

CHURCH GROWTH (AND DECLINE)
IN A SOUTHERN CITY

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of the urban setting on the numerical growth and decline of churches in a southern city. Using a typology of urban location developed by Douglas Walrath the paper shows how greatly churches are influenced by their environments. In one type of environment none of the churches were growing, but in other settings all of the churches were either growing or at least on plateaus. The source of this influence appears to be found in the basic structure of mainline Protestant churches in America. They tend to be conservative, neighborhood based organizations, and are composed of entrenched social groups. As such, they resist change when change is necessary and in most cases are not only affected by their settings but are largely controlled by them.

In addition to demonstrating the massive impact of church location on growth and decline the purpose of the study was also to illustrate a case study technique for area study and church planning.

CHURCH GROWTH (AND DECLINE) IN A SOUTHERN CITY

Churches are profoundly affected by their settings. To be sure, they may grow or decline in nearly any urban location, but in some areas the possibilities for growth or decline are clearly better (or worse) than in others. It is also true that good locations for growth may change into poor locations--because urban environments are not static. As housing ages or is revitalized, and as residents age, move away and are replaced by newcomers, the entire character of a neighborhood may undergo a drastic alteration. These changes necessarily affect the church because they reflect changes which are occurring in the population pool from which it draws its members. Churches, however, generally try to ignore the influences of their settings and make plans for growth built on a view of their parish as it once was (Jones and Wilson, 1974: 41, 45, 107). Partially this tendency may stem from ignorance of major trends affecting the city, but it is also fostered by the publication of innumerable books, articles and manuals on church growth and church planning which give little or no attention to the effect of a church's context. The purpose of this analysis is to help balance this one-sided approach to church planning, and also to provide additional understanding of how the church is affected by its demographic setting.

The foundation of the relationship between the church and its surrounding environment is rather obvious. The church exists as a congregation, and the congregation must be drawn from neighborhoods close enough to the church to make it feasible for residents to participate in church activities on a regular basis.

At one time the potential parish of the church was quite small since members had to either walk or use other modes of transportation considerably less convenient for long distance commuting than the automobile. However, today many people are quite willing to drive three, five, ten or even more miles to attend the church of their choice. Yet the long distance commute of over five miles to church is not the norm among Protestants in America. Most still prefer to attend churches that are fairly close (the median distance appears to be between one and three miles [Price, 1980; General Assembly Missions Council, 1976]). After all, attendance at a specific church is not mandatory, so most Americans do not commute nearly as far to church as they do to their jobs. The exceptions, of course, are provided by those churches which offer something unique, such as large and beautiful facilities, an exceptional preacher, specialized ministries, or churches that are organized around a special purpose.¹ But for the most part churches are still locally based organizations, dependent for their membership on the neighborhoods that surround them.

The dependency on surrounding neighborhoods causes churches to largely mirror the population growth patterns occurring in these areas. As more possible constituents become available through the construction of new housing the churches will almost inevitably grow. The reverse is true when population decline occurs (Douglass and Brunner, 1935; Hadaway, 1981) and in many cases the decline in membership may begin prior to an actual decline in population. Membership growth brings with it satisfaction, optimism and the sort of positive feeling which newcomers find attractive (see Roof, et al, 1979). Yet when there are few newcomers available because the population has stabilized, church growth typically slows. Rarely will the membership recognize that the easy growth of previous years was not due to the pastor and their own efforts, so

they are likely to become demoralized and dissatisfied. The once active, optimistic church can easily become the introspective stagnant church. Such a church is not only unattractive to new residents but many of the members may also leave to find a more "dynamic" church. Before long, serious membership decline may develop.

In addition to the problems brought on when population growth ends, churches also tend to suffer when the social composition of their neighborhoods begins to change. Churches find it increasingly difficult to replace members who move away, and the "fit" of the congregation to its surrounding neighborhoods becomes less and less close (see Walrath, 1979: 260). These tendencies all relate to the fact that when a church initially forms it becomes structured around the class character, values and actual residents of the neighborhoods it serves (Schaller, 1975: 51-56; Schaller, 1979: 78-81). Yet the development of this structure is not intrinsically problematic. In fact, the church needs an identity, close-knit friendship groups, and informal rules of dress and behavior, since these elements all contribute to its stability and sense of unity. However, as Schaller (1978: 36, 37) notes, many of the factors which provide unity and identity for the church may help exclude newcomers.

