Displaced Households and Hearts:
Portland’s African-American Churches and Residential Adversity

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Displaced Households and Hearts: Portland’s African-American Churches and Residential Adversity

Introduction

On an inner-Northeast Portland street corner, a historically African-American church in what is now a predominantly white neighborhood, stands empty behind a “for sale” sign. The Gethsemane Church of God in Christ has not held services in the past few years, leaving the pews, bibles, and the rest of the vibrant interior to collect dust. Potential buyers of the church are not interested in maintaining the structure as a religious institution, but instead view the property as an opportunity for development. Both the church’s entrance into the market and the interest in the property for development reflect the trends of gentrification and demographic shifts in North and inner-Northeast neighborhoods. The Gethsemane Church of God in Christ is only one of four churches within a mile radius that are for sale for various reasons, but all support the notion that the people moving into inner-Northeast Portland are less likely to attend church. This is only one of many differences between the newcomers and the long-term residents of what was historically called the Albina District in Portland.¹ African-American churches in North and Northeast Portland have been transforming in the past few decades as a result of demographic shifts and displacement.

To serve their communities, African-American churches have responded to displacement through social activism. Churches have begun relocating to follow the movement of the African-American community and opening additional community centers, implementing bussing programs to provide transportation for congregants residing in distant locations, and presenting the church as open to all racial backgrounds to welcome new members and harbor community.

All of these changes represent outreach to benefit both nearby and displaced community members and exemplify that the African-American church continually operates to serve the African-American community. Recent decades of reinvestment in the historically African-American neighborhoods of North and Northeast Portland have changed the racial and socioeconomic composition of the neighborhoods, to majority white and middle- to upper-class. Consequently, reinvestment and the process of gentrification have led to the displacement of many African-Americans, which adversely affects the African-American community. Displacement negatively impacts individuals’ ability to connect with the community. The church, a cornerstone of the African-American community, serves as an institution that fosters community and provides social, economic, and educational resources. However, displacement has splintered and disadvantaged the church and its congregants. Displacement removes individuals from the proximity of their churches and has harmed the social and economic well being of the African-American community. As a reaction to demographic changes in Albina, African-American churches have been changing their locations or services to better accommodate the new circumstances of these neighborhoods. Consequently, the African-American church serves its congregants with new forms of activism similarly to previous decades and the Civil Rights era.

This study begins after the flood that destroyed Vanport City in 1948 because that event marks a large influx of African-Americans into North and Northeast Portland and the establishment of Albina as an African-American neighborhood. The research continues into the present, examining and analyzing current events and studies about gentrification and displacement. This study focuses on Portland specifically, but also compares Portland to other cities with larger African American populations. This study focuses on the historically African-
American neighborhood of Albina in Portland, which is at the center of Portland’s gentrification debate. Gentrification is not specifically a race-based process, although it is more apparent in areas where populations are racially changing, and while there are currently historically white neighborhoods experiencing gentrification, these neighborhoods will not be included, because this study focuses on how reinvestment, gentrification, and displacement have impacted the African-American church.

When referring to churches in the Albina district and beyond, the study examines African-American churches belonging to both historically African-American denominations and majority white denominations. This includes, but is not limited to, African Methodist Episcopal, Christian Methodist Episcopal, Church of Christ, and the Baptist Church. The church is the focus of this study because it is one of the most important pillars of the African-American community. That being stated, there is not one entity that makes up the African-American church; there are multiple denominations that occasionally disagree. Additionally, changes occurring in the African-American church do not all relate to gentrification, but instead follow national religious trends. The focus for my study is the reinvestment and residential impact on African-American churches. This includes both public reinvestment through urban renewal programs and private reinvestment in the housing market. There are no scholarly studies of the changes of the African-American church in Portland due to urban renewal or gentrification, so this study is written out of multiple historiographies and scholarly conversations combining, contrasting, and engaging with each other.

Gentrification is crucial to understanding the changes in the African-American Church in the Albina district in Portland. Gentrification is defined in *The Encyclopedia of Housing* as “the process by which central urban neighborhoods that have undergone disinvestment and economic
decline experience a reversal, reinvestment, and the in-migration of a relatively well-off, middle- and upper-middle-class population.” However, there is no one official definition because it has changed since studies about gentrification in the United States began in the 1970s and 1980s. Additionally, people often understand gentrification as a nebulous term that encompasses not the process itself, but instead the effects of the process. For example, in an article titled “Doing the Right Thing?” the Oregonian asserts, “Gentrification is broadly defined as the mass displacement of a group of people that occurs as a result of revitalization.” This study will adhere to the definition from The Encyclopedia of Housing, one that describes the actual process of neighborhood and community change. For many, gentrification causes displacement, which contributes to the controversy of the processes of gentrification and reinvestment. Rates of displacement remain a contention in gentrification studies among scholars.

