



*Slow Church: Cultivating Community in the Patient Way of Jesus*

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## In Praise of Slowness

### What does the term “slow church” mean?

**John Pattison:** “Slow church” is, on one level, a call to unmask and repent of our industrialized and fast-food approaches to church, which tend to emphasize quantity over quality, programs over people, the church sanctuary over the neighborhood, control over empowerment, and predictability over risk and beauty and wonder. But it’s more than a critique. Slow church is inspired by the language and philosophy of the slow food movement to re-imagine the ways in which we share life together in our church communities. It seeks to recover the holistic and abundant life together to which God called us in Christ Jesus. It embraces the mutual interdependence that is woven into the fabric of God’s diverse creation. John 1:14 says, “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood” (The Message). As the body of Christ, we want to move into our neighborhoods and to be faithfully rooted in our particular places.

**Christopher Smith:** Following in the footsteps of other slow movements, which all trace their roots back to the emergence of the slow food movement in the 1980s, slow church calls churches to a deeper life together in the local church community, a way of being that not only transforms the congregation but flows outward from the church, transforming the neighborhood as well. The key to this deeper life is cultivating attentiveness to the vast diversity of gifts that God has given us – in our members, in our facilities, in our neighbors and neighborhood, and in the land of our place.

### At a time when everything seems to be happening at a faster and faster pace, why are you encouraging the church to slow down?

**JP:** Speed is one of the idols of the modern world and it has demanded some costly sacrifices including, I believe, the wellbeing of our families, our mental and spiritual health and the health of the planet. Though we live in the age characterized by instant gratification, many of the best things take time. These include the long labor of spiritual formation, which occurs in the context of the *ekklesia* and the work of cultivating community.

**CS:** Because we move so fast, we often are unaware of the so-called collateral damage of our speed. When churches are so driven to expand their numbers and succeed in this quest to the extent that they choose to move to a new location, what are the costs to the neighborhoods and relationships that are left behind? When we’re doing so many things as individuals and churches that we don’t have time to walk compassionately with a brother or sister who is hurting, or even worse, that we’re too busy and moving too fast to notice a friend in pain, we’ve got to recognize our madness and stop and take a hard look at our lives. The church is called into God’s mission as a contrast society, a people who bear witness to a different way. By learning to live a slow, attentive life together in our churches,



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we give our neighbors and the world a tiny but irresistible taste of a life that is rich, vibrant and full of meaning. Isn't that ultimately what everybody wants?

**How is your approach different from more established church growth strategies?**

**JP:** Slow church focuses less on growth and more on faithfulness. Growth will happen organically, like yeast in dough, but it has to come from the inside out. To use another agricultural metaphor, typical church growth strategies are like conventional farming practices that focus on rapid growth of the crop or animal, often at the expense of long-term sustainability. Slow church takes a more organic approach, focusing instead on the health of the "soil," which is the local church and its neighborhood.

**CS:** We certainly believe that God desires churches to grow and not stagnate, but growth is not an end in itself; the end must be a faithful life together that bears the delectable fruits of the Spirit. An over-emphasis on numbers leads some churches to take shortcuts—reducing the Gospel to four easy steps, rushing people to confessions of faith or baptism—which might look good on paper but does not make for a healthy body of Christ. We maintain that churches should focus not simply on growing but on growing deeper as local communities of God's people.

**The locavore movement champions the commitment to eat as locally as possible. How might a church be similarly committed to their surrounding community?**

**JP:** What excites us about slow church is a vision of local churches of all stripes—Catholic and Protestant, Quaker and Mennonite, evangelical and mainline, megachurches and house churches—experimenting with what it means to be truly *local*. These are churches that have thrown in their lot with their neighbors, come what may, and are seeking the flourishing of their particular neighborhoods. A slow church is one that has submitted to the limits and possibilities of its place—to its past, present and future, and, of course, to the people and nonhuman creatures who share that place. The truth is, the re-localization of the Western church is happening, whether it's happening under the guise of slow church or not. We're hearing incredible stories coming out of neighborhoods in Tacoma, Richmond, Portland, Seattle, San Diego, Australia, Canada and so many more. This is an exciting time.

**CS:** Like the local food movement, slow church could perhaps be thought of as launching a local church movement of churches who are deeply in love with, and therefore attentive to the places in which they exist. Churches need to be boldly committed to their neighborhoods, and to demonstrate their commitment by working with their neighbors for the health and flourishing of that place. This sort of commitment is difficult to muster if there are no church members who live in the neighborhood. This is a powerful way that pastors and other leaders in the congregation can lead, by living or moving into the neighborhood and demonstrating an engaged life that strengthens that bond between church and neighborhood.



**Christopher Smith** is editor of *The Englewood Review of Books* and a member of the Englewood Christian Church community in the urban Near Eastside of Indianapolis. Englewood is one of the churches whose experiences gave root to the concept of *Slow Church*. Chris's recent work has appeared in *Books and Culture*, *Sojourners*, *The Christian Century* and *Indiana Green Living*.

