

Can Churches change a Neighborhood?

Executive Summary of Recently Completed Research by Dave Kresta, PhD.

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Church leaders commonly assume that their local congregations provide a generally positive societal impact, but there is very little understanding if or how churches tangibly influence the communities around them. As “salt and light”, can churches affect the socioeconomic trajectory of a neighborhood? For example, what is the impact of a predominantly white church in a gentrifying neighborhood whose low-income residents of color are suffering displacement? Or, can local churches help turn around declining neighborhoods through social services and social capital? Below we will see that churches do, in fact, impact their neighborhoods’ socioeconomic trajectories, sometimes positively, other times negatively.

This study invites church leaders to consider how churches relate to individuals as well as how they interact with social processes in their communities. My hope is that this research will help connect local faith communities with the worlds of community and economic development, leading church leaders and participants to ask hard questions about the role of churches in their communities, realizing that the impacts go far beyond the spiritual and the intentional.

To those who deserve to hear good news...but only see a church parking lot and a cheap sign

To those who are not thriving...because we are too busy doing “spiritual” work

To those who've been displaced...forgive us!

To those who want to be a blessing rather than a curse.

From the study's dedication

MAJOR FINDINGS

1. White churches in non-white neighborhoods are associated with more gentrification.
2. Church social services do not reverse neighborhood decline, but they do help slow down gentrification by stemming displacement.
3. More geographically dispersed congregations result in less white influx and less gentrification, but these churches are also less helpful in declining neighborhoods.
4. Churches in the USA are 1.6 times more segregated than our neighborhoods.

Based on research completed as part of a PhD program in Urban Studies at Portland State University.

Summary of Study

This study examines the relationship between Christian churches and changes in household median incomes from 1990 to 2010 in the census tract in which each church is located. Using a nationally representative sample of over 2000 churches from 2006 and 2012, key church characteristics such as social service involvement, social capital generation, residential patterns of attendees, and demographic composition are analyzed to determine how they are related to changes in neighborhoods. The study also examines changing patterns of church location with respect to neighborhood types, and trends in church and neighborhood segregation.

Neighborhood change types

Four neighborhood change types are used throughout this study, based on household income changes from 1990 to 2010 in the neighborhood relative to the surrounding city. Thus, neighborhoods that started in the bottom 40% of neighborhoods in a city, but increased by 20 percentage points or more are considered to have “gentrified” (6.6% of all neighborhoods nationally). Neighborhoods that started out above the 40% level and also increased by 20 points or more were classified as “upgraded” (5% of all neighborhoods). Neighborhoods that dropped by 20 points or more, regardless of where they started, were in “decline” (11.4% of all neighborhoods). Finally, all other neighborhoods (76.9%) were classified as “stable”.

So, can churches change a neighborhood?

My findings indicate YES, along several fronts. For example, the impact of a church’s demographic makeup on a neighborhood is complex and often operates indirectly by amplifying or moderating existing neighborhood forces. This study found that a higher percentage of whites in churches located in predominantly non-white neighborhoods is associated with more neighborhood change such as gentrification and upgrading, and less neighborhood decline. White churches are also positively associated with higher levels of white influx into the neighborhood, especially in very low-income neighborhoods and in neighborhoods that have a white percentage higher than the overall city. These churches also caused about 10% of the neighborhood income growth required to trigger gentrification. *The conclusion is that local churches are implicated in the gentrification process, potentially serving as a signal to gentrifiers that the neighborhood is turning in the “right” direction and is safe to move into.*

The research revealed that although church social services neither stem neighborhood decline nor necessarily improve the economic status of neighborhoods, there is evidence for a stabilizing, anti-displacement effect: *church social services appear to be enabling low-income residents to stay in their neighborhoods, thereby slowing gentrification.* In addition to providing material resources such as food, clothing, and financial assistance to help residents stay in their homes, these services may provide a connection for lower-income residents into the social capital being generated by the church, which in turn can aid in fighting against displacement.

This study found dramatically differing impacts between socially oriented and politically oriented bridging social capital. The former refers to activity that connects churches with those of relatively equal power such as neighborhood nonprofits and local parents, whereas the latter is focused on linking to unequal sources of power such as those found in the political system. Socially oriented bridging activities are associated with increases in gentrification in metropolitan areas, but also with more

neighborhood decline and less white influx. Politically oriented bridging, or linking, has the opposite effects and is associated with reductions in neighborhood decline and more stable low-income neighborhoods. While politically oriented bridging was not found to be associated with gentrification, it does have a positive effect on income change and is also associated with higher levels of white influx. This could point to the beginnings of gentrification as neighborhood decline is stemmed, incomes rise, and the white population increases. Churches must therefore exercise caution as they generate bridging social capital, as both political and social forms appear to hold promise as well as danger. On the balance, politically oriented bridging appears to have a more positive overall impact on neighborhood change than socially oriented bridging.

Churches with higher percentages of poor attendees are associated with less gentrification and less white influx. These lower-income attendees may be able to connect more directly into the social capital and social services provided by the church, enabling them to stay in their homes. The economic diversity in these churches may also help attune middle- and higher-income church attendees to the challenges low-income residents face to stay in their neighborhoods, leading to less displacement-inducing actions on their part, such as opting out of buying up depressed properties, and taking on more aggressive advocating positions for anti-displacement initiatives.

Churches with higher levels of racial diversity are associated with less white influx, potentially helping to stem race-based displacement in all types of neighborhoods, including low and very low-income neighborhoods. Uncovering the specific mechanisms leading to less white influx requires additional research, but the increased racial diversity may function like that of increased economic diversity described above, with less displacement-inducing actions and more aggressive advocating against displacement.

