

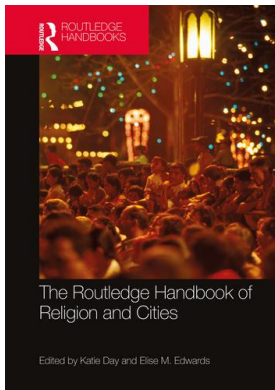
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RELIGIOUS AGENCY IN THE DYNAMICS OF GENTRIFICATION

Moving in, moving out, and staying put in Philadelphia

Kristin E. Holmes

On Sundays in one of Philadelphia's most gentrified neighborhoods,¹ religious worship is a reflection of what happens when a community is transformed from a series of forgotten and neglected city blocks to a gleaming haven for new construction. Like neighbors themselves, new congregations attracted by change have moved in, old ones who can't afford to stay have moved out, and others have stubbornly remained despite the changing landscape.

Graduate Hospital, a neighborhood named for a now-defunct hospital just south of downtown Philadelphia, is like the Shaw section of Washington, DC,² and Harlem in New York,³ transformed from the underappreciated wallflower to the new Instagram star whose phone number everyone wants in their contacts.

The Philadelphia neighborhood is dotted with shiny new buildings accented with metal and chrome, and million-dollar homes whose facades jut out, breaking once uniform flanks of brick facades that lined the block. The coffee shops, trendy restaurants, chain drug stores, chic wine bar, and vegan bakery have set up shop on a once unglamorous commercial strip of small businesses and vacant storefronts. In three of Graduate Hospital's most gentrified census tracts (the largest is 0.3 sq. mi., the others, 0.1 sq. mi.), the African American population has plunged,⁴ while the number of white residents has tripled⁵ and median income has soared by between 64 and 111 percent.⁶ The Pew Charitable Trusts called the changes "swift and sweeping."

Amid this jarring transformation, religious communities work to provide a spiritual anchor. They do it as the neighborhoods around them are shifting and the people of faith who live there change along with it. The congregations often do it while maintaining a perilous grip on the future, one loosened by decades of wearying efforts to cope with shrinking finances and aging buildings,⁷ and a depleted membership made up mostly of older members.

For some, the prospect of staying in the changing community amounts to a prescription for institutional death, so they pack up and set out to carry on "the Great Commission" of sharing their faith and making what the Bible calls "disciples of all nations" in what they believe will be friendlier territory. Others remain, looking for ways to appeal to new neighbors or sometimes

sustain themselves financially by adopting new models of owning their sacred buildings that allow them to stay put. Yet amid what is a struggle for some longtime congregations, new houses of worship emerge that settle into the changing neighborhood, as new spiritual beacons offering a way of worship and a youthful community that appeal to the relocated faithful in ways that longtime churches in the neighborhood do not.

“Church planters are after people in their young late 20s, early 30s and plant for that generation,” said the Rev. Dr. William Krispin,⁸ co-founder of the former Center for Urban Theological Studies, now Lancaster Bible College | Capital Seminary & Graduate School, an educational program founded to focus on city-oriented ministry. “People move and find a church that reflects them. Gen X and Gen Zers are looking for their own age group, they want pastors from their own group,” Krispin said.

That search leaves older, often old-fashioned churches on the outs, Krispin said. And, in Graduate Hospital’s case, those churches are mostly African American.

Urban gentry

For the purposes of urban research, the word *gentrification* has been defined as significant increases in variables such as income, housing values, and educational attainment associated with a neighborhood.⁹ The term dates back to 1964 when Ruth Glass coined it in *London: Aspects of Change*,¹⁰ a collection of essays co-edited by the British sociologist.

Glass used “gentry,” a word associated with British upper classes, and employed it in the description of the way houses in London’s Notting Hill and Islington neighborhoods were being taken over by bohemian couples with the money to refurbish them, thereby squeezing out existing blue-collar communities¹¹ who can no longer afford property taxes, increased rents, and other costs associated with living in a particular place.

One by one, many of the working class quarters of London have been invaded by the middle classes—upper and lower. Once this process of ‘gentrification’ starts in a district, it goes on rapidly until all or most of the original working class occupiers are displaced and the whole social character of the district is changed.¹²

The original definition has a kind of “replacement class value,” with one economic value replacing another, said Bruce Mitchell,¹³ senior research analyst with the National Community Reinvestment Coalition (NCRC), a Washington, DC-based organization that advocates for fairness in housing, lending, and business. Mitchell is a co-author of “Shifting Neighborhoods: Gentrification and cultural displacement in American Cities,” a 2019 NCRC study that analyzed gentrification in the nation.¹⁴ “I would say that gentrification has this kind of class war, racial or ethnic component to it. If it didn’t have that replacement component, it would really be just revitalization with economic values of homes going up and incomes going up ...,” Mitchell said.

