

Proximity Matters: Exploring Relationships Among Neighborhoods, Congregations, and the Residential Patterns of Members

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Using the Philadelphia Congregations Census, the Neighborhood Change Database, the U.S. Census, and geographic information systems (GIS) software, this study compared characteristics of congregations made up of members who live nearby their congregation's building to those with more members who commute from outside the immediate area or outside the city. We considered whether the neighborhood characteristics in which the "commuter" versus "resident" congregations were located differed in regard to racial composition, socioeconomic status, and residential stability. The study found that where the pastor lives in relation to the building, denomination, racial composition of membership, and the stability of the neighborhood were related to members' residential proximity to the congregation building.

INTRODUCTION: LOOKING SPATIALLY AT PLACES OF WORSHIP—DO PEOPLE WORSHIP WHERE THEY LIVE OR WITH LIKE OTHERS?

With whom do people choose to worship, and how far do they go to find a worship community? In an era of increased mobility and commutes to work, to family, or to special events, community is less and less bounded by geography. We wondered if significant patterns existed among congregations that were composed of people who lived close to the worship space versus those with a more dispersed membership. Thus, this research note describes differences among congregations with more members who live nearby and congregations whose members live farther away. Congregation size, ethnic composition, denominational affiliation, and age of the congregation were other factors taken into account.

A second question guiding this study was whether there was a relationship between the type of neighborhood in which the congregation is located and the proportion of members that live nearby. In other words, do "resident" congregations, those with many members who live nearby, exist in stable neighborhoods with more home ownership or less change in the racial composition of the neighborhoods adjacent to building? Conversely, do congregations with more members who commute from farther away exist in neighborhoods that have experienced decline? This question was prompted by the suggestion that in many poor neighborhoods, congregations are the most enduring and stable institutions present (Dionne and DiIulio 2000). We explored neighborhood

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change or stability through such factors as average household income, rates of home ownership, and change in population density and racial composition.

We also attempt to confirm an observation made by several scholars regarding black urban churches. Trulear (2001) observed that many large inner-city African-American congregations are “middle-class” churches in which fewer than 20 percent of the membership still live within walking distance. McRoberts (2003) and Ortiz (1991) suggested that as African Americans gained economic stability and moved to more desirable neighborhoods, many have chosen to drive back to their previous neighborhoods for worship. We assess whether our data supported this observation.

The question of why people choose to worship with, and thus commute to, or live near, a particular congregation has elicited theories from a number of disciplines including urban development, ethnic studies, and religious studies. We do not attempt to cover this ground with any thoroughness. However, here we look at where members have lived in relation to where they worshipped, historically, and patterns of population migration and ethnicity in Philadelphia.

GEOGRAPHIC PROXIMITY AND COMMUTING HABITS

What do we know historically about where people live and where they worship? Pre-20th-century communities and their religiously involved members often lived within walking distance or a carriage ride of their congregation. Members of these communities could likely hear church bells or a call to prayer that regulated daily life, seasons, and community events (Cnaan 2002; Holifield 1994). In the past, then, religious communities were at least partly influenced by members’ spatial proximity to the worship space. Today, few religious communities prescribe proximity as a required part of membership. Exceptions to this include Orthodox Judaism, pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic parish models, and traditional Amish communities.

Thus, proximity does not necessarily dictate where urban residents choose to worship. In fact, for many members of religious communities, commuting some distance for worship has been a common experience since at least the mid 20th century. Research in the 1930s indicated that the majority of members of congregations in Connecticut commuted by car (Whetten and Devereaux 1936). Of course, this particular observation was influenced by economic status. In the late 1950s and 1960s, two studies reported that over half of members lived outside their congregation’s geographic community, or more than five miles away (Indianapolis Family Life Clinic 1958; Schaller 1962). More recently, the majority of 170 churches in the Polis Center research reported that most of their members commuted from outside the neighborhood for worship services and less than one-fifth of urban residents attended worship within their own neighborhoods (Diamond 1999).

On the other hand, many people do attend worship services close to home. In their study of 300,000 worshippers in more than 2,000 congregations, Woolever and Bruce (2002) found that more than half (55 percent) reported a commute of 10 or less minutes. An additional 21 percent reported a commute of 11–15 minutes, with a total of 88 percent of worshippers reporting a commute of 20 minutes or less. Few worshippers reported a commute of more than 20 minutes (8 percent) or more than 30 minutes (4 percent). Likewise, in Philadelphia, substantial proportions of members were reported as living within walking distance of their place of worship. An average of 44.5 percent of members in 1,393 congregations in Philadelphia were described as residing within a 10-block radius (or about one mile) of their congregation (Cnaan and Boddie 2001). It is thus clear that while proximity to a worship space is not the only factor that influences where people choose to worship, many people do worship near their homes.

