

How Laissez-Faire Is Biased Against Urban Churches: A Challenge for Unitarian Universalists

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Introduction. As religious liberals, Unitarian Universalists have a concern for issues of social justice both far away and close to home. The purpose of this memo is to suggest that we as U Us face a challenge in regard to how we deal with urban congregations, particularly those located in predominantly African American cities. Drawing on a combination of personal experience as an officer and president of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Essex County, as a local integration activist and also on academic studies, I will argue first that free markets in real estate have been conducive to racial segregation, the drying up of white demand in predominantly African American communities, and stagnating or declining economic circumstances in those communities. If one cares about residential integration, one cannot expect it to arise spontaneously through the market. People must generally work hard collectively to achieve long-term integration, rather than expect it to occur through the market's invisible hand.

Next, I will turn from the problems associated with a laissez-faire policy toward real-estate markets to the problems associated with a laissez-faire policy toward church attendance markets. My basic claim is that a policy of having all churches compete for members from all towns is a laissez-faire policy on church attendance, and that the denomination needs to move from that policy toward one more favorable toward urban churches. A laissez-faire policy, I will suggest, is likely to systematically disadvantage churches located in predominantly black cities. Given a free market in church attendance, a certain substantial portion of prospective members will choose to go to a church located in a suburb rather than a predominantly African American city, even if the city church is closer to where they live than the suburban church. I will propose and explain a simple "screening" model, based on Thomas Schelling's "tipping" model for real estate, to analyze church choice by prospective members and the adverse consequences those choices have for the viability of an urban Unitarian Universalist church.

Finally, I will address the issue of what could be done. The basic line here is an optimistic one. I will suggest that prospective U U members who screen out an urban church in a predominantly African American city in their initial decision as to where to visit might well remain at the urban church if exposed to it. I will also suggest that the viability of the urban church is likely to be much improved if urban and suburban churches cooperate by defining "suggested church of choice" regions, so that an increased number of prospective U Us would be exposed to the urban church. I will also note other possibilities, such as "seeding" an urban church with additional members and subsidy for urban church programs from other churches or the metro district. If we are committed to liberal U U values, I believe we should work hard as a denomination to see

what we can do to change a laissez-faire policy on church competition that harms urban churches.

Problems of laissez-faire in the real estate market. A high level of segregation between whites and African Americans characterizes American living patterns, especially in the large metropolitan areas of the Northeast and the Midwest. In **American Apartheid**, sociologists Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton classify the Newark metropolitan area, along with several others (including Cleveland, Chicago, and Detroit) as “hypersegregated,” based on its especially high levels of segregation as measured on a variety of indices.

Black-white residential segregation is overwhelmingly not the consequence of different levels of affluence of blacks and whites. Analyses of midwestern metropolitan areas such as Chicago and Kansas City, which I have replicated for parts of the Newark metropolitan area, show that if income were the only determinant of where people lived, towns would have much less segregation and much more similar racial makeups than they do now.

There is, I believe, a significant need to challenge real estate practices, such as blockbusting and steering, that contribute to segregation. At the same time, pro-segregative real estate practices are not the whole problem. An honest evaluation of racial segregation and the real estate market needs to acknowledge the role of individually understandable but collectively undesirable customer preferences.

Years ago, economist Thomas Schelling and others laid out the dynamics that often lead to white flight from integrating areas and to the eventual resegregation of these areas. The basic idea is that even though there may be a very substantial number of both blacks and whites who would prefer to live in integrated communities (which surveys suggest is indeed the case), the dynamics of individual decision-making tend to lead to segregation when people need to have a significant number of neighbors of their own race. For example, if black-white housing decisions are modelled by dimes and nickels arrayed randomly in a square, with members of both groups moving if necessary to gain at least three neighbors (out of eight possible) of the same race, an initially integrated array will give way to a segregated one. If one assumes, as is plausible, that many people, especially whites, want to have at least that proportion of same-race neighbors, Schelling’s coin exercise gives one an insight into the fragility of integration in the real estate market.

The understandable perception of integration’s fragility in the market contributes to its becoming even more fragile. Here one encounters the unfortunate dynamics of “tipping,” in which even some individuals who support integration are nonetheless unwilling to commit to an integrated community in the belief that it will not remain integrated for long. That belief validates itself through the integrated area’s becoming resegregated, with a drying up of white demand for housing and a consequent lagging in appreciation in housing values. In the Newark metropolitan area, that dynamic has played itself out repeatedly in different neighborhoods and communities over decades.

Communities here and elsewhere that have been successful in upholding integration over a long period of time have generally been those that have taken a proactive, interventionist governmental and private role on a variety of different fronts, including real estate, schools, and publicity. Left to themselves, markets have been conducive to residential segregation rather than integration.

Parallel problems of laissez-faire in church attendance. The first point is to define laissez-faire in church attendance. Laissez-faire as defined here is a denominational policy in which all churches compete for members, much like firms competing for customers, in all territories, without any system of parishes, “churches of choice,” or other mechanisms to intervene in the competitive process.

