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The German Immigrant Church in Vancouver:
Service Provision and Identity Formation[1]

by

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Abstract: This paper examines the role of the immigrant church in Canada in the evolving stages of immigrant acculturation. Our case study is of ten congregations in South Vancouver that served the German-speaking newcomers who entered the city in considerable number in the 1950s and 1960s. Using oral histories from pastors and long-established members, church archives, and census material, we assemble the changing place of the immigrant church. We begin with its status as a welcoming point for new German migrants and its significant role in providing advice, friendship, spiritual guidance and a network aiding access to everyday needs including housing and employment. This role of the immigrant church as a centre of settlement services has, we argue, been underestimated. From this initial phase when the church served almost as a total institution for its members, we move to the more recent period when acculturation, suburbanization, and the attenuation of German immigration have redefined its role. Sooner or later each church confronts a crisis of identity; to what extent does it continue to celebrate an old-world identity, and at what stage does a "cultural funeral" occur, as the church moves away from its ethnic and linguistic origins? Resolution of this crisis influences heavily its ability to hold the second generation in its ranks, and its capacity to assemble a new, multicultural neighbourhood identity.

Key words: churches, settlement services, German immigrants, ethnic identity, South Vancouver

Introduction

In recent years the long-established geography of religion has been moving in a number of new directions. The considerable expansion of work – for recent reviews see Kong (2001) and Ley (2000) – has undoubtedly benefitted from the refusal of religion to die away as secularization theorists had predicted, and also from the cultural turn in the social sciences that has thrust cultural geography into the principal growth area of the discipline in Anglo-America. An important contribution, too, has been the rapid development of Asian religions in western societies with recent immigration (Peach and Vertovec 1997; Dunn and Mahtani 2001). Work has developed considerable theoretical sophistication, for example, in James Duncan's interpretation of the landscape of the Kandyan kingdom in pre-colonial Sri Lanka, where he demonstrated not only how the king's palace and grounds represented a symbolic microcosm of the Buddhist universe, but also how the presence of that landscape reproduced royal power in everyday life (Duncan 1990). The move that has occurred here is one of seeing landscape forms (or map distributions) not as unproblematic social facts but as social constructions embodying meanings that are to be opened up hermeneutically, meanings that both create landscapes and also perpetuate existing cultural values and social and political relationships. There is a further step that might be taken into epistemological and ontological terrain, where the hermeneutic method is applied reflexively to the research process. The most impressive example of this is John Milbank's remarkable volume, *Theology and Social Theory,* which raises important qualifiers about the ability of a secular social science, skeptical of metaphysics, to impose its categories upon the world of spiritual belief. The result, argues Milbank (1990), is a policing of the religious world where category errors are a likely outcome.

This is an important line of thinking but we will not pursue it further here. Instead we wish to move to an empirical study of immigrant religious practices in Canada that regards religious institutions both as the articulation of intersubjective values, and also as a source of their perpetuation. However, as we shall see, that process of perpetuation is not unproblematic for with the acculturation that follows immigration, the social values of church members themselves undergo change. The immigrant church, which for some parishioners comes close to a total institution in the early years of settlement, faces institutional rivals over time, and its ability to reconfigure itself during this period provides an important predictor of its subsequent capacity to survive. The project we are drawing from is a comparative study of German, Chinese, and Korean immigrant churches in Vancouver, though this paper will refer only to German congregations.

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The methodology involved initial telephone interviews with all 17 ethnic German churches in the City of Vancouver, followed by more intensive face-to-face interviews with current pastors and at least one long-established member from 10 of the churches. Twenty-five interviews were completed, primarily open-ended, and lasting typically over an hour. Where they existed, church archives were also consulted.

We are interested in two questions: first the practices of the churches that sustained their members as newcomers to Canada, and second the work of self-reproduction of the ethnic church in a new and strange milieu. The immigrant phase represents a close convergence of the values of members and the practices of the church; the church we might say is a landscape form that closely articulates its founding values. These values we shall see are supported and reproduced through practices, including the practical assistance of settlement services of all kinds that the church supplies to new immigrants. But what happens next, when immigrant arrivals dry up, as they did in the late 1960s, when the congregation's needs *and values* begin to adjust, to acculturate, to a new national entity? How then does this landscape, this place, remain relevant to its Canadianizing members? To what extent can social and cultural reproduction continue? How does the immigrant church position itself for continuity when it no longer has a congregation of new immigrants? It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the spiritual and counseling roles of the churches, despite their obvious significance. This study, while acknowledging the metaphysical realm of church life as the source of its vitality, avoids direct examination of it. Our study is concerned with the results of a shared spirituality rather than its content.

German Immigration to Canada

The twenty years following 1945 were a period of significant European immigration to Canada. While the numerically dominant group originated in Britain, substantial numbers moved from Germany, seeking a new start after the emotional trauma, physical destruction and material deprivation of war. In the 1950s close to a quarter of a million ethnic Germans entered Canada, making the community third largest after the British and French. Ethnic churches were instrumental in the passage of refugees and immigrants, lobbying for entry, making travel arrangements, and offering financial assistance to new arrivals. In Vancouver, the small ethnic German community of less than 20,000 in 1951, with its modest concentration in several census tracts in the southern part of the city, expanded to over 50,000 in 1961 and reached a peak of almost 90,000 in 1971. By the latter date, dispersion and suburbanization were already evident

(**Figure 1**, page 26),but nonetheless, the South Vancouver concentration had consolidated and had overflowed into the northern tracts of the adjacent suburb of Richmond.

The Immigrant Church in its Glory Days

Immigrants found a rich matrix of church life in place to serve them, and as immigrant numbers grew, new congregations were formed, often as sister churches of older ones. For example, among German Baptists, Ebenezer, founded in 1927, spun off Bethany in 1937, Bethany founded Immanuel in 1956, and a group from Immanuel formed Pilgrim, a few blocks away, in 1965 (**Figure 2**, page 27), *Membership Numbers of Three German Baptist Churches, 1927-1997*). Note, too, the expansion of congregations in the 1950s and 1960s and their subsequent decline. These four congregations were part of a larger welcoming network of 17 German churches in the south-east quadrant of the city of Vancouver (**Figure 3**, page 28). They included Mennonite, Mennonite Brethren, Baptist, Roman Catholic and Lutheran congregations; the latter claimed the largest numbers of members – and continued to do so in 1991[2] – though attendance was less regular among many Lutherans.

