Communities within Community:
The Birth of a Contemporary "Religious District"

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The Four Corners area of Dorchester is well-fixed for churches but little else. The area's application for Main Street designation - a city-funded program to boost commercial activity in struggling business districts - says it all: 0 supermarkets; 0 bakeries; 0 hardware stores; 0 accounting offices; 11 religious organizations; 14 vacant storefronts (Boston Globe 11/08/99, A20).

In the Summer of 1995 I began visiting Four Corners, a depressed, predominantly black neighborhood in Boston. Although I possessed an academic understanding of what the neighborhood was like prior to my first visit, there was something else about Four Corners that revealed itself only after repeated visits. Each time I returned to the neighborhood, I noticed more churches, many in storefronts tucked between quick shops and hair salons. The cliché about depressed black neighborhoods containing little other than churches and liquor stores came to mind. I wondered what it could mean for twenty-nine religious communities (more than twice the Boston Globe estimate) to be concentrated in a .6 square mile area. I wondered also how these religious communities impacted broader community life -- that is, at the neighborhood level. These concerns evolved into a four-year, primarily ethnographic study of religion and community revitalization in Four Corners.

This chapter attempts to move beyond the cliché about churches in depressed neighborhoods. I first explain the historic origins of this spectacularly dense, diverse form of religious presence – what I call the "religious district" – in historic black Boston. I then explain how Four Corners became a religious district in the 1970s, and how the neighborhood has been able to sustain so much religious activity. Finally, I explain how the case of the Four Corners challenges common assumptions about "community" as it applies to organized religious life and urban neighborhoods.

Birth of the Historic Black Religious District

Reverend Robert Jameson, founder and pastor of the Church of the Holy Ghost[1] in Four Corners, arrived in Boston from South Carolina in 1954. He had left the South in search of work - his older brother had already found plentiful employment as a laborer in Boston. Jameson settled in a lower Roxbury apartment not far from where his brother lived. He noticed that here, "there were *lots* of little storefronts." Having found Pentecostal religion in South Carolina, Jameson set out among the many storefronts to find a new church home, only to find himself bewildered by the sheer range of choices. His brother eventually pulled him into one of the three Church of God in Christ congregations in the South End. The church was composed almost entirely of black migrants like himself.

Reverend Jameson's story is not unique. It resembles the experiences of thousands of black Southerners, who, between the end of the Civil War and the end of the Second World War, set out for Boston and other Northern centers in search of a higher standard of living, and a reprieve from the relentless, often violent racial repression of the South. Especially telling, though, is Jameson's impression of religious life in 1950s black Boston. Like Jameson, many migrants were used to a more sparse and homogeneous religious landscape. Those migrants arriving at the close of the Second World War must have been especially amazed at the panoply of religious organizations that lined the major arteries of black Boston.

Jameson's recollections indicate that what I have dubbed the "religious district" is not unique to Four Corners in Boston history (indeed, it is not unique to Boston; it is a northern urban phenomenon). Instead, the template for the contemporary religious district, with its high concentration of churches characterized by their shifting, percolating particularisms and their handiness with untraditional (especially commercial) worship spaces, has its origins in early 20th century black Boston. It emerged in direct response to the black population, which was being transfigured numerically, socially, and spatially by the Great Migration. As the black population grew more diverse and more concentrated in space, more churches appeared, each appealing to a certain social group.

The period of the Great Migration thus witnessed the establishment of dozens of churches in Boston that functioned as havens, particularly for southerners and West Indians, and which

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[1] Except for Reverend Eugene Rivers and the Azusa Christian Community, the names of all currently operating churches and their clergy are pseudonymous.

joined preexisting havens of northern religious sociability. These churches were "particularistic spaces of sociability" (Ammerman 1997; see also Warner 1993) in that they aimed distinctive worship and hand-tailored social and material opportunities at certain *kinds* of people.[2] The resulting religious environment operated like a contemporary shopping mall or garment district. Here, one finds in a small area numerous clothing stores, each appealing to a particular shopper with a distinctive taste in apparel and a fixed pocketbook. But most significant about the rise of the historic religious district is the fact that it responded to the shifting contours of the urban social milieu itself. The great migration diversified and spatially consolidated the black population in such a way that made the religious district possible and likely.

