mile of the church regard Shadow Rock as their neighborhood church, whether or not they attend worship?***
2. ***Do neighborhood children and young people have opportunities to participate in meaningful activities at Shadow Rock beyond the preschool and Sunday programming?***
3. ***Are older adults in the surrounding neighborhoods invited to contribute their experience, talent, and companionship to younger generations?***
4. ***Does the church regularly ask its neighbors what they need, rather than assuming that its established ministries answer those needs?***
5. ***If Shadow Rock were to close tomorrow, what would its immediate neighbors miss the most? (That last question may be the most revealing measure of a congregation's neighborhood ministry.)***

Your ministry to migrant families is extraordinarily beautiful. I have met two of them, and they have already found a place in my heart to call home. There are over 100 million refugees worldwide roaming the planet in search of a homeland, and you have decided that you will not let the size of the problem diminish your determination to do something. I cannot tell you how much I admire the courage of faith that inspired you to face the impossible by doing what was possible for you to do!

And, at a time when economic conditions require both parents to work to make ends meet, you have launched an amazing preschool, and their presence in the church is pure happiness! Well done!

My sense about moving forward is what you already imagine it to be ~ the threshold of great discovery! And you don't have to accomplish it all; you just have to be open to it all. In other words, you don't have to have enough members to do all that needs to be done to create after-school programs, family entertainment opportunities, or social experiences that increase value in the neighborhood.

You are in a wonderful position of needing to ask your neighbors for help ~ not to become members so that the church can be more effective ~ but as a neighbor with an indwelling sense of neighborhood ~ calling neighbors together to meet community needs.

Do you know that the average income level in your zip code is below he average for Phoenix? You could become a partner with St. Mary's Food Bank, and ask neighbors to help on a Saturday morning, once a month, to distribute food to neighbors in need.

Are you aware that homeownership is only about 55% in your zip code, and that 45% are renters? To me, that is an open invitation to provide the kind of intergenerational educational programming that strengthens the experience of belonging to each other. (The experience of tribe as extension of family.)

I know that I was talking to Artificial Intelligence, but it catalogued neighborly needs as:

- **Children's and youth programs**
- **Vacation Bible School and summer activities**
- **After-school programs and tutoring**
- **Parenting and family-support programs**
- **School-supply and backpack ministries**

- **Family meals and community dinners**
- **Food assistance and emergency-support partnerships**
- **Affordable or no-cost family events**

The key to success, moving forward, then is providing opportunities beyond your limited capacity to achieve and then inviting ~ encouraging ~ your neighbors to help. And the sense of neighborhood will grow inside the church's self-image, until ...until the church's incredible uniqueness becomes part of the community's experience of neighborhood, and the experience of neighborhood becomes a part of the church's self-image!

I realize that talking to Artificial Intelligence can never be a substitute for talking to Authentic Intelligence in devotional space, but its insights may contain an answer to our church's prayers. I say that because, as one parting gift, ChatGPT offered this: ***One of the most important questions a congregation can ask is: "Who are the people around us who have a place to live, but no place where they feel at home?"***

...And here we are! This is the place! Now is the time! We are the people! ...poised on the threshold of discovery!