More geographically dispersed white congregations are associated with less neighborhood white influx, especially in low- and very low-income neighborhoods. Thus, whites who choose to commute to churches in these low-income neighborhoods rather than relocate may help slow down gentrification by limiting white influx and reducing displacement pressures. This finding is sure to be troubling to well-intentioned church planters and attendees who have a genuine desire to help these neighborhoods thrive. Looking at neighborhoods in decline, the research shows that geographically-dispersed congregations are associated with less positive income change in low- and very low-income neighborhoods. Thus, while more geographically dispersed, commuter-style churches may not be contributing to gentrification, neither are they helping declining neighborhoods become healthy.

What kind of neighborhoods are churches located in?

Nationally, the percentage of churches in gentrifying neighborhoods dropped slightly from 10.4% to 8.4% during the 1998 to 2012 time period. However, even with the drop, churches were still overrepresented in gentrifying neighborhoods in 2012, and slightly underrepresented in declining neighborhoods. Church planting practices have changed dramatically from the 1980s to the 2000s, eschewing higher-income upgrading neighborhoods for lower-income neighborhoods. Churches founded in the 2000s decade are overrepresented in gentrifying neighborhoods, with 8.1% of churches planted in gentrifying neighborhoods, compared to 6.6% of US tracts experiencing gentrification from 1990 to 2010. While there appears to have been an effort to start more churches in declining neighborhoods in the 2000s, there was also a renewed effort to start churches in lower income gentrifying neighborhoods, thereby reinforcing the overrepresentation of churches in gentrifying

neighborhoods. With this “back to the city” movement, new church locations have shifted from predominantly up-and-coming higher income neighborhoods in the 1980s, to “grittier” and perhaps “cooler” lower-income neighborhoods in the 2000s, some of which were already gentrifying, while others remained in the throes of decline.

Church diversity and segregation

In 1998, churches on average were 8 times less racially diverse than their neighborhood. This large gap decreased slightly in 2012, with churches now “only” 6 times less diverse, on average, than their neighborhood. 87% of churches nationwide are less diverse than the neighborhood in which they are located, a figure that has not changed substantially from 1998 to 2012. This study also explored the related concept of segregation which is a measure of how evenly distributed racial groups are within churches or neighborhoods. Nationally, churches on average are 1.6 times more segregated than neighborhoods. Regionally, the South has the most segregated churches as well as the biggest spread between church and residential segregation, with church segregation approximately 1.9 times greater than neighborhood segregation. While the West has the least segregated churches, it also has the least segregated neighborhoods by a substantial amount compared to other regions. This creates a large spread between church and residential segregation in the West. In fact, the spread in the West is larger than that seen in Northeast: in 2012, church segregation was 1.8 times higher than residential segregation in the West, compared to 1.4 times higher in the Northeast.

Regardless of how it is measured, churches in the United States continue to lag culture in this important, some would say, central component of the gospel. Sadly, this siren was sounded decades before the Civil Rights movement, with Aubrey Burns writing in 1949 that as “scores of nationwide and local secular organizations and agencies [were] working earnestly for better race relations...last in the procession, behold the Church, the spotless Bride of Christ, reluctantly dragging her heels.”

Implications

This study invites church leaders to consider both how churches relate to individuals and how they interact with social processes in their communities. This study shows that churches do, in fact, impact their neighborhoods’ socioeconomic trajectories, sometimes positively, other times negatively. For example, the anti-gentrification, anti-displacement impact of social services deserves more attention and investigation. While churches and researchers may bemoan slow progress in lifting people out of poverty, perhaps that is not the ultimate benefit of these services. Church social services can be more focused on helping low-income residents keep their homes, strengthening the anti-gentrification impact. Churches should also examine how their programs and activities generate social capital and the implications of that social capital: bridging activities that link congregations to the larger political and economic systems appear to have the most beneficial impacts for surrounding neighborhoods, a definite challenge for church leaders who may be uncomfortable interacting with those systems.

Particularly urgent is the need for church leaders, especially those starting new churches, to realize that their choices can either resist or reinforce general urban trends that have resulted in the displacement of marginalized populations and increasing economic inequality. For example, this study’s finding that white churches in predominantly non-white neighborhoods can contribute to gentrification by acting as a beacon or an amenity for gentrifiers is troubling news, but it shines a necessary light on an understudied and little-understood phenomenon. Similarly, the choice to commute or relocate into a neighborhood to attend church needs careful deliberation, given my study’s finding that white churches

with more dispersed attendees can lessen white influx, especially in low-income neighborhoods. Given the varied impacts highlighted in this study, church leaders should consider doing a “community impact study” prior to making location choices for new churches. Such a study could result in a decision to change locations, or pursue partnering with existing churches and institutions rather than starting a new church. At the very least, this process would sensitize church leaders to the context of the neighborhood and the potential benefits and pitfalls of a new church in the community. Periodic community impact studies can help churches track neighborhood changes and risk factors, informing needed course corrections as the church seeks to contribute to the welfare of the neighborhood and city.

Study Limitations

As with any study, my research has several limitations. My measurement of neighborhood change based on changes in household income misses important cultural, demographic, and political indicators of neighborhood change. I have been somewhat able to address this limitation by incorporating an analysis of white influx to account for demographic changes. Also, this study measures church impacts in a very specific manner. The impact of churches is much broader, so this study cannot be used to assess the net positive or negative contribution of churches to neighborhoods or our society in general. Finally, because this is a large sample statistical study, I cannot provide detailed accounts of how specific churches impact their neighborhoods. For example, while I can make claims about the average anti-displacement impact of social services, further research is required to identify the types of social services that have this impact and other factors that may contribute to or inhibit this effect.

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