Racial Change and Economic Decline in Four Corners

The religious district in old black Boston responded to the density and diversity of the post-migration black population. Contemporary religious districts emerged in the pockets of intense economic depression opened in the late 1960s, when "white flight" and subsequent commercial disinvestment changed the racial and economic profile of areas in Dorchester and Mattapan. Uneven community development has exacerbated the problem by leaving some of these areas to fester, even as nearby locales revitalize. In urban contexts, a symptom of economic depression is an abundance of vacant storefronts; these storefronts become available for churches to rent or purchase relatively cheaply. Thus, the contemporary religious district, like the old, is made possible by aspects of the urban environment itself.

Just prior to the 1960s, the Four Corners area, which straddles Dorchester and Roxbury, was predominantly white and Jewish. Jews lived on the west side of Washington Street, and whites, largely of Scottish and Irish ancestry, lived to the east in an area known as Mt. Bowdoin. The Four Corners segment of Washington Street was a vibrant commercial district featuring a

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[2] The term "religious particularism" comes from the religious voluntarism literature, which traces the decline of ascriptive religious practices, such as the geographically defined parish, and observes the rise of elective, voluntary forms of adherence that transform congregations into cultural forums for specific social groups (Rowe 1924; Roof and McKinney 1987; Bellah et al. 1985). People tend to "shop" for religious communities that suit their tastes and interests, rather than submit to traditions that assign individuals to congregations according to some prior familial, geographical, or denominational affiliation (Wuthnow 1988). This means that people congregate around common ethnicity, gender, social status, sexual orientation, and other dimensions of difference. Territorial identity, however, rarely is the basis for coming together. Thus churches tend toward *"de facto* congregationalism," where "the local religious community is in fact constituted by those who assemble together (which is the etymological root of "congregation") rather than by the geographic units into which higher church authorities divide their constituents, which is what 'parishes' historically are (Warner 1993: 1066-1067).

pharmacy, a tailor, several delis and bakeries, an A & P Supermarket, a bank, and a very popular movie theater. Four religious institutions served the area: St. Bridget's Catholic, Highlands Methodist, Temple Beth El, and Central Congregational.

In 1966, federally funded urban renewal bulldozers, which in the 1950s had famously razed the West End (Gans 1962), arrived at the South End and Lower Roxbury, where the great majority of Boston blacks still lived. As thousands of units of housing were demolished to make way for high-priced apartments and townhouses, some 22,000 blacks were displaced (Mollenkopf 1983: 166). Initially, exiled families had little choice but to settle in Jewish Dorchester: the only affordable area where blacks would not face overt hostility.

As the first black families trickled in, the Jewish part of Four Corners began its rapid "tip" toward black predominance. Moved by the racist scare-tactics of "blockbusting" real estate agents (Levine and Harmon 1992), and lacking parish-like religious attachments to the neighborhood (Gamm 1999), Jews hurriedly left Four Corners and Temple Beth El for the suburbs. By 1970 the western portion of Four Corners was almost entirely black. Before long, the eastern portion had followed suit, as blockbusters began to guide moderate income families to Mt. Bowdoin.

As the racial composition of the neighborhood changed, population and income levels plummeted, according to data compiled by the Boston Public Facilities Department (1997) on four core central tracts in the neighborhood. The population across these tracts dropped from 18,382 in 1960 to 13,127 in 1980 — a 29% loss. During the same period, the city lost 20% of its population, as white Bostonians moved to various suburbs. In 1950, median incomes in Four Corners were actually $458 to $748 *higher* than the city median of $2,643. But earnings declined precipitously through 1970, when individual tracts reported median incomes $1,322 to $3,928 below the city median of $9,133. Since 1960, Four Corners tracts have never posted median income levels meeting or surpassing city levels.