Philadelphia is one of seven cities that accounted for nearly half of the gentrification nationally between 2000 and 2013, the study reported.¹⁵ Most low- to moderate-income neighborhoods did not gentrify or revitalize during the period of our study, Mitchell said. But while gentrification across the nation was rare, the NCRC study found that many major American cities showed signs of gentrification and some racialized displacement between 2000 and 2012. In metropolitan centers where the changes are occurring, there is a “particular intensity” to the phenomenon, Mitchell said.

Philadelphia ranked 4th among US cities in the raw number of gentrified tracts, behind New York, Los Angeles, and Washington DC, according to the NCRC report, but it fell to 10th place when the proportion of neighborhoods that had gentrified within the city was measured (17 percent).¹⁶ The NCRC study analyzed US Census data for the period between 2000 and 2010, and social and economic data from the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey program, from 2008 through 2012. Areas with median household income and median house value below the 40th percentile in 2000 that increased to the top 60th percentile by 2012, with an adjustment for inflation, were defined as gentrified.¹⁷

In a 2016 study, only 15 of Philadelphia's 372 residential census tracts were found to have gentrified from 2000 to 2014, according to "Philadelphia's Changing Neighborhoods: Gentrification and other shifts since 2000," released by Pew Research Charitable Trusts.¹⁸ Sections of Graduate Hospital accounted for the most gentrified neighborhoods, the Pew study reported.¹⁹ In one section, median home sale prices increased from \$25,500 in 2000–2001 to \$311,250 in 2013–2014, up 1,120 percent, partly because there was a significant number of vacant properties.²⁰ In all three of the most gentrified neighborhoods in Graduate Hospital, home prices grew largely out of reach for the residents who had been living there in 2000, the study reported.

"When I moved here 63 years ago, I paid \$5,000 for my house," said Doris Reddick,²¹ 88, of Graduate Hospital, who worked as a community coordinator at the neighborhood's Edwin M. Stanton Elementary School before she retired 20 years ago. "Now houses in this area going for \$500,000," Reddick said (According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Price Index, \$5,000 in 1956 has the equivalent purchasing power of \$48,128.92 in 2020).²²

Before the transformation, these neighborhoods languished. A combination of neglect and concerted disinvestment by investors, due to high risk and low rates of return, initiated a long period of deterioration and a lack of new capital investment in the inner city, wrote sociologist Neil Smith in "Toward a Theory of Gentrification: A Back to the City Movement by Capital, not People," published in 1979.²³ Instead, investment shifted to the suburbs, a movement of capital begun at the turn of the century. Throughout the decades of most sustained suburbanization, from the 1940s to the 1960s, land values continued to decline in cities across the US, the study said.

The deterioration was exacerbated by unethical practices such as blockbusting and redlining.²⁴ In blockbusting, real estate agents persuaded owners to sell their property cheaply because of the fear of buyers of another race or class moving into the neighborhood. Later, the realtors would resell these properties at a higher price to incoming families. In redlining, lenders refused to extend credit to residents who lived in certain areas deemed a high financial risk; they literally drew red lines on maps to designate the areas. Those red-lined areas were typically occupied by racial minorities. Both practices were exposed and deemed illegal by federal legislation.

But there have been other contributing factors.

Gentrification in Graduate Hospital, a historic neighborhood for African Americans in the city, was preceded by a "massive depopulation," the result of a failed plan to construct an interstate highway down South Street, the neighborhood's commercial strip. The area lost half of its residents between 1960 and 1990.²⁵ That abandoning of a neighborhood and other forces that lead to disinvestment, and depreciation of property values produce "the objective economic conditions that make capital revaluation (gentrification) a rational market response" when developers can invest in cheap properties and secure a large profit, Smith wrote.²⁶

Neighborhood transformation also can occur organically in a more purposeful way, Mitchell said. Social scientist and economist Richard Florida writes about a "creative class"²⁷ moving in when costs are lower and neighborhoods are in distress, buying properties and renovating them to realize a profit, Mitchell said. Smith calls them "occupier developers" who buy, redevelop

and inhabit. Florida describes the creative class as 40 million Americans in a variety of fields including engineering, theater, education, and bio-tech who create for a living. Their participation in buying into neighborhoods with vacant housing spurs an organic change, according to Mitchell.²⁸

Neighborhood change can also be a product of urban planning decisions made by city officials and others to encourage gentrification. In 2000, Philadelphia officials seeking to stem the flood of residents moving out of the city and to stimulate new construction enacted a ten-year tax abatement law. Buyers of newly built homes or units in improved buildings would not have to pay real estate taxes on the improvements for a decade. As a result, housing starts boomed.²⁹

In Philadelphia, gentrification has been driven by the neighborhoods' proximity to universities and the downtown area called Center City, said Emily Dowdall, policy director at the Reinvestment Fund, which advocates on behalf of underserved communities.³⁰ Colleges including the University of Pennsylvania and Drexel University in West Philadelphia and Temple University in North Philadelphia instituted initiatives designed to encourage faculty and staff to settle in the school's surrounding neighborhoods, according to "Philadelphia's Changing Neighborhoods: Gentrification and other shifts since 2000,"³¹ the 2016 study that Dowdall researched and wrote for the Pew Charitable Trusts when she was an officer of the organization.