When new residents are not of the same social class, stage in the life cycle, or do not share the same values and life styles as the members who make up the core of the church, these newcomers may feel that the present structure and orientation of the church simply does not meet their needs. The membership, on the other hand, who feel very comfortable with the church are not likely to change in order to accommodate the new residents because they do not understand why the newcomers should feel uncomfortable. And even if new residents felt the church could possibly offer them something they may not be

accepted by long-time members because of prejudice toward their age group, life style, social class or simply because the bonds within informal friendship groups are so strong that newcomers have great difficulty breaking through (see Schaller, 1979: 80-81).

These problems are magnified greatly when the neighborhoods are changing very rapidly, such as when racial transition occurs. If a pattern of "white flight" develops church and Sunday School class rolls tend to quickly dwindle, but the members who remain in nearby neighborhoods or who commute back to the church still cling to their image of the church as it once was. Potential newcomers are now of another race and the barriers between "we" and "they" (Greeley, 1972: 229-230) become even greater. Radical change is necessary in the identity of the church and new avenues of entry for newcomers are essential if a decline is ever to be halted. Yet most churches do not react in time, they dwindle and die or they simply move to new neighborhoods where racial transition is not yet a problem.

In summary, because the church is a conservative, neighborhood based organization, composed of entrenched social groups, it tends not only to be affected by its context, but is largely controlled by the character of that context and the changes that occur within it. The degree of this control needs to be better understood, and we hope to show how the impact varies in its strength and consequences within a variety of church settings.

A TYPOLOGICAL APPROACH

There are many possible approaches to the problem addressed in this paper. Several recent studies (Hadaway, 1981; McKinney, 1979; and Roof et al., 1979) have used correlation/regression techniques in order to estimate the

overall variance in church membership change explained by different sets of demographic indicators. While extremely valuable, such studies give only the global view and do not show how the impact of the demographic environment varies among different areas of the city, nor do they show why certain churches fail to fit the predominant pattern. In order to gain additional insight into the relationship between church growth and the local context it is necessary to first partition the city into its major types of environments. Each area can then be considered in depth in terms of church membership trends and major demographic characteristics.

Fortunately, Walrath (1977; 1979) has already constructed an excellent typology of the major church environments which is easily adapted to our study. The set of twelve types was developed from previous work in social ecology and social stratification, and is very similar (though somewhat more elaborate in its total number of types) to earlier models of urban development such as the concentric zone model (Park and Burgess, 1925; Burgess, 1929). Nine of the twelve types refer to metropolitan areas, beginning with the midtown location (central business district) and ending with fringe settlements which are "former rural settlements that have recently been overrun by metropolitan expansion" (Walrath, 1979: 255). Beyond the fringe settlements is what Walrath calls the nonmetropolitan region. Here the last three types are found--independent cities, rural villages, and rural settlements. A more complete discussion of Walrath's types can be found in Understanding Church Growth and Decline (Walrath, 1979), Small Churches are Beautiful (Walrath, 1977) and in several reports published by the Synod of Albany, Reformed Church in America (Walrath, 1969; 1974).

While Walrath's typology was developed and tested among churches in upstate New York it should have much wider utility, at least in those cities

with definable urban centers.² In the present study we have employed the typology in a much different region, the South, and in a city where church decline is not the rule, as it was in Albany, New York. Our data are on Southern Baptist churches located in Shelby County, Tennessee.

The methods employed in this study are quite simple. Addresses were obtained for all of the Southern Baptist churches located in Memphis and in the surrounding countryside of Shelby County. Each of the 120 churches was visited individually and photographs were taken of the church and the characteristic housing nearby. In addition, detailed descriptions were made of the setting surrounding each church and these descriptions supplemented by 1960 and 1970 Census data on the tracts where the churches were located.

In order to construct our measure of membership growth, resident membership figures were collected on each church from 1970 to 1980. Various procedures were possible, but we decided to develop a three-category-ordinal scale to represent membership change. Each church was classified as growing, on a plateau, or declining. This made it possible to clearly represent our membership data in a cross-tabular form against Walrath's typology of church locations, and also allowed use of all of the years for which data were collected. Rather than measuring membership change as the difference between two fixed points in time we were able to look for trends. Thus, if a church had declined severely between 1970 and 1972 but had grown steadily each year since that time we classified the church as growing, even if its membership in 1980 was less than its membership in 1970. Likewise, churches that had grown in the first few years of measurement, but which had leveled off in later years were classified as on a plateau, rather than as growing churches. Also, very new churches could be included, even though data was only available for the past few years.