In addition to location or denominational affiliation, other factors such as shared interests, relationships, or theological preferences affect with whom people choose to worship (Farnsley 2003). Personal and social identification have often been especially connected to a geographic neighborhood or ethnic enclave. However, changes in transportation, communication, Internet

access, and the media have drastically affected our patterns of personal interaction and sense of community in the past half-century. Today, individuals are as likely to base identity on beliefs, cohort, experience, or accomplishments (Wuthnow 1998), or in relationship to like-minded people (Cimino and Lattin 1998; Gallup 1996; Wuthnow 1994) rather than on their immediate physical community.

McRoberts (2003) observed that churches are less neighborhood institutions than collections of people who are similar in some way: congregations may be drawn together by common ethnicity, regional or national origin, political orientation, life stage, lifestyle, or class background, such as middle-class professionals or the working poor. The concept “niche congregations,” which developed in the early 21st century, emphasizes the decreasing importance of neighborhood or place-based identity for current generations of worshippers.

Ethnic congregations represent a unique phenomenon in which members choose to worship with others of a particular ethnicity, culture, or language. Thus, migration patterns of ethnic groups may be particularly salient in understanding the resident and commuter mix in ethnic congregations. Some ethnic groups have settled in certain neighborhoods and have enough resources to start ethnic-specific congregations. Other ethnic populations are widely dispersed and thus members may travel significant commutes to participate in language- or culture-specific worship. We turn here to consider such migration patterns in Philadelphia.

MIGRATION WITHIN PHILADELPHIA

Philadelphia’s current residential patterns are shaped by its past boundaries. In 1854, the relatively small city of Philadelphia joined with the surrounding towns and villages within the county of Philadelphia to form the shape of the present day city limits (Contosta 1992). The result is a physically large city that extends more than 120 square miles, in that one can travel a full 20 miles. This large size also means that Philadelphia includes many neighborhoods built after World War II that have housing, street patterns, and population densities more typical of suburban areas. For our study, this complicates the issue of what constitutes “commuting” from a “suburb.” While suburbanization has traditionally been defined as concentrations of human activity and settlements outside of city limits, newer patterns of urbanization include the concepts of exurbia, edge city (Garreau 1991), network city (Batten 1995), and postmodern city (Dear 2000), in which new concentrations occur outside the downtown but within the city limits. While Philadelphia’s demographic trends are similar to other cities, its residential development is unusual given its expansive city boundaries.

Philadelphia shares many characteristics with other urban centers in the Northeast and Midwest. Like other older industrial centers in the United States, Philadelphia grew rapidly during the 19th and the first part of the 20th century due to its manufacture of textiles, shoes, iron, steel, and tools. Philadelphia absorbed waves of European immigration during the early 20th century, as well as the migration of southern blacks during and after World War I. A significant portion of the city’s population moved out of the city center to other parts of the city and to the suburbs as streetcars, subways, and automobiles increased people’s mobility. In common with many older cities in the United States after 1970, while the overall *region’s* population grew from 1950 to 1970, Philadelphia’s city center’s population peaked around 1950 at 2 million and then dropped by 25 percent over the following decades (Adams et al. 1991).

Much of this population loss has been attributed to the relocation of city residents, particularly white residents, to the suburbs as a result of shifting job opportunities, federal housing and transportation subsidies, and perceptions about race and crime (Jackson 1985). Recently, this trend has slowed or reversed in Philadelphia, Norfolk, Baltimore, Cleveland, and Detroit, where downtowns have gained population and Latino and Asian immigrants offset some of the outmigration (Katz and Lang 2003). However, within metropolitan areas, suburban growth is still the dominant trend.

The loss of tens of thousands of industrial jobs and selective outmigration has resulted in increased concentration of poverty within Philadelphia, where service sector jobs prevail. This socioeconomic trend has been paralleled by racial change. Before World War II, Philadelphia was predominantly white, with a significant black minority; by 2000 the ratio of black to white was nearly equal in the city, while most of the surrounding suburbs are overwhelmingly white (U.S. Census 2000).

A growing body of literature exists on why congregations attract various subgroups of people and why they are located in various sections of the city and not others (Ammerman 1997; Eiesland 1999; Gamm 1999; McRoberts 2003; Warner 1993). Until now, however, such research has not explored how member proximity is related to neighborhood variables and residential patterns. This study adds to the literature in precisely this area. The following results describe qualities of high-resident and high-commuter congregations and explore whether a relationship exists between neighborhood changes and members' spatial proximity to the worship space.

METHODS

We analyzed survey data from the Philadelphia Census of Congregations (PCC) and tract-level data from several U.S. Censuses using descriptive statistics, logistic regression, and geographic information systems (GIS). The carefully constructed sampling frame was gathered from multiple sources including: the phonebook; denominational sources; and canvassing. We located 2,123 congregations within the city limits of Philadelphia. From this list, 1,393 congregations were interviewed between February 1999 and June 2002. The in-depth face-to-face interview lasted from one and one-half to three hours and covered a range of topics, including congregation demographics, budget, governance structures, and social programming. Interviews were conducted with just one person at each congregation because pilot interviews with two or more people from the same congregation resulted in a high degree of reliability (Chaves et al. 1999). For additional information on the PCC data collection, please contact the authors.