The most recent spate of neighborhood change includes Northern Liberties (a once thriving industrial section of the city dotted with vacant warehouses), East Passyunk in South Philadelphia (a middle-class community of mostly homeowners with a popular restaurant strip), and Graduate Hospital (a predominantly African American community adjacent to Center City with a high percentage of renters). Moving in are new residents who are mostly 18–34, non-Hispanic whites, and college graduates, according to "A Portrait of Philadelphia Migration: Who Is Coming to the City—and Who Is Leaving," a 2016 study by Pew using data from 2011 to 2013.³²

But whether old residents are actually displaced because of gentrification—black for white, low income for upper income, etc.—remains the subject of debate among social scientists. Quantifying displacement is near impossible, Dowdall said. Whether or not a resident moves by choice or because of the economic and social pressures rising in the neighborhood is difficult to discern, she said.

"Vulnerable residents" are generally no more likely to move from gentrifying neighborhoods compared with their counterparts in non-gentrifying neighborhoods," according to *Gentrification and Residential Mobility in Philadelphia*, a 2015 study by the Federal Reserve Bank.³³

Some research indicates that succession, rather than displacement is at work, Dowdall says. "Residents might not be forced out, but when they move they might be replaced by people who are a different race and make more money," she says.

Mitchell argues that as low-income residents move out of the gentrifying neighborhood, [residents with similar incomes] can't afford to move in, so there is a gradual displacement and increase in income level. "That decrease in residents translates to a decrease in black and Hispanic residents," Mitchell said. About 12,000 black residents moved out of Philadelphia's gentrifying neighborhoods, from 2000 to 2010, the NCRC study reports.³⁴

Richard Florida says that he was naïve to think that his creative class and the cities they help transform could inspire inclusive and equitable growth.³⁵ Philadelphia and other cities are in the midst of "a new urban crisis" that is "a crisis of success manifested in accelerated gentrification, rising housing costs, and growing inequality and social division," Florida wrote in "Philadelphia's Next Challenge: From Urban Revitalization to Inclusive Prosperity,"³⁶ a 2019

report he produced as part of year-long fellowship aimed at developing “meaningful goals for equity and economic inclusion” in the wake of the city’s demographic and housing shifts.

It is in that atmosphere that long-term neighbors feel unsettled by what can seem like dizzying change. The tastes, norms, and desires of newcomers supplant and replace those of the incumbent residents, researchers found in “Shifting Neighborhoods.”³⁷ The changes in the neighborhood can ignite tensions among neighbors over issues such as parking, neighborhood traditions, and tax breaks afforded to wealthier newcomers (while long-term residents cope with increases in rent and property taxes).

“When changes come slowly, tensions aren’t as volatile, and but the more rapid the change the more intensely tensions get played out,” Dowdall said.

That change can also upend historically- and culturally-significant institutions for a community, the NCRC study said. Churches are among them, Mitchell said.

Moving in

Medical researcher Mary Beth Ritchey moved away from Philadelphia for a job, but she moved back to the city for a church.³⁸ Ritchey, 40, had comfortably settled among the young Christians that make up Epic Church with its 5 locations, before she accepted an out-of-town job. But when the new post didn’t work out, she felt the pull of the church she loved calling her home. So Ritchey returned to Philadelphia and settled in the Graduate Hospital area, four blocks from the Center City branch of Epic (for “Every Person in the City”). The congregation opened the location seven years ago in the Suzanne Roberts Theater on the Avenue of the Arts, the city’s cultural arts thoroughfare, which spans a section of Broad Street.

“This is a church for people like me—and not like me, and that’s extremely important.” Ritchey said. “If I go to a church where everybody is white, or everybody is married with two kids ... Philly is for everyone. Epic puts it all together,” according to Ritchey, who is white. The church is a multicultural congregation.

In moving back to a gentrified area of the city, Ritchey is helping to make Epic what researcher David E. Kresta calls “a beacon” to others who might consider moving into a neighborhood they perhaps wouldn’t have considered before its latest evolution. The message that Epic—and other churches that move in—send is “this neighborhood is safe to move into and changing. That can attract gentrifiers to a neighborhood—just like a hip coffee shop,” said Kresta, whose study “Can Churches Change a Neighborhood? A Census Tract, Multilevel Analysis of Churches and Neighborhood Change” examines the role of local churches as communities undergo transition.³⁹ Kresta found that in following the flock and settling in the city neighborhoods, houses of worship aren’t just setting up shop in a new place, they are impacting the process of gentrification, perhaps in an unintended way.

