# Congregational Responses to Growing Urban Diversity in a White Ethnic Denomination

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*How do congregations from a white ethnic denomination respond to growing urban diversity? Using an ecological perspective, we examine 14 Christian Reformed congregations in Southeast Grand Rapids, Michigan over a 30-year time period (1970 to 2000). We track neighborhood composition, residential patterns of congregation members, and congregation membership totals. As white residents declined in urban neighborhoods, congregations from this historically Dutch denomination had difficulty sustaining themselves as neighborhood churches. Tracing the history of these congregations revealed churches reaching beyond their neighborhoods for members as the surroundings changed. Such activities resulted in niche overlap, heightened competition, and jeopardized organizational sustainability. Older, more traditional churches in the most dramatically changing neighborhoods saw membership plummet. Newer, more suburban congregations showed greater stability. Fastest growing were mission churches originally formed to serve non-Dutch constituencies but now attracting diverse members from a wide area. Implementing organizational ecology theory, our conclusions address issues of adaptation, institutional interrelationships, and the contingent nature of competitive advantage. Keywords: organizational ecology, congregations, neighborhood change, denomination, ethnic.*

Grand Rapids, Michigan is typical of many Northern industrial cities. A burgeoning industrial base in the nineteenth century attracted a steady stream of immigrants. Early immigrants were Dutch, Polish, Lithuanian, and German, among others. The character of the city traces its roots to these early white ethnics, most notably the Dutch. By mid-twentieth century, the complexion of the city was changing. African Americans immigrated north in increasing numbers to industrial, rust belt cities like Grand Rapids. They settled largely in working class neighborhoods on the southeast side of the city. In later decades, Hispanic immigrants would follow a similar path. This changing complexion had profound social consequences. A familiar process of "invasion-succession" reshaped urban neighborhoods. As nonwhite residents, especially African Americans, moved into a neighborhood, white residents relocated to outlying areas. This process, aided institutionally by banks and real estate agencies, led to a type of hypersegregation in U.S. residential life (Massey and Denton 1993). Today, with a population of approximately 200,000, nearly 40 percent of whom are nonwhite, the city of Grand Rapids is diverse but largely segregated. The purpose of this study is to consider the religious implications of growing urban diversity in Grand Rapids. How do congregations from a historically Dutch denomination respond to ethnically changing neighborhoods?

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Like residential life, religious life in the United States is largely segregated (Emerson and Smith 2000). New evidence suggests that congregations do more than reflect racial residential segregation. Evangelical Protestant congregations in particular, with their strong in-group ties and conservative political orientations, contribute to segregation (Blanchard 2007). While there is a lengthy history of studies connecting congregation and community (e.g., Ammerman 1997; Douglass 1927; Eiesland 2000; McRoberts 2003; Wilson and Davis 1966), few studies mine the differences occurring within congregations of a single denomination in the same geographic space. Prior research also says little about the consequences of urban diversity for religious groups with a distinct ethnic heritage.

Drawing on organizational ecology literature, we examine a population of Christian Reformed congregations (an ethnically Dutch, conservative Protestant denomination) in Southeast Grand Rapids between 1970 and 2000. A unique combination of data from census tracts, church membership directories, denominational yearbooks, and focus group interviews allow us to probe the competitive dynamics facing congregations in a changing community. We trace the transition that most of the older, more traditional churches went through from being specialist organizations to generalist organizations. Changing neighborhood compositions drove many churches to reach beyond their neighborhood of origin for members. The resulting condition of niche overlap raised competitive pressures and threatened organizational sustainability. The future of congregations in changing communities is an issue of significance across the United States. Using the concept of organizational niches, we bring new theoretical attention to this salient topic.

## An Ecological Approach to Congregations

Organizational ecology provides an ideal basis to explore the interaction of organizations and environments. The starting point for organizational ecology is with populations of organizations. Michael Hannan and John Freeman (1977) explained "a population of organizations consists of all the organizations within a particular boundary that have a common form" (p. 936). Applied to religion, congregations from the same denomination operating within a geographic region readily fit the concept of population (see Scheitle and Dougherty 2008). These congregations are subject to the same environmental forces. Like animal species in the natural world, each population of organizations relies on a different set of resources. The resources needed for survival define a population's niche. For religious organizations, people are the essential resource. Religious groups cater to different types of people. An African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church does not serve the same people as a Greek Orthodox church, for example, even if two such congregations sit side-by-side. AME and Greek Orthodox churches occupy different niches.

Organizational niches are multidimensional. Beliefs, rituals, and other elements of religion represent one resource dimension for religious organizations (Scheitle 2007). Because individuals develop lasting religious preferences (Sherkat 2001), picking a place of worship is not arbitrary. People gravitate to congregations where they find theology, liturgy, and structure familiar. Part of the reason that AME and Greek Orthodox churches draw different members is the theological traditions of these two Christian denominations. But the ethnic labels in these denominational titles attest that religious groups are more than gatherings of like-minded people. They are gatherings of like people. The composition of voluntary organizations varies on demographic dimensions such as age, gender, and socioeconomic characteristics (McPherson 1983). Demographic factors likewise define niches of religious organizations (Scheitle 2007). Since voluntary organizations are most successful at attracting and retaining members central to their niche, a high degree of internal homogeneity results (Popielarz and McPherson 1995). The tendency toward homophily in congregations is well recognized. As Michael Emerson and Christian Smith (2000) assert, "individual congregations tend to be made up of people

from similar geographic locations, similar socioeconomic statuses, similar ethnicities, and, perhaps first and foremost, predominantly the same race" (p. 142). Indeed, race divides American congregations in more dramatic fashion than age or social class (Dougherty 2003).

The concept of organizational niche offers a useful theoretical basis for understanding the competitive dynamics associated with changing environmental conditions. Two additional concepts from organizational ecology are important toward this end. The first is niche width. The second is niche overlap.

### *Niche Width*

Organizations differ in the extent to which they extract resources from a wide or narrow niche (Hannan and Freeman 1977). A lone Greek Orthodox congregation in a community would likely cater to all religious Greeks of Orthodox Christian background, without regard to age, gender, income, education, or proximity in the community. Hence, on many demographic variables, this congregation serves a wide niche. Since niches are multidimensional, organizations may operate within a wide niche on some dimensions, while being relatively narrow on other dimensions. So it is with the Greek Orthodox congregation in our example. Its wide appeal on age, income, education, and proximity is combined with a narrow appeal on ethnicity and theological tradition. When niche dimensions like race/ethnicity and theology are correlated, it narrows the niche of an organization (McPherson 1983). The coupling of race/ethnicity and theology is prominent in the religious environment. Just as religious Greeks are likely to be Orthodox Christians, African Americans overwhelmingly identify as Baptist, Methodist, or Pentecostal (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990); and U.S. Hispanics remain largely Catholic (Levitt 2002). This sorting of religious groups by cultural background points to another important distinction: specialist versus generalist organizations.

Specialist organizations depend on a narrow set of resources. They exist within a narrow niche. Generalist organizations, on the other hand, occupy a broad niche. We referenced above the likelihood of religious groups to specialize by theology and ethnicity, but there are numerous other mechanisms for specialization. Many congregations at their inception specialize geographically. The parish model of the Roman Catholic Church is a classic example. Historically, many Protestant denominations followed a similar pattern. Church names reflect geographic specialization: Fourth Street Presbyterian, Maple Avenue Methodist, City Park Baptist, etc. Today, Protestant congregations, especially evangelical, are far less likely to operate on a parish model. The 1998 National Congregations Study (Chaves 1999) documents that the typical evangelical congregation in the United States has more adherents drive 30+ minutes to get to church than can walk there within 10 minutes. Instead of geographic specialization, they may specialize by age, social class, worship style, or some other demographic or religious characteristics.

Specialization has advantages, especially in relatively stable environments (Hannan and Freeman 1977). The narrow focus of specialists raises the appeal of these organizations for persons within the segment of the niche being served. Christopher Scheitle (2007) demonstrated the benefits associated with specialization in 13 Christian denominations. Greater religious and demographic specialization corresponded with membership growth, and evangelical groups were more specialized than mainline groups. The benefit of specialization can also be seen in America's ethnic religious groups, which show high levels of commitment and in-group solidarity (Dudley and Roozen 2001; Sherkat 2001). The rise of "seeker churches" to mega-church stature is a further example. Churches like Willow Creek Community Church, now averaging some 20,000 in weekend worship, are generalist in regard to location (drawing attendees from a wide area), but highly specialized in targeting a specific demographic group: middle class Baby Boomers (Sargeant 2000). A critical clarification about specialist organizations is that the advantage of specialization is environmentally contingent. Specialist organizations are said to be more "fit" (i.e., more likely to survive and thrive), but only so long

as environmental conditions remain favorable to the specialization (Popielarz and Neal 2007). When environmental conditions change, new competitive pressures often emerge.