For this study, congregations were grouped into three categories based on where their members lived in relation to the congregation's building. Interviewees responded to the question: "What percentage of your congregational members live in the immediate community (10-block radius from the congregational building)?" This 10-block distance was intended to approximate "nearby," "the same neighborhood," or a walkable commute of no more than one mile. Interviewees were also asked to identify the percentage of members living outside the city limits. Thus, we identified three groups of congregational members: those who reside near the congregation (within 10 blocks); those who reside farther away from the congregation but within the city limit; and those who reside outside the city limits.

We used the city boundaries as our definition of "city" and "suburban" for two reasons. First, even though some parts of the city have lower population density, street patterns, and average household incomes that are more typical of suburban neighborhoods, there was no easy way to distinguish such locales. Second, regardless of distance from the center city, all Philadelphia residents pay the city wage tax, receive the same municipal services, and are served by the same political system and school district.

Resident congregations ($N = 569$) were defined as having 50 percent or more of their members living within 10 blocks of their congregation's building. City commuter congregations ($N = 663$) were defined as having less than 50 percent of their members living within 10 blocks but also less than 50 percent of members living outside city limits. Finally, suburban commuter congregations ($N = 108$) were defined as having 50 percent or more of their members living outside the city limits.

The street addresses of the congregations were mapped using GIS software and the census tract in which they were located was determined. Out of the original 1,393 congregations, 1,340 (96

percent) could be mapped. Of the addresses that could not be mapped, several only included post office box numbers or did not have complete address information. Most, however, had addresses that could not be matched with the street centerline file for Philadelphia, either because the street name was not recognized or the house number could not be located. Demographic and housing data from the 2000 U.S. Census, 1950 U.S. Census, and the Neighborhood Change Database (NCDB) were then integrated into the PCC database.

The NCDB included census-tract-level data from the 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000 U.S. Census. We assessed neighborhood stability or change by looking at several demographics within the census tracts adjacent to the congregation building. We assessed change in population (gain or loss) between 1970 and 2000; population density in 2000; rates of home ownership in 1980 and in 2000; racial composition and change in composition from 1950 and 2000; and median household income. Because census tract boundaries in Philadelphia (as in other cities) have changed over time, it can be difficult to measure change over time for a given area. The NCDB overcomes this problem by reaggregating data from the 1970, 1980, and 1990 censuses using the 2000 census tract boundaries. These estimations make it possible to measure change over time in a given tract. The NCDB does not include 1950 data, so the census tract assignment for the 1950 data does not correspond to the data from 1970 to 2000.

In order to determine the relationships among congregation and neighborhood-level characteristics and the geographic distribution of members, chi-square tests and logistic regressions were conducted. The chi-square tests of independence were used to determine the significance of the predominant race (see Table 1) and denomination (see Table 2) of the congregation while these and other variables (see Tables 3 and 4) were included in three separate logistic regression models to determine which relationships were significant in a multivariate context. Dummy variables for each type of congregations were used as the dependent variable for the logistic regressions. Three separate models were used instead of a single multinomial regression because of the nature of the dependent variable. We hypothesized that the three types of congregations—resident, city commuter, and suburban commuter—are qualitatively different and cannot be represented using an ordered variable, making multinomial logistic regression complicated to run and interpret. Congregations with missing data for any of the variables included in the logistic regression models were omitted, leaving a sample size of 1,257 congregations.

RESULTS

As expected, the chi-square tests confirmed that the three types of congregations do vary significantly by the predominant race and denomination of the congregation. The regression models identified several statistically significant variables, although these variables explained a

TABLE 1
CONGREGATIONS BY TYPE AND PREDOMINANT RACE

	Total	Resident	City Commuter	Suburban Commuter
Black	702	259	406	37
Asian	62	12	29	21
White	331	186	106	39
Hispanic	97	38	57	2
Other	148	74	65	9
Total	1,340	569	663	108

$\chi^2 = 131.6$, d.f. = 8, $p < 0.001$.

TABLE 2
CONGREGATIONS BY TYPE AND DENOMINATION

	Total	Resident	City Commuter	Suburban Commuter
Anglican	61	27	30	4
Catholic	133	97	18	8
Baptist	310	125	162	23
Methodist	96	52	39	5
Pentecostal	211	70	131	10
Presbyterian	83	34	35	14
Nondenom Christian	151	42	91	18

$\chi^2 = 128.2$, d.f. = 14, $p < 0.001$.