Aside from population shifts, the economy and overall feel of the neighborhood changed drastically. Municipal services, such as trash pickup and street cleaning, became irregular, and rat infestations followed. White and Jewish shopkeepers evacuated the commercial spaces along Washington Street; some reopened in newly built suburban malls. Among the first large establishments to leave were the movie theater and A&P Supermarket. Even the local branch of

the Boston Public Library closed. Meanwhile the discriminatory lending practices known as "redlining," discouraged new businesses from locating in the area.

This pattern of neighborhood decline was hardly unique at the time. Four Corners represented a single episode in a serial drama playing in urban theaters across the northern United States. During this period black "ghettoes" were not only disbanding, with better off blacks putting as much distance between themselves and the urban core as possible (Wilson 1987), but *expanding* as many blacks found it difficult to get very far (Massey and Denton 1993; Pattillo 1999).

What chroniclers of the drama almost entirely miss, however, is the way the expansion of the ghetto led to competition *among* ghetto neighborhoods for resources - a competition that would inevitably result in some locales, like Four Corners, falling between the cracks. They also neglect a major character in the drama: churches. The next section will explain how Four Corners fell through the cracks, and gained new self-awareness by doing so. The subsequent section shows how the neglect of Four Corners made way for the show-stopping appearance of a contemporary religious district.

Four Corners Becomes a "Community" by Exclusion

> *Why create a development plan? Because the need exists. While the communities around the Four Corners (Codman Square, Bowdoin-Geneva, Fields Corner, Grove Hall and Blue Hill Avenue) have realized economic resurgence and new housing initiatives, the same cannot be said of the Four Corners. Every other community has Mainstreet's money but Four Corners. A map of the [Enterprise Community] reveals how the parameters include Four Corners neighbors, but not the Four Corners.* - Reverend Dennis Paul, former pastor of the Highlands Methodist Church.

Rev. Paul's remark suggests that Four Corners is distinguished not only by its churches and depressed state, but by an inability to keep up with the economic revitalization occurring in neighborhoods all around it. Four Corners is a casualty of a fundamentally competitive and often adversarial urban political and economic process. As in numerous other cities (Henig 1982; Mollenkopf 1983; Rieder 1985), the politics of land use, economic development, municipal services, education, and housing in Boston have often revolved around neighborhoods, and the ability of neighborhoods to either compete for limited resources or defend integrity. Such politics have privileged neighborhoods that are internally organized in ways conducive to

mobilization around spatially defined interests. The underlying assumption here is that neighborhoods can and should function as self-helping communities.

In 1957, this logic of resource distribution was institutionalized with the creation of the Boston Redevelopment Authority, the state-authorized agency responsible for the planning, development, and administration of neighborhood programs. The resurgence of community-based anti-poverty strategies since the War on Poverty, including a host of public and private community development grants, has further raised the premium on neighborhood collective action (Halpern 1995). Thus, at various historical junctures, Boston neighborhoods have mobilized against urban renewal (Gans 1962), public school desegregation and busing (Formisano 1991) and, more recently, in favor of community-controlled development (King 1981; Medoff and Sklar 1994). Meanwhile, Boston mayoral politics frequently appeal to the neighborhood basis of resource allocation. Raymond Flynn, mayor of Boston from 1983 to 1993, often referred to himself as "the neighborhood mayor."