At the same time, the ethnic uniformity of these churches did not necessarily translate into ecclesiastical unity. Pastors in the churches emphasized that even among the same denomination, and sometimes within the same congregation, differences in terms of region or country of origin and time of arrival acted to stratify members. The establishment of daughter churches was a function not only of growth but also to accommodate congregational differences. In the Baptist sequence mentioned above, for example, Bethany's establishment was in part a secession of members who wanted to maintain a German-speaking congregation and other cultural traditions, in face of the Canadianizing tendencies of Ebenezer. Subsequent divisions were also built around micro-differences among members. As one long-established pastor put it:

> The first wave was actually Germany proper, the second wave was more Prussia, Poland and the Ukraine, and the third wave was then from another place and that kind of precipitated a move from Bethany to Immanuel…then among all of them there was still kind of that feeling of distance and that then fawned Pilgrim. So I think it was more that each church had been identified as social territory, familiar territory…[their differences] kind of enforced the breaks and the moves. Even…just their accents…the way they spoke.

It was the same with the Lutheran congregations. A church leader told us:

> Martin Luther is a different church…they have people from pre-War and those Martin Luther people are totally different from our congregation. Different totally…because of regions…because of where they come from. They haven't experienced real Germany as we knew it…[St.Mark's] were different people from us too. The younger people were [different] in age but the older ones were *Reichsdeutsche* and from Northern Germany. [We at Oakridge Lutheran are] a few from West Germany, a lot from East Germany and then a lot of Baltics. Actually the Baltics were the instrumental people.

The churches then – some distance from the theological directive to a common identity "neither Jew nor Greek" – were institutions created around diverse European geographies and memories. We might say that they perfected the articulation of social difference.

The result was an institution, a sacred place that closely matched the values of its adherents. A 1960 study of two Mennonite Brethren churches showed the close proximity of the congregations to the church building, particularly for the older Vancouver Mennonite Brethren Church which had established the daughter church of Fraserview MB just a few years earlier (Siemens 1960). At its peak in the early 1960s, almost 30 percent of Ebenezer Baptist's membership of 690 lived in the same postal district as the church (**Figure 4**, page 29). During that period of rapid growth, Bethany twice expanded its building and despite hiving off a daughter congregation was rebuilt on a new and larger site in 1959. As a long-established member told us, "there was not a Sunday when there wasn't a dozen or two dozen new people in the congregation." If we accept the normal convention in social geography of equating spatial proximity with social interaction, we would conclude that the church was an important institution of everyday life for its members. Min (1992) has reviewed the social function of Korean churches in the United States, and among the German churches community-building was also a by-product of a common tradition and shared contemporary needs. As one immigrant explained to us, the church became

> …the focal point of their spiritual life and also their social life to such an extent that they had no other contacts except with church people. They had their jobs and they did that everyday but weekends and evenings were taken up with fellowship and socialising among their own kind.

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[2] A special cross-tabulation of the 1991 Census of Canada revealed that 35 percent of immigrant Germans in Vancouver claimed Lutheran affiliation, 19 percent some other Protestant identity, 23 percent were Catholics, and 21 percent declared no religious affiliation.

For some, the church came close to a total institution: "whether it was helping to build a house…or feed them or educate their kids. The church had that complete role in the social life of the family where today that is a much more separated role."

The Immigrant Church as Servant of the Immigrant Community

Many of these churches presented remarkable models of stewardship, as mutual aid was collectively practised, springing from shared spiritual belief. Recent research on volunteering, charitable giving, and civic participation has shown that religious affiliation is a very strong predictor of all three of these expressions of social capital (Reed and Selbee 2001). Among larger Christian denominations in Canada, the highest volunteering rates are amongst Lutherans and Baptists (Jones 2001), both groups who comprise large sections of the German community.

If barn-raising was a foundational expression of social capital in rural faith communities, the construction of the church as a collective project has often been its urban counterpart. The church building itself was a material expression of a deeply held intersubjectivity:

> When the church was built, when Immanuel was built, the people, they stayed in basement suites for instance, many of them instead of buying a home so that the church could be up and work… I spent eight months working on the church from the start…giving my job up for the construction of the church.

Almost half the churches we surveyed were built by such volunteer labour, and in all ten, financing came from congregational members.

There has been limited attention in the immigration literature to the practical aid, the settlement services, provided by the immigrant church. We will present some examples here, and it is clear from our research with Chinese and Korean churches that are in the same phase of rapid immigration today, that the work of the German churches in the 1950s and 1960s was not unique nor indeed unusual. Indeed so deeply ingrained is service provision in the Korean church, that Hyun (1995) argued that

> [t]he Korean ethnic church is the best resource in the Korean ethnic community with which to meet the psycho-social needs of Korean immigrants. It can integrate both the social service functions of church and the classic community based intervention approach…[which] must be culturally sensitive and linguistically appropriate.

The German churches were no exception to the rule. "As a whole," observed one pastor who was himself an immigrant, "the German community looked after each other and I think

during the first ten years this was the great strength of the churches… [including] emotional needs, spiritual needs and physical needs." Another immigrant noted how

> [t]he church in the beginning was somewhere in between a religious group and a community centre so it served both purposes. This was so important for those people who left everything behind, got on a ship, got on a train, didn't know anybody and in many cases, hardly spoke any English, It was like finding a second home right away.

Aside from worship, Bible studies, choir practices and prayer meetings, services invariably included Saturday or early evening language schools: "We've got German lessons for the kids, we've got English lessons for adults." At its peak in 1972 some 3,600 children in British Columbia attended German schools (Schmidt 1983), and at least four of the ten churches we surveyed had organized language schools. Specialized programs for men, women and children, often age stratified, provided networks and resources for everyday life. For example the Catholic Holy Family parish offered a German language school, Sunday School, a Women's Auxiliary group, a youth program, a choir, a youth choir, a brass orchestra group, a folk music group, family night meetings, the Kolping Society (a men's group), the Knights of Columbus, a seniors' group, support at the German-Canadian Rest Home, and refugee sponsorship. Such programs expanded and contracted according to congregational needs and support, and they provided a rich matrix for social life. Not least of course for immigrant and refugee families with limited budgets participation in collective church events was economical:

> [T]here was so much activity…the women used to have plays and we'd have to memorize pages…there wasn't much [money] for outings as there is today. At that time everyone had to plug along to make a living. But church was utmost in everyone's mind.

In the larger churches there were events available almost every evening:

> We had English classes…we had music classes…there were educational activities all week and then there were of course the church services and ministry on Sundays. They taught piano and violin to the kids so we have always had an abundance of musical talent and there are still some at church today who were taught by church volunteers to play instruments. There were other things like sewing classes and such but it goes through phases. They had a couple of years of that and then they'd do something else.

The groups practised old-country traditions and culture as a matter of course, and in this manner reinforced social and cultural boundaries. "I think of all the concerts we had. The concerts were mostly all in German and there was some really lively singing. Youth choirs and other choirs and male choirs. They were huge, big choirs."