Some borderline cases existed which were somewhat difficult to classify using this technique, but in most cases it was readily apparent how to code each church. We feel the resulting classification is quite accurate on the whole and adequately represents the present direction of the church. Of 118 churches for which good data are available, 38 are growing, 40 are on a plateau, and 40 are declining.³

We have used Walrath's typology to show the percentage of churches growing, plateaued or declining in different urban environments and also employed our detailed descriptions of the churches and their settings to show why areas differ so greatly in the likelihood of having growing churches. Also, the information on church settings was used to partially explain why certain churches vary drastically from the overall pattern in their particular type of environment.

RESULTS

An Overall View

Memphis, Tennessee, like other large cities in the United States has experienced rapid suburban expansion over the past 25 years and also has had great difficulty maintaining a viable central business district. In fact, Memphis has had more problems than most cities in trying to keep its downtown alive, and despite several revitalization projects,⁴ few people of any race venture into downtown at night. During the day the central business district is fairly busy, but white shoppers are almost non-existent. The few Whites to be seen downtown can be found primarily in government buildings clustered at the north end of town.

Another important characteristic which Memphis shares with other cities, and especially those in the South and East, is its very large population of

Blacks (around 40 percent of the total population). Typically, few neighborhoods are integrated so the city can be accurately divided into black areas and white areas (see Roof, VanValey and Wilcox, 1977: 833). The map presented in figure 1 indicates the major areas of black concentration in Memphis.

"Figure 1 About Here"

Because of the overall decline in downtown Memphis and the large concentration of Blacks around the central business district, no Southern Baptist churches are to be found in Walrath's midtown location and only two are present in the inner city. It is only as we move into the inner-urban neighborhoods that we begin to find large numbers of Southern Baptist churches. As shown in table 1, 87 percent of these churches are declining and none are growing, so it is likely that many downtown and inner-city Southern Baptist churches have long since either relocated or actually died.⁵

"Table 1 About Here"

The overall trend in table 1 is quite apparent. Growth is extremely unlikely in the older neighborhoods closest to downtown and then becomes progressively more likely as we move towards the suburban fringe. In fact, where new housing is presently being constructed, none of the churches are declining and the large majority are growing. Clearly, in Memphis the impact of urban location on church growth is massive, and is almost deterministic within the metropolitan area.

Further out, in those regions beyond fringe villages, population growth is more uneven and distance to downtown becomes less of a factor in predicting church growth. Few areas are really good for growth and few areas are so bad that decline is inevitable. As a result, the churches in Walrath's last four

categories are fairly evenly divided between those that are growing and those that are on a plateau.

City Locations (Non-Suburban)

The first four categories in table 1 fall within what we will call city locations. In Memphis this is the area within the Interstate 240 beltway which surrounds the city.

As was indicated earlier, Southern Baptist churches no longer are present within the midtown location (or the central business district). In fact, Memphis has very few churches of the "old first church" type (see Jones and Wilson, 1974) left in downtown. Most of the large, old, stately churches are located at least a mile east of downtown on major transportation arteries. In addition to the poor condition of downtown and the lack of white neighborhoods closeby, an important reason for the absence of Southern Baptist churches in this area is the relatively poor highway system in Memphis. Unlike many cities where downtown churches can remain viable through interstate highways converging on the central business district, downtown Memphis has been largely inaccessible because of a series of lawsuits that halted interstate construction. It has been only in the past few years that alternate routes have been constructed, but still it is not easy to reach downtown from many city and suburban locations.

In the inner city of Memphis there are only two Southern Baptist churches and both are really on the borderline between the inner-city and inner-urban neighborhoods. Much of the inner city is dilapidated, large tracts have been leveled by urban renewal and as can be seen in figure one it is almost totally Black in population, so we would expect all of the Southern Baptist churches in

this area to be declining. One church is, but the growing congregation is not a typical Southern Baptist church.

Bellevue Baptist, although located over one mile from downtown, in some ways approximates an "old first church." It is extremely large with a total membership of nearly 11,000 and is pastored by Adrian Rogers, who was President of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1979 and is an unusually gifted preacher. In addition, Bellevue has extensive educational and recreational facilities which are far superior to all but a few churches in the entire city.

Bellevue is also located among small office buildings, businesses, hospitals, and schools rather than in the midst of dilapidated housing--so people feel safe attending the church, even at night. Its primary problem is the fact that few members live anywhere near the building. Bellevue draws its members from all over the city and to do so it must provide something unique. That something is primarily the pastor, who was able to quickly turn around membership declines suffered over several years before he came to the church.

