

EXCERPT



My Vertical Neighborhood *How Strangers Became a Community*

March 30, 2021 | \$17, 157 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-4740-2

When Lynda MacGibbon moved from a small town to a high-rise in Toronto, she asked herself what she would have if she took seriously the ancient command to “Love your neighbor.” This book chronicles the unique challenges—and joys—of her journey as a community slowly began to grow in her high-rise apartment building: her “vertical neighborhood.” This is a book about loving our neighbor seriously and, refreshingly, literally.

“Won’t You Be My Neighbor?”

The year before my fiftieth birthday, I upended my life. Sometimes when I’m feeling a bit stuck, I rearrange the furniture or cut my hair. But there have been a few times in my life when I’ve needed more than a room makeover or a good stylist to loosen whatever it is that is constraining me. When that happens, I recognize the need for upheaval, the kind that requires a moving truck.

When I was forty-nine, I said a nervous but hopeful yes to a new job, one that meant relocating from my small city in eastern Canada to Toronto, the fourth largest city in North America.

Moncton, New Brunswick, where I’d lived for twenty-two years, has a population of about 140,000 and one high-rise (with twenty floors). Toronto is home to more than 9.2 million people, many of them living in the city’s more than two thousand high-rises (some towering sixty-five stories into the sky).

The size of the city was daunting enough, but Toronto also had a reputation, and it wasn’t good: “Toronto thinks it’s the center of the universe. Toronto drivers are crazy and the commutes unbearable. It’s unaffordable. Unwelcoming. No one wants to live there unless they have to. And no one can buy a house. It’s too expensive.”

But I said yes.

I gave it all up—my three-bedroom Cape Cod house and generous yard—for exactly what Toronto’s reputation had suggested I’d get: a 900-square-foot apartment with a decent view, but a kitchen far too small to provide life support for any party. I went from living close to the land to living high in the sky, fifteen floors off the ground. Fortunately, I wasn’t afraid of heights.

Overtime, I became happier in my new home than I’d initially expected. My apartment faced Lake Ontario, and I could see Toronto’s skyline to the east and the faint plumes of Niagara Falls to the southwest. Sunrises were stunning, rays of red and gold spilling across the lake and filling my living room with light. Sunsets reflected off the towers in downtown Toronto, transforming the city center into a collection of glittering jewel boxes.

Who lives in all those boxes? I wondered as I gazed out my windows at the distant towers. And who, for that matter, lives next door to me, in the half dozen high rises in my new neighborhood? Would I ever meet the people who lived so close we could exchange a cup of coffee across balcony railings? I wanted to meet them. I just didn’t know how to make it happen.

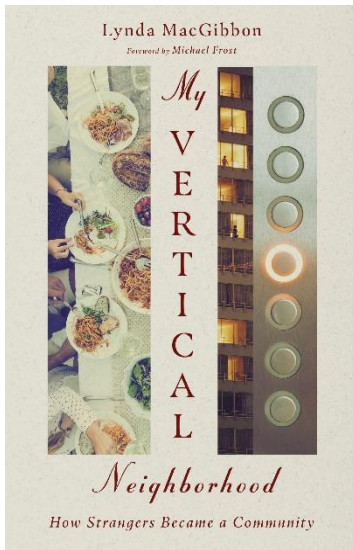


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“Riveting, fascinating, authentic, vulnerable, funny—this book grabbed me and I could not put it down. Lynda’s neighbors are established, lonely, secular urbanites in a high-rise apartment building. When she prioritizes them over church connections, they become her best friends. What does it mean to love a neighbor? ‘Pay attention,’ she says. ‘Notice. Engage. Welcome. Open your door. Accept their invitations. Give time. Laugh. Debate. Apologize. Forgive. Cry. Celebrate.’”

—Miriam Adeney, associate professor of world Christian studies at Seattle Pacific University, author of *Kingdom Without Borders: The Untold Story of Global Christianity*

I suppose you could say I’d decided to engage in a social experiment, although I was more likely to describe it as wrestling with a theological conundrum, one that had been nagging me for a while.

Why did God command me to love my neighbor? What does this kind of love look like? What would happen if I tried to follow the command daily, not just when some random stranger seemed in need of my assistance?

