

*Reading for the Common Good:
How Books Help Our Churches
and Neighborhoods Flourish*
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“Our primary objective is not to foist a vision of flourishing upon society but rather to name in a clear and unwavering way that which is unacceptable in society and to demand that it be addressed.”

Corporate Reading and Political Engagement as a Congregation

Forty years ago Englewood Christian Church, my church community, was like a lot of other large evangelical churches. We were not involved in economics or politics as a congregation beyond the scope of our life together and the participation of our members as individuals. While today we aren't exactly super-active in politics or economics beyond our neighborhood, we are definitely more engaged in these arenas than we have been in previous generations. This shift follows from our efforts in getting to know our neighborhood and working with our neighbors toward its flourishing, as well as maturing in our understanding of the ways that our neighborhood is connected to other places.

Our involvement in broader economic and political issues has flowed from the work that we are doing as a church in our neighborhood – particularly in early childhood education and community development. Doing either of these kinds of work well will inevitably lead to collaboration with the governmental organizations that oversee it. It will also lead to participation in refining legislation that helps the work to be done in ways that promote the flourishing of people and neighborhoods. In our early childhood education work, we have taken a stand with state legislators and others calling for making quality preschool education available to all children and for statewide economic legislation that would fund such an initiative. After a couple of tragic incidents here in Indiana, including one in which a young child at a church-based daycare center drowned in a baptistery, we have also pushed for stricter legislation that would promote the safety and learning of young children in other church daycares.

In our community development work, we have worked closely for many years with the city's Department of Metropolitan Development, which funds and oversees community development projects across the city. Some of the affordable housing that we have created and managed has been funded through federal housing programs. As food access has been a particular challenge for our neighborhood, we also have done a substantial amount of work on this issue both within our neighborhood and in partnership with state and national groups. For instance, we have recently partnered with a company based in Toledo, Ohio, to start a hydroponic growing operation. This initiative has required working not only with this corporation but also with a range of other partners and funders at the city, state and national levels.

In the last few years we have been working diligently to promote the use of solar energy in our neighborhood and beyond, an effort that includes installing solar panels on the roof of our church building. One of the challenges that we have encountered in these efforts was that the coal industry was lobbying for state legislation that would make it difficult for

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families and corporations to install and use solar panels. This proposed legislation was not in the interest of healthy neighborhoods or of creation as a whole. Working with environmental groups and others who opposed it, we were able to stall it indefinitely.

Our church has not entered into broader economic or political arenas on the basis of abstract issues that we feel strongly about but rather as extensions of the work of knowing and loving our place, as described over the last three chapters. Reading has been vital to this journey, helping us understand the arenas that we are working in and the issues that we are engaging.

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Literature, especially fiction and poetry, can be immensely helpful to us in the work delineated in the previous five chapters: imagining a shared life that is rooted in knowledge of ourselves and our places and in the connections we have with people in other places. Literature is not as helpful in the more abstract work of imagining what healthy economies and politics look like in broad arenas like states and nations. Some modern poets and novelists are writing excellent works that are deeply political, but their politics almost always takes a negative approach: telling us what healthy, flourishing societies are *not* instead of what they are. Allen Ginsberg, for instance, rages in his poem “America”: “America I’ve given you all and now I’m nothing. . . . America when will we end the human war?” The poet Steve Mason likewise, in writing critically about his experiences as a soldier in Vietnam, makes a bold statement that warmongering societies are not healthy ones. Dystopian novels like George Orwell’s *1984* and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* also take a negative approach, vividly depicting what healthy societies are *not*.

Literature excels in depicting particularities. It does not fare so well in grappling with the abstractions needed to order society at large. “Poetry hates the generality,” writes Clyde Kilby in *Poetry and Life*, “not because the generality is untrue but because the generality is unconvincing.” Similarly, fiction excels at telling specific stories of particular people and places.

One of the clearest arguments that writers (and especially Christian writers) serve their society best by writing in a negative mode is Flannery O’Connor’s essay “The Fiction Writer and His Country.” Responding to an editorial in *Life* magazine that griped that no novelist spoke for America, O’Connor makes the case that the fiction writer speaks best for her country when she critiques its imperfections. “My own feeling,” she writes, “is that writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse and for the unacceptable.” This essay, I believe, offers some of the keenest wisdom for how churches should be involved in economics and politics beyond the local arena. Our primary objective is not to foist a vision of flourishing upon society but rather to name in a clear and unwavering way that which is unacceptable in society and to demand that it be addressed.

– Taken from chapter eight, “Toward Faithful Engagement in Economics and Politics”



C. Christopher (Chris) Smith founded *The Englewood Review of Books* in 2007 and currently serves as the senior editor. His writing has appeared in *Sojourners*, *Relevant*, *Books and Culture*, the *Christian Century*, the *Huffington Post* and *Indiana Green Living*, and the *Washington Post*, *USA Today* and the *Indianapolis Star* have covered his work. Chris is the author of six books, including *Slow Church: Cultivating Community in the Patient Way of Jesus* (cowritten with John Pattison, IVP, 2014), which received a starred review from *Publishers Weekly* in 2014. Chris is an active member of the Englewood Christian Church community and he regularly speaks at churches, universities and conferences in the Midwest and beyond.