The other church in the inner city dropped in membership from 1,200 to 600 in ten years. It is located in an increasingly dilapidated-appearing neighborhood which is experiencing racial transition and is nearly surrounded by areas which are over 90 percent Black in population.

Beyond the inner city are the inner-urban neighborhoods where 87 percent of the Southern Baptist churches are declining, 13 percent are plateaued and none are growing. This area contains 15 Southern Baptist churches and roughly corresponds to the "zone of workingmen's homes" in the concentric zone model of urban development.

Nearly all of these churches are located on major thoroughfares in the city and many are large, half being over 1,000 in resident membership. Being

quite visible and accessible, such churches tend to draw their members from a fairly wide area. The problem, however, is that the area is not wide enough to include any neighborhoods where population growth is occurring. In fact, many of the census tracts in inner-urban neighborhoods actually declined rather severely in population between 1960 and 1970 and probably continued to do so over the past decade. Also, racial transition has begun around a number of these churches, especially those located near the large bands of black concentration that border the center of Memphis to the north and the south (see figure 1). For instance, the percent White dropped by 70 percent in one census tract and 40 percent in another between 1960 and 1970. The churches in each tract are declining severely.

The two "exceptions" to the decline in this region are not really exceptions since both are only now plateaued after declining in previous years. One church has about 1,000 members and is on a back street in a census tract that declined 27 percent in population between 1960 and 1970. Many of its members drive in from the suburbs and it is considering relocating. The other is a new church (started in 1968) with only 100 members, most of whom are older, long-time residents of this community. The church began when another Southern Baptist church in this area moved to the suburbs (it was in the interstate right-of-way). Rather than joining other churches, the remnant of members still in this area decided to start a new church. It remains stable but with an aging membership decline may not be far away.

The region of outer-urban neighborhoods is the final "city" location. Here nearly 90 percent of the churches are either plateaued or declining, but membership growth is at least possible, although not likely. Unlike the inner-urban neighborhoods, population decline is not yet a problem, but in several areas extensive racial transition has led to the closing of churches.

The twenty-four churches in this large area of Memphis are spread among three relatively distinct regions. First, there are nine located rather closely together in the working class neighborhoods which comprise the northern third of area 4 (see figure 1). Most of these churches are on small side streets and all save one are under 1,000 in membership. Lack of population growth, the natural tendency of neighborhoods to become more heterogeneous in population as they age (Schaller, 1975: 51-56) and a possible oversupply of churches are the most problematic factors in this area. However, as can be seen, racial transition has begun to occur in the western edge of these neighborhoods and one church already has declined to the point that the building was recently sold to a black congregation.

In the southern section of area 4, nine other Southern Baptist churches are located in a region of similar lower-middle class and middle class housing. Here racial transition has been even more rapid as Blacks have moved steadily outward from the inner city along a band of similar land-use. (This movement can be seen in figure 1.) Block busting combined with almost hysterical white flight led to neighborhoods becoming 100 percent Black in as little as three or four years. As a result, several very large churches suffered serious membership declines and finally moved farther out, selling their buildings to black congregations.

In the middle part of area 4, most of the churches are quite large (over 1,000 membership) regionally based churches. All but one are on major thoroughfares and none are growing. This is an affluent section of Memphis where Southern Baptist churches are not the norm, and although these regional congregations have good facilities, they probably are losing out to larger and newer churches located near interstate highways at the edge of the suburbs.

Suburban Locations

City suburbs are older suburban areas where rapid growth usually began in the 1940s and continued at least into the late 1950s. In Memphis this type of development is located primarily in three areas, and each is across major geographical barriers from what we have called city locations. To the north, and on the other side of the Wolf River and Interstate 240, is the suburb of Frayser. And to the south, also across the I-240 loop, are two other older suburbs.

In the city suburbs of Memphis churches are predominantly on stable plateaus rather than growing or declining. This trend likely relates to the rapid population growth of these suburbs and its relatively sudden end when land for new housing was no longer available (Zikmund, 1975). In nearly all cities suburban development has tended to be extremely rapid (see Fava, 1975: 11-13), and in most cases much more so than was the development of city locations. New churches have been started almost as quickly as new neighborhoods emerge and tended to grow extremely rapidly. Yet when population ends it does so suddenly and just as suddenly the suburban churches cease to grow. Few churches realize that previous growth was due primarily to demographic factors so they tend to turn inward and blame themselves or their pastors. Rather than beginning to truly reach out to the unchurched people in their communities many of the suburban churches in Memphis and elsewhere fail to regain their earlier optimism and vitality and thus languish at plateau levels before eventually declining.