Jewish congregations were not included because there were too few to meet standards for chi-square tests.

TABLE 3
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR VARIABLES INCLUDED IN MODEL

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Stand. Dev.
Asian (dummy variable, 75% or more of members)	0	1	0.05	0.21
Black (dummy variable, 75% or more of members)	0	1	0.53	0.50
Catholic (dummy variable)	0	1	0.10	0.30
Baptist (dummy variable)	0	1	0.23	0.42
Pentecostal (dummy variable)	0	1	0.16	0.37
Nondenom (nondenominational Christian congregation)	0	1	0.11	0.31
Presbyt (dummy variable)	0	1	0.06	0.24
SmBudget (annual budget < \$50,000)	0	1	0.60	0.49
CongAge (congregational age, in tens)	0.4	32.3	6.41	5.61
Members (members of congregation, in tens)	0.2	1300	26.07	67.07
MedHHinc (median household income, 2000, in thousands)	2.50	122.79	28.69	15.00
PerAfAm (% African American, 2000)	0.12	98.48	56.81	37.55
PerOwnOcc (% owner occupied housing, 2000)	0.19	98.78	48.14	20.20
PerRes1980 (% residents in same house, 1980–2000)	0.27	50.83	21.44	9.88
PopChange (net change in population, 1970–2000, in thousands)	-22.10	69.58	14.10	17.42
PopDensity (population per square mile, 2000, in thousands)	0.12	56.41	20.49	8.96

relatively small amount of the variation among the three types of denominations (R^2 less than 0.17). Denomination, racial composition of the congregation, where the pastor lives, and the stability of the area where the congregation is located contributed most to distinguishing the spatial distribution of congregation members. Conversely, membership size, budget size, age of the congregation, and age of congregation members did relatively little to distinguish between types of congregations. The specific results are described below and are organized by the type of congregation.

TABLE 4
LOGISTIC REGRESSION RESULTS FOR RESIDENT CONGREGATIONS

Step	-2 Log Likelihood		Cox & Snell R^2	Nagelkerke R^2	
1	1556.399371		0.122261	0.163991	
Variable	<i>B</i>	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	Exp(<i>B</i>)
Asian	-0.18968	0.201308	0.887834	0.346065	0.827222
Black	-1.28022	0.356277	12.91194	0.000326	0.277977
Catholic	1.354473	0.277717	23.7868	1.08E - 06	3.87472
Baptist	-0.03274	0.174332	0.035262	0.851048	0.967794
Pentecostal	-0.37866	0.2012	3.541958	0.059835	0.684778
Nondenom	-0.5744	0.235123	5.968102	0.014567	0.563043
Presbyt	-0.034	0.268776	0.016005	0.899328	0.966569
SmBudget	0.091915	0.143648	0.40942	0.522264	1.096271
CongAge	0.022592	0.013045	2.999091	0.083311	1.022849
Members	0.001368	0.001445	0.895983	0.343861	1.001369
MedHHinc	-0.00581	0.005231	1.235117	0.266414	0.994203
PerAfAm	-0.004	0.002676	2.23738	0.134709	0.996005
PerOwnOcc	0.005543	0.004588	1.459586	0.226996	1.005558
PerRes1980	0.030158	0.008642	12.17688	0.000484	1.030617
PopDensity	0.024203	0.00721	11.2683	0.000788	1.024498
PopLoss	-0.0079	0.004326	3.336659	0.067752	0.992128
Constant	-1.25839	0.361905	12.09055	0.000507	0.28411

Resident Congregations

Denomination, Size, and Age

Resident congregations had an average of 75.9 percent of members living within 10 blocks. Within the resident congregation category, there was considerable variation in size, race, and denomination. Not unsurprisingly, large white Catholic churches made up 17 percent of the congregations in this category, and 73 percent of all Catholic churches in Philadelphia fell in this category. The relationship between Catholic and resident congregations was statistically significant in the logistic regression model (see Table 5). In fact, being a Catholic congregation was by far the biggest predictor (odds ratio of 3.9) of being a resident congregation, despite some relaxation of the requirement that Catholics attend the church within their parish.

In our sample, 62 percent (21/34) of Jewish congregations fell within the resident category. Of course, among Orthodox congregations, five out of seven were resident congregations while the other two were city commuter. Lutheran (32 out of 50, 64 percent) and Methodist (52 out of 96, 54 percent) congregations were also disproportionately represented in the resident category. Pentecostal and nondenominational Christian congregations, on the other hand, were unlikely to be resident congregations and this relationship was statistically significant.

Resident congregations tended to be larger than commuter congregations, with an average of 372 members (compared to an average membership size of 171 for city commuters and 248 for suburban commuters). However, the relationship between membership size and resident or commuter members was not statistically significant. Again, the membership average for resident congregations was likely skewed by a few large congregations that were mostly Catholic. Of the 20 congregations in the sample with 2,500 or more members, 17 were Catholic and 17 were resident congregations.