In the Graduate Hospital area, Epic is one of several churches that gathers for services in mostly unconventional venues.⁴⁰ The Block Church, which had been meeting for two evening services on Sundays at the Philadelphia Clef Club of Jazz and Performing Arts (until it recently began renting space in a church one block away), joins Epic as one of several youth-oriented churches that that have opened in Graduate Hospital and its near environs. Freedom Church meets at the Philadelphia Film Center in Center City. City Life Philly met at South Philadelphia High School before moving farther south to the Packer Park neighborhood. Liberty, which was renting space from First Baptist Church in Center City, has grown so much that it purchased the building and rents to the smaller First Baptist Church congregation, now tenants in the building they once owned. Other similar congregations have sprung up in the city in Fairmount, University City, and North and South Philadelphia.

With slogans like, “We are the church for people who aren’t church people,” these congregations have attracted those from the Millennial, Gen X, and Gen Z cohorts with an uncomplicated and practical theology that is dispensed in short services, but sustained during the week in small groups. These gatherings are not only opportunities to talk church, but also to engage in shared interests such as skateboarding, cooking, watching movies, or participating in community service projects. Tech is integral, music is modern, and coffee is plentiful.

“What worked yesterday doesn’t always work today,” said Pastor Joey Furjanic,⁴¹ founder of The Block Church, which includes three locations in Philadelphia with another in the Passyunk Square neighborhood scheduled to launch in 2020. “You can’t expect someone who has no [church-going experience] or whose been hurt by the church, ignored by it or bored by the church to re-engage when the way [traditional] churches go about it doesn’t work [for them],” Furjanic said.

Studies show that young adults tend to be less religious than older adults. A 2019 Pew Research Center survey found 84 percent of people born between 1928 and 1945 describe themselves as Christians, while only 49 percent of Millennials identify as Christians. Four-in-ten of them say they are religious “nones,” with no affiliation, and one-in-ten identify with non-Christian faiths. Overall, the “nones” have increased from 17 to 26 percent since 2009, the study said.⁴²

It is in this cultural context that church planters have set out to attract young people, William Krispin said. Millennial-oriented churches locate in places where change is being driven by the presence of young people in the community—with gentrification being a part of it, said Krispin who went on to explain that churches have long followed the residential patterns of their flocks. Decades earlier, the emphasis was on planting churches in the then-up-and-coming neighborhoods that were mostly in the suburbs. During that time, the megachurches multiplied in the suburbs. But since the 1990s, churches started moving to lower-income neighborhoods in a “back-to-the-city” movement for churches. It is a reversal of what became known as “white flight” among residents and houses of worship, Kresta said.

The young people who grew up in those suburban households and have moved to the city are finding churches where they are, Krispin said. The search for—and founding of—churches in a new neighborhood reflects the way immigrant groups relocate and build social networks and institutions that help reshape the cultural identity of the surrounding community, a process call ethnogenesis.⁴³

When Joey Furjanic and his wife Lauren decided to start a church in Philadelphia, the 33-year-old chose a catering hall in the Port Richmond neighborhood because the owner offered Furjanic a good deal on the rent. A former resident of Philadelphia, he had moved away as a youngster, but later decided to return.

When the church had grown to over 300, Furjanic needed to expand. He looked around at where his congregants were coming from and found contingents from Graduate Hospital and South Philadelphia, two of the city’s most gentrified areas. As he walked the streets of Graduate Hospital, looking for a prospective venue, he found the Clef Club, a concert venue and music school. Soon, more than 300 people started showing up for 2 Sunday services, surrounded by images of jazz men Grover Washington Jr. and John Coltrane displayed high on the wall.

Typically, Furjanic preaches live at one location and the sermon is livestreamed to the other congregations. Each location has a site pastor who supervises the location and its particular events and projects, and occasionally preaches. Epic Church is organized similarly and recently opened a new location in King of Prussia, a Philadelphia suburb. They also meet in schools and theaters.

Kent Jacobs, who started Epic with his wife Tiffany and friend Joanne Domagala, had been the youth pastor at a 500-member church in the Philadelphia suburbs. He felt called to start a multicultural congregation that he says is “for Philly”—and for someone like him, just a “regular guy.” He describes it as a place where anyone can walk through the doors, be comfortable, and leave with a message that applies to everyday life.

“I didn’t feel like the church that I came from—or churches in general—really addressed the questions that regular people were asking,” Jacobs said. “Tell me how to be a great dad, a great spouse. Tell me how I can make my life matter.”