I’d been pondering these questions for nearly a decade, ever since I’d heard a lecture by the Australian writer, Michael Frost. He told a story of moving into a neighborhood with a few other followers of Jesus precisely so they could live out what Jesus said was the second greatest commandment of all, the one that summed up the ten given to Moses on Mount Sinai and the hundreds of others written in the Hebrew Torah. It’s the commandment Jesus references in three of the four Gospel books of the Bible when asked what he considered to be the first and greatest commandment.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength,” said Jesus (Mark 12:30). But he didn’t stop there. He added this: “The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:31).

I’ve spent a lot of time in my life learning to love God with my heart, soul, mind, and strength. I was raised in the kind of Christian family that considered church an extension of our home life. I work for a nonprofit organization that helps young people discover Jesus and follow God for a lifetime. Back in my own university days, I was one of the students they helped, and much of my learning about loving God has come from surrounding myself with other believers who are both thoughtful and practical about their faith. And while there were lots of people in my life—classmates, extended family, coworkers—who did not share or approach faith as I did, the biggest investment of my time was reserved for those who were committed believers like me. As an adult, whenever I moved to a new town or city, I looked for friendship and community first among people who, like me, went to church more often than not and devoted at least one evening a night to a small group Bible study.

That didn’t leave much room for anyone else.

Specifically, it meant I didn’t have much time for my neighbors, for the people I might encounter who did not share my beliefs about God or any of my other values either. Until I heard Frost speak, I wasn’t even aware I was putting so much effort into loving God that I’d missed the other half of the great commandment, the part about loving our neighbors. I knew it was a commandment, but I’d equated it with all the other commandments in Scripture. Jesus doesn’t do that. Jesus says loving God, self, and neighbor is foundational to everything else. If we don’t understand and practice these conjoined commandments, it will be harder to obey the rest.



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Lynda MacGibbon is vice president of people and culture for InterVarsity Canada. Before working for InterVarsity, she was a journalist for over twenty years. She lives in Toronto.

Long before moving to Toronto, I'd figured out who my neighbor might be—anyone in my sightline. The Good Samaritan is in one of Jesus' most famous stories, and even people who don't know the details are often aware of what the phrase means: to honor, care about, help, and respect someone who is a stranger, who is nothing like you, who might even be considered an enemy but is still worthy of your consideration.

But what it meant to love such a person was a mystery to me. Like, enjoy, appreciate, welcome, tolerate, respect—these words all made sense when it came to interacting with neighbors. But love? How would that work its way into my relationship with people I bumped up against, especially the ones who lived nearby, but weren't family, fellow churchgoers, or lifelong friends?

I doubt my parents intended for me to adopt the perspective that love was mostly reserved for fellow Christians. In fact, they taught us that all people deserved our neighborliness—our kindness, politeness, and hospitality. I liked and appreciated people who didn't share my beliefs and rarely shied away from friendships that came my way. But it never really occurred to me to approach each person I encountered with a default inclination of love. That particular teaching of Jesus was lost to me.

I tried lots of things to meet my new neighbors: I joined the condo gardening committee, brought meatballs to the annual Christmas potluck, and went to every business meeting in the building, smiling at whoever sat next to me. I said polite hellos to people in the elevator and even had a few extended conversations in the hallway with the woman who lived two doors from me.

But the conversations never went beyond a superficial hello, how are you, hope you have a good day. It helped if someone had a dog—then you could ask the dog's name, admire the color of its fur, inquire about its age. Somehow it was appropriate to ask questions about dogs, less so their humans. I rarely asked people who rode the elevator with me to share their names, but I always asked what they called their pets.

We were an arm's length away from each other, the hundreds of humans (and almost as many dogs) who made up my vertical neighborhood. We were stacked on top and squished alongside each other, so close you would think it impossible not to become acquainted with one another. But it was. Walk along any hallway in my building and you'd see door after door, each looking exactly like the other. Walk by those doors often enough and eventually you'd stop seeing them, let alone give a passing thought to the people living on the other side.

I wanted to live differently. I prayed a lot. My conviction grew, but my actions seemed to keep hitting a wall. All those doors along the hallways of my apartment building remained closed to me. And then Rachel moved in, and everything began to change.

—Adapted from chapter two, "Chasing a Question"



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