### *Niche Overlap*

Organizational ecology assumes a delicate balance between organizations and resource environments. Resources are finite. Consequently, in a population of organizations, two or more organizations may come to overlap in the niches they occupy. In religious groups, niche overlap involves relying on the same potential pool of members. The more niches overlap, the more competitive the quest for resources becomes in affected organizations (Dobrev, Kim, and Hannan 2001). A crowded environment means fewer resources for all. The number of organizations in an organizational population drives niche overlap and competition. Changes in the availability of key resources likewise can push organizations into a position of niche overlap with increased competition. Our interest is in this latter circumstance.

Changing environments can mean changes in resource availability. Given the correlation of race and religion, confronting racial changes in an environment proves particularly challenging for congregations. Facing heightened competition for scarce resources, how do congregations respond? Ethnographic work by Nancy Ammerman (1997) on congregations in changing communities provides answers. From an organizational ecology perspective, it is not surprising that the congregations in Ammerman's (1997) study were unlikely to attempt radical change. Few successfully adapted to serve new community constituents. Staying local and adapting to attract new neighborhood residents requires a shift in the resource base of a congregation. Of course this is unlikely. There is incredible risk in attempting to serve a different niche. Legitimacy for organizations is niche specific and this creates strong inertial tendencies (Hannan and Freeman 1984). For the few congregations that do succeed, neither theology nor denomination routinely aid adaptation. The actual process of change for congregations must come from within congregations themselves (Ammerman 1997; Becker 1998; Emerson and Woo 2006). A litany of other research testifies to the difficulty of congregational adaptation.[1]

More often, congregations remain in an original niche. Many simply ignore the changing nature of their community and continue with business as usual (Ammerman 1997). Congregations with long histories are especially prone to a path of persistence. With history comes heavy pressure toward inertia (Hannan and Freeman 1984). Persistence in a neighborhood specialization could pay off, provided the neighborhood retains enough of the people central to the congregation's niche. If neighborhood change is substantial and the resource base no longer exists in the neighborhood, congregations will be forced to either relocate or to become more generalist and compete for a wider pool of potential members. Relocation can be successful. Suburban locations are associated with higher levels of congregation growth than are cities (Dudley and Roozen 2001). But for congregations that stay, reaching further for members is prevalent. In one of the few studies to examine residential patterns of congregation members, Jill Witmer Sinha and colleagues (2007) found "city commuter congregations"

1. There are many fine examples of books detailing congregational culture and congregational change. Ammerman wrote about a conservative Baptist congregation in *Bible Believers: Fundamentalism in the Modern World* (1987). An excellent study on congregations is edited by Wind and Lewis, *American Congregations: Portraits of Twelve Religious Communities,* Vol. 1 (1994) and *New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations,* Vol. 2 (1994). In addition, Warner's *New Wine in Old Wineskins: Evangelicals and Liberals in a Smalltown Church* (1988) offers insight on a Presbyterian congregation experiencing change. Editors Dudley, Carroll, and Wind offer an overview of congregational studies in *Carriers of Faith: Lessons from Congregational Studies* (1991). Kloetzli examined Lutheran congregations and their responses to urban changes in *The City Church–Death or Renewal: A Study of Eight Urban Lutheran Churches* (1961). Gibson assessed the role of Protestant congregations in urban areas in *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches: An Analysis of Protestant Responsibility in the Expanding Metropolis* (1961). Lee edited a classic tome on urban churches, *Cities and Churches: Readings on the Urban Church* (1962). Lee's volume includes chapters by Louis Wirth, Georg Simmel, Robert Park, Peter Berger, Martin E. Marty, and Will Herberg, among others.

in which at least half of congregation members commute from more than 10 blocks away but within city limits to be "frequently located in the central city neighborhoods from which white middle class—and later middle class black—residents left during the middle and late part of the twentieth century" (p. 254). Without the ability to attract new members to drive into a congregation from outside the neighborhood, the path of persistence is one of sure decline.

One of the more successful ways that congregations survive environmental change is through specialization within their broader niche. Congregations might specialize demographically or religiously in a way that enables them to pull members from beyond the neighborhood. Ammerman referred to this nongeographic specialization as a "niche strategy." Ethnicity can function as a specialization for congregations, noted Ammerman. In comparable fashion though, being multicultural/multiracial can itself become a niche specialization. Emerson and Rodney Woo (2006) reasoned that there is a growing segment of persons across racial groups whose own multiracial networks make them interested in racially mixed congregations. This segment represents a resource for congregations seeking to be diverse. Championing diversity as a defining part of congregational identity—i.e., that shared sense of "who we are" as a worshipping community—represents one of the most sustainable models of multiracial ministry (Emerson and Woo 2006).

Our overview of ecological concepts of niche, niche width, and niche overlap leads us to several expectations about how congregations from a white-ethnic denomination might fare amidst growing urban diversity. First, we expect increasing neighborhood diversity to relate directly to increasing distances that congregations reach for members. Congregations will attempt to stay within their niche and, therefore, become more generalist if necessary to attract typical members. Second, we expect the challenge of urban diversity to be greatest for congregations most closely tied to the denomination. Deep roots in a white-ethnic niche will hamper a congregation's ability to adapt to cultural changes outside its doors. Finally, we expect specialist congregations to outperform more generalist congregations. We test these expectations within a historically Dutch denomination in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

## Grand Rapids and the Christian Reformed Church

Grand Rapids has been deeply influenced by the numerical dominance of persons of Dutch descent. Dutch immigrants arrived in the area in 1847. Most of the Dutch immigrants arrived in large groups—often in congregations, in fact. They tended to settle on the east side of the city and found great unity within their churches. The Dutch population of the city was bifurcated to a large degree, however, by loyalty to one of two ethnically Dutch denominations: the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and the Christian Reformed Church of North America (CRC). Schism birthed the CRC in 1857. It was a conservative, evangelical offshoot of the RCA, with origins in Grand Rapids.

Bolstered by continuing waves of Dutch immigrants throughout the late nineteenth century, the fledgling denomination helped distinguish the Grand Rapids' religious landscape more than any other entity (Bratt and Meehan 1993). New congregations proliferated. The typical pattern of founding congregations in the Christian Reformed Church was for Dutch Reformed families in a neighborhood to band together to launch a new church. Thus, Christian Reformed congregations started as specialists designed to minister to CRC families in a specific neighborhood. This development strategy led the city of Grand Rapids, spanning approximately 45 square miles, to be home to 39 CRC congregations—nearly one Christian Reformed church per square mile.

For Christian Reformed congregations, whites of Dutch descent and conservative Reformed Protestant background constitute basic niche dimensions. Evidence of CRC niche composition comes from a sample of 515 Christian Reformed congregations surveyed as a part

of the 2000 Faith Communities Today (FACT) study.[2] Nearly nine out of ten CRC worshippers are non-Hispanic whites, and more than half of CRC congregations report that their members are of Dutch descent. All but a handful of CRC congregations are racially homogeneous and overwhelmingly white. According to 2005 denominational records, just 40 of the approximately 1,000 CRC congregations were racially mixed; another 150 or so were nonwhite ethnic churches (Mulder 2006). FACT data also show many in CRC congregations (more than 40 percent on average) are lifelong denominational members.

Southeast Grand Rapids long stood as the locus of the Dutch community within the city. The world headquarters of the CRC denomination as well as the largest denominational college (Calvin College) and the denomination's only seminary (Calvin Theological Seminary) reside within this quadrant of the city. However, after World War II, Southeast Grand Rapids began an ethnic transition. It became the most prominent site of the invasion-succession process that took place in so many rust belt cities. Southeast Grand Rapids was seen as containing the African American "ghetto" and was the locus of race rioting in 1967 (Samuelson and Schrier 2003).