While Four Corners was still caught in its downward spiral, nearby locales were, in various ways, exploiting the neighborhood-based system of resource distribution and interest politics. In the late 1960s, Dorchester Fair Share organized for increased police presence in Uphams Corner. Codman Square organized a "Not In My Back Yard" style campaign to stop the local transit authority from storing large amounts of rolling stock in its midst. In the late '70s and early '80s, these locales won winning Community Development Block Grants to start Cud's, and Community Health Center funds to establish neighborhood health centers.   Unlike Four Corners, though, Bostonians have for many generations recognized these areas *as distinct neighborhoods*. They contain important historic landmarks, such as the old Public Library in Codman Square and the historic Strand Theater in Uphams Corner. These neighborhoods also contain secular organizations that serve those neighborhoods exclusively, such as the Codman Square Health Center.

Codman Square and other adjacent neighborhoods continued to mobilize for community revitalization well into the 1990s. Notable winnings during this period include Massachusetts Mainstreets and Enterprise Community moneys, both of which are geared toward the revival of commercial districts. At the center of these mobilization efforts have been health centers, CDC's, and neighborhood councils – all organizations expressly founded to serve the needs of people in those neighborhoods. They, more than any other institutions, pull residents together in

face-to-face settings to discuss the welfare of the neighborhood. They establish ties with outside agencies, and perpetually milk these ties for human and material resources. Churches, block groups, social clubs, businesses, and other neighborhood organizations cluster around the efforts of these core institutions, lending an air of legitimacy and unified diversity to the revitalization process.

The initial success of revitalization in these neighborhoods has thrown into relief the relative destitution of Four Corners, and put even more pressure on the latter to mobilize. Unlike nearby neighborhoods, however, Four Corners has lacked, until fairly recently, self-awareness as such. Four Corners has never even appeared on an official city map; only maps circulated among Four Corners activists take for granted its existence as a cartographic entity. To be certain, references to the "Five Corners" appear as early as 1901 in documents chronicling the origins of the Highlands Methodist Church. But "Five Corners" was merely an odd-looking intersection, which later became a bustling streetcar junction. At times this intersection was associated with the Victorian "Mt. Bowdoin" enclave lying to the northeast. At other times it was considered a northern extension of Codman Square, which was known as "historic" even at the beginning of the twentieth century.

It was, nonetheless, the decisive *exclusion* of Four Corners from development in Codman Square and other abutting locales that sparked self-awareness within the former. When Codman Square acquired a Community Development Corporation in 1981, Four Corners was included in its service boundary, yet the preponderance of the Corporation's development projects carried on south of Park street. This act of exclusion spurred residents to form Neighborhood Housing Services (NHS): the first secular organization aimed at revitalizing Four Corners. In an attempt to replicate in Four Corners the work of the Codman Square CDC, NHS partnered with area banks to provide rehabilitation loans for inhabitants of dilapidated housing. NHS was quickly sidetracked, nonetheless, by complaints of violent crime and illicit drug sales, a symptom of the exploding crack epidemic that was ravaging inner city neighborhoods all over the country. People avoided evening NHS meetings for fear of being victimized in the streets. NHS responded by pressing police to provide better coverage of area, the kind of coverage Codman Square had successfully won for its merchants. The distraction, however, proved fatal to the organization. As NHS devoted more and more time to public safety concerns, it began to neglect its portfolio of loans. Homeowners, afraid of coming out for evening training and support

sessions, began defaulting on these loans, and NHS fell into a state of financial crisis. As a result, NHS died as suddenly as it had been born.

Since it lacked sentience until it was excluded from something else, Four Corners might be considered less than a real "neighborhood" or "community." Urban sociologist Gerald Suttles (1972), however, would have recognized Four Corners not as an fluke, but as the norm: "Most likely, local communities and neighborhoods, like other groups, acquire a corporate identity because they are held jointly responsible by other communities and external organizations. Thus, I suggest, it is in their 'foreign relations' that communities come into existence and have to settle on an identity and a set of boundaries which oversimplify their reality"(12-13). Four Corners came into existence because foreign relations demanded so; this makes it a "real" neighborhood, and perhaps even an ordinary one.