TABLE 5
LOGISTIC REGRESSION RESULTS FOR CITY COMMUTER CONGREGATIONS

Step	-2 Log Likelihood		Cox & Snell R^2	Nagelkerke R^2	
1	1600.88467		0.105905	0.141243	
	<i>B</i>	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	Exp(<i>B</i>)
Asian	0.484384	0.196797	6.058201	0.013842	1.623175
Black	0.146163	0.300196	0.237063	0.626335	1.157384
Catholic	-1.38343	0.30018	21.23977	4.05E - 06	0.250717
Baptist	-0.11367	0.171861	0.437492	0.508336	0.892549
Pentecostal	0.342965	0.196185	3.0561	0.080435	1.409119
Nondenom	0.217778	0.221476	0.966881	0.325459	1.243311
Presbyt	-0.11803	0.260495	0.205309	0.650469	0.888667
SmBudget	-0.05938	0.142298	0.174125	0.676471	0.94235
CongAge	-0.01742	0.013014	1.791821	0.180704	0.982731
Members	-0.00209	0.001651	1.595821	0.206496	0.997917
MedHHinc	-0.00083	0.005232	0.025076	0.874178	0.999172
PerAfAm	0.000996	0.002633	0.143025	0.705292	1.000996
PerOwnOcc	-0.00299	0.004484	0.443783	0.505302	0.997017
PerRes1980	-0.02623	0.008542	9.432009	0.002132	0.974107
PopDensity	-0.01254	0.007069	3.145289	0.076147	0.987542
PopLoss	0.009786	0.0042	5.428766	0.019808	1.009834
Constant	0.727484	0.35324	4.241373	0.03945	2.069867

Finally, age may play a role in understanding which congregations attract resident members and commuting members. Resident congregations were older than commuter congregations, with an average age of 73 years (compared with 57 years for city commuter and 59 years for suburban commuter), but this relationship was not statistically significant. Half of the 30 congregations in the sample that were 200 years old or older were resident congregations; only two were suburban commuter congregations.

Where the Pastor Lives

The pastor's place of residence in relation to the congregational building was an even greater predictor than denomination in determining where members would live. More than half (53 percent) of resident congregations had pastors living within 10 blocks, and more than half (57 percent) of all congregations with pastors living nearby were resident congregations. Of course, nearly all the Catholic congregations (84.6 percent) met this criterion, given that parish priests are generally provided with adjacent housing, but only one-third of all congregations that had pastors living nearby were Catholic. The other resident congregations with pastors living within 10 blocks were Baptist (35 percent), Lutheran (12 percent), Methodist (24 percent), and Presbyterian (46 percent).

Racial Composition

White congregations were disproportionately represented in the resident category. Catholic, Jewish, Lutheran, and Methodist congregations, which tended to have predominantly white memberships, were more likely to be resident congregations. Black resident congregations outnumbered white resident congregations because black congregations make up a large part of the sample, but there is a statistically significant negative relationship between being predominantly black and

being a resident congregation (see Table 5). Black resident congregations were most frequently Baptist, Pentecostal, and nondenominational Christian. All three of these three denominations were more likely to have congregations in the city commuter category.

Neighborhood Characteristics

Resident congregations tended to be located in more stable neighborhoods. There was a statistically significant and positive relationship between a census tract's percent of residents living in 2000 in the same home where they lived in 1979 and location of high-resident congregations. That is, the more census tract residents who had lived in the same home for the past 21 years, the more likely there were to be resident congregations located in that tract. The relationship with homeownership rates in 2000 was also positive, although it was not statistically significant. In addition, the areas in which resident congregations were located tended to gain population since between 1950 and 2000 (statistically significant) and to have greater population densities in 2000 (marginally significant).

City Commuter Congregations

Denomination, Size, and Age

Of the 663 city commuter congregations, Baptist (162 or 24 percent), Pentecostal (131 or 20 percent), and nondenominational Christian (91 or 14 percent) congregations together made up more than half of the congregations in this category. However, higher proportions of the Apostolic (25 out of 33, or 76 percent) and Islamic (8 out of 11, or 73 percent) fell in this category. City commuter congregations were the most likely to have memberships that were described as "getting younger" and had the smallest proportion of members 65 and older. City commuter congregations had a slightly lower percentage of low-income members than resident congregations, but they had significantly more poor members than suburban commuter congregations.

The city commuter category included the most congregations that were less than 10 years old. Of the 136 congregations in the sample that were less than 10 years old, 83 (61 percent) fell in the city commuter category, compared to 46 (34 percent) resident congregations and 9 (7 percent) suburban commuter congregations. Nearly all of these newer churches were predominantly black (58.8 percent) or Hispanic (18 percent) and most were also Pentecostal, nondenominational Christian, or Baptist.