This scenario fits Frayser and the eastern city suburb south of town. However, as can be seen in figure 1, the city suburb directly south of downtown has experienced extensive racial transition. Obviously, racial transition is no longer a challenge for only "city" churches, in Memphis, Atlanta,

Washington, D.C. and other cities with a large black component. Black suburbanization is a major trend of much greater significance, at least today, than is the so-called "back-to-the-city" movement of whites⁶ (see Spain, Reid and Long, 1980; Birch, 1975). In this particular city suburb, one large Southern Baptist church is declining severely and several other churches have already relocated to newer white suburbs.

Metropolitan suburbs are relatively new suburban areas where rapid growth began in the 1950s and continued into the 1960s and early 1970s. In Memphis 15 of the 19 metropolitan suburban churches are located in the two rather densely populated suburbs south of town.

Being newer than city suburbs, population growth has only recently ended in area 6 and, as can be seen in figure 1, these areas border fringe suburbs where population growth is still occurring. Racial transition has not yet become a problem except in the western part of Whitehaven, and even here only one church which is close to the border of the all-black area is suffering. The other Southern Baptist churches in the path of black migration moved in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In general, the neighborhoods in area 6 where Southern Baptist churches are present remain fairly homogeneous and stable.

Because of this overall situation, the churches in metropolitan suburbs are much more likely to grow than those in city suburbs, especially those located closest to areas where new housing is still being constructed (region 7). Oddly enough, however, an equal percentage in areas 5 and 6 are declining. Most of these churches are in Whitehaven (none are in the northern suburb) and seem to be affected by another suburban problem--the tendency to overbuild large regionally oriented (as opposed to neighborhood oriented) churches. Massive population growth fueled the building programs of these

congregations and each built large and even massive facilities in highly visible locations on major transportation arteries. For a while membership growth was as rapid as population expansion, but in the early 1970s both came to an almost complete halt.

As is often the case, one church in Whitehaven has emerged from "the pack" as an institutionally exceptional church and has not only avoided decline in this stagnant suburb, but is actually growing extremely rapidly. Over the past decade Broadway Baptist has increased from 2,000 to 3,700 in membership. Two other churches in the metropolitan suburbs have also doubled or almost doubled in membership since 1970, but each is in a much better environment than is Broadway. Being located near areas where population growth continues and on transportation arteries leading to these areas, the two churches are growing rapidly and should continue to do so.

As we move to the fringe suburbs the church environment changes completely. Here new housing is currently being built and population growth is enormous. This category does not include small towns that are being surrounded by new housing, but instead refers to totally new subdivisions. In Memphis these new suburbs are being built on all three sides of the city and in all areas church growth is the rule. Seventy-three percent of the churches are growing, 27 percent are plateaued, and none are declining.

Six of the eleven growing churches are new, having been formed from the late 1960s to 1978. Some have already built fairly impressive buildings while two others are housed in very temporary-appearing structures of corrugated steel. In addition to the new churches, two congregations moved from locations in the city to the fringe suburbs and constructed very large impressive buildings. Both are growing rapidly. The final three are older churches located on

former rural roads. Each of these made the difficult step of accepting newcomers and becoming active growing churches rather than trying to recapture the past.

Of the four fringe suburban churches that are plateaued, two are churches that moved from inner-urban neighborhoods and have not adjusted well enough to their new settings in order to grow (see Schaller, 1979: 80). The other two are in neighborhoods where population growth is only recently past. They hit their plateaus early, possibly because they were too dependent on new residents coming to them, rather than vice versa.

Metropolitan Fringe Locations

The metropolitan fringe, which does not include fringe suburbs, is composed of former rural towns, villages and settlements that have been engulfed by growth of the metropolitan region over the past ten years. Here population growth has been fairly rapid but in most cases it has been greatly influenced by the preexisting structure and social characteristics of the town.

The first of the two types in this category are fringe villages, which are somewhat larger than fringe settlements. Two of these villages exist on the periphery of Memphis, and both have been incorporated. Population growth has been fairly rapid and now the still existing "downtowns" are surrounded by suburban developments. Because population growth has been substantial and also because it has been rather gradual and sustained, the churches in the fringe villages are nearly all experiencing healthy growth. Two of the growing churches are very new and are located in new suburban neighborhoods rather than in the village center. Another church was formed in the early 1960s, years before the most recent neighborhoods had been built, and has grown steadily to its current membership of around 500. The other two growing churches and the

one that is on a plateau are all very old churches. The former two have evidently adjusted quite well to the influx of newcomers and the church located at the village center of Germantown has built large new facilities for worship services and Sunday School. The third church, which is located in a village center, has not grown in years and remains a stable, somber-appearing church that has failed to capitalize on the population growth that has occurred all around it.