Awakening Churches from Their Electronic Slumbers: An Interview with C. Christopher Smith

Your last book, *Slow Church*, was widely received upon its release, receiving a starred review in *Publishers Weekly* and a review in *Sojourners* stating that it “explores being church in a way that emphasizes deep engagement in local people and places, quality over quantity, and in all things taking the long view – understanding individuals and congregations as participants in the unfolding drama of all creation.” How does *Reading for the Common Good* build on those concepts?

Chris Smith: Although in the Christian tradition we deeply value the practice of reading Scripture slowly and attentively, much less reflection has been given to how we might read other books together in ways that benefit our churches, our neighborhoods and the world. I argue here for a way of reading together, rooted in our local churches, that goes deeper than merely reading for personal pleasure or self-improvement. Books help us better understand our places, our times and even ourselves, and reading – and conversation about books – are crucial practices to discerning the shape of our faithfulness to Christ in our particular place. This book also could be read as a more narrowly-focused follow-up to *Slow Church*, reflecting in depth on a specific church-based practice that helps us slow down and be more attentive to the vibrant life of God’s creation.

Likewise, how does it tie into your work as editor of *The Englewood Review of Books*?

Smith: As editor of *The Englewood Review of Books*, I am often asked why we as a church are so eager to promote and discuss books. *Reading for the Common Good* is rooted in my reflection on this question. The practices of reading and talking about what we are reading have been transformative for us as a congregation at Englewood Christian Church, drawing us deeper into the life of God in our congregation and our neighborhood. In this book I hope to give readers a delectable taste of the rich life God has given to us as we seek to understand God and creation better through practices of reading and conversation.

The church is in the midst of a seemingly great transition, especially with the rise of the spiritual but not religious. How do you hope your book will aid these growing and changing communities?

Smith: *Reading for the Common Good* is for those who desire a deeper life together in our churches. Through my work as editor of *The Englewood Review of Books*, I have found that there is a population of Christians from diverse traditions – evangelical, mainline Protestant, even Roman Catholic – who desire to discuss the books they are reading and out of that conversation to imagine a flourishing future for their churches and neighborhoods.

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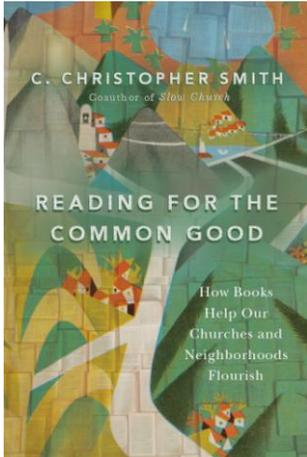


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"There are many books on the common good, but C. Christopher Smith's new book on reading for the common good is one of the most intriguing and compelling to come out in a long time. Reading for the Common Good weaves personal enrichment, ethics and education into a beautiful and simple unity. It is a paradigm-altering book and one that is sure to enrich and inspire as we seek to find meaningful ways to think about and engage our communities, cities and the world."

—Ken Wytsma, author of *Pursuing Justice* and *The Grand Paradox*

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I have been fortunate to belong for over a decade to a church community that is starting to wrestle with these questions and to be connected with other churches around the world that are beginning to do likewise. The first steps on the journey toward seeking God's healing for our shattered world are: 1) learning to slow down and 2) beginning to imagine – with the sisters and brothers of our congregations and our neighbors – what it might look like for seeds of healing to be planted and take root in our particular place.

Walter Brueggemann writes of *Reading for the Common Good*: "C. Christopher Smith offers a fresh, rich and quite unfamiliar proposal concerning human renewal and church regeneration. He expounds the cruciality of reading, thinking and conversing in the community as a bedrock practice for a sustainable missional community. His project serves to awaken us from our numbing 'electronic slumbers' into a slow engagement with imaginative words. I suggest that this book can be a valuable reference for pastoral nurture and education in the church." How do you hope that your book will be a resource to many in the years to come?

Smith: Reading is a vital practice that can – if done carefully and well – ultimately contribute to the health and flourishing of our communities. The term *flourishing* comes from roots that mean "flower;" to flourish is to bloom, to emerge into the full glory for which God has created us. Flourishing is the opposite of sin and brokenness and suffering. It is an English synonym for the Hebrew word *shalom*, which means total peace, health and well-being. Thus, in these pages we will explore the sort of reading that moves us toward flourishing in our churches, our neighborhoods and the world at large.

I hope and pray that this book will serve as a sort of wake-up call – a call not only to deeper engagement and compassion but also to be increasingly aware of how God is working in and around us. I hope this book inspires us to imagine ways of deepening our shared life together. And I hope to make clear that reading is integral to all facets of our calling in Christ. May we all stay awake and grow in our awareness that in Christ "there is a new creation" (2 Cor 5:17) emerging from within our deeply broken and hurting world.

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