The power of strong ties established through such activities, as well as shared values and common backgrounds, provided a firm basis for trust and friendship, courtship and marriage, in short the consolidation of personal identity within a broader collective identity. These bonds were continually sustained through informal activities as well as the more organized church events. Welcoming showers for newly-arrived immigrant families were a particular feature of many churches. One pastor remembered how "there was a lot of interest in the newcomers, the early immigrants who came in the late 1940s and early 1950s. They were received with a lot of enthusiasm and they were given many, many gifts and benefits." Very common through the 1950s and 1960s were welcoming showers, arranged by church women, where the wives and mothers of newly-arrived families were given food and household items to stock their shelves, as a material expression of welcome and inclusion within a culturally bounded life-world.

> I'll never forget when our family came to Canada…when a new family was the first time in the church, right away it was a shower that was provided for them, that was a grocery shower or cooking pots, something like that, everything for the kitchen and even the groceries…and that was wonderful. If you came and had nothing, living in an empty basement suite it was wonderful, even some towels or some sheets or something like that…

After welcoming showers, later came wedding and baby showers. As one of the early members of the Catholic parish remembered: "wedding showers and baby showers…I think I had at least 40 or 50 in my home. As I mentioned, we were the first ones to have a house and we had showers by the dozens. This was all church community." Great emphasis was placed upon activities for youth:

> We used to arrange ice-skating parties with 50 or 60 kids. These were young people aged 17 to 30. Sixty of them and I remember we'd have 20 car loads of people and then we'd go to a restaurant…we had banquets at the Georgia Hotel for 125 people…On summer evenings, it was the thing to do to go up Fraser Street and get ice cream. The whole street would be filled with kids from church at the ice cream parlours and soda fountains.

Friendships led to marriage. "I was in the youth group where I met my wife…we had an extensive youth group going from the ages of 16 to 28; mainly young people coming independently from Germany." One respondent guessed that the majority of couples in her congregation had met through church activities, a circumstance encouraged by the relative closure of social relations. Such in-marriage reinforced continuing commitment to an institution where both partners spoke the same language, held shared religious values, and experienced a common set of friendships.

The economic relations of church members were also firmly embedded in their social and cultural networks. Within a community of trust, shopping and service use between church members was encouraged, just as Coburn (1992) noted in her study of a German Lutheran congregation in the American mid-west. But the most widespread settlement services offered by the churches involved assistance in finding jobs and accommodation. Virtually every respondent noted how the pastor and church members had acted as an employment agency and a housing register. Within the Lutheran community,

> [s]ome of the pastors were very active for people who needed a job. They could phone him or he would be having his feelers out. Where is a German firm or a German boss somewhere where we could get this guy who has just arrived, get him a job until he was established? So it was quite interwoven this whole thing. Also with advice. Some people, I don't know how many tax forms they made out because some people couldn't read [English]…and things like that. Do you know a good doctor? You know what I'm saying? It was a centre where the lines come together in one spot…that's in the pastor's office or at the church where others came in and exchanged information. Still today [the church] still does that.

One couple we interviewed was in contact with the Catholic parish priest before they landed in Vancouver. He was their only contact, and the church their only support. The minister frequently became a gatekeeper to the immigrant community and a bridge with government:

> The pastors had to deal with the situation. Many of them went out of their way personally to help these people to find work and find accommodation because the Immigration Board was quite strict on the pastors on that. The Immigration Board really pressed on pastors to help out…because the Immigration Board was so swamped.

Job referrals and recruitment were common services offered in the churches. One Baptist church member had a flourishing construction company he replenished with church newcomers. In a Mennonite church one woman took on the role of employment co-ordinator for immigrant women looking for work as housekeepers. A leader in the Mennonite church observed that congregations were very helpful in finding jobs for those newcomers.

> I guess that's true in any community. Whenever somebody new came in here, he didn't have to wonder what he would do. He just came to the church and said what he did and everybody knew this…someone would say we need construction workers…of course many were in construction at that time. I think that was really a plus for the newcomers. They didn't have to worry. Language was a new thing anyway and if they had to find jobs through some other agency that was just English-speaking they would have been lost.

A number of our respondents had provided accommodation for immigrants in their homes. One couple housed newly arrived young men, accommodating up to five at a time, and

were frequently called by the priest to place a newcomer. For longer-established German-Canadians this service could become an economic opportunity and was formalized as the home became a boarding house. Such a residence would also act as a clearing house for immigrant services.

> Phone calls came from the church, saying that there were fellows who had just arrived…[we'd] have five or six fellows boarding…then through the network and my dad, they'd either direct them to Burrard Shipyards [to find work] as shipwrights or trained carpenters or to the various mills in the Fraser River area for employment.

Such services and networks were crucial, for immigrants frequently arrived with almost no funds and unable to speak English. Practical assistance from church members went a long way in facilitating settlement. "You came here with nothing. We lived in basement suites and we didn't necessarily have furniture so the people who were here already gave you furniture or whatever you needed for your house…It was a very close-knit community." A shopkeeper on Fraser Street in the heart of the German district sold groceries to new immigrant families at discounted prices. When it could, his church's treasury made up the cost difference. Such practical aid was wide-ranging (cf. Min 1992): "They provided us warmth and welcome and any [help] needed in finding a doctor, finding a dentist, all those little things…helped us with the shopping because we didn't know what to buy or where to buy…" The church became the primary reference group and its services were warmly remembered almost 50 years later:

> The church became an extended family, a tremendous support community. I remember we arrived …on June 15th, 1953 and my father had some friends who had immigrated the year before and we were picked up at the railway station. Already they had rented an apartment for us and put food in the fridge…that was all done by the church.

> Such sentiments were widely – and deeply – felt:

> Remember, these people who came were uprooted from somewhere. Like myself, I left all my relatives, my place of work. I came to a completely new country, a new town, didn't speak 10 words of English when I arrived here…[the church] became in addition to a spiritual centre, it became a social centre."

The Changing Service Role of the Immigrant Church

Since the peak period of immigration from Germany in the 1950s and 1960s, the service role of the church has altered. In part the welfare state assumed some of the functions previously delivered through the churches. In part acculturation and assimilation removed some of the urgent needs of the early years. There is also severe competition from secular institutions for informal

activities, especially for youth. In part the movement of women into the labour force has weakened volunteer capacity. But of most significance for this study is the abrupt termination of immigration from the German-speaking world, especially following the 1967 Immigration Act that removed the policy of European preference that had always characterized Canada's immigration regime. The German-Canadian community shared fully in the long economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s, enjoyed upward mobility, and moved from the basement suites of South Vancouver into new suburban homes. A few churches followed, but most remained in their traditional location.