Still, if foreign relations sparked neighborhood self awareness, the death of Neighborhood Housing Services left Four Corners without an ambassador. It contained no CDC or neighborhood health center around which to organize. Aside from two church-based community development organizations, the only organizational entity containing the name of the neighborhood in its title is Four Corners Beepers. The neighborhood hosts three public elementary schools, one social service agency, and four secular voluntary associations, but none of these is concerned with Four Corners as such. The public schools serve three separate districts that just happen to cut into Four Corners. The social service agency serves all of Dorchester without regard to its numerous sub-neighborhoods. The voluntary associations include two labor union posts, a social club for immigrants from the Caribbean island of Monserrat, and a club for motorcycle enthusiasts. Rather than addressing neighborhood issues, these associations appeal to particular occupational, ethnic, and recreational interests. Moreover, they draw few or none of their members from the neighborhood.

The absence of secular neighborhood-oriented institutions has placed the onus on churches to "make noise" on behalf of the neighborhood and develop the kind of interpersonal and inter-institutional networks that have supported mobilization in other locales. But these churches do not draw many of their members from the neighborhood either. As I next will show, a critical consequence of unchecked economic decline in the neighborhood has been a veritable explosion of religious life there. As a result of this explosion, the original religious ecology of four quaint neighborhood congregations has given way to a religious district, where dozens of

churches coexist by *not* competing for the same local membership pool. Four Corners has become a neighborhood for religious communities, although most of these communities are not particularly concerned with Four Corners.

Religious Communities Move, Change, and Proliferate

The racial and economic shift that hit Four Corners in the 1960s presented challenges and opportunities for religious organizations. As the face of the neighborhood changed, pre-existent churches faced first hand the four options outlined in the classic congregational ecology studies (Douglass 1927; Kincheloe 1964, 1989; Ammerman 1997): move, adapt to serve the incoming population, become a "niche" or metropolitan-wide church, or die.[3] The Central Congregational church pulled up stakes and moved elsewhere, leaving the building to a Wesleyan Holiness congregation. Jewish families abandoned Temple Beth El, which remained a rotting hull until 1998, when the structure was razed and cleared. The vacant property is still fronted by an old black iron fence, into which Stars of David have been wrought. This haunting relic alone bears witness to what the space once was.

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[3] The congregational ecologists inherited from the Chicago School of Urban Sociology (for example, see (Burgess 1969[1925]) a sensitivity to the fluctuating nature of racial and ethnic settlement in the city. Churches, they theorized, must extract resources from the local environment in order to survive. Resources include membership, money, legitimacy, and information. When the resources in a neighborhood change due to the exodus and/or influx of a particular population group, churches have four options: 1) alter their products to satisfy new local consumers, 2) follow familiar populations and resources to new neighborhoods, 3) become "niche" churches — that is, abandon the geographical parish focus and create metropolitan-wide ministries, or 4) die of resource starvation. In short, shifting local environments *select* for the most appropriate congregations.

Highlands Methodist and St. Bridget's became metropolitan niches, each focusing on a particular population. Although the neighborhood was becoming African-American, St. Bridget's became a Haitian niche after being assigned a Haitian pastor. Traditionally, Catholic churches demarcated geographic parishes and claimed all of the residents within them (Gamm 1999; McGreevy 1996). Instead of relinquishing their hold on local neighborhoods, Catholic churches tended to respond to neighborhood racial and ethnic change by assimilating incoming populations. In this case, the incoming population was African-American, among whom there are relatively few Catholics. St. Bridget's thus became one of an increasing number of ethnic parishes in Boston. Ethnic parishes usually serve immigrant Catholic populations that may be dispersed throughout the city rather than concentrated in a few contiguous neighborhoods. The ethnic parish is thus a *niche* form. Until its very recent closing, St. Bridget's church served as a major center of Haitian life in Boston.[4]

Like St. Bridget's, Highlands was unable to attract many black Americans into its fold. The great majority of African-American Methodists belong not to the United Methodist Church, but to the various African Methodist Episcopal denominations. The United Methodists therefore assigned a series of Caribbean pastors to the church, in the hope of attracting immigrants from former British colonies in the West Indies and Africa, where British Methodism had laid deep roots. The strategy proved effective: Highlands is now a solidly West Indian church, with a sizeable West African minority.