**In a society that tends to be hyper-mobile, why do you argue that church congregations should cultivate the notion of stability?**

**JP:** Stability, the long-term commitment to people and place, is a peculiar virtue in a hyper-mobile society. If disputes arise between members it's all too easy to pack our bags and switch churches. But if we are committed to stability we are committed to staying put and working it out, which means developing practices of conversation and reconciliation. Similarly, what happens when neighborhood demographics change suddenly or over time? Who will be around to make sure the vulnerable in the neighborhood are cared for and aren't pushed out against their will? Who will be around to capture and preserve the history of the neighborhoods for the benefit of the newcomers as well as the old-timers? I love the idea of churches as "memory keepers."

**CS:** As a general rule, healthy creatures are rooted creatures. Every time a plant is uprooted and moved from one place to another, it struggles to survive and its maturity is stunted. Similarly, if a church is the embodiment of Christ in a particular place and the members of that body are rapidly moving elsewhere, it's like lopping off an arm or a spleen and then trying to replace it. We're not saying that members should never move from one congregation to another, but like organ transfers these moves should be done intentionally and delicately and should be the exception and not the rule. Stability of churches in their places and stability of members within churches is absolutely essential to slow church.

**You note that there is an aversion to suffering in our Western culture. Why might this pose a problem for our Christian witness?**

**JP:** Because so much of our Christian witness is, or should be, about humbly and authentically entering into the suffering of others! This is the root of compassion, a word that literally means "to suffer with." Jesus was profoundly compassionate, even unto the cross. He always made time for the hurting person who was right in front of him. He didn't dismiss them as someone else's problem. Part of what it means to take up our cross as the hands and feet and shoulders of Christ in the world is to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. Here's another example of why stability, long-term commitment to a particular place and church, is so important. It's interesting to me how often the Gospels say that Jesus *saw* somebody and had compassion on them. Jesus was great at really seeing people. We will be better at actually *seeing* people when we grow and flourish over time in our neighborhoods.

**CS:** One of the defining characteristics of the life and ministry of Jesus was his compassion. His primary mission was not fixing the world but rather to be with humanity and to suffer with us. If we are always trying to avoid suffering it makes it very difficult for us to enter into and to bear the sufferings of others, and this is going to disfigure our Christian witness. The Christ we embody, when we are averse to suffering, is not the Christ of compassion that we find in Scripture.

**Within our churches, how can we begin to move towards reconciliation with each other?**

**JP:** The first step from alienation toward reconciliation is to recognize, repent and lament the ways in which the church has contributed to fragmentation. The second is to marvel at the manifold diversity of God's creation. The church, like nature, should abhor a monoculture. The third step is to begin cultivating community practices that are worthy of our calling as ambassadors of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:20). These include practices like generosity, hospitality and gratitude.

*By learning to live a slow, attentive life together in our churches, we give our neighbors and the world a tiny but irresistible taste of a life that is rich, vibrant and full of meaning.*

**CS:** We advocate conversation, and particularly dinner table conversation, as perhaps the most important practice by which we come to know, to trust and ultimately to be reconciled to the brothers and sisters that God has given us in our church community. To paraphrase the apostle John, if we aren't reconciled in love to our brother whom we have seen, how can we seek reconciliation with other humans in other places, or even God, whom we have not seen?

**What are we meant to learn through practicing the sabbath?**

**JP:** So many things! The sabbath is the day we cease our earthly strivings to acknowledge that God is in ultimate control. So we learn obedience. In the book of Exodus God promises seven days of food for six days of work. Here we learn to trust God's provision. Sabbath is the day we slow down long enough to pay attention to the world around us. We are moved to worship God for God's good creation. In *Slow Church*, we make the case for good work. But we also make the case that work isn't the "chief end" of a person's life. Sabbath is a vital reminder of this too. Finally, we're indebted to Dr. Dan Allender for showing us that sabbath is far from the legalistic burden it's sometimes portrayed to be: it is actually the ultimate day of rest and delight.

**CS:** If we look carefully at the story of the Israelite people, sabbath was primarily intended as a practice that gave shape to the community of God's people. In our individualistic age, we too often lose sight of this reality when talking about sabbath. Our churches have very little imagination for what sabbath might mean for us as a community. Even in writing this, we struggled with what this might look like. But here are two thoughts that will help us move in this direction. First, we need spaces in which we can simply be together and to know and be known across all the sorts of diversity inherent in our congregation (age, economics, race, language, etc.). We need spaces in which we can eat and laugh and play together as the church; these sorts of leisure activities will build familiarity and trust and will energize our work in ways that are difficult to quantify. Secondly, we need spaces in which we can step back from our work and reflect together on it: why and how we do it, but also on clarifying the theological convictions that drive us. This sort of practice of congregational reflection and conversation will not only energize us in the work to which we are called but will also help us move in the direction of reconciliation.