Settlement services developed in new directions. Refugee sponsorship in the early years had favoured German-speaking households, but as this supply dried up, some congregations ventured further afield to Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia. The Mennonite churches have been the most active, and through the Mennonite Central Committee, 1243 refugees were settled in British Columbia between 1979 and 1988, 90 percent of them from Southeast Asia. In the 1980s a Refugee Resettlement Centre in a Mennonite church welcomed up to 200 refugees a month. A Baptist church is presently sponsoring an Armenian family after previously sponsoring five families from Southeast Asia. Sponsorship entails financial support for a year and daily assistance with settlement needs. The Catholic parish welcomed a Vietnamese family with eight children in a property they renovated and furnished, and moved on to sponsor a second family from Poland. These commitments are an expression of Christian charity and also acts of solidarity, remembering their own history as immigrants: "We settle them, we collect furniture, we find them a place to live…this and that. After all we went through it ourselves forty years ago."

Our argument, however, has now moved ahead of itself. The extension of settlement services to new Canadians who are not of German origin represents a decisive move beyond the hermetic ethno-cultural boundaries of the early post-war period. That transition did not occur without conscious intent, for some with regret, even opposition. In the second part of the paper we examine the reconfiguration of the German immigrant church in the changed conditions from the 1970s on, with the cessation of heavy immigration. A crisis of identity occurred as religious institutions created by immigrants and for immigrants confronted ethnic Germans who were becoming ethnic Canadians – and whose Vancouver-born children knew no other identity. How was institutional survival, or at least well-being, to be assured when its foundational values were no longer as widely shared?

New Geographies, New Identities, Restructured Institutions?

The immigrant church was a potent tool for cultural preservation. Usually this objective was unselfconscious. A community of spoken German, shared memories and often similar regions of origin could not help but preserve old-world traditions. The role of the Lutheran church as the state church made this commitment more explicit. The status of German Canadians was not exceptional for Kalbach and Kalbach (1999) have discovered a broader tendency for affiliation with immigrant churches to delay the loss of an old-world mother tongue.

But as other studies have shown (Vertovec 2000), immigration frequently leads to an adjustment of old-world religious patterns. With the significant decline of immigration from Europe after the 1960s, the status of South Vancouver as an ethnic German district began to dissolve. Upward mobility took many German-Canadians and their second- generation children to the newer and usually cheaper suburbs, while aging members of the 1950s cohort often moved even further afield. Public school and the mass media speedily eroded the use of German among their children. By 1991, the German ethnic concentration in South Vancouver had virtually disappeared (**Figure 5**, page 30), and in the classic model of ecological succession the population was replaced by Chinese- and Indo-Canadians who represented the new face of immigration from the 1970s onwards. Congregations suffered significant numerical losses, as memberships were transferred to suburban churches. The social geography of church membership was transformed and by the 1990s, the German churches of South Vancouver were increasingly becoming commuter congregations. At Ebenezer Baptist, for example, the masses who had huddled around the skirts of the church in 1963 had diminished in number and had flown the nest by 1997 (**Figure 6**, page 31). And just as the tight concentration of 1963 had intimated strong patterns of social interaction, the tyranny of distance a generation later made church community more contingent and more negotiable.

Distance in time and space from the South Vancouver of the 1960s has introduced significant challenges to the German churches. To what extent should the immigrant church remain the refuge of old-world traditions; indeed to what extent could it? Other studies have examined the oppositional tensions of cultural retention *versus* cultural assimilation for the immigrant church (Vertovec 2000; Hurh and Kim 1990; Mullins 1989). Favouring cultural retention was the political context of Canadian multiculturalism, declared in 1971 with the specific intent of maintaining old-world traditions. Moving in the other direction, however, was the rapid acculturation of German-Canadians themselves, accelerated in the 1950s by the active desire among some to renounce a past that had brought trauma and shame. In some households,

family names were anglicized and the German language was not encouraged in the home. Reflecting on the 1950s, a pastor remembered that

> [a]t that time many parents…a German husband and a German wife would only speak English at home between each other and to the kids. So basically they denied their mother tongue because they tried to assimilate as fast as they could and sometimes they even denied their heritage because it was bad, Hitler, Nazis, everything…It wasn't fashionable to speak German.

A key issue in the life of the German immigrant churches became the status of the German language. It was the language, above all, that had originally brought congregations together, that had been the primary (but not only) marker of the church community. The task of cultural preservation is strongly influenced by the continuing use of the heritage language (Kalbach and Kalbach 1999**;** Coburn 1992). More than a symbol, language is an articulation of home in an immigrant church.

> But see this is home, church is home and that is why these German churches, as long as they have their founding members, they will still have a German part in their services because this is home. They have established it, they have lived together. They went through very hard times together and there is a bond, not only a Christian one, but there is an interpersonal bond.

Even when church members become fluent in English, praying and singing in German holds a particular significance. The Biblical word cannot be adequately expressed in translation. Consequently, despite the spatial displacement of the community and acculturation to English, over half the South Vancouver churches retain a German-language service. There are strong defenders of this practice in a number of congregations. In a Lutheran church

> I think over 40 percent, according to our survey of our members, have been members since between '61 and '70. There are some German people I think who want us to build up the English side more. But some of the German people are so opposed to it. It has to be German.

Pastors are commonly recruited from Germany to ensure "a perfect German" enunciation; commonly liturgies "are still very traditional" (cf. Nagata 1987).

But such cultural conservatism was countered by a more pragmatic orientation that acknowledged the advantages, indeed the inevitability of acculturation. Moreover, the theological universalism of Christianity ultimately challenges a narrow cultural focus in circumstances where that focus can obscure the broader aims of the gospel. Practical services including English classes, tax completion and a myriad other acts of assistance grounded the immigrant not only in the church but also in the world. As one long-established immigrant noted simply "[We] clung

to…traditions…on the other side we wanted to adjust to the new country too." The Church's own fortieth anniversary volume articulated that same project: "[Holy Family] served those of German origin as a place of worship, as a focus of Christian community, and as a centre of cultural heritage. In all of these ways it has helped them to make the necessary transitions to a new culture" (Holy Family Parish 1988).

But in these "necessary transitions" retention of the mother tongue has frequently proven a contentious issue, and the subject of divisions among both Baptists and Lutherans in our sample, with new congregations being formed by members wishing to maintain German-language worship. The status of the Lutheran church as the state church in Germany certainly gave longevity to its ethnic identity and limited its outreach activities. In contrast Baptist historians (Pousett 1983) noted a directive from the central office against fostering mother tongue and cultural traditions when these conflicted with the church's spiritual mission. The Mennonites took an even stronger position against ethnic preservation and led the movement to multicultural congregations (Redekop 1987; Burkinshaw 1995).