Where the Pastor Lives

City commuter congregations were the least likely to have pastors living nearby. Only 32.2 percent of them had pastors who lived within 10 blocks (compared with 53 percent of resident congregations and 35 percent of suburban commuter congregations). The city commuter congregations with pastors living nearby were evenly divided among Baptist, Pentecostal, and nondenominational Christian congregations.

Racial Composition

Black congregations made up over 60 percent of city commuter congregations. Black (58 percent) and Hispanic (59 percent) congregations were equally likely to fall in the city commuter category, while white (32 percent) and Asian (47 percent) congregations were less likely.

Neighborhood Characteristics

The neighborhood profile for city commuter congregations is the most distinct of the three types. Such congregations were more likely to be located in areas with high percentages of African Americans, in 2000 as well as 1950, and in areas that have lost population. These congregations were frequently located in the central city neighborhoods from which middle-class white—and later middle-class black—residents left during the middle and late part of the 20th century. These neighborhoods had the highest rates of poverty and households living under \$20,000 and the lowest median income, lowest housing values, and lowest percent of homeowners. Neighborhoods in which city commuter congregations were located also tended to be further from the city boundary and closer to downtown in older neighborhoods. The exceptions to this trend were located in middle-class black neighborhoods that also house some city commuter congregations. However, overall, neighborhood characteristics helped distinguish city commuter congregations from resident and suburban commuter congregations (Table 6).

Suburban Commuter Congregations

Denomination, Size, and Age

Suburban commuter congregations—those with 50 percent or more of members commuting from outside the city limits—make up the smallest category of congregations in the sample. Less than 10 percent of congregations in the total sample were suburban commuter congregations. On average, 67 percent of members in these congregations live outside the city and just 17 percent live within 10 blocks of the congregation. Suburban commuter congregations had the

TABLE 6
LOGISTIC REGRESSION RESULTS FOR SUBURBAN
COMMUTER CONGREGATIONS

Step	-2 Log Likelihood		Cox & Snell R^2	Nagelkerke R^2	
1	631.1252015		0.055555592	0.129694	
	<i>B</i>	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	Exp(<i>B</i>)
Asian	-1.041657714	0.36172	8.292864	0.00398	0.352869
Black	1.509717001	0.373337	16.35273	5.26E - 05	4.52545
Catholic	-0.319901601	0.473333	0.456772	0.499136	0.72622
Baptist	0.540162923	0.337368	2.563553	0.109353	1.716286
Pentecostal	0.019375326	0.412527	0.002206	0.962539	1.019564
Nondenom	0.966177151	0.373869	6.67845	0.009759	2.627879
Presbyt	0.258444766	0.400991	0.415399	0.519242	1.294915
SmBudget	-0.124368697	0.251384	0.244763	0.620787	0.883054
CongAge	-0.015814451	0.023312	0.460199	0.497531	0.98431
Members	0.000434161	0.00186	0.054508	0.815397	1.000434
MedHHinc	0.016515513	0.00789	4.381177	0.036338	1.016653
PerAfAm	0.009457407	0.004502	4.412985	0.035666	1.009502
PerOwnOcc	-0.005963659	0.007596	0.616463	0.432365	0.994054
PerRes1980	-0.012001728	0.015213	0.622368	0.430169	0.98807
PopDensity	-0.036099101	0.01372	6.922839	0.00851	0.964545
PopLoss	-0.009434262	0.008102	1.355945	0.244241	0.99061
Constant	-1.8801253	0.600915	9.789203	0.001755	0.152571

**TABLE 7
COMPARISON OF TYPICAL RESIDENT, CITY COMMUTER, AND SUBURBAN
COMMUTER CONGREGATIONS**

	Resident Congregations	City Commuter Congregations	Suburban Commuter Congregations
Characteristics of congregation			
Proximity of members	50% or more within 1 mile (42% of sample)	<50% within 1 mile AND <50% outside city limits (49% of sample)	50% or more outside city limits (8% of sample)
Denomination*	Catholic (73% of Catholic congregations) Lutheran (64% of Lutheran congregations) Jewish (62% of Jewish congregations) Methodist (54% of Methodist congregations)	Apostolic (76% of Apostolic) Islamic (73% of Islamic) Baptist (24% of Baptist) Pentecostal (20% of Pentecostal) Nondenominational (14% of nondenominational)	Nondenominational Christian Christian Eastern
Founded	Average years in existence = 73 years 34% of the congregations that were <10 years old included half of the 30 congregations that were 200 years or older	Average years in existence = 57 years 61% of the congregations that were <10 years old	Average years in existence = 59 years; 7% of the congregations that were <10 years old
Members 65 years old and older		More likely to be gaining younger members with smallest proportion of members aged 65 and older	
Number of members	Average = 372 members (this includes 17 Catholic congregations with 2,500 or more members)	Average = 171 members	Average = 248 members
Predominant race	56% of white congregations were resident congregations 37% of black congregations were resident congregations	58% of black congregations and 59% of Hispanic congregations were city commuter congregations	34% of Asian congregations were suburban commuters
Income below \$50,000	Highest proportions of "poor" members	Slightly fewer "poor" members than resident congregations	Fewest "poor" members and most members earning 75K or more
Pastor residence	53% had pastor within 1 mile	32% had pastor within 1 mile	35% had pastor within 1 mile