As with many northern cities that experienced race riots during the 1960s, Grand Rapids's crisis had origins some two decades earlier. During and after World War II, the city proper of Grand Rapids experienced an influx of African Americans. The response of many white families was to move either to the fringes of the city or out all together. Between 1940 and 1960, the African American community grew from 1.6 percent to 8 percent of the Grand Rapids population (Bratt and Meehan 1993). For the next 40 years, trends stayed much the same. While the number of residents in Grand Rapids proper essentially stagnated, surrounding suburban areas experienced dramatic growth. During the 1990s, 88 percent of household growth in the Grand Rapids metropolitan statistical area occurred outside of the urban area (West Michigan Strategic Alliance 2005). The black population swelled to comprise over 20 percent of the city's population. Growing suburbs and an expanding black presence belie the fact that the overall population of the city proper stayed relatively static. What did change was the color of neighborhoods. Whites headed for the suburbs, while the majority of the African American influx into Grand Rapids occurred in the southeast neighborhoods. It marked a shift in the location of resources for Christian Reformed congregations. For CRC congregations most dependent on white Reformed persons, growing urban diversity posed a considerable challenge. We consider in the following sections how established congregations in the Southeast Grand Rapids (an area designated by the denomination as Classis Grand Rapids East) responded.

## Plan of Analysis

To explore changes in congregation and community, our analysis makes use of congregational membership data, archival records, focus group interviews, and tract-level data from the U.S. Census Bureau. As measures of congregational response, we analyze the spread of membership residences (standard distance in miles) as well as change in membership size. We gathered membership data from 14 established congregations in the form of printed directories in ten-year intervals from 1970 to 2000.[3] While Classis Grand Rapids East encompasses more than these 14 congregations, we restrict our focus only to those churches in existence

2. Faith Communities Today was a cooperative research project that brought together denominations and faith groups to create and administer a broad, national survey of American congregations. The Christian Reformed Church was one of 41 faith groups to participate. A questionnaire tailored to the denomination was sent to all 724 CRC congregations existing in the United States in 2000. A total of 515 churches responded for a response rate of 71.1 percent. For more information about the FACT study, see Dudley and Roozen (2001) or the FACT Web site (http://fact.hartsem.edu/).

3. We made every effort to keep years of comparison consistent across congregations, but membership directories were not always available for matching years in all congregations. Using what was available, we attempted to get as close to ten-year intervals as possible.

since 1970.[4] Directories provided street addresses for members and attendees. Using geographic information systems (GIS) software, we were able to map and spatially analyze membership residential patterns over time. For all addresses falling with an eight-county area surrounding Grand Rapids, we were able to match 98.7 percent of households for graphical analysis to the U.S. Census Bureau's Topographical Integrated Geographic Encoding and Referencing (TIGER) system files. Information on total number of members in each congregation by decade is from denominational yearbooks. Supplementing these quantitative records is content analysis of archival documents, current congregational Web sites, and focus group interviews in selected congregations.

We match congregational information with census tract data from the U.S. Census Bureau over the same 30-year period, offering a baseline measure for 1970 and a change rate (1970 to 2000). The 14 congregations occupy ten census tracts in Southeast Grand Rapids, with six of the oldest congregations split between just two tracts closest to downtown. Our census tract variables are population, percent white[5], percent African American, percent Hispanic, percent poor, and median age. Incorporating information from members, congregations, and census tracts over time sets our study apart. Although Sinha and colleagues (2007) explored similar relationships, their data were cross-sectional and lacked membership addresses. They commented in their conclusion:

> 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 (p. 259).

Our study does precisely this.

A final stage of data collection took us deeper inside congregations. We did content analysis on archival documents (e.g., published congregational histories, denominational reports, and relevant newspaper articles) and congregational Web sites. In addition, we conducted focus group interviews in four congregations in summer 2006. Group interviews were to generate congregational timelines. The timeline exercise is an effective way to allow congregants to tell their own story (Thumma 1998). Their recounting of significant persons and events in an organizational history offers telling clues to congregational identity and shifts in congregational identity over time. The selected congregations were archetypal of the range of congregations under investigation.

## Christian Reformed Congregations in Southeast Grand Rapids

From an ecological perspective, we expect growing urban diversity to be disruptive to congregations in a white ethnic denomination. The niche of Christian Reformed congregations is white, conservative Reformed people. People fitting these racial and theological parameters used to be plentiful in Southeast Grand Rapids neighborhoods. Neighborhoods change though. The first step of our analysis is to outline the extent of racial change in the ten census tracts inhabited by our 14 congregations. Figure 1 depicts a declining resource base.

4. Over time, the geographic boundaries of Classis Grand Rapids East and the specific congregations comprising the classis have fluctuated. For example, until the late 1980s, Classis Grand Rapids East also included some outlying churches as far away as Detroit (160 miles to the east).

5. Census data in 1970 did not enumerate Hispanics by race. Therefore, our calculation for percent white in this year includes persons of Hispanic ancestry, while percent white for all later decades refers to non-Hispanic whites. Fortunately, this shift in measurement poses little problem for our analysis. Hispanics were still largely absent from Southeast Grand Rapids in 1970. Census data report less than one percent of residents in the ten tracts under investigation were "persons of Spanish language" at this time.

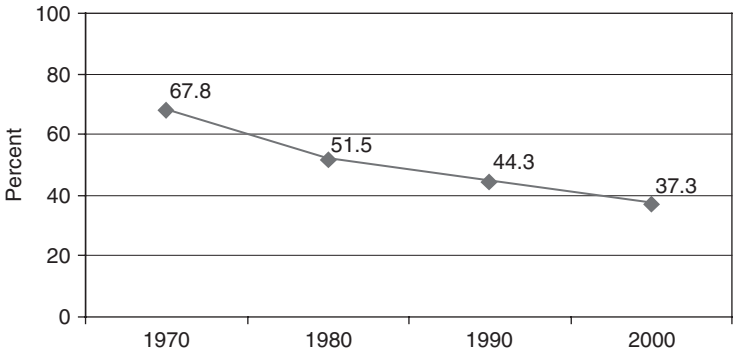


**Figure 1** • *Percent White in Census Tracts of CRC Congregations in Southeast Grand Rapids, 1970–2000*

Between 1970 and 1980, white residents fell from two-thirds to barely half (51 percent) of tract populations, on average. Growth in the nonwhite population was almost exclusively African American. Nearly half of residents in the typical southeast neighborhood were African American (48 percent) in 1990. By 2000, whites made up just a third of neighborhoods, with Hispanics representing an increasing share of nonwhite residents (up to 7 percent). Overall population in the ten census tracts edged down slightly as well from approximately 70,000 residents in 1970 to less than 65,000 in 2000. Not coincidentally, 1970 to 1980 witnessed the biggest drop.

Our question is how did Christian Reformed congregations respond? One notable way they did not respond is by physically abandoning their neighborhoods. Not a single congregation relocated during this 30-year time period. Nor did they adapt to remain neighborhood churches serving new demographic constituencies. Rather, they reached geographically further for members, as Figure 2 illustrates. As the percentage of white residents in neighborhoods declined, members of CRC congregations in these neighborhoods lived increasingly spread out from where they worshipped. Identical to Figure 1, the largest change took place between 1970 and 1980.

Changing racial composition coupled with congregations reaching across neighborhood lines for members are strong indications of niche overlap for CRC congregations in Southeast

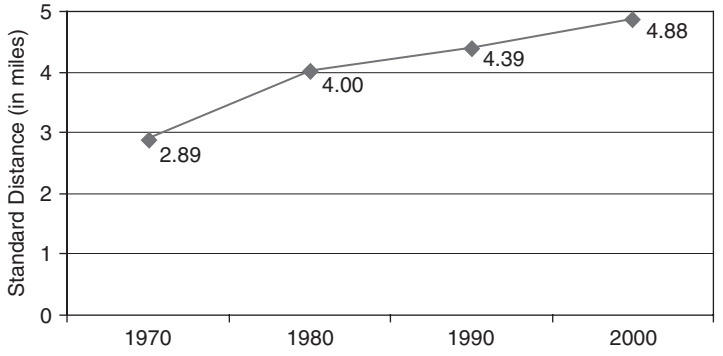


**Figure 2** • *Spread of Members Around Southeast Grand Rapids CRC Churches, 1970–2000*

**Table 1 • *Changing External and Internal Characteristics of Christian Reformed Congregations in Southeast Grand Rapids, 1970–2000***