The Challenge of Cultural Transition

In a historical period with negligible German-speaking immigration, the issue of re-orientation of church ministry cannot be avoided, and has frequently generated institutional crisis within the immigrant church. More abstractly, the task of institutional reproduction is under threat when the tight immigrant colony that shaped the church becomes over time more diverse in its values through differential acculturation and the rise of the second generation. New circumstances prescribe institutional re-visioning. The stark choice between "accommodation and extinction" (Mullins 1989:5) is apparent to German church leaders:

> Basically the choice is change or die, take your pick. If you don't change, well the last one can turn out the lights. If you do change and become more relevant to people around you, you can survive. It's traumatic for a lot of people and a lot of them never do make the transition. They'll go from church to church trying to find where that tradition still exists.

But most congregations have faced the trauma of prising loose their cultural traditions so that as one pastor put it, "the fabric of the church really focuses on the ministry of the church rather than as a depot for culture." The differentiation of faith and culture is a necessary if painful experience:

> What God called us to in the 1950s and 1960s as an immigrant people…it wasn't wrong to circle the wagons for self-protection. You were tired. You were hurt.

> You were lost. You were without…[but now] we are part of the mainstream of society. We can stop hiding so let's get going. We have to turn the page and yet psychologically I know what that does when somebody strips away our experience.

As a number of studies of immigrant religious institutions have observed, cultural diversity is encountered first within the ethnic congregation itself in the responses of the second generation (Vertovec 2000; Kawano 1992; McKay 1985). Internal conflict is a common stage as a tightly bonded immigrant generation seeks to incorporate the complexity of different experiences:

> The next generation that was born here could no longer identify with the immigrant experience, with the war experience…The economy was picking up here and they were always at the cutting edge of technology and education and all of these things were available to them…They could not relate to not having food…So that led to a tremendous amount of tension…the younger generation came into times of intense conflict with the older generation. The older generation said 'You don't value our heritage.' The language issue became a very critical one…It all led to very strong church conflicts in many of these ethnic groups.

Among the churches we interviewed there was considerable variation in the success with which these conflicts had been resolved. Least successful have been the congregations that have most fully played the ethnic card of the immigrant generation, maintaining the mother tongue and marginalizing the interests of the second generation. In a Lutheran congregation

> [y]ou go to church on a Sunday and you look around and 80 percent of the congregation are 60 plus…the young generation, like our daughter, she never goes to church…very few of the young ones come back…but it has to do with the older people, some of them, very few are sticklers against the English language and they want to keep the German tradition which I personally think is wrong.

To a greater or lesser degree this was a common condition. A Mennonite pastor put the matter succinctly: "Children left because we were so rigid." The loss of the second generation creates a downward spiral, for it is harder to run programs with fewer children and parents to lead them. With few young families it becomes more difficult to attract other young families. The congregation ages and dwindles. The cultural homogeneity that was the church's initial strength now becomes a disabling handicap.

One of the indicators of acculturation was growing intermarriage outside the ethnic German population.

> People intermarrying with others…that has changed. That was something that was very rare when we first came to Vancouver…It was very seldom that a Mennonite would marry somebody from another church. That has really, really changed. Now I'd say almost half our young people, maybe more, intermarry with others because they get together more.

This pastor's judgment – that much has changed when by his assessment close to half the young adults in his congregation continue to intermarry – is eloquent testimony to the closure that characterized these immigrant congregations in their early years.

The status of the German language is the symbolic heart of adjustment. Some churches made the transition to English early and self-consciously. Others were governed by inertia and have been caught by changing demographics:

> We made one mistake. We did not start speaking English in our meetings early enough. It was mostly German and our kids hesitated to speak because they couldn't speak perfectly. We switched over [to English] in the 1970s, but then our children were already 14, 15.

Even within the same denomination, churches that made different decisions concerning the role of German have made the linguistic transition more, or less, easily.

> [We] had accepted, I believe right from the outset, that we are going to minister in two languages and language is not going to be a problem. Where [the other church] started out to be German only and 'German' was spelled with a capital 'G'. It was very, very important to them and the early beginnings [of language transition] were very difficult.

The invariable consequence of such decisions has been the loss of the second generation: "The church wanted to be such a German stronghold and the next generation said 'I don't care about that stuff.'"

Not only did the German church face internal diversity, but in addition its parish underwent ethnic transition. The acculturation and economic assimilation of the second generation took them to the suburbs and South Vancouver became the site of immigrants from Asia, many of whom spoke limited English and of course no German. Members of Ebenezer Baptist who lived in the same postal district as the church declined in number from 197 in 1963 to only 27 in 1997 (**Figure 6**, page 31). The problems of out-migration were faced by all of the churches: "As soon as you got established, you wanted to get out of the old house that you bought and you wanted a new one. This is why we moved to Coquitlam. And this happened to most of our families." The tyranny of distance created an insuperable barrier for most families: "Why

should I drive 40 miles [to a German church] when I have an English-speaking church around the corner?" Vancouver's expensive housing market has accelerated the out-migration:

> A young family trying to build a house and buy a property have to move to Surrey or Port Coquitlam…very few of them have remained in Vancouver and even fewer still attend church services. There must have been a youth group of at least 20 to 30 members and most of them moved to the suburbs or disappeared never to be seen again which is sad really.

Price inflation also encouraged the immigrant generation to sell in the 1980s and 1990s and move outside the metropolitan area, with their house sale providing a retirement cushion. "All of a sudden they could sell [their house] for $350,000 because of the Asian money. It became very attractive…It became their retirement package because RRSPs just weren't something they had…many of them relocated to Abbotsford which has become a hub for the Mennonite community." In some instances the process of out-migration was hastened by a growing sense of cultural marginality as South Vancouver was settled by immigrants from India and East Asia.

Re-orientation: The Immigrant Church as a Multicultural Institution?

There are several trajectories that congregations may follow as they move beyond the glory days of the immigrant church. Some may choose ethnic preservation even in the face of daunting demographic conditions. In our study this has most commonly been the choice of Lutheran congregations. Others may relocate with their suburban-bound congregations and in the process reconfigure their own services. A few churches in our sample had established suburban daughter churches and, although several had considered relocation, only one had moved out of Vancouver, though not too far from its original site. The final choice is to remain a neighbourhood church but to re-orient ministry to a new population, trading in its cultural history in part or in full, and in the process, in Warner's (1993) words, transmuting its ethnicity for religion. The Mennonite Brethren churches have moved furthest along this path, with a more variable record among the Baptist and Mennonite churches. Each of these routes brings its own internal struggles. At one church in the 1980s the pastoral staff had made a decision to relocate, but were opposed by a congregation looking beyond culture to universal mission:

> We had three pastors who decided that we shouldn't be there any more and they said we can't minister to this community so we need to move…We [the congregation] said no, we can do better than that. We can have Chinese pastors and Punjabi pastors who will share the gospel to them right here. We send all kinds of missionaries overseas to do the same thing so why can't we have those same people here ministering to the people who are right around our doors? That

has been our philosophy…to provide services and ministries to the people that they can use.