If racial change sent older churches into identity crises, economic decline created opportunities for entrepreneurial churches, as it freed up dozens of cheaply acquirable spaces on Washington and Harvard streets. These thoroughfares were not only well traveled, but were accessible to other neighborhoods in Roxbury and Dorchester. The combination of access, visibility and affordability proved irresistible to churches, if not businesses. Almost immediately, observers began to notice churches moving into vacated storefronts along Washington, Harvard, and Bowdoin Streets (Kyper 1975). A Jehovah's Witness congregation moved into the old theater. An Apostolic church moved into the empty public library building.

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[4] A shortage of Creole-speaking priests prompted the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston to merge St. Bridget's Creole mass with that already being held at St. Bonaventure's, a Haitian Catholic church in Mattapan. In addition to its Haitian Creole mass, St. Bridget's did celebrate an English language mass, which attracted only about 30 worshipers per Sunday. The forced exodus of the Creole speaking congregation left the church in financial dire straits. The Archdiocese shut down St. Bridget's church in spring 1999.

As revitalization ensued in surrounding areas, the relative cheapness of storefronts in Four Corners was thrown into relief. In 1998, merchants and pastors reported paying between $300 and $500 a month for commercial spaces in the neighborhood. Rents in Codman Square, by contrast, reportedly were twice as high. As the owner of the sole dry cleaning business in Four Corners averred (shortly before moving his business elsewhere), "It's much more expensive there [in Codman Square] because they have a lot going on there. But there's nothing *going on* here. There are hardly any other businesses." Ironically, at least one Four Corners church, the Haitian Maison d'Esprit, was displaced from Codman Square as that neighborhood began to realize its plans for development. As compensation, the Codman Square Development found a new space for Maison d'Esprit: the abandoned bank building in Four Corners.

Thus, although surrounding neighborhoods now contain many congregations, none surpasses Four Corners in density of congregations. The neighborhood hosts a total of 29 congregations in 20 buildings. This means Four Corners weighs in at 47.54 congregations per square mile — 14 more congregations per square mile than the next densest neighborhood[5]. This is so despite the fact that Four Corners has lost thousands of residents since 1960.

The availability of commercial spaces, nevertheless, does not fully explain how so many churches can coexist in the same neighborhood. The rest of the explanation lies in the template for urban religious coexistence etched during the Great Migration period. This normative template takes for granted that churches will locate quite near each other, but assumes also that these churches will not compete with each other for spatial territory. Rather, they will compete for the attention of particular populations. Thus, churches can coexist in Four Corners because they are basically all "niche" churches, competing not for neighborhood residents, but for certain kinds of people who may or may not live nearby. Put differently, churches in Four Corners, like the dozens of storefronts that sprang up in old black Boston, are *particularistic* in their outreach to constituencies of color, which are now more widely distributed over the residential cityscape than they were during the Great Migration. Where physical distances between churches are negligible, social distances compensate.

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[5]The six Witness congregations may be considered a skewing factor. If these were counted as one congregation, the neighborhood would have 39.34 churches per square mile — still 10 more churches per square mile than Grove Hall.

If St. Bridget's and Highlands became niches in order to cope with neighborhood change, the churches than poured into the neighborhood *after* it changed are niches by design. Four Corners is a grand place to start a niche church because of its ideal location at the intersection of two major thoroughfares: Washington and Harvard streets. This religious locational logic is similar to that which motivates retailers and restaurateurs to locate in shopping districts, often quite near competing businesses. In a society made mobile by paved roads, public transportation and automobiles, people from many parts of the metropolis can fairly easily get to downtown shopping centers and commercial districts in ethnic enclaves (i.e. Chinatown, Little Italy). People of faith can just as easily travel to religious districts to worship at niche churches.