At the outset, Jacobs chose venues that wouldn’t intimidate the non-church goer. He started the first branch in a movie theater in the Manayunk neighborhood, which had already gentrified. When the church had grown to weekly attendance of over 300, Jacobs formed a focus group to consider a location for the next site. The group chose Center City and added services at the Suzanne Roberts Theater in 2012, and it also has locations in Northern Liberties and Parkside. “We are taking church to the people, not waiting for people to come to the church,” said Epic co-founder Jacobs.⁴⁴

But moving in with good intentions to carry out the Great Commission may contribute to something less than great for longtime residents coping with change that they can’t control. A higher percentage of whites attending churches located in non-white neighborhoods is associated with more neighborhood gentrification, and, on average, white churches in low-income neighborhoods account for about 10 percent of the relative income growth required for gentrification, Kresta’s study reports.⁴⁵

Moving in can cause a “negative disruption” to the existing community, and among the churches already doing good in the neighborhood, writes author D.L. Mayfield in “Church Planting and the Gospel of Gentrification: Are we seeking the ‘welfare of the city,’ or just our own?,” an article published in *Sojourners* magazine in 2017.⁴⁶

When The Simple Way, an intentional community, moved into a blighted part of Kensington section of Philadelphia, “the last thing we wanted to do was start a church service,” said Christian activist and author Shane Claiborne, a founding partner of the community.⁴⁷ “There are worship services on every corner,” he said. So the Simple Way wanted to join an existing worshipping community. “When you are a white person [and part of the majority culture] like myself and you’re moving into a diverse neighborhood,” you want to be mindful of the culture of the neighborhood and the “indigenous pastors” that are working in it, Claiborne said.

The Rev. Robert L. Johnson, pastor of 117-year-old Tindley Temple United Methodist Church in Graduate Hospital, wonders if the new churches are committed to the neighborhood beyond meeting for services on Sunday and dispersing until the next.⁴⁸ Furjanic and Jacobs argue that their churches are there to carry out grassroots ministry, and that their congregations they are intentionally diverse for a reason. “We are committed to everybody. We are asking the question how can we help? Not just the guy in the million-dollar condo. It’s how can we help the guy—wherever he lives,” Jacobs said. “We have a responsibility to look for opportunities to collaborate around serving the city,” he said.

Jacobs and Furjanic say their congregations participate in community service projects and are looking to do more, including working with already established homeless missions, hosting a prom for disabled youth, and partnering with schools, neighborhood groups and other ministries. Such social service efforts by churches—new or longstanding in the neighborhood—can slow down the adverse effects of gentrification by helping low-income residents stay in place, David Kresta said.

“We don’t want to just start something new. We want to partner with those doing people doing great work,” Furjanic said.

“Are we part of gentrification? I don’t know,” Furjanic continued. “In a sense, we are a wave of something fresh. We’re just here to serve people and we go where we are welcomed and where people live and where opportunity presents itself. Although there’s nothing wrong with it, we are not a restaurant capitalizing on hipsters.”

Moving out

It was a long gradual decline for First African Baptist Church from the heady days when congregants lined up to attend services in its grand sanctuary where legendary figures such as Booker T. Washington once stood at the pulpit. But there they were, in 2015, the church’s 109-year-old building cordoned off to protect passersby as official construction workers repaired portions of the building’s stone exterior. Now only about 50 people gathered for worship in a church that had been built for thousands. The last thing that First African needed, was something else to squeeze more of the future out of it. But the Graduate Hospital neighborhood around it was shifting, becoming less black, more white, and, perhaps as importantly, was starting to have fewer places for cars to park—for most all of the members had moved to other areas of the city and drove to church from outside the neighborhood.

Half a mile away, the members of Greater Saint Matthew Baptist Church knew well the travails of parking in the gentrified Graduate Hospital neighborhood. Bishop Steven Avinger had watched members of his congregation drift away from the church, tired of repeated parking tickets, and attempts to find alternate solutions to a problem exacerbated by tensions with new neighbors who bristled at Sunday worshippers taking up valued spots for long services and complained about it to city officials.

“I saw death” in the future, said Avinger, who has been pastor of Greater St. Matthew for 32 years. “It’s not like our new neighbors wouldn’t come in, they did, but they just wouldn’t join.”⁴⁹ Without new members in the neighborhood to replace the old ones who were leaving, Greater St. Matthews’ finances tightened, and the congregation made what Avinger describes as a business decision that had to be made “if we wanted to survive.”

In 2014, the congregation moved to the Nicetown section of North Philadelphia, a community that is predominantly black. A year later, First African moved from Graduate Hospital as well. The congregations sold their properties, packed up, and moved away from the home they had known for decades. They relocated with a couple of million dollars to help them set up shop elsewhere—and hopefully find a renewed sense of mission and purpose.