The challenge of such reconfiguration is momentous and puts religious faith constantly to the test. South Vancouver today has a majority Asian population, primarily Chinese and Punjabi, non-European groups with limited English facility and weak or absent Christian traditions. Despite vigorously 'getting out the message' response from the neighbourhood to the German churches has been polite but non-committal in most cases.

Part of the difficulty is that the churches have not reconfigured themselves adequately. They are inviting newcomers to join a congregation that still maintains some German traditions; the invitation is to assimilate, and not surprisingly there have been relatively few takers. A second choice is to encourage the formation of a separate congregation that uses the same facility and has more or less contact with the original congregation. A more common model in Vancouver is a contractual rental arrangement of shared space among different congregations, but there are examples where some modest integration occurs in common events. Seven of the ten churches have experimented with such arrangements. The most ambitious model is the development of a multicultural church that has severed its original ethnic affiliations and become a fully Canadian institution. This degree of re-invention has been most successfully undertaken by Mennonite Brethren congregations who have sought to become community-based churches, signaling their new identity in their selection of ministers who are not ethnically German. A suburban daughter church of Vancouver Mennonite Brethren in South Vancouver has Sunday services in eight languages. Just outside South Vancouver is a Baptist church that has sought to integrate difference in a multicultural congregation that is about one-third Chinese, one-third Filippino, and one-third Anglo, with some 27 nationalities present among its membership.

While this level of ethno-cultural integration has not been achieved by any of the German churches of South Vancouver, a multicultural congregation is the objective of several and there are already significant points of multicultural engagement. Six of the ten congregations have made concerted efforts to become neighbourhood rather than ethnic commuter churches. The outliers are the Lutheran churches who hold to an ethnic project and the Catholic parish that is running down its German program. Children's and youth programs have been the most effective service and have attracted some Chinese and South Asian immigrants. Some common events are held with 'tenant' congregations of Chinese, Spanish, Vietnamese, and Greek churches, and in one case with a daughter South Asian church.

> We have functions together where we are together, our church, the Chinese church, and the Punjabi church. We respect each others' cultures and traditions but being a church there is one thing that binds you together and that is our beliefs…of course our common beliefs really enhance us and makes something that could be very negative, very positive.

There is more receptiveness among the second generation of Chinese- and Indo-Canadians, particularly to youth programs in such fields as crafts, wood-working and sports. To some extent the churches are reviving their own immigrant roots as they renew youth programs and re-establish English classes for adults. In their own way, these meetings represent a front line of cultural integration and negate the criticism that a multicultural society must involve cultural fragmentation that undercuts the nation-building project. One church's youth group includes

> {k]ids that are involved in street gangs in some cases. Kids who are struggling in school or who have dropped out…there is a whole host of different kids. You have Portuguese background, you have Spanish background, you have east Indian, you have [kids] from Africa, Chinese…just a hodgepodge…We've had kids come here with smoke bombs, with drugs and part of gangs, checking it out and saying 'This is cool, I think I'll come back' and then two hours later involved in a shooting incident where they've been shot…just two blocks away. That's the kind of neighbourhood [we are in and] that has changed dramatically from when the church was first built.

Conclusion

The classical view of the immigrant church has frequently alluded to a life cycle that begins with immigration and ends with acculturation (Kincheloe 1971). During the early days there is intense activity as the church becomes virtually a total institution for its members, providing a wide range of settlement services, cultural programs, and spiritual renewal. The self-selection of members, common memories, and shared needs create powerful intersubjective bonds, as the institution becomes the sedimentation of its members' values. As we have seen, time challenges this powerful synergy of place and identity; new recruits dwindle as immigration falls off, members enjoy upward mobility and move away, and are less needy materially, while their children do not share the heritage of language and old-world experiences. The mutual embeddedness of people and place is wrenched apart.

At this point the church enters a legitimacy crisis; it achieves a new configuration or its survival is in jeopardy. Some congregations seek to keep the ethnic story going, but there are increasingly few to listen; some join the suburban rush of their members; some try to reinvent

themselves as they go through the painful process of cultural forgetting. One pastor made this point eloquently as he spoke of the need for a cultural funeral:

> [There comes a time]when you bury the past. You honour it, you eulogize it, you help it find its place in history and in memory. But when the funeral is done you go on. There are some who have done a very gracious funeral but have moved on. There are some whose whole ministry is a lingering funeral.

At this stage, re-visioning of the church's role may bring it back to its parish as it seeks to find a new constituency among the quite different immigrant communities who are its new neighbours. This is a much more demanding task than the early years, for now culture, instead of being an asset, becomes a liability. The taken-for-granted world that was so fully shared in the culturally homogenous German congregation is replaced by the spectre of strangeness experienced between diverse groups in plural societies (in the sense of J. S. Furnivall [1948] and his anthropological successors). The social capital that was so abundantly present in the original congregation must be painstakingly constructed in unfamiliar and unreceptive territory. Slowly, we have seen, trust may be built as programs and settlement services relevant to new Canadians in the district are provided. This is a work still in process; its full success is yet to be proven. We suggested it provides one of the sites in urban Canada where serious efforts at cultural engagement are underway. An important issue is the terms on which these engagements are negotiated; is the intended outcome to be cultural assimilation or the more ambitious goal of a multicultural congregation? A few at least of the churches we investigated have set their sights on the latter.

A final issue is the generality of this interpretation of the immigrant German church. Min (1992) has raised cautions against too direct a comparison of immigrant churches of European provenance with their more recent Asian counterparts. While the class status of recent arrivals from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Korea in particular differs from the frequently poorer European arrivals of the 1950s, yet research we are conducting with Chinese and Korean congregations is repeating over and over again the patterns identified in this study during what we have called the glory days of the German churches: rapid numerical growth, an immense range of settlement services, and an enclave mentality where there is a tight bonding of place and a single identity. A Chinese pastor in Vancouver has noted (Tsang 1990):

> Some of the most popular services that can be provided to the ethnic new immigrants are ESL classes and Chinese schools…Other projects that can attract non-Christian youths are the starting of a big brother or big sister program or sponsorship of a new immigrant orientation program.