Fringe settlements are formerly quite small villages which are slowly becoming part of the larger metropolitan area. In Memphis, population growth around these villages is spotty and uneven, and as a result membership growth is not the rule. Some churches in such areas have the option of accepting new "suburban" newcomers, but a few others are so small and rural that they really do not have this option. The three growing churches are all very old congregations in the center of "town." Ellendale Baptist, one of these churches, is a classic example of a formerly rural church which has made the difficult adjustment to rapid population growth. It is constructing a large new sanctuary and has grown from 360 members to 750 in only six years.

The one church that is plateaued is located on a formerly rural road. It is a very small, older congregation away from the settlement center and appears too much like a small, old-fashioned, rural church to attract the middle and upper middle-class newcomers that are moving nearby. The two declining churches are in even worse situations. Both are very small, nondescript, cheaply constructed, rural-appearing churches located on what is now a major highway that accesses relatively high-priced homes and condominium developments. These churches seem very much out of place and each has declined about 70 percent in membership during the 1970s.

Non-Metropolitan Region

Like many other counties which make up SMSAs, Shelby county is quite large and contains numerous towns and villages that relate only minimally to the Memphis metropolitan area. They are independent for all practical purposes, and surrounded by sparsely populated rural environments. Church growth is not at all predictable in such settings and is largely determined by factors unique to the particular town.

Two fairly large independent cities exist, one at the far north of the county and the other at the far east. In Millington, the northern city, little recent population growth has occurred, and as a result only one of the three churches is presently growing. This particular church is quite large (1,000 members), attractive and is located near the center of town in a very prominent and visible setting. A second church is fairly new, located at the edge of town and is on a plateau. It is fairly attractive, but it is also small and its location would only be an advantage if population growth was occurring nearby, which it is not. The third church is almost out of town on a major road near a very large Naval base. This small rural church has not been kept up well, appears to be declining and is, having dropped from 150 members to 53 in ten years.

Collierville, the city in the east, has been growing in population. Of the two churches here, one is near the center of town in what looks like an inner-urban neighborhood. It is on a plateau with around 1,000 members, even though it probably is the most attractive Southern Baptist church in Shelby county. Possibly its side street location in the center of this city does not make it visible enough and accessible enough to new residents. The other church in this city is a former mission of the first. It is quite new, growing, and is located in the midst of this city's growing suburbs.

In rural villages we begin to find older small-town churches, ranging in size from 90 to just below 400 in membership. These areas have not benefited from population growth occurring around the metropolitan center and in fact most of the rural tracts in Shelby county have declined in population between 1960 and 1970. The churches, however, which are all located in or near the village centers, are largely stable in their memberships. Declines of earlier years have largely bottomed out and a few churches have been able to overcome their relatively stagnant setting with a vital institutional life.

Churches in rural settlements are very similar to those in rural villages. In fact the primary difference is that churches in rural settlements are located along country roads outside the small villages that dot the countryside. One older church, which has recently built a new building, is growing, probably because some new residents are moving in, but also because the pastor and the church are making a deliberate effort to reach their community. The other three churches have long been on stable plateaus.

CONCLUSIONS

Church growth and decline are of great concern to church and denominational leaders today. This concern does not typically stem from a worry that the growth of some "superchurch," such as Bellevue Baptist in Memphis, is unauthentic, but rather that many, and in some cases most, of a denomination's urban churches are declining seriously. There is clearly a need for greater understanding of why some churches decline and others grow, and there are many approaches to the problem. In this study we have tried to show how it is possible to look at an urban area in terms of its constituent environments, and how each type of setting has a different impact on the numerical growth and decline of churches.

Using Memphis as an example it was shown that church growth is quite unlikely in the downtown, inner city and even in older established neighborhoods. However, as we move outward from the city to the suburbs and to areas where new housing is currently being constructed, membership growth becomes progressively more likely. These findings underscore the tremendous impact of urban location on the church, an impact which cannot be ignored if church planning is to be realistic. As was seen in Memphis, even in the case of a growing denomination, there were areas where none of the churches were growing and there were also areas where none of the churches were declining. Clearly, a church on a plateau in an inner-urban neighborhood must be treated differently than a church on a plateau in a fringe village. Both are atypical, of course, but one is unusual because it is not growing and the other because it is not declining.