In and around the Graduate Hospital area, churches have sold their buildings to ensure that they can continue saving souls. Gone are African American congregations, including Metropolitan AME, Greater Mount Olive AME, New Light Beulah Baptist Church, First Colored Wesley Methodist (now Fellowship Community Wesley Methodist), Christian Street Baptist, and New Hope Temple Baptist.⁵⁰ A permit to demolish 19th Street Baptist Church, designed by noted architect Frank Furness in nearby Point Breeze, was denied by the Philadelphia Historical Commission in October 2019 amid legal wrangling between the church and a developer.⁵¹

Most have already relocated, or plan to move to neighborhoods they hope will be more open to their brand of religion. They have moved to North Philadelphia, the Lower Northeast, West Philadelphia, and to at least one suburban community with a diverse population. Between 2009 and 2019, nearly 40 religious buildings associated with multiple denominations have been torn down in Philadelphia, said Rachel Hildebrandt, senior program manager for Partners for Sacred Places, a national organization based in Philadelphia that helps congregations with community

engagement and caring for their aging buildings. Graduate Hospital and the adjacent Point Breeze neighborhood have been among the hardest hit, observed Hildebrandt.⁵²

“It’s disheartening,” longtime Greater St. Matthew member Katherine Reynolds, 61, said of churches’ disappearance from the area. “People don’t understand that spiritual connection. You need God in the neighborhood. When you kick out God, you kick out love.”⁵³

Nationally, houses of worship have closed in “cities, suburbs, small towns, and rural locales alike,” as membership has plunged, Hildebrandt said. But the trend towards demolition is more pronounced in places that are experiencing development pressure and communities in which there is a high demand for new housing, Hildebrandt said. In Graduate Hospital, Avinger and his congregation increasingly felt that pressure, but tried to adapt to stay put. Avinger tried what he called a multicultural initiative to make services more new-neighborhood friendly. The change included altering his preaching style during worship, and opening up the church for community meetings and other events. A few new neighbors joined, but not enough.

The Rev. Dr. Terrence Griffith, pastor of First African, stood outside of the now-113-year-old stone building at 16th and Christian Streets, and chatted with passersby. He found that, in addition to everything else—an aging congregation, deteriorating building, and tight finances—the name of his church, “First African Baptist,” was a problem. “People [whites and blacks] thought it was a church for Africans, so they stayed away,” Griffith said.⁵⁴

In fact, First African was founded by 13 African Americans in 1809. Two of the church’s members sold themselves into slavery in 1832 to free a slave who could serve as their pastor. The congregation moved into their newly built church in Graduate Hospital in 1906. It became a church with a national reputation, with 3,000 to 4,000 attending on Sundays. Church members founded a savings and loan company, and a school.

The neighborhood at one time “was perhaps the most important center for African American people in the city,” said Charles L. Blockson, curator emeritus and founder of the Charles L. Blockson Afro American Collection at Temple University.⁵⁵ “It was the center for black talent. Doctors, ministers, teachers lived there,” Blockson said. Among them were historic figures such as architect Julian Abele, who contributed to the design of the Philadelphia Museum of Art; John Asbury, who founded a Philadelphia hospital; and opera singer Marian Anderson, who famously sang in a concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1939 after the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to let her sing at the organization’s Constitution Hall because Anderson was black.

Greater St. Matthew moved in on the edge of the neighborhood in the early 2000s. They moved from a building farther south in Philadelphia because they had outgrown its space. They purchased what was a Catholic Church in Graduate Hospital and built a congregation that once averaged over 300 on Sunday. In the mid-2000s, a 618-unit development called Naval Square opened across the street on the grounds of a former site of the first US Naval Academy that had also served as a retirement home for veterans.

The changes in the neighborhood exacerbated the troubles many churches already faced with aging, dwindling congregations, and old buildings that cost a lot of money to heat and maintain. “It’s really sad,” said Murray Spencer, a 45-year resident of Graduate Hospital, an architect, and chair of the zoning committee of the South of South Neighborhood Association, a community group.⁵⁶ Spencer said:

As a person who used to go to church every Sunday, because I had to, there were a lot of churches. But then people began to move out, congregations diminished ... The population that supported 20 churches doesn’t exist to support 5 anymore—no matter who goes.

For First African, the decline started in 1979 when the church split. The congregation that had once been such a stronghold, one that planted several churches in the city, was never the same, Griffith said. First African sold their building for \$2,000,000 in 2015 and purchased the former St. Callistus Catholic Church, a 2-acre property in the Overbrook section of the city that included a church and office buildings. By then, Greater St. Matthew had already left the neighborhood, purchasing the former Triumph Baptist Church building and an annex in the Nicetown section.

But the new locations don't guarantee that the churches will have a future. Both must guard against the pitfall of moving to new location, but retaining the old ways of carrying out their mission at a time when people are less attached to religious institutions, Avinger said. Without real change and connection to the new neighborhood, church officials may be just postponing a church closure.⁵⁷ "Churches are in a continual cycle of churches dying and new churches being planted," Krispin said. "I can count on my hands the number of churches that are 50. The average life cycle of a church is 40 years. It's become generational. It's a church for a generation," Krispin said.