| *Church* | *Year Organized* | *Percent White in Census Tract in 1970* | *Change in Percent White, 1970–2000* | *Standard Distance in Miles of Members' Residences in 1970*[a] | *Change in Standard Distance, 1970–2000*[a] | *Percent Change in Membership, 1970–2000* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Old urban | | | | | | |
| First | 1857 | 11.58 | +11.31 | 2.89 | +.69 | −36.69 |
| Eastern Avenue | 1879 | 43.02 | −38.81 | 2.94 | +2.51 | −37.58 |
| Oakdale Park | 1890 | 97.61 | −63.20 | 2.22 | +2.70 | −51.50 |
| Sherman Street | 1907 | 43.02 | −38.81 | 3.13 | +.24 | −24.56 |
| Neland Avenue | 1915 | 43.02 | −38.81 | 3.40 | +1.68 | −38.91 |
| Fuller Avenue | 1925 | 97.61 | −63.20 | 2.74 | +1.18 | −56.34 |
| Means | 1896 | 56.0 | −38.6 | 2.9 | +1.5 | −40.9 |
| Middle-aged urban | | | | | | |
| Seymour | 1939 | 99.84 | −25.69 | 2.88 | +2.52 | −19.86 |
| Boston Square | 1942 | 97.61 | −63.20 | 2.86 | +1.25 | −66.47 |
| Calvin | 1946 | 74.95 | −23.78 | 2.84 | +.95 | −40.44 |
| Plymouth Heights | 1951 | 99.37 | −25.31 | 2.81 | +2.50 | −31.34 |
| Means | 1945 | 92.9 | −34.5 | 2.8 | +1.8 | −39.5 |
| Newer suburban | | | | | | |
| Shawnee Park | 1961 | 99.21 | −16.50 | 2.89 | +2.97 | +3.73 |
| Woodlawn | 1968 | 99.38 | −10.79 | 1.52 | +3.96 | +26.55 |
| Means | 1965 | 99.3 | −13.6 | 2.2 | +3.5 | +15.1 |
| Mission | | | | | | |
| Grace | 1949/1962[b] | 11.94 | −4.78 | 5.42 | +.31 | +136.67 |
| Madison Square | 1914/1970[b] | 30.53 | −24.25 | 1.97 | +4.40 | +1009.09 |
| Means | 1932/1966 | 21.23 | −14.5 | 3.7 | +2.4 | +572.9 |

[a]The range of dates vary slightly for some congregations, based on availability of printed membership directories. Exceptions were First (1971–2002), Eastern (1971–2000), Calvin (1970–2001), Plymouth Heights (1970–2001), Woodlawn (1969–2000), Grace (1970–1999), and Madison Square (1975–2004).

[b]Given a long lag between founding and organization dates for this church, we report both (founded/organized).

Grand Rapids. With niche overlap, competitive pressures mount. This can have dire consequences for organizations unfit to compete. It appears that a majority of the congregations in Classis Grand Rapids East suffered as a result of changing niche dynamics. The 14 congregations posted a high of almost 12,000 members in the early 1970s but were down to 6,969 by 2007 (Christian Reformed Church 1970, 2007). These plunging numbers reflect an era of instability for classis congregations overall. Some felt this more directly than others.

Origins and history seemingly predispose congregations, even those in the same area and from the same denomination, to respond differently to changing external circumstances. We see this in Table 1. The six oldest churches, founded between 1857 and 1925, reside in neighborhoods where whites in 2000 were a statistical minority. Demographic change was especially dramatic around Oakdale Park and Fuller Avenue congregations; the census track went from being nearly entirely white in 1970 to two-thirds nonwhite by 2000—a change of more than 60 percentage points. For all of these old urban churches, the residential spread of church members expanded. Standard distances of membership residences were 2.8 miles on average in 1970 and 4.4 miles in 2000. Membership plummeted in all six congregations. Middle-aged urban churches, founded between 1939 and 1951, were nearly identical to their

older counterparts in terms of neighborhood change, membership residential spread, and membership loss. Newer outlying congregations witnessed negligible neighborhood change and fared better in terms of membership size. Challenging our first expectation, the standard distance separating members in these newer suburban-like congregations outpaced rates of other congregations in more diverse neighborhood contexts. A final category of churches supports our second and third expectations however. The mission churches stand as the least traditional, and perhaps most specialized, of the congregations in our sample. Grace CRC and Madison Square Church, originally planted as mission chapels in non-Dutch urban neighborhoods, grew substantially. The absence of whites in these neighborhoods did not stymie growth, but nor did these congregations rely on neighborhood residents to fill their churches. They drew members from a wide area. To understand why some congregations decline while others prosper in the same ecology, the analysis to follow takes us inside four representative congregations.

### *Old Urban Churches*

The history of Fuller Avenue Christian Reformed Church matches most closely what we would predict. Fuller Avenue CRC is one of the older congregations (founded in 1925) and sits in a neighborhood that has gone from being working class Dutch to a neighborhood of African Americans, whites, and Hispanics that church members describe as "transitional."

The church, like Sherman Street (1907), Boston Square (1942), and Madison Square (planted as a chapel in 1914, organized as a church in 1970) congregations, was planted by Oakdale Park—a dominant church of the era. Mother church and daughter church stood barely three city blocks apart, but the cultural gap between the two was much wider. The Fuller Avenue congregation emerged to accommodate Dutch residents in the Fuller neighborhood who wanted to worship in English and use the "band" music of the times. Thus, Fuller Avenue began as a specialist congregation. It catered to a younger, more assimilated strand of working class Dutch found in ready supply within the Fuller neighborhood. The congregation grew to some 300 families by the early 1940s. It played an important role in the expansion of southeast CRC congregations, helping to found Calvin (1946), Plymouth Heights (1951), and supporting Madison Square Chapel (planted by Oakdale Park in 1914).

Through mid-century, Fuller Avenue functioned as a parish church serving a predominantly Dutch neighborhood. Members walked to church. Even into the 1960s, Sunday worship services were crowded and the church basement was used for overflow seating. African Americans were settling in increasing numbers just to the north of the neighborhood (in the vicinity of Sherman Street CRC and Neland Avenue CRC). Between 1970 and 1980, shrinking tract population (due principally to whites moving out) coupled with African Americans moving in caused the African American percentage in the Fuller neighborhood to jump from 2.0 percent to 22.5 percent. Ethnic changes continued through the 1980s and 1990s, even though neighborhood population size leveled out after 1990. Half of residents were African American in 2000. In addition, the 1990s brought an influx of Hispanics. Nearly one in ten residents (8.4 percent) was Latino by 2000. Non-Hispanic whites, the racial niche of CRC congregations, dropped to barely a quarter of the neighborhood population.

It was not that the congregation ignored the neighborhood. Neighborhood outreach started in the 1960s. A visitation committee formed mid-1970s, and by the end of the decade, the church was canvassing the neighborhood to invite children and teens to church programs. In 1973, Fuller Avenue called an African American co-pastor, Rev. Virgil Patterson, from California. Rev. Patterson was one of the first African American ministers in the denomination. He stayed less than two years before leaving to pastor the newly organized Madison Square CRC.

The 1970s brought a number of other complicating circumstances that took a toll on church morale and membership. The denominational college and seminary located one mile north of

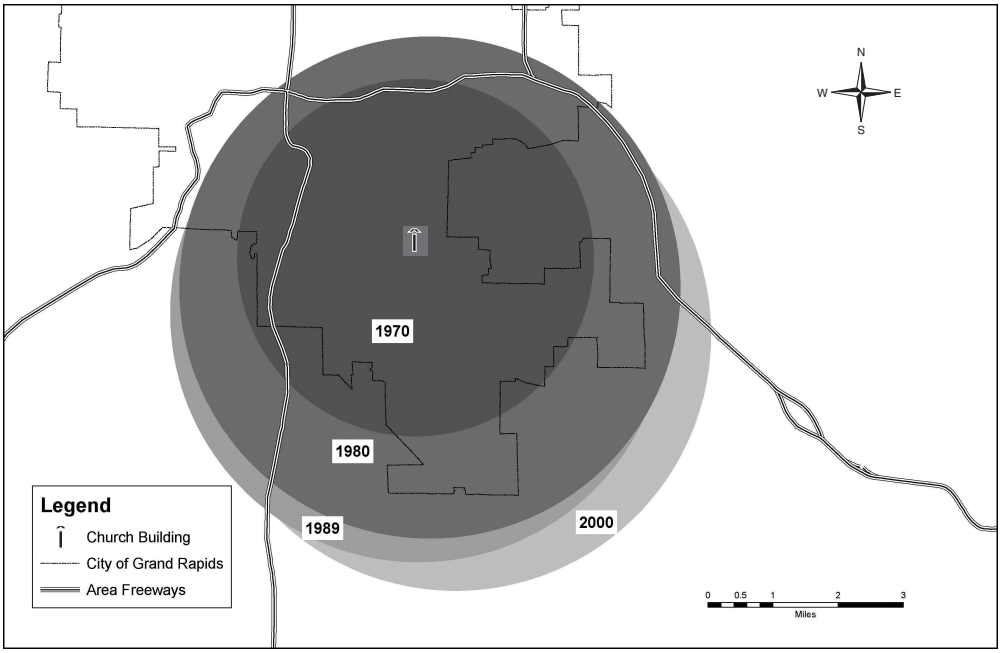


**Figure 3** • *Membership Dispersion of Fuller Avenue Christian Reformed Church, 1970–2000*

the church moved to a new campus on the southeastern edge of the city. After the college's move in 1973, fewer faculty families and students made Fuller Avenue their church home. Second, safety concerns of members and several burglaries led the church to put into place parking lot patrols, observers for interior coat closets, and even use police escorts for a period of time to take monetary collections to the bank. Additionally, from the 1970s into the 1990s, pastoral turnover and internal turbulence related to pastoral leadership plagued the church.