Scholarly arguments about gentrification relate to whether the process causes displacement or not, and how beneficial or harmful gentrification is to long-term residents of gentrifying neighborhoods. According to scholar Lance Freeman, displacement is the threat “whereby current residents are forced to move because they can no longer afford to reside in the gentrifying neighborhoods.” Previously, most scholars agreed that gentrification led to displacement, which was harmful to the individuals moving out of their neighborhood and community. In the study “Gentrification-Caused Displacement,” scholars Legates and Hartman cite Portland as one of the cities that experienced displacement at a much higher rate than

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5 Freeman, “Displacement or Succession?,” 463.
expected. However, scholars have recently begun to contest both gentrification’s role in displacement and gentrification’s negative effects. Lance Freeman concludes his study by claiming that displacement is “rare in gentrifying neighborhoods.” Additionally, in a recent report, research economist Daniel Hartley argues that gentrification benefits low-income residents of the affected neighborhood. This essay will enter this debate with the examination of gentrification in Portland and recent demographic shifts that show that displacement is occurring in the Albina district. This study argues that Portland is different from other major cities because its African-American community is proportionally much smaller, and as a result, the displacement of African-Americans in Portland causes harm to African-American church communities.

Scholars examine the essential role of the African-American church during the Civil Rights Movement as a platform for political and social progress. Many scholars and Americans view the contemporary African-American church in the same light as the African-American church of the Civil Rights era. As a result, scholars use the African-American church of the Civil Rights era as a baseline for comparison with the contemporary African-American church. Scholars debate whether the church has transformed and in which ways. Many scholars argue that community action for issues of social justice remains a major aspect of the African-American church.

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7 Freeman, “Displacement or Succession?,” 488.
changed, mostly away from the social action due to religious trends. With this study, I will track the changes in the African-American church that relate to residential changes and displacement. These changes directly impact the religious and socioeconomic experience of African-Americans.

To understand the significance of the African-American church to the African-American community, it is important to recognize that African-Americans are more religious than other Americans. Recent studies have found that over half of African-Americans attend church at least weekly and that almost nine in ten have absolute belief in God, rates that are higher compared to the total United States population. Staggeringly, African-Americans claimed that religion is very important to their lives at a rate over 20% higher than that of the total United States population. Nationally, 87% of African-Americans belong to a religious denomination, 83% are Christian, and 59% belong to historically African-American Protestant churches, while 84% of the total United States population affiliates with religion and 75% identifies as Christian. African-Americans were included in the comparative total United States population and African-American Protestant churches count for 7% of the religious composition. Portland represents an anomaly in this religious landscape due to the low level of religious affiliation among its population. Possibly influenced by progressive, secular, and majority-white culture, 62.8% of the people in the Pacific Northwest affiliate with no religion. However, scholars contend that African-Americans who reside in inner cities in the northern United States are not as involved in

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church life as white people.\textsuperscript{17} Despite these arguments, data shows that in the Western United States African-Americans, at 15\%, show lower levels of “unaffiliation” than their white counterparts at 21\%. Additionally, a comprehensive study of African-Americans in Oregon conducted by the Urban League of Portland claims that “spirituality and church activity defines much of Portland’s African American community.”\textsuperscript{18} Therefore, I argue that even in Portland, religion and church are more important to African-Americans than the rest of the population.

My research included interviewing reverends and pastors of historically African-American churches in Portland. I spoke with Reverend Arthur B. Carter, Jr. of Bethel A.M.E. Church, Pastor Ed Williams of Mt. Olivet Baptist Church, Reverend Dr. W. G. Hardy of Highland Christian Center, and Reverend Dr. LeRoy Haynes of Allen Temple C.M.E. Church. These leaders represented churches all in different neighborhoods across North and Northeast Portland, surrounded by varying types of housing and businesses, and all experiencing different levels of residential turnover. The interviews provided me with valuable primary source information that helped shape my argument. The reverends and pastors contributed as authorities to the topics I studied and became the most valuable sources for discussing Portland’s contemporary African-American churches. Before starting my interview process I was invited to attend a service at Bethel A.M.E. Church. I had a great experience participating in worship with a welcoming community that acted with kindness toward me. The reverends and pastors generously helped me with unique and valuable information, and their engagement with the topic of my research provided me with a better understanding of what I analyzed and is an experience I am grateful for. Interacting with the material and seeing the neighborhoods, churches, and

communities in person, from neighborhoods experiencing racial transition to areas where displaced people are relocating, gave me a more practical lens to view my research. All of the on-site and oral history research was an interesting learning experience, in part because I come from a background and look more similar to the typical people moving into these transitioning neighborhoods than long-term residents.