There are already indications in these congregations not only of immense creativity in the provision of immigrant services, but also of the birth of the next stage, as use of the Chinese or Korean language is questioned, and tensions emerge with the second generation. These parallels have been observed by one of the German pastors we interviewed:

> Interestingly the Chinese have some of the same dynamics at work that the Mennonites did years ago. Years ago when Mennonites moved from the German [language] to [using] English, the language issue was a big one, similar to the music one today. The Chinese have the same issue now, the older generation wants to keep the mother tongue and the younger generation says, 'we want to see our friends come to Christ and we need to have English'. They are going through some of the same and identical dynamics and the same will be true for other language groups as well. It's very, very noticeable in the Chinese.

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Figures

(Following Pages)

WEST VANCOUVER

NORTH VANCOUVER

NORTH
VANCOUVER
CITY

COQUITLAM

PORT
MOODY

PORT
COQUITLAM

PITT
MEADOWS

MAPLE
RIDGE

BURNABY

VANCOUVER

RICHMOND

DELTA

SURREY

LANGLEY

WHITE
ROCK

Percentage of
total population

> 15
10.00 - 15.00
7.50 - 9.99
5.00 - 7.49
< 5.00
No data

0   2 miles

0   2 kilometers

Case study church
Non-case study church

Burrard Inlet

Downtown

33rd

41st

49th

Cambie St

Fraser St

54th

0   2 miles

0   2 kilometers

West Vancouver

North Vancouver

Burrard Inlet

Vancouver

Burnaby

Coquitlam

New
Westminster

Richmond

Surrey

Delta

White Rock

✝ Ebenezer
Baptist
Church

• One household

Total church
membership
= 690

0   5 miles

0   5 kilometers

WEST VANCOUVER

NORTH VANCOUVER

NORTH
VANCOUVER
CITY

PORT
MOODY

COQUITLAM

PORT
COQUITLAM

PITT
MEADOWS

MAPLE
RIDGE

VANCOUVER

BURNABY

RICHMOND

DELTA

SURREY

LANGLEY

WHITE
ROCK

Percentage of
total population

> 15
10.00 - 15.00
7.50 - 9.99
5.00 - 7.49
< 5.00
No data

0   2 miles
0   2 kilometers

West Vancouver

North Vancouver

Vancouver

Burnaby

Coquitlam

New
Westminster

Richmond

Surrey

Delta

✠ Ebenezer
Baptist
Church

• One household

Total church
membership
= 297

White Rock

0   5 miles

0   5 kilometers
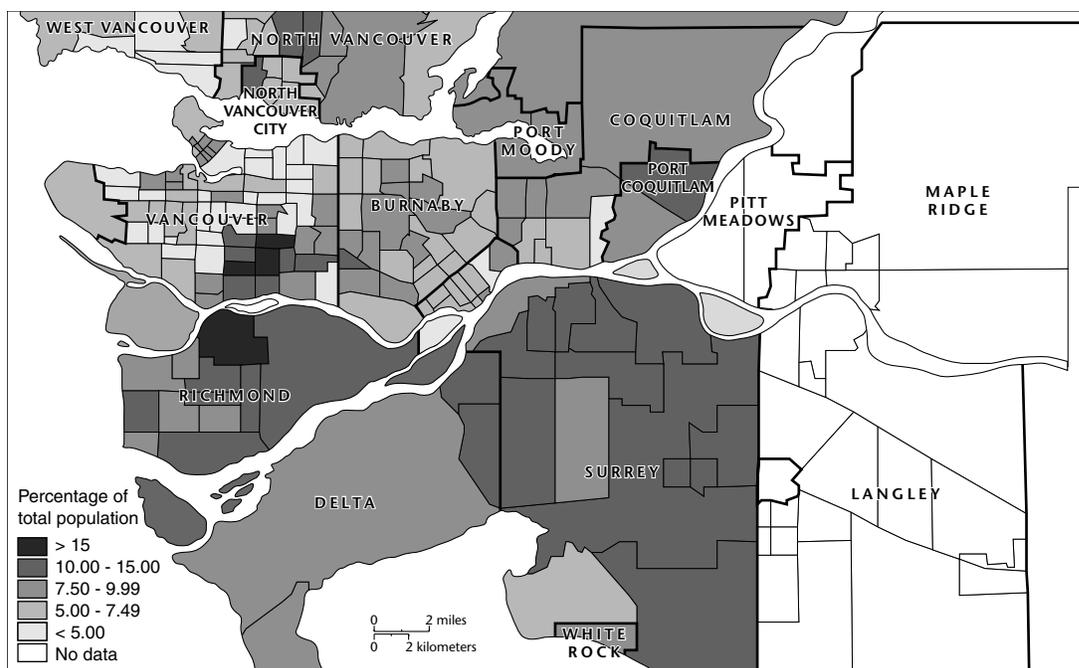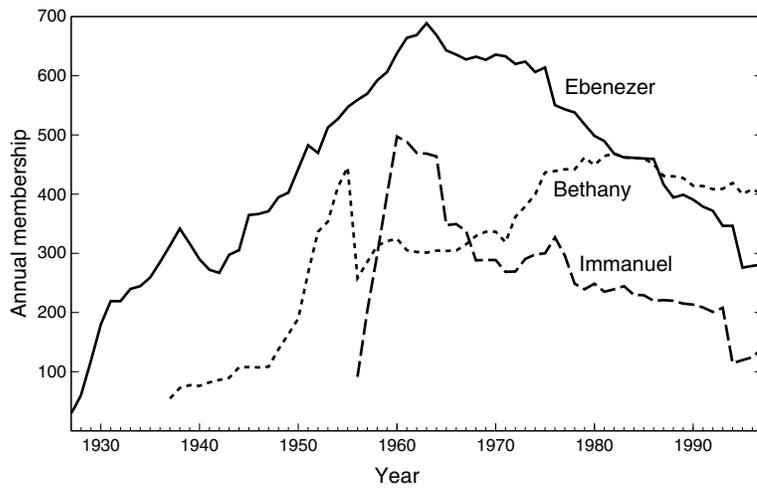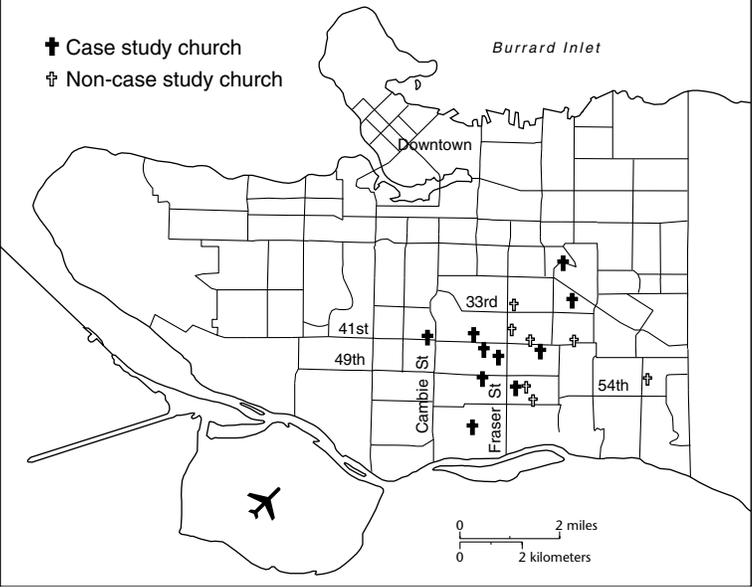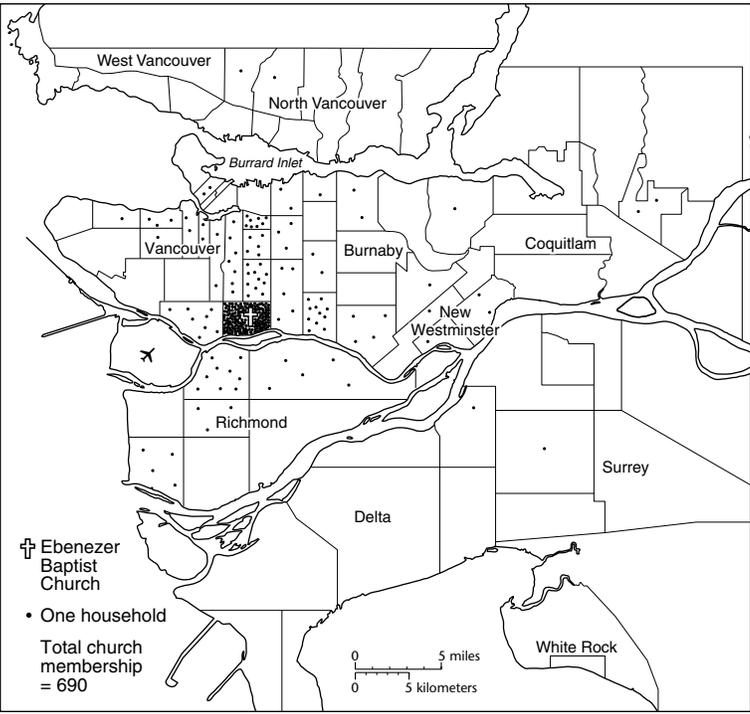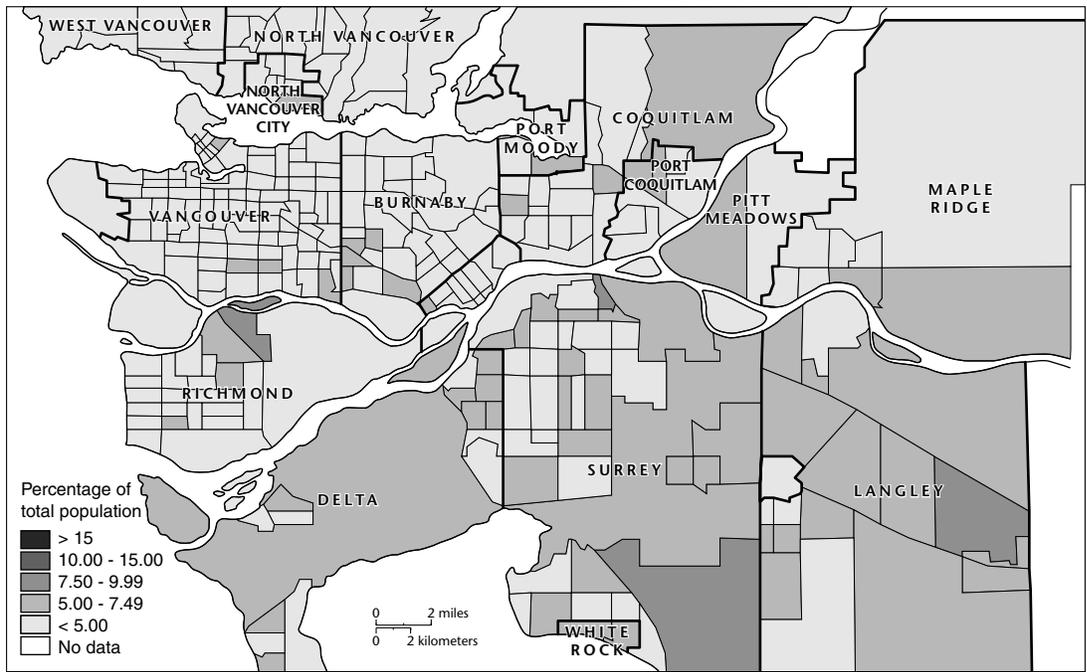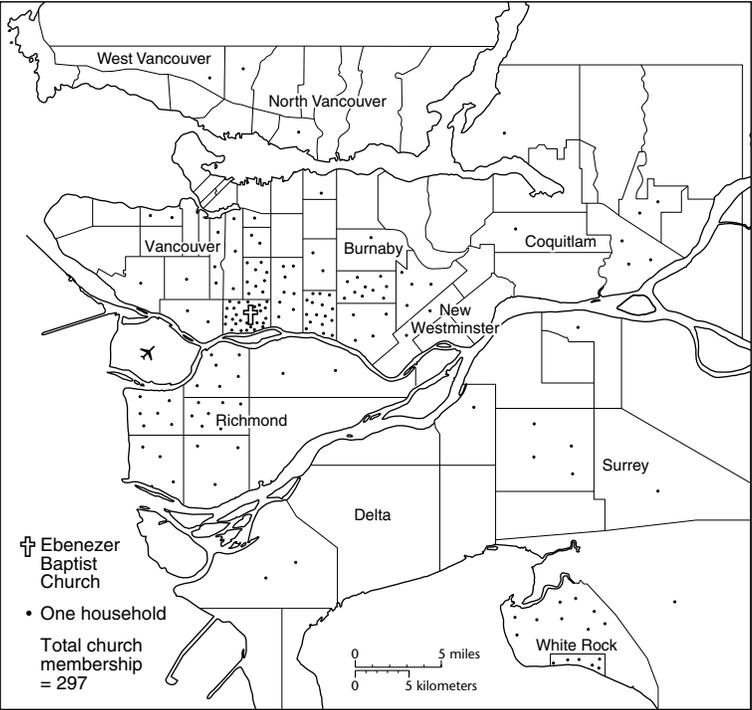
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