While the neighborhood outside its doors was changing, the racial composition inside Fuller Avenue CRC remained on the whole homogeneous. Members were white and Dutch heritage pervasive. Members were no longer coming exclusively from the neighborhood however. As the neighborhood declined in size and in proportion white, distances church members lived from Fuller Avenue CRC climbed and membership declined in linear progression. In 1970, the church boasted over 1,000 members and the standard distance separating membership residences was 2.74 miles. Figure 3 documents the residential spread of members over successive decades. Members increasingly came from east and south of the Fuller neighborhood, the direction of newer suburbs. Reflecting a changing age structure in the congregation, the number of infant baptisms dropped from 39 in 1979 to just three to five annually in recent years. Membership rosters shortened with each decade: 800 members in 1980, 728 in 1990, and 448 in 2000. The 448 persons belonging to the church in 2000 lived more than a mile further apart (3.92 miles in 2000) than did members in 1970 when membership was more than double.

Fuller Avenue Christian Reformed Church continues to see itself as a key neighborhood institution. Although it draws members from further distances, much of its ministry effort retains a neighborhood focus, including meal deliveries to area shut-ins and outreach efforts to a local school for teen mothers and to a publicly subsidized housing complex. In 2000, the

congregation called a new pastor. The chosen candidate, a white male in his 50s, possessed a background in urban, interracial ministry. Shortly after his arrival, the pastor helped organize a neighborhood association, for which the church provided support staff and office space. At the same time, the church identifies closely with its Dutch denominational heritage. The church's mission statement begins, "We are a community of covenant people." Emphasis on "the covenant" is a hallmark of Reformed theology and the Christian Reformed Church. Other older, urban churches stressed covenant as well. The theme of the one-hundredth anniversary for Eastern Avenue CRC in 1979 was "One Hundred Years of Covenant." Denominational heritage also gets expressed in older, urban churches like Fuller Avenue through worship music. A booklet prepared for Fuller's seventy-fifth anniversary in 2000 declared: "The Psalter hymnal has been the main songbook of praise since 1934." It seems highly doubtful that this combination of neighborhood specialization and traditional CRC identity will translate into a sustainable future in a neighborhood where so few white, conservative Reformed people now reside.

### *Middle-Aged Urban Churches*

Another church with a storied past is Calvin Christian Reformed Church. Bearing the name of the denominational college it was borne to serve, college and church sat adjacent to each other. Calvin was a part of a post-World War II boom that produced more than babies in Southeast Grand Rapids. Returning servicemen caused southeast CRC congregations to swell, resulting in new congregational offspring. Fuller Avenue, Neland Avenue, and Sherman Street congregations planted Calvin CRC in 1946.

These WWII-era congregations had an early history much like the first decades of older CRC congregations in the city. Calvin entered a neighborhood that was racially white and ethnically Dutch, although residents tended more toward middle class than did the Fuller Avenue neighborhood to the south. The church met for nine years in college facilities until erecting its own building on contiguous land in 1955. Church membership rolls had as many as 500 students on them at a time during its first decade. As the college grew in the 1950s, so did Calvin church.

Strong preaching and high-quality liturgical music became hallmarks of the church. Two men were instrumental in shaping this legacy: first pastor, Rev. Clarence Boomsma, and first choir director, Dr. Henry Bruinsma. Rev. Boomsma was a strong preacher who led the church until 1982. Dr. Bruinsma was a music professor at the college. His direction of music at Calvin Church established a tradition of professionalism and an emphasis on traditional liturgy that matched the tastes of middle class parishioners. Membership and attendance were robust, and remained so for the next 20 years. Membership peaked in 1967 at 1486. Calvin was the largest congregation in the CRC denomination at the time.

Already in the late 1950s, environmental changes were underway. In 1956, Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary purchased land for a new campus. The seminary was the first to move to the new campus in 1959. Neighborhood composition changed rapidly over the next several years. Whites moved out. African Americans moved in. Property values started to drop. By 1970, a quarter of the population in this neighborhood would be African American. Nearly half (48.1 percent) were African American twenty years later. Overall population in the census tract dropped by 13 percent from 1970 to 1990. Poverty rates jumped over the same twenty year span from 11.5 percent to 30.3 percent. The church reached ever further for members (see Figure 4). The standard distance separating Calvin's members was 2.84 miles in 1970, 4.42 miles in 1980, and 4.51 miles in 1990.

As observed in Fuller Avenue, the 1970s were a turbulent decade for Calvin Christian Reformed church. The move of Calvin College, finalized in 1972, to its new suburban campus left Calvin Church without a ready stock of student members for the first time in its history. In 1973, Grand Rapids Christian School (an important Christian day-school that fed into Calvin

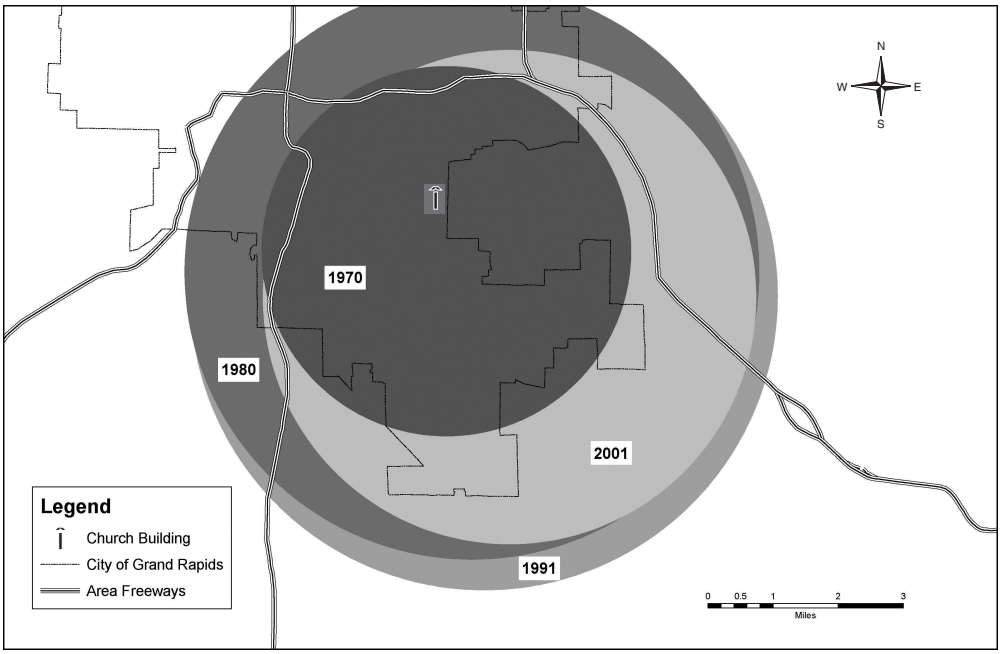


**Figure 4** • *Membership Dispersion of Calvin Christian Reformed Church, 1970–2001*

College) would similarly move from downtown to a new campus further to the southeast. Supportive institutions disappeared from the neighborhood and new competitive pressures arose. The emergence of megachurches was one source of competition. These churches of several thousand worshippers offered more contemporary music and expository preaching appealing to younger generations. Sunshine Chapel, a CRC plant in a growing area east of the city that grew to mega-church stature, became a destination for young families. Near the same time, a respected philosophy professor from Calvin College helped launch a new CRC congregation near the new college campus that appealed to academics and other professionals.