Though in certain contexts religious laissez-faire may have virtues, it is highly counterproductive to the prospects of U U churches located in urban areas. Although prospective U Us are likely substantially more liberal in their attitudes on race than Americans as a whole, they are not and cannot be completely apart from the society they are part of and the attitudes prevalent within it. A U U church located in a predominantly black city is likely to be screened out by a substantial proportion of prospective members, even those who live closer to that church than to a suburban alternative. (Although the screening effect is likely to be smaller for blacks than for whites, middle class blacks as well whites may well screen out a church located in a poor city.) These prospective members, if not given some additional impetus, will simply choose not to explore the urban church option. The screen or wall between suburbs and predominantly African American cities such as Newark, Orange, East Orange, and Irvington is a reality in this and other metropolitan areas. That reality is partly one of class division, and also one of race.

Screening by prospective U U members makes the competition between an urban and a suburban church for members an unequal one. A simple numerical model of screening—in which the point is the nature and dynamics of the process, not the specific numbers selected—illustrates the point. Suppose there is a pool of 600 current U U members in an area, some of whom attend a church in a predominantly black city and some of whom attend a church in a suburb. (For current purposes, it doesn’t matter which church is bigger).

For stability and growth, both the urban and suburban churches rely on recruiting new members, at least some of whom are “floaters,” in that they have no fixed previous tie to either the suburban or the urban church. I will assume the yearly pool of new floaters amounts to 5% of current members, or 30 people. Now suppose that the urban church is screened out by a percentage of floaters equal to the African American percentage of the city in which it is located. Thus, with a 20% black population in the city, 6 of the floaters don’t consider the urban church, with a 50% black population, 15 of the floaters don’t consider it, and with 80% black population, 24 don’t consider it, leaving only 6 prospective members to consider it at all.

Assuming that among prospective members who do not screen out the urban church the urban and suburban church are equally appealing, the urban church in an 80% black city will attract some new floaters—3 out of the 30, given the numbers here. Still, screening is a very substantial handicap to the urban church in competition with the suburban church. All else equal, the urban church in an 80% black city is attracting 12 fewer members a year than it would in the absence of screening.

The dynamics of screening over time lead not to resegregation, as in the tipping model for real estate, but to the disappearance of the urban church, as the church's natural attrition in membership is not replaced. Other factors—overall growth in the pool of prospective members, especially black, working class, and urban members; particular dynamism in the leadership and membership of the urban church, and so on—can undoubtedly give the urban church a chance to stay alive. But if one accepts the reality of screening—if not that of any particular set of numbers, such as the ones here—one also has to realize that denominational laissez-faire in church attendance leaves the urban church laboring under a heavy handicap in the competitive process.

What is to be done? If screening by prospective U Us represented an irrevocable opposition by the screeners to ever becoming members of a U U church located in a predominantly black city, then there would be effectively nothing to do about it. I am much more optimistic than that. I believe that screening represents an understandable, often only half-conscious process that can be countered to some substantial degree if the screeners are exposed to the urban church. I also believe that religious liberals from urban and suburban churches can cooperate to intervene in the market for church attendance in a way that is respectful of individual choice, but also counters the tendency of prospective members to screen out the urban church. If such cooperative efforts result in substantially more people being exposed to the urban church, and if even a substantial fraction of them remain at it, the baneful effects of screening on the prospects of the urban church can be substantially mitigated. I also believe that leadership at the U U district and denominational level can and should play a significant role in countering the negative effects of screening on churches in predominantly black areas.

I believe the appropriate nature of cooperative action at the level of individual churches, the district, or the denomination is something that needs to be determined through group process. I see three major strategies for enhancing the prospects of an urban church—"seeding," in which a suburban church sends members to an urban one; "subsidy," in which suburban churches or a broad coalition of churches, such as those in the Metro district, support urban church programs; and "market expansion" through "church of choice" zones or other means that increase the number of people exposed to the urban church. All of the strategies, separately or in combination, may have validity under different circumstances. I believe that market expansion strategies are one important part of the menu. Such strategies directly counter the screening effect in a way the other approaches do not, and better preserve incentives for the urban church to recruit effectively.

Without following a model in which there are rigidly defined parishes or stakes in which all residents must go to a particular church, I believe it is possible to work out “church of choice” regions, in which individuals residing closer to an urban church would be informed about that church and invited to attend that church. With such a system of suburban-urban cooperation in place, the screening dynamic would, I suspect, be considerably less potent.

Individual choice by prospective U Us of which church they choose to go to is an important principle. But given our values as religious liberals, it is also important not simply to acquiesce to socially conditioned and collectively undesirable outcomes of market processes that disadvantage churches located in predominantly African American cities. This memo is written in the hope and faith that we as Unitarian Universalists can make progress on this issue in our own denomination.