Although location within one of Walrath's environment types goes far in explaining why churches grow or decline, it is also clear that in a given type there will be exceptions. To be sure, some of this variation is due to institutional factors. One church may have an unusually gifted preacher who is able to attract new members through his own personal charisma. But it is also true that substantial differences may exist in the "quality" of church environment within a specific type. Racial transition, for instance, while typically more a problem for churches in inner-urban neighborhoods may greatly affect certain portions of outer-urban neighborhoods and even suburbs. Likewise, a very abrupt end to housing construction in a particular suburb may account for such an area being less productive for membership growth than similar appearing suburbs in other parts of the city. So it should not be assumed that a church is "sick" simply because it is located in a suburb and happens not to be growing.

Each church must be evaluated in terms of what is actually happening to its parish, and how other churches are responding which are in very similar situations. This is not to say that institutional factors have no influence on church growth and decline. They clearly do. However, it should be understood that demographic location provides a baseline for the growth of a church, making it that much easier or that much harder.

The purpose of this paper was not just to demonstrate the massive impact of church settings on growth and decline. A further goal was to illustrate a technique for area study and planning. Case studies such as this can be conducted on any city using Walrath's typology and the procedures employed in this paper. Used as a basis for area planning and strategy this type of study gives a clear overview of what is occurring in a city with respect to membership growth, concentration of churches, and demographic trends affecting congregations. It also provides clues for further investigation, such as churches that are growing when they should be declining or churches that are declining when they should be growing.

FOOTNOTES

¹Another type of church which draws its members from long distances is what Schaller (1975) calls the ex-neighborhood church. Former residents of surrounding neighborhoods have moved to suburban areas far from the church, but still commute back for church services. As Wagner (1979a: 284) notes, "It becomes an island of one kind of people in the midst of a community of another kind of people." This church, however, does not escape the influence of community transition for long, and usually within five years (Wagner, 1979b: 30) it dies or relocates.

²Walrath's typology and the models on which it is based would seem to have less utility in urban centers which are essentially interlocking multiple nuclei (Harris and Ullman, 1945). The Los Angeles Metropolitan area is probably the best example of such an urban center.

³Two churches moved from city to suburban locations several years before the end of our measurement period. In both cases it was not possible to establish a trend at their new location nor did it seem legitimate to treat them as having remained at their old location. For this reason they were dropped from the analysis.

⁴Like other large cities Memphis has placed convention facilities near downtown and has made an uncovered "mall" of main street. The success of such attempts in truly revitalizing downtown has been minimal.

⁵Walrath (1979: 260) notes that the lack of "mainline, predominantly white, Protestant" congregations in the inner city is typical, and that most died, merged or relocated before World War II.

⁶Since 1970 there has been an increase in black-to-white housing transition in central cities, reflecting a "back-to-the-city" movement to some degree. However, white to black transition is still more common and the percent Black in central cities increased from 20.5 percent in 1970 to 22.4 percent in 1977 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1978). In traditionally white suburbs, on the other hand, as Spain, Reid and Long (1980) note, the number of Blacks replacing Whites is also higher and the percent Black in the suburbs has increased from 4.6 percent in 1970 to 5.6 percent in 1977.