When founding pastor Clarence Boomsma retired in 1982, the congregation did some introspection to guide selection of a new minister. Instead of changing course to better fit its neighborhood context, the congregation made a conscious choice to affirm its theological and liturgical heritage. A June 1982 survey of church members found that "while over half of the congregation agreed that the church should engage in evangelism they did not want to change the worship services in order to do so" (Van Kley 1996:44). This decision was affirmed again a decade later by a long range planning committee, which wrote in a May 1995 report: "While Calvin CRC—with its style of worship, Reformed heritage, and musical preferences—may not be the most likely church which many minority persons might join, we do feel that we can be the presence of Jesus in their lives even if they choose to worship (or are already worshipping) elsewhere" (reported in Van Kley 1996:57). Thus, Calvin seemed to tacitly accept that they were unlikely to be a congregation *of the community*. Instead, as formalized in their mission statement, they oriented themselves to be "a positive presence *in the community*" (emphasis added).

Unlike the census tract in which Fuller Avenue sits, the external context of Calvin had a reversal of sorts in the 1990s. White residents began moving back into the neighborhood. Non-Hispanic whites made up half the area's population in 2000, after slipping under 50 percent

in the 1980s. Many of the new arrivals were young professionals. Property values rose. Calvin benefited little from these changing trends however, since the gay and lesbian residents helping to fuel neighborhood revival were not the conservative Reformed niche of the congregation or denomination. Calvin's membership continued its downward trend from 1380 in 1980 to 1136 in 1990 to 838 in 2000. With the sizable drop in membership in the last decade, the spread of member residence also contracted as seen in Figure 4.

Even as membership declined, members' relative affluence enabled the church to operate with a healthy budget and even add to their physical facilities. In 1988, a children's worship center was added. In 2001, the church nearly doubled its square footage with new space for educational programs, children and youth programs, and fellowship. Along the way, the church seems to have made a strategic decision to focus its neighborhood outreach efforts to the trendy, largely white Eastown area to the east. It remains to be seen whether the residents of Eastown will find the Reformed theology, liturgical style, and Dutch denominational heritage appealing. It is clear that this combination does little to attract nonwhite neighbors.

### *Newer, More Suburban Churches*

A striking contrast to the older CRC churches located closer to downtown is found in congregations planted since 1960: Shawnee Park (1961) and Woodlawn (1968). The settlement of middle class Dutch residents into new neighborhoods to the southeast made fertile ground for new CRC congregations. Though still within city limits, these new neighborhoods were and are more suburban in nature and composition. Populations of the census tracts in which these congregations emerged were almost exclusively English-speaking whites in 1970. Thirty years later, more than 80 percent of Shawnee's neighborhood and nearly 90 percent of the greater Woodlawn community remained white, non-Hispanic. These new congregations benefited from close association with the new Calvin College campus; Woodlawn, in fact, meets in a chapel facility on campus built jointly by congregation and college. For both Shawnee Park and Woodlawn, contextual change was substantially less than experienced in neighborhoods closer to downtown. Poverty rates stayed fairly constant as did population size around Shawnee. Woodlawn's census tract, further to the east, grew by 68 percent from 1970 to 2000. Our analysis takes us inside Shawnee Park CRC.

Shawnee was planted by Plymouth Heights CRC in 1961; Plymouth Heights was an offshoot of Fuller Avenue only a decade earlier (1951). Like Calvin CRC and Plymouth Heights, Shawnee's origins were to serve professionals of Dutch descent. Its specialist orientation and suburban location helped Shawnee grow quickly. Just nine years after its launch, despite meeting in temporary quarters at the seminary for most of this time, membership was 804. Members included many Calvin College professors, physicians, and other professionals. One middle-aged female member joked that she originally came to the church to find an obstetrician, as well as for the fact that the relatively affluent congregation was known for assisting member families with Christian school tuition. With a popular pastor and a thriving Sunday School program, Shawnee had a very successful first decade. Membership was fairly concentrated in and around the neighborhood. The standard distance between members' residences in 1970 was 2.89 miles.

Relative stability characterized the 1970s for the congregation. Outside the church, a small percentage of African Americans entered the neighborhood, but 95 percent of neighborhood residents were still non-Hispanic whites in 1980. Inside the church, attendance stayed high; folding chairs were added in the sanctuary as overflow seating in 1977. Despite a pastoral change in 1973, new programs like Coffee Break (a Bible study outreach to neighborhood women) reinforced Shawnee's reputation as a creative, engaged congregation. Membership held constant at approximately 800. Members lived increasingly spread out though. By 1980, the standard distance between members' residences was 6.13, more than double a decade earlier.

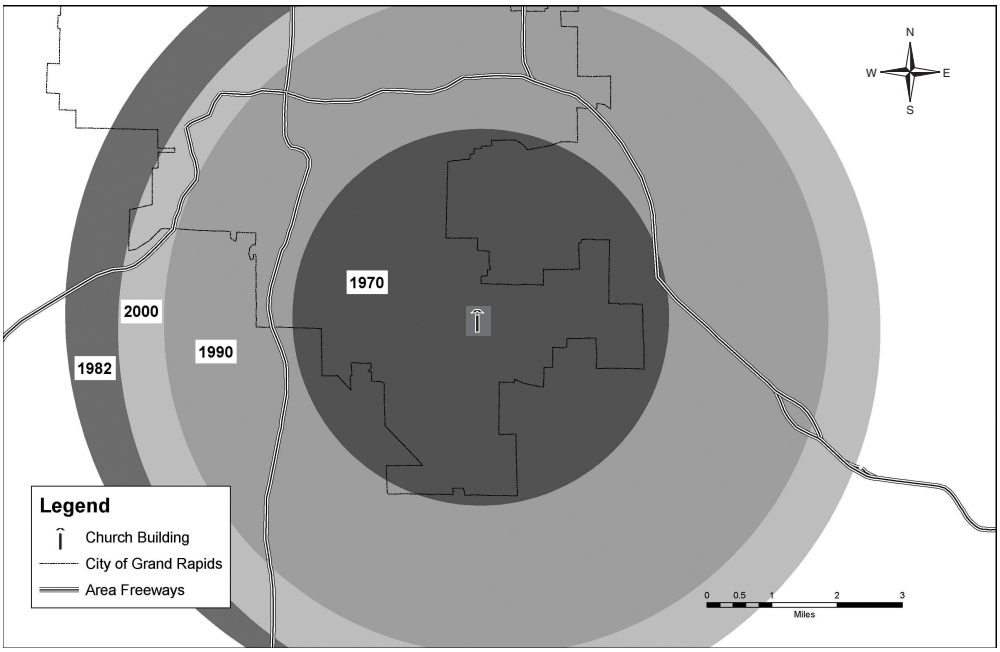


**Figure 5** • *Membership Dispersion of Shawnee Park Christian Reformed Church, 1970–2000*

The 1980s proved more turbulent. Shawnee lost 10 to 12 families over the decade to other CRC congregations that offered more charismatic/Pentecostal worship styles. Sunshine CRC and Madison Square Church (as we will describe shortly) were recipients of some of these families as was a suburban, nondenominational megachurch with Reformed heritage. Some saw in the megachurches stronger children's programs as well. Young professional families were among the membership casualties. Complicating matters was the arrival of a new minister in 1983. Members perceived the pastor as unable or unwilling to lead the church through change. Tensions mounted, culminating in the pastor's 1988 departure. Membership slid to 612 by 1990, even as neighborhood composition remained favorable to the church. Rows of pews were taken out of the sanctuary so that Sunday attendance would retain a feeling of being full. The loss in membership corresponded to a contraction of membership residences. The standard distance describing members' residential dispersion dropped by more than mile between 1980 (6.13 miles) and 1990 (5.10 miles).