First African, which sunk nearly all of its \$2,000,000 sale proceeds into renovating the new church, has rebranded itself as part of its efforts to ensure that it lives on in the generations to come. Instead of First African Baptist Church, it's calling itself FAB Church. Church services are shorter, hymnals have been banished for video screens, music is hipper, church content is available on YouTube and Facebook, donations can be made via an app, and officials are considering installing a donation kiosk. "We are doing exceptionally well," Griffith said. Attendance had declined to about 50 on an average Sunday in Graduate Hospital. "It is now over 100—and getting younger," Griffith said, who added that church officials are working closely with block captains and developing partnerships with schools and other organizations.

At Greater St. Matthew, Avinger says his church is "still rebuilding," at a time when nationwide church attendance is on the decline. The church lost about half its membership, although a small number still make the trek from South Philadelphia via the church van. Neighborhood residents are coming, but at a slower pace than Avinger hoped. And the newbies tend to be middle-aged.

Reynolds still comes to Greater St. Matthew where she has been a member for 25 years. She started attending when she could walk to the church, which was then only two blocks from her house in Point Breeze. When the congregation moved ten blocks away to Graduate Hospital, she began driving to services, and now that it's on the "other side of town," she takes the church van. Her involvement in the church has diminished and she has considered joining a congregation closer to her home.

Reynolds calls the change a "culture shock." She misses the chance to make a quick dash to church for some guidance or counseling from the pastor. "But I guess the Lord finished our work in [Graduate Hospital] and took us to the other side of the city," Reynolds said. "It's a need for ministry in that neighborhood and doing the work the Lord is important."

Since the move, Avinger hasn't changed a lot about his services, but his community outreach, which began a year before the church even moved, is paying off. He is in negotiations with a local university to establish a family medical center in the church's basement. The neighborhood is what Avinger calls "a family-physician desert." A drug treatment center may be in the wings for a church annex, and a heart disease prevention program is in the planning stages. "In South Philadelphia, we ran youth programs. Here the need is different," Avinger said. "Our approach is transformational. There is an opportunity for science and religion to come together to treat the whole person."

In a nod to the younger generation, Greater St. Matthew has started what the church calls a “Millennial Remix” service. What’s different? Said Avinger, “They do everything in 20 minutes, and I just get up and preach.”

Staying put

The Rev. Robert L. Johnson is preaching a tough-love message of survival in the halls of the historic church where hymn-writing legend Charles Albert Tindley once served as pastor.⁵⁸ “Reaching young people is hard when you have an old congregation. Who are the members going to invite to services? Other 80 year-olds?” Johnson said. For Tindley Temple United Methodist Church to survive beyond the years of the people who currently sit in its pews, the church must confront its mortality.

The prospect of Tindley Temple’s death is not a fate that Johnson and the members of the church are willing to accept. Neither is moving away from their Graduate Hospital location in its prime position on the Avenue of the Arts. So Johnson and other church officials are working hard to save the congregation founded by the minister whose gospel songs with lyrics such as “Take your burden to the Lord and leave it there” still comfort the faithful. Gentrification can be a good thing for churches, Johnson said. “We just need to find a way to turn it into an opportunity that we can take advantage of. It’s not something we should be running from,” he said.

Johnson, who grew up in Tindley Temple as a little boy, has vowed that the nearly 100-year-old Beaux Arts building will remain standing and serving as a church at a time when other congregations have found the changes in the neighborhood to be a final straw. They’ve sold and moved out. By Johnson’s count, some 13 have moved since he was named Tindley’s pastor in 2014.⁵⁹ “Churches have to do what they must for their own situation,” Johnson said. “Sometimes it’s easier to relocate and start over some place than to stay and struggle,” he said.

Longtime member Doris Reddick shudders at the thought of Tindley anywhere else but near the corner of Broad and Fitzwater Streets, or, worse, closing entirely.⁶⁰ She has lived in the neighborhood for decades and has long urged her neighbors and acquaintances to come visit, including a then-eight-year-old Robert Johnson who she escorted safely across the street when he was a student and Reddick was a school crossing guard. “I made a lot of children in the neighborhood go to Sunday School,” said Reddick who added that she is saddened by what she calls the loss of black churches. “They’re turning them into apartments and condos. That’s the part that hurts,” Reddick said.

Tindley Temple perhaps feels the weight of history pressing it to stand firm despite the vicissitudes of gentrification that not only swirl around the neighborhood, but have landed across the street and next door. Luxury condominium complex 777 South Broad faces the church and the new Lydian Place complex of townhouses is next door.⁶¹ Units at Lydian Place are projected to sell for over \$1,000,000 starting in 2020.⁶²

In an effort to save the church and its legacy, Tindley Temple is doing what other churches have done: devising a strategy to turn its property into a revenue-producing asset. Johnson envisions a concert hall showcase for which a promoter schedules performers who may be more trendy than Tindley.