Missionary Baptist, for example, serves about one hundred American-born middle class blacks, many of whom are first generation Southern migrants. Most members commute to church from as far as the suburbs, and none live in Four Corners. The church purchased a storefront in the neighborhood in 1984 after its original storefront in Codman Square was destroyed in a fire. Holy Road Christian Center, by contrast, is a Pentecostal church serving about fifty people, mostly Boston-born and mostly working class, who live in Roxbury, Dorchester, and Jamaica Plain. This church contains a small number of college educated young adults, whom the pastor, Rev. Powell, brought into the church "off the street" when they were teens. Holy Road originated in Roxbury and moved to a Four Corners storefront in 1994.

Maison d'Esprit, which I introduced previously, is located in a corner storefront that used to be a bank. The Maison space actually houses multiple congregations: one Haitian and one Latina/o (Iglesia de Santos). Both congregations are Pentecostal and largely working class. Also, like the native-born religious communities, both congregations tend to draw membership from outside the neighborhood — even the suburbs. Most of the Maison congregation commute from Mattapan, which contains the largest Haitian residential community. Iglesia del Santos draws primarily from Jamaica Plain and Roxbury, where latina/os reside in highest concentration.

I have argued that the religious district is made possible not only by the availability of vacant commercial spaces, but by the fact that churches are not all competing for neighborhood people. That is, churches are niches. But these churches are also *particularistic*. Implicit in the idea of religious particularism is the recognition that congregations can be meaningfully different in a multitude of ways, so that people are able to sort themselves into religious communities

according to complex bundles of preferences. Sociologists of religion have well documented how race, national origin socioeconomic class, lifestyle, level of strictness, size, and internal organization — not to mention religious tradition and denomination — can serve to distinguish institutions in the multicongregational field (see Warner 1988, 1993; Ammerman 1997; Iannoconne 1994; Eiesland 1999). When people choose one church or another, they are locating themselves along some or all of these dimensions. There are also those whose religious needs cannot be met in any one church. These are the perpetual shoppers: they are committed churchgoers, but are not committed to any one church.[6]

As particularisms go, it might be easy to lump Four Corners churches into two groups — "African-American" and "Immigrant" — but these designations hardly capture the range of choices to be found in the religious district. As I have hinted in the previous section, particularisms in Four Corners vary by ethnicity, regional and national origin, social class, and more. As such, what appear from afar as "African-American" churches are actually congregations of southern migrants or native northerners. Likewise, "immigrant" churches include Haitian, Latina/o, West Indian, and mixed congregations.

Also cutting across the two gross categories are no less than eight religious traditions. Black American congregations are Baptist, Pentecostal, Apostolic, Holiness, Jehovah's Witness, and Catholic. Immigrant congregations are Pentecostal, Jehovah's Witness, Seventh Day Adventist and Catholic. Class differences are salient as well. The Church of God and the Divine Peace churches are both West Indian and Pentecostal. Yet, the former is composed almost entirely of upwardly mobile immigrants from several islands, while the latter attracts working class laborers from Antigua.

So the communities that congeal inside these churches are not melting pots, mixing people across lines of class, national origin, ethnicity, or race. They are not "beloved communities" where the task of interracial and interethnic reconciliation takes top priority. Rather, they tend to be homogeneous social spaces where people affirm those things that make them different from others in the cosmopolitan urban context. In other words, most of these churches are places where particularities are celebrated and perpetuated. They are places where black southerners can gather and *be* southern despite the fact that they live in Boston. They are

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[6]For deeper discussions of non-committal forms of religious commitment, see Eiesland 1999 and Ammerman 1997b.

places where recent immigrants from Haiti can meet and not only worship in Haitian Creole, but exchange information on job openings, the naturalization process, housing opportunities, and a host of other concerns of acute interest to new arrivals.