A stable neighborhood context may help account for a rebound in membership at Shawnee between 1990 and 2000, despite new internal controversies. Aiding the rebound was a popular new pastor (a white male in his 50s), who arrived in 1990 and served for a decade. The church made some innovative steps during the decade that not all in the church appreciated. Most controversial was a contemporary worship service launched to attract unchurched persons in 1991. Called "Time Out," the service was designed to be "seeker-sensitive" and featured Christian rock music, dance, and drama. It occurred at 11:00 am on Sundays, after the main worship service. The goal was to build a new congregation of 200 worshippers—persons who would not typically end up at a traditional church like Shawnee Park CRC. The service never met its goal. Furthermore, some long-standing members complained that that it was "extreme" and "noisy." The volume of complaints rose as elements of the Time Out service began showing up in the main worship service circa 1997. Five to seven families left Shawnee

Park at this time as a result. They headed to one of the more traditional downtown CRC churches. Shawnee lost several more families with the appointment of a female elder in 1998. At the same time, the congregation initiated a flurry of new activities, of which Time Out was one. More successful were a new bi-weekly Wednesday night program that had as many as 150 to 200 people attend and several new social service programs. Despite controversy, the net effect of these activities, a popular pastor, and a stable neighborhood environment was membership growth. Membership climbed back up to 834 by 2000, and the spread of members around the church inched up to 5.86 miles (see Figure 5). Members are almost entirely white and a strong Dutch presence still lingers.

Just four decades removed from its founding and residing in a relatively stable neighborhood environment, Shawnee's Dutch denominational heritage seems to pose little problem. Shawnee enjoys a stable membership base from within the white, Reformed niche. A survey of members conducted by the church in 2000 found location and teachings among the most important reasons members joined the church. The survey also revealed strong allegiance to denominational traditions, particularly traditional worship/liturgy and sermons based on the Heidelberg Catechism (a doctrinal standard for the CRC). Based on the survey, the Time Out service was discontinued in 2003. At Shawnee, staying traditional Christian Reformed has not yet proved a liability.

### *Mission Churches*

Madison Square and Grace had very different beginnings that the other 12 congregations we examined. They began as mission chapels. As described by a CRC insider: "The intent of the chapel strategy was simply to create safe space for non-Dutch folks to encounter the gospel. A side benefit was that chapels also relieved Dutch folks' uneasiness with 'others' who were not familiar with CRC tradition and culture" (Smith 2006:94). So began Madison Square and Grace: Madison in 1914 as a mission to poor whites of Appalachian background living south of downtown and Grace (originally called Buckley Chapel) in 1949 as the denomination's first mission to African Americans. From their start, neither were traditional Christian Reformed churches. Their very origins were to reach populations outside the doors of traditional CRC congregations. Our oral history timeline comes from Madison Square.

Madison Square Chapel was a storefront ministry "outpost" planted by Oakdale Park. At the time, Madison Square was an area inhabited by residents who could not afford to live elsewhere in the city. The poor Appalachian families of Madison Square were foreign socioeconomically and ethnically to the Dutch people of First, Eastern Avenue, Oakdale Park, and other early CRC congregations in Grand Rapids. The chapel, supported by Oakdale Park and Fuller Avenue churches, operated as a neighborhood congregation for decades, even as the neighborhood began to racially change.

The exodus of white residents hit the neighborhood and chapel hard following World War II. Facing an uncertain future, chapel leaders looked to interracial ministry as a survival strategy. While a survival strategy is seen as less successful for creating a multiracial congregation than is a strategy motivated by mission (Emerson and Woo 2006), the interracial effort of Madison Square took root. Even before the chapel was officially organized as a church in 1970, an intentional focus on racial diversity was present. By 1970, the Madison Square neighborhood was two-thirds African American and more than a quarter of the neighborhood population fell below the federal poverty line. Newly organized Madison Square CRC had 88 members. The standard distance separating members' residences was less than two miles.

Testimony to the interracial focus was the calling of a black senior pastor—Rev. Virgil Patterson, then associate pastor at Fuller Avenue CRC—in 1974. With Patterson commenced a consistent history of persons of color in key pastoral roles in the church. His time in the congregation (1974 to 1976) had another enduring outcome. He ushered Pentecostalism into the congregation. Worship came to include raising hands, speaking in tongues, and other

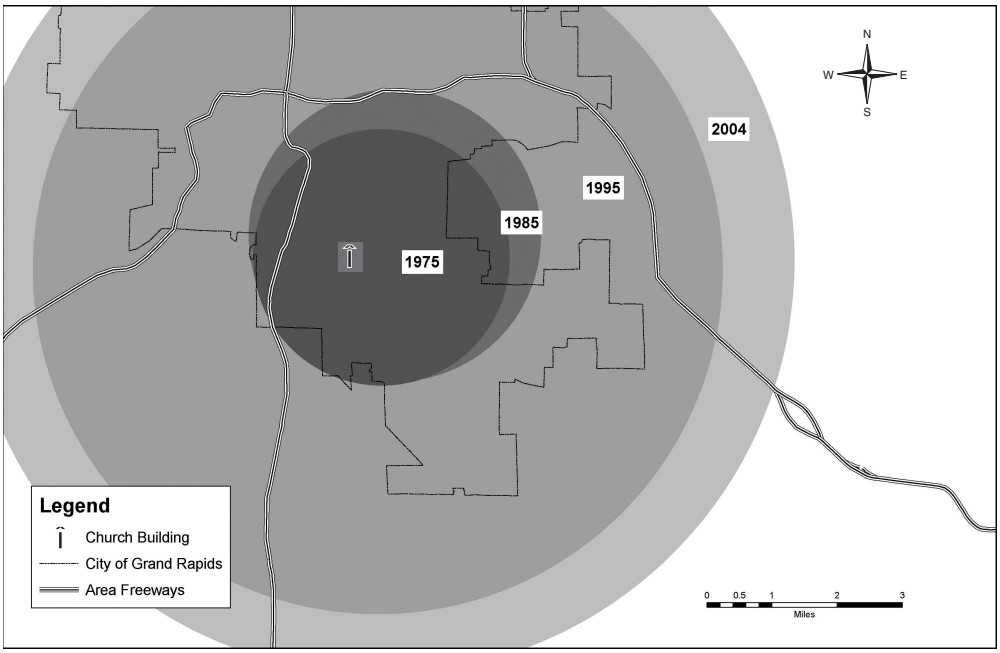


**Figure 6** • *Membership Dispersion of Madison Square Church, 1975–2004*

spontaneous expressions. This upset some in the church, and a controversy ensued that took on racial overtones. Patterson left the church in 1976 and soon after left the denomination. His replacement at Madison Square was white but, like Patterson, charismatic in worship. In 1978, a Puerto Rican co-pastor joined the staff. Interracial and charismatic became hallmarks of Madison Square church. By 1979, nonwhites (mainly African American) made up approximately 40 percent of church members and a third of the church council; black-white evangelism teams canvassed the neighborhood. In 1979, the church purchased and moved into a building in the neighborhood formerly occupied by a Presbyterian church. The Presbyterian congregation was moving to the suburbs after dwindling to just a handful of families in its urban location.

Music at the church by late 1970s bore more resemblance to black gospel than Dutch Psalter hymnody. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, a series of African American music ministers put their stamp on Madison Square's worship style and congregational identity. The African American flavor to the congregation fit well the growing nonwhite population outside its doors. African Americans comprised 80 percent of the Madison Square community by 1980 and 86 percent by 1990. Church membership climbed from 88 in 1970 to 180 in 1980 to 447 in 1990. It was not neighborhood members alone generating growth though. As portrayed in Figure 6, membership dispersion was 1.97 miles in 1975, 2.24 miles by 1985, and more than doubled to 5.30 miles by 1995. The church grew, in no small part, by attracting people outside the neighborhood including progressive-minded suburban families and crowds of college students. This is a trend that would continue.

Since 1990, a new ethnic transition has occurred. Hispanics grew from less than 5 percent of the neighborhood population in 1990 to 16 percent in 2000, while African American representation dropped over the decade to 75 percent in 2000. High rates of poverty went unchanged. More than 40 percent of neighborhood residents were in poverty throughout the

1980s and 1990s. Still, the church grew. Entering the twenty-first century, Madison Square had the largest membership of any of the 14 CRC churches in Southeast Grand Rapids. Membership was 976, and double that number attends the church. Madison Square also had the widest residential dispersion of members (standard distance = 6.37 in 2000). It prospers in a neighborhood where fewer than one in ten residents resemble original neighborhood inhabitants. Poor and nonwhite are not neighborhood characteristics within which typical Christian Reformed churches thrive. Of course, Madison Square Church (as it is known—no reference to denomination in its name, on its sign, or on the opening page of its Web site) is not a typical Christian Reformed church. This is its competitive advantage.