Shiloh Baptist Church, about a half mile away, is confronting the same dilemma—how to stay put, survive—and perhaps thrive. The congregation’s “mother church” First African Baptist, elected to depart the neighborhood, leaving Shiloh, a church First African planted, to fight on. Since the Rev. Edward Sparkman became the pastor of the congregation in the late 1990s, the minister has presided over 150 funerals. Yet Sparkman, who is also a lawyer, doesn’t consider

the congregation “a dying church.”⁶³ It is the midst—along with other churches—of what Sparkman describes as a retrenchment that marks the end of the church-growth era. Adapting means focusing on “what we have”—Shiloh’s building and its people. About 40 members attend service every Sunday in the congregation’s fellowship hall, because the 1,200-seat sanctuary—with its \$4,000-a-month heating bill—is just too big.

“Doing for Millennials is fine, but what about others who want to do more traditional services?” Sparkman said. On a Sunday in September of 2019, that worship in celebration of Shiloh’s 177th anniversary is a buoyant and emotional gathering, featuring songs from the choir that sang with a spirit as vibrant as their cobalt blue dresses. A congregation of more than 100 sang about “Holding on to God’s unchanging hand” a 1906 hymn that encourages the faithful to build their hopes “on things eternal” when times are filled with “swift transition.”

Shiloh is working with Partners for Sacred Places, which is helping church officials to better utilize the congregation’s three historic buildings on the corner of 21st and Christian Streets and enhance its relationship to the changing community around it. An aerial dance troupe rents rehearsal and performance space; it has also become the meeting space for neighborhood groups, and become a beneficiary of local charitable fundraising social events. The congregation’s message is: “Don’t think of us just as a building—or just a church.” The strategy may be working. “Some of the young people are coming back. But they just don’t join.” Sparkman said.

On this issue, Jacobs shares his own hard truth acknowledging the demographic segregation in much of morning worship:

If you look around and don’t see people who look like you, you feel out of place. No matter how great the experience, you might say it’s not for me ... If you walk in and see an older congregation, [and you’re young], you want to have friends, cultivate relationships and not feel like you’re on the outside looking in.

When a church is “not so diverse,” its ability to be a “convener of people with different backgrounds,” can be limited, observed Emily Dowdall. “The same is true when most of the church is older. Congregations lose their ability to be nimble enough to change and attract younger people,” Krispin said.

“The church must bear some responsibility for the absence of young people,” observed Robert Johnson. “It has alienated young people by dismissing their ideas and participation, when they were attending church with their parents and grandparents,” Johnson said. He figures that if young people won’t visit for services, maybe they’ll come to the building for another kind of event—a concert, a play, or other performances—that will generate funds to help preserve the life of the church.

Johnson’s plan to save Tindley Temple is an adaptation of one now in operation at Holy Ghost Headquarters, a church that owned the former Metropolitan Opera House in Francisville, another of Philadelphia’s gentrifying neighborhoods. In 2012, the congregation leaders struck a deal with a music promoter and a developer who would spend \$56,000,000 to renovate the then-111-year-old building and turn it into the Met Philadelphia, which so far has hosted concerts by Madonna, Bob Dylan, and Sting.⁶⁴ Holy Ghost Headquarters still worships at the Met on Sundays and will share in the profits—when they start rolling in. That’s what Johnson envisions, along with partnering with another organization to turn the church parking lot into senior citizen condos with underground parking that will be shared with other church members.

While Johnson says that Tindley Temple isn't leaving, Sparkman says the time may come for Shiloh. "When God tells us to leave, we'll leave, and I have no problem with that," Sparkman said. And when he does leave, Sparkman plans for the church to be paid handsomely—not what he views as the "chump change" that other developers are paying other churches. "We have five buildings," Sparkman continued. "They've got to come up with at least \$25 million," he said.

Until Sparkman or someone else feels that heavenly direction, Shiloh plans to continue partnering with community groups and opening its doors to new neighbors. Kresta says that those collaborations are important. "That's what we hope to see in the future that churches [new and longstanding in the community] partner with others who care about the neighborhood and not approach ministry in a silo," Kresta offered. It's also important that religious leaders—old, new, and in-training—understand more about the nuts and bolts of neighborhood change. "Seminary education and other training programs need to catch up," Kresta said, "because those who really want to help their [communities] will definitely have to deal with these issues."

The economic, social, cultural, and religious shifts that shake communities in transition can upend churches and other institutions in gentrifying neighborhoods. The changes can help create a breeding ground for upstart congregations who appeal to the new neighbors, or a possible burial ground for longtime churches who must scramble for a way to survive the new normal—inside the community, or outside of it. They must confront unsettling questions. How can they re-establish the kinship that at one time made the church a community foundation? Should they move, stay put, or dissolve? And if they fight on, how much of their identity are they willing to change for a chance at institutional survival?

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