Religion and Urban "Community"

The larger point, though, is this: Churches in Four Corners are all viable communities, but few can be called "community institutions" if "community" is taken to mean "neighborhood." Instead, churches pull people together around common ethnicity, regional or national origin, class background, political orientation, life stage, or lifestyle. Less often do congregations form around, or even acknowledge, neighborhood identity. As such, many churches draw membership from a geographic area much wider than the immediate neighborhood, and none need be located where their target populations live. As long as the church isn't too far away, people will "commute" to worship where they feel at home. This explains, along with the abundance of vacant commercial spaces, how dozens of churches can concentrate in a very small economically depressed area, forming a "religious district." Churches can locate quite near each other, all taking advantage of cheap rents in otherwise vacant commercial spaces, because they are not competing for neighborhood residents per se.

Many observers, noting the absence of secular neighborhood institutions and the abundance of churches in Four Corners, would conclude that churches were the ideal and natural candidates for neighborhood revitalization work. Are churches not morally inclined to build community? The latter may well be true: but to what extent are urban religious communities coterminous with neighborhoods? The case of the Four Corners suggests that certain religious forms, particularly the "religious district," are sustainable in part because churches are, for the most part, *not* identified with neighborhoods. This means they are not likely to build community at the neighborhood level, but rather within the particularistic spaces of churches themselves. In this way, the most depressed urban areas, where empty commercial properties abound, may contain the least neighborhood-oriented churches.

Still, popular concern about the deterioration of community and the disintegration of society's "moral fabric" have reached fever pitch. Meanwhile, churches remain the only viable institutions left in many depressed urban locales. Often they are the only civic spaces where people meet regularly to share experiences, hopes, plans. These circumstances have put

tremendous pressure on religious institutions to play major roles in the resurrection of economically, physically, and sometimes socially devastated neighborhoods. The idea is that local religious organizations can make communities out of mere neighborhoods.

It is, therefore, not surprising that many of the most celebrated examples of church-based community development involve a single church, usually a large and well financed one, taking charge of a single neighborhood and attracting the resources necessary to rebuild that neighborhood's economic, physical, and social infrastructure. Such examples, however inspiring, tempt us to view churches as traditional parishes where congregants come from the neighborhood and religious community is the same as geographic community. These examples obscure places like Four Corners, where there may be dozens of poorly financed churches lacking neighborhood identity.

My observations suggest that if churches do not respond to calls for increased neighborhood activism and local community-building, it may not be because of an allergy to ecumenism and worldly activity. Rather, churches may fail to respond because of the general tendency of congregations to delocalize their religious activity and think of community in non-geographic terms. As indicated by the popularity in Boston of trans-neighborhood and city-wide faith-based activist groups such as the Ten Point Coalition, the Black Ministerial Alliance, and Mattapan-Dorchester Churches in Action, churches may be more inclined to organize at levels that include, yet transcend, the local neighborhood in geographic scope.

Still, in neighborhoods that lack secular institutional advocates such as CDC's, who will speak up on behalf of local interests? A few churches will undoubtedly emerge as advocates in *some* neighborhoods, as Reverend Eugene Rivers' Azusa Christian Community and the aforementioned Highlands Methodist Church have done in Four Corners. We cannot assume this to be the norm, though, especially if the bulk of churches are not oriented toward neighborhoods in mission or membership. The only reasonable prediction is that many more neighborhoods will fall through the cracks, with no institutions emerging as advocates of local community. Scholarly and policy attention therefore should shift to the larger problem, which is that inner city neighborhoods are forced to compete for and defend resources in the first place (Abu Lughod 1994; Warren 1975; Fainstein 1987), and that inner city residents so often must squeeze complex, cross-neighborhood, and even regional interests and grievances into a "place bound" version of community in order to get attention (Gregory 1998). In this system, someone's

neighborhood will *always* lose, regardless of the urgency of the problems there, or the number of churches present.

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