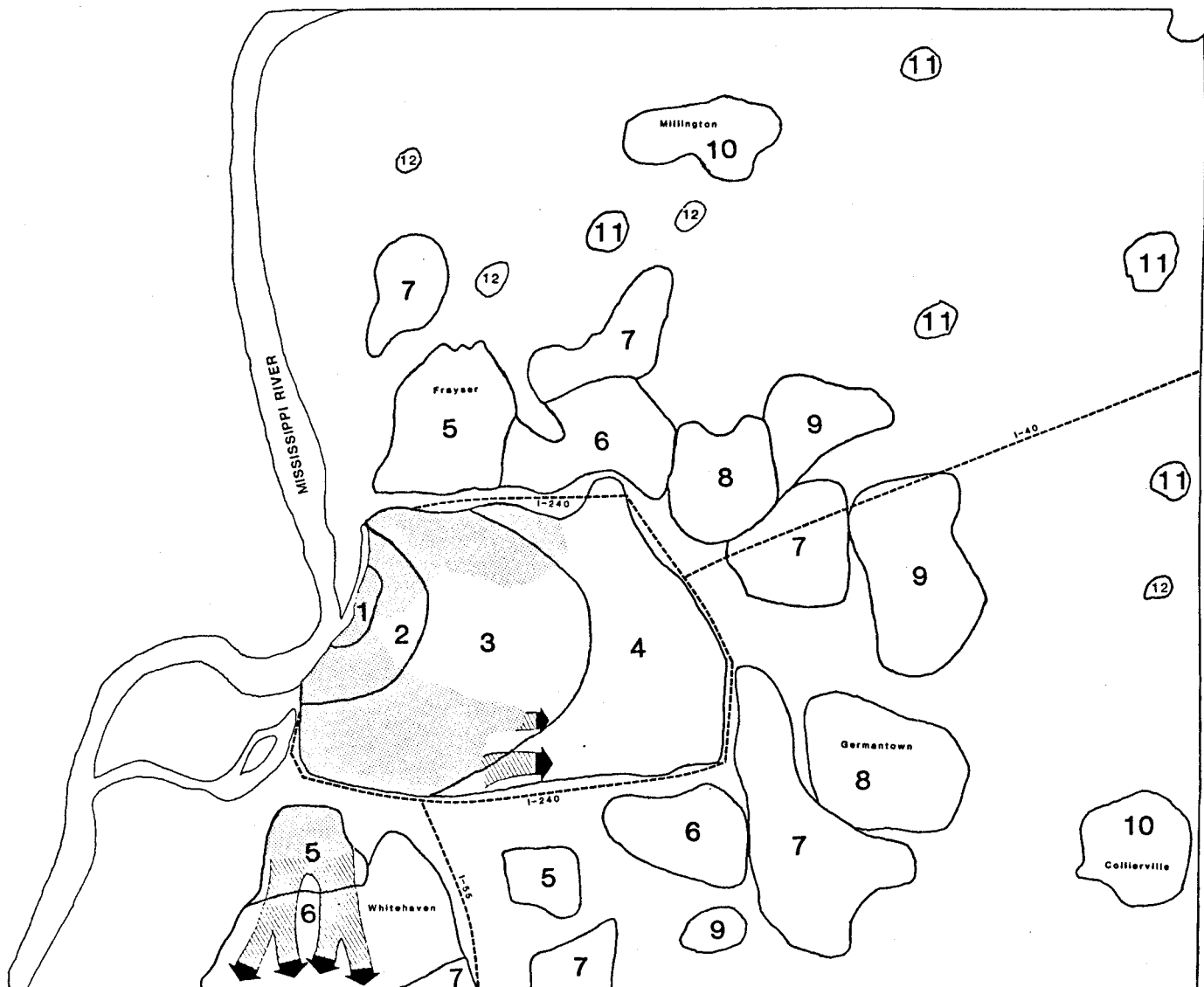
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FIGURE 1

TYPES OF URBAN LOCATIONS IN SHELBY COUNTY



City Locations

1. Midtown
2. Inner City
3. Inner Urban Neighborhood
4. Outer Urban Neighborhood

Suburban Locations

5. City Suburb
6. Metropolitan Suburb
7. Fringe Suburb

Fringe Locations

8. Fringe Village
9. Fringe Settlement

Nonmetropolitan

10. Independent City
11. Rural Village
12. Rural Settlement

Predominantly Black
Areas in 1970



Areas of Extensive
Racial Transition
(White to Black)
1970 - 1980



TABLE 1
CHURCH GROWTH BY URBAN LOCATION

	(1) Midtown (N=0)	(2) Inner City (N=2)	(3) Inner- Urban Neigh- borhood (N=15)	(4) Outer- Urban Neigh- borhood (N=24)	(5) City Suburb (N=17)	(6) Metro- politan Suburb (N=19)	(7) Fringe Suburb (N=15)	(8) Fringe Village (N=6)	(9) Fringe Settle- ment (N=6)	(10) Inde- pendent City (N=5)	(11) Rural Village (N=5)	(12) Rural Settle- ment (N=4)
Growing	0.0%	50.0%	0.0%	12.5%	11.8%	42.1%	73.3%	83.3%	50.0%	40.0%	40.0%	25.0%
Plateau	0.0	0.0	13.3	45.8	52.9	21.0	26.7	16.7	16.7	40.0	60.0	75.0
Declining	0.0	50.0	86.7	41.7	35.3	36.8	0.0	0.0	33.3	20.0	0.0	0.0
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Gamma = $-.52$, $p .001$. If only types 1-8 are included, Gamma = $-.64$.