

Is the church being neighborly?

By [Thom Turner](#)

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On this past week's This American Life, the third act, "[Wary Home Companion](#)," told the story of an elderly woman with a middle aged son who is autistic. Knowing that she only had a few more years left to watch over her son, the woman began to ask her neighbors if they would begin to take a bit more responsibility for checking in on her son in case she passed soon. Her neighbors declined. She ventured off to the police station, where she inquired about a big brother program or an officer who would try to befriend him. The police didn't know how to help her. Still not deterred, the woman went to the mayor's office and asked if the mayor knew of anyone who could help with her son. Surely, she thought, the mayor knows everyone, there must be someone he knows that can help my son. The administrative assistants didn't let the conversation go on too long, and politely changed the subject with a referral to the Health Department. The woman was dismayed that no one in her community wanted to help with her son.

She brought up in the interview how she would watch *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*

and noticed that the neighbors would all pitch in to help a family, and that she thought surely her community would want to watch her son, who now lived alone in a house next door, but needed some companionship.

This story naturally caught my attention because of the despair in the lady's voice. What really made me pay attention was that this is happening in my backyard, in Fair Lawn, New Jersey, the town that is adjacent to my own. This mother and son are probably five miles or less away from me.

What struck me about this story was the absence of the church in the midst of this. I know there are plenty of churches in Fair Lawn. This is

a complicated issue, and some questions arise from this:

How can the church become an institution or body that people think of when they need help? This mother never thought to approach the church. Also, what does it say about the church that a woman thinks of the mayor or police station as a source of help and companionship before a church?

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