(continued)

TABLE 7
(Continued)

	Resident Congregations	City Commuter Congregations	Suburban Commuter Congregations
Characteristics of location and neighborhood by census tract			
Location within city	In stable neighborhoods with more home ownership, with populations gains, and greater population densities	In neighborhoods that lost middle-class (white and black) residents with lowest median incomes, lowest housing values, and least homeowners; closer to central city; farthest from city boundaries except for historically black neighborhoods that are near boundaries	At the northern boundary of the city, in the northern (central) part of the city, and in the central part of the city, with higher concentrations of Asian and black residents
Median HH income, 2000		Lowest median incomes	Higher median incomes
Poverty rate, 1970		Highest rates of poverty	
Black, 1950		Neighborhoods have been predominantly black since 1950	Higher concentrations of black residents
Pop change, 1970–2000	Gained population, denser populations	Lost population	Lower population densities
Homeownership	Larger percent of homeowners in 2000; larger percent of long-term homeowners (since 1980)	Lowest percent of homeowners in 2000	

smallest percentage of poor members and the largest proportions of members who earned \$75,000 or more.

There were no distinct denominational patterns among this group. However, non-Christian and Christian Eastern congregations were the most likely to have a majority of suburban commuters. The only statistically significant relationship (positive) between denomination and suburban commuter congregations was for nondenominational Christian congregations. Neither size nor age was significant in predicting suburban commuter congregations. Suburban commuter congregations were, on average, 67 years old and had 248 members. We discuss this finding further in the discussion section.

Where the Pastor Lives

Among suburban commuter congregations, about a third or 35.3 percent of congregations had pastors living within a 10-block radius.

Racial Composition

A small percentage of black (5 percent), white (12 percent), and Hispanic congregations (2 percent) were suburban commuters, compared to 34 percent of Asian congregations. Despite the fact that Asian congregations made up less than 5 percent of the total sample, almost one-fifth (19 percent) of all suburban commuter congregations were predominantly Asian. There were many Korean congregations in this category, and also Chinese, Japanese, and Indonesian congregations.

Neighborhood Characteristics

The GIS maps showed the suburban commuter congregations clustered in three areas: at the northern boundary of the city; in a multiethnic neighborhood in the northern part of the city; and in the central part of the city. They tended to be located in areas with higher incomes, higher concentrations of black residents, and lower population densities (all statistically significant) (Table 7).

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE QUESTIONS

This study asked whether resident, city commuter, and suburban commuter congregations had recognizably different characteristics or were located in certain types of neighborhoods. We found that denominational affiliation, age of the congregation, racial composition, and where the pastors live were important factors that were related to where members lived in proximity to the worship space.

The finding that age and size are important is not surprising, in one sense, since these two variables are often related to denomination. In this study, the larger and older congregations were more likely to have many members who lived close by; this was influenced by Catholic congregations, which made up 18 percent of resident congregations. However, in addition to the influence of the Catholic parish model, there are other possible explanations for the relationship between resident membership, size, and age. After all, only one in five resident congregations were Catholic. The fact that 40 percent of the sample (569 congregations) were resident congregations shows that people in Philadelphia are still likely to worship in their immediate neighborhood. Another interesting relationship emerged between proximity of members and age of members: city commuter congregations were more likely to be formed more recently and had the fewest members who were aged 65 and older.

We also determined that the three types of congregations are likely to be distinguished by the neighborhoods in which they are located. Neighborhood racial composition, change in racial composition, population stability, income levels, and rates of home ownership were helpful indicators in understanding the areas around resident, city commuter, and commuter congregations. For example, our data confirmed that suburban commuter congregations were often located close to city boundaries or where the population density is low, and that city commuter congregations were most likely to be located in neighborhoods with higher concentrations of poverty, less home ownership, African-American residents, and decreasing populations.

As such, our data and residential patterns within Philadelphia support Ortiz's (1991) observation of "commuter congregations" as churches in large cities that are populated by middle-class churchgoers who continued to attend the church as the neighborhood around it changed and they moved their homes to the suburbs. The areas in which city commuter congregations are located have suffered the greatest losses of population and have the highest rates of poverty. While our data set did not include individuals' addresses and thus cannot prove that the households that moved out of distressed neighborhoods were the same ones that commute back to congregations in those neighborhoods, our findings support this idea. In our data, black churches were the most likely to draw members from outside the neighborhood but still within the city.