The outpost status of Madison Square enabled it to survive successive environmental changes in ways that other more traditional CRC congregations have not. Today Madison Square Church is the most racially diverse congregation in the Christian Reformed denomination. Approximately 40 percent of participants are people of color, and it is no longer a black-white mix. Increasingly, the church is shifting from biracial to multiethnic, with Hispanics and a smaller portion of Asians also calling the congregation home. People of color hold at least half of staff and council positions. Internal controversies have stirred the church—Pentecostalism (1970s), women in leadership (1980s), selection of a youth pastor (early 1990s). Some of these had racial overtones. Nevertheless, the church continued to thrive. It found success by attracting people throughout Grand Rapids to participate in a multiracial/multiethnic, charismatic fellowship. The racial/ethnic composition and worship style are dominant reasons that new members give for their attraction to the church.

## Conclusion

The story of Southeast Grand Rapids is a familiar tale in many northern industrial cities. Established urban neighborhoods experienced an ethnic transformation beginning mid-twentieth century. African Americans arrived followed in more recent decades by Hispanics. White inhabitants exited for the suburbs. Downtown neighborhoods dominated by Dutch residents are now a thing of the past in Grand Rapids. Our interest is what happened in and to churches planted by a Dutch ethnic denomination to serve these neighborhoods—a scenario for which past research says little. We extend prior research on race and religion by drawing attention to the unique challenges urban diversity presents to a religious group with a distinctive ethnic heritage. Furthermore, by looking historically within one denomination in one city, we are able to observe both causes and effects of religious competition on a local level. Organizational ecology and the concept of organizational niches guide our exploration.

When neighborhoods change, the resource base of neighborhood-oriented congregations is altered. These congregations must change to fit new contextual conditions (a dangerous proposition as it entails serving a different niche) or look elsewhere for resources. Remarkably, none of the Christian Reformed congregations in Southeast Grand Rapids moved out and none completely shed their denominational ties. The centrality of denominational heritage in conjunction with neighborhood composition shaped in powerful ways the outcomes experienced by these congregations. This leads us to several conclusions about congregational survival and the utility of organizational ecology to explain it.

First, the propensity not to change affirms the heavy pressure toward inertia in congregations. Normative organizations like congregations may be especially susceptible to inertia. A sense of mission rather than a financial bottom line drives normative organizations. For-profit firms will seek change to enhance profitability. Normative organizations may consciously resist change as a threat to mission. Most congregations inherit a sense of mission from a larger denomination. Mission likewise defines a niche for congregations. By merit of mission and heritage, denominational congregations are unlikely to abandon their original niche even as the resource base shrinks. Not surprisingly then, decline was most common for older congregations

in our study that resided in areas experiencing greater racial transition. A strong identification with denominational heritage rooted older congregations more centrally within the white, conservative Reformed niche. Adaptation to nonwhite neighborhoods was virtually impossible. Instead, congregations became more generalist in pursuit of members, since neighborhood specialization was no longer a viable survival strategy for most. Decline followed. Although both congregational and denominational cultures may weigh heavily against attempts to adapt, congregations in changing environments cannot continue doing business as usual and expect to survive indefinitely. One might think that the denomination would guide congregations through such changes. Like Ammerman (1997), we heard nothing in the four churches we did interviews in about how the Christian Reformed denomination had helped congregations actually change. The denomination sponsored outreach campaigns, formed national committees, and issued reports. It solved little in these congregations. This raises an interesting question: Are congregations without a denominational affiliation better equipped to face changing environmental conditions? Independent or nondenominational congregations do not inherit a niche from a larger national organization. For the ones that survive, they must establish themselves within a niche. It would be worth exploring whether these congregations might be more adaptive long term as a result.

Second, a stable resource base makes for stable congregations. Newer congregations in more demographically stable neighborhoods fared better in our analysis. With charter members still alive and active in the church, the sense of mission in places like Shawnee Park and Woodlawn may remain more clear and salient for members. Traditions are not so deeply rooted that change is rejected outright. This is not to say that there is no disagreement. As observed in Shawnee Park, battles flare over who and what will define the church. Internal controversy at Shawnee did not prove as detrimental to congregational sustainability as were controversies at Fuller Avenue. A stable environmental context may enable congregations to bounce back from setback in ways that an environment in transition may not. Our findings highlight why relocation can be profitable for urban congregations. If the suburbs are home to likely members, a physical move to this location puts a congregation in closer proximity to its niche. Relocation brings risks. New competitors may await. Current members may dispute. And moving connotes abandoning an area maybe in most desperate need of a stable institutional presence. Ironically, it appears that in operation, most of the urban congregations in our sample already are substantially suburban in terms of membership location even if not in terms of facility location. Whether urban or suburban, congregations and resource environments exist in dynamic relation, and an ecological approach is useful at dissecting the consequences of this dynamic process.

Third, in an extension of organizational ecology theory, we point out that the viability of organizations from one organizational population is related to concomitant changes in other organizational populations in the same geographic space. Organizational ecology treats each organizational population as a species and generally remains silent about cross-species interactions. Yet, we find the fate of congregations to depend considerably on the actions of other neighborhood organizations. The closing of Dutch-owned grocery and drug stores in downtown neighborhoods as well as the southward migration of Christian day-schools were symptomatic of the difficulties ahead for Fuller Avenue and Calvin congregations. The move of denominational college and seminary was even more consequential. A convenient population of students, faculty, and staff were transplanted physically and symbolically. All of the older urban churches felt the move. None suffered more than Calvin, the original campus church and college namesake. Yet, the new suburban-like campus was a catalyst for birth and boom for other CRC congregations. From 1961 to 1968, the new campus was temporary home to the new Shawnee Park congregation. Calvin professors were among the early members. No sooner had Shawnee moved to its own building than the campus hosted another nascent congregation, Woodlawn. Congregation and college would end up permanently sharing space. In effect, a new campus church was born. Nor would Woodlawn be the last CRC church that the

college and seminary would help birth on the eastern edge of Grand Rapids. The important point here for us is the ecological impact of institutional interrelationships (for an examination of such interrelationships on a national scale, see Ammerman 2005). The move of Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary provided cultural infrastructure for a growing suburban population in eastern Grand Rapids. At the same time, the move extracted a key institutional resource from another section of the city already on the verge of seismic change.

Fourth, congregational specialization is advantageous, but not forever and not in all forms. As expected, congregations least tied to the ethnic heritage of the denomination turned out to be most successful in diverse urban neighborhoods. Mission churches operate on the fringe of the CRC's niche. Their origins as specialist congregations serving non-Dutch people lead these churches to depend less on white, Dutch people as a resource. This extends the reach of the denomination beyond its traditional niche. It also makes it so that the mission churches are not direct competitors with other more traditional CRC congregations. However, specialization at one point in time is no guarantee of long-term advantage. Environmental conditions change and the favorability of any one organizational form will change with it. Remarkably, the outpost status of Madison Square seemed to give it an ability to adapt to a changing neighborhood in a way not seen in older, more traditional churches. Madison Square adapted from serving poor whites to become a multiethnic congregation of whites, African Americans, Hispanics, and other ethnicities. Its status as a mission outpost seemed to exempt it from the normative pressure for conformity characterizing other CRC congregations. Other congregations have made attempts to specialize outside of geography without gaining much. Calvin CRC's decision to emphasize classical liturgy and expository preaching puts it at a disadvantage for attracting nonwhite ethnicities that now compose almost half the neighborhood population. It also puts it in a position of niche overlap with a well-heeled downtown congregation and an innovative suburban upstart. The difficulty for Calvin and other more traditional CRC congregations is that attempting to specialize within the CRC niche is complicated by the number of comparable congregations within the niche. To contrast, Madison Square has specialized as an outsider congregation in the denomination and by doing so found a larger potential audience from within and beyond the CRC.

Finally, it is essential to recognize the limits of specialization within any one organizational population. Copying the strategies of a growing sister church nearby is not a recipe for success; it is a recipe for niche overlap and competition. In what may seem a paradox to denominational leaders, Madison Square's success may inadvertently impair other CRC congregations with similar multiracial ambitions. It seems unlikely that Southeast Grand Rapids could support multiple multiracial CRC churches. As it currently stands, Christian Reformed people in Grand Rapids who want to attend such a congregation know where to go. As membership maps of Madison Square show, it does not matter if they have to drive across town to get there. The Pentecostal leanings of the congregation, a common correlate of multiracial membership (see Emerson and Woo 2006), additionally distinguish the church. On two fronts then, Madison Square offers a congregational culture unlike any other CRC church in the city. And it prospered. The challenge for other Christian Reformed congregations in Grand Rapids and for all congregations is to cultivate an identity that attracts resources, recognizing that the salience of congregational identity is always subject to environmental conditions that can and do change.

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