Two key factors may be at play here. First, as McRoberts (2003) showed, blacks are likely to select a congregation based on sociodemographic origins and shared experiences, and are more likely to drive to the place that offers this combination. Second, upward housing mobility among blacks has often occurred within Philadelphia city limits and only to a limited extent more recently into the suburbs. From the middle decades of the 20th century, middle and upper-income white households moved to the suburbs, while middle and upper-income black households moved to newer neighborhoods within the city. This pattern may be specific to Philadelphia, which contains sufficient space and neighborhood diversity to accommodate migration patterns that in other cities might have meant a move outside the city limits. Another undeniable fact is the discrimination that many African Americans faced in relocating to suburban neighborhoods.

In Philadelphia, as in most places in the United States, congregations are overwhelmingly made up of people of the same race or ethnicity: all but five of the 1,340 churches in our sample had 75 percent or more members of the same race or ethnicity, and our data confirmed that people are willing to commute longer distances to worship with co-ethnics. As previous research has found, shared languages, traditions, and culture draw people together, even when they do not live in the same area. This is true for Asians Buddhists, Ukrainian orthodox Christians, Hispanic Catholics, and Jews. Two congregations serve as examples, showing that ethnic congregations are both commuter and local. The first is a small Presbyterian church that had just 19 members at the time of the interview. Though the congregation was over 12 years old, none of the members lived close by. The second congregation, a small Korean Presbyterian church, had been in existence for over 20 years with 30 members, all of who lived within walking distance.

As Numrich (2000) noted, that settlement patterns and increased mobility have contributed to ethnic “commuter religious centers” that draw their constituencies from large areas is a particularly strong finding for Asian congregations. Almost one-fifth of suburban commuting congregations were Asian even though Asian congregations comprised only 5 percent of the sample. Also, a number of Asian congregations were likely to be located close to a growing Asian population along the northern border of the city. These neighborhoods also had higher property values and a higher household income than older sections of the central city.

The limitations of this study are worthy of note. The low explanatory value of the logistic regression models ($R^2 < 0.17$) indicates that additional variables account for the differences among the three types of congregations. As such, this study provides only a starting point for understanding congregations’ member proximity and their demographic contexts. Further, the biggest missing variable relates to subjective factors including personal choice: Why do households commute to particular congregations? How much of their decision is related to family religious history, neighborhood ties, culture, language, or personal faith in addition to proximity? Are younger people more likely to switch denominations when choosing a congregation, while ethnic minorities may be willing to drive further to find a specific culture niche?

Furthermore, the regression models also did not suggest the direction of influence between congregations and their neighborhood demographics. Do neighborhood conditions—such as high population density or inexpensive housing values—influence the decision about where to locate a congregation? Is it possible that the presence of congregations, which in poor neighborhoods are known to be one of the most stable institutions, could influence housing and demographic patterns?

Finally, the survey data used here did not provide information about members’ actual addresses. Do they live outside the 10-block radius but still in the same general section of the city with its similar racial composition and demographics, or are they commuting from distant neighborhoods? If they live in the suburbs, are they just over the city boundary in the older, inner-ring suburbs or are they commuting all the way from the newer outer suburbs? The information about where members live in relation to their congregation was based on the report of a single staff member or lay leader. While interviews with multiple representatives of the same congregation indicated high reliability, the proportions of member’s proximity (within 10 blocks, within the

city, or outside of the city limits), were estimates. Subsequent studies might use GIS to map the actual addresses or zip code of members in order to provide more reliable detail about the spatial distribution of members. An interesting study would be to assess how the distribution of members has changed in conjunction with changing neighborhood characteristics.

We also suggest other next steps. Given the social welfare mix of the United States and recent interest in the role of congregations in delivering social services, an important investigation is how members' proximity may affect congregational networks and programs offered. Pervading politicized assumptions hold that contemporary congregations are naturally involved in their surrounding communities, or meet immediate neighborhood needs (McRoberts 2003); studies that further explore the relationship between congregations and their neighborhoods would be most enlightening. Assessing congregations as resident, city commuter, and suburban commuter may prove helpful in understanding why some congregations play a larger role than others in their local or larger communities. Furthermore, exploring congregations in relation to their communities can shed light on the efficacy of policies that promote religious congregations as providers of social services for specific populations.

We offer one further observation. The *neighborhoods* in which the congregations in this study were located—resident, city commuter, and suburban commuter congregations, alike—experienced increased rates of poverty and decreased rates of home ownership between 1970 and 2000, with the exception of some areas immediately downtown. Philadelphia is not alone in these patterns and this raises troubling questions about the sustainability of urban congregations. Congregations and the communities in which they are located are interconnected. In an era of increased pressure for congregations and faith-based entities to care for the nation's poor, attention must be given to the viability of the urban communities in which congregations are located.

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