1. Albina Community: 1940s-1950s

On May 30, 1948, a flood destroyed Vanport City, a federal housing project built between Portland and the Columbia River to house some of the tens of thousands of migrant shipyard workers during World War II. The flood displaced the 16,931 residents who lived there, over 5,000 of whom were African-American. A wall of water transformed the temporary city built on a flood plain into a lake, forcing the largely poor and unemployed population to relocate.\textsuperscript{19} The flood created a surge of residential migration to Portland, where African-Americans were already struggling to find decent housing due to discriminatory housing practices. At this time the Portland metropolitan area housed 534,000 people, 90,000 of whom resided in substandard housing. Portland’s lack of sanitary and safe houses afflicted many low-income residents in the Albina district, where more than half of Portland’s African-American population lived.\textsuperscript{20}

By the time of the Vanport City flood, many of the African-American laborers had been laid off from jobs at Kaiser Shipyard due to the end of the Second World War, prompting some to leave Portland. The African-Americans who stayed in Portland at this time settled in the African-American community of Albina. Three African-American churches near North Williams Avenue, where over half of Portland’s African-American population lived, housed refugees of

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, 86.
the flood for weeks and provided 515 meals a day to various victims. These churches, alongside other community groups, provided aid to refugees while the City of Portland helped very little. Most of the refugees ended up residing near North Williams Avenue, an area of town experiencing overcrowding and segregation. The discriminatory real estate industry refused to sell or rent houses to African-Americans outside of the Albina district. Additionally, banks often refused to give loans to African-Americans to afford proper housing. The real estate industry used discriminatory practices to effectively funnel African-Americans into residentially segregated neighborhoods in Northeast Portland, despite a shortage of suitable houses. Although Albina became majority African-American, African-Americans never represented more than seven percent of Portland’s population. While the issues of poor housing continued, the neighborhoods around North Williams Avenue became the center of the African-American community, containing various African-American churches, businesses, and community centers.

At this time Portland’s African-American church community, along with the NAACP and the Urban League of Portland, was active in pursuing civil rights. In addition to housing refugees after the Vanport City flood, Reverend J. J. Clow from Mount Olivet Baptist Church, as well as The Portland Council of Churches, advocated that the Housing Authority of Portland adopt a no-segregation policy for landlords and realtors to follow. As the head of the largest African-American church in Oregon at the time and the Portland chapter of the NAACP, Reverend Clow

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23 Ibid, 141.
was one of Portland’s most active advocates for civil rights. To address the racism African-Americans faced in the housing market, Reverend Clow directed a letter of complaint to the Federal Public Housing Authority, arguing that the Housing Authority of Portland practiced segregation instead of enforcing its anti-discrimination clause. While such entities as the Portland Realty Board had rules designed to prohibit realtors from selling houses in white neighborhoods to African-Americans, church communities fought for civil rights. Reverend Dr. Hardy declares that “in the African-American community, ever since slavery, the church has had to address the social issues, the social justice issues… and be a voice for the people.”


28 Reverend Dr. W. G. Hardy, Jr., Interview by author, Portland, March 5, 2014.
Later in the 1940s and into the 1950s, as African-Americans continued to move into Albina, more long-term white residents moved out. Over the course of the 1950s, 23,000 whites moved out of the Albina neighborhood as the African-American population added 7,300 new residents. The succession of the neighborhood by African-Americans represents a stage in disinvestment referred to as downgrading, which “is associated with the outflow of original residents and inflow of lower-income residents and often corresponds with racial segregation.” Capital systematically flowed out of Albina, into the hands of profiting realtors, leaving houses and businesses in the neighborhood to lose value. Due to strict housing laws and discriminatory real estate practices, an increasing number of African-Americans were “forced… to live in crowded, ancient, unhealthy, and wholly inadequate dwellings,” while due to discriminatory disinvestment no new houses were built in the neighborhood. White flight from neighborhoods such as Albina into surrounding suburban areas accelerated disinvestment. Despite such poor conditions, social circumstances improved for African-Americans at this time. In 1953, Portland became the final major city to adopt a form of civil rights legislation with Oregon’s Public Accommodation Law, which banned racial discrimination in places of business. During the same decade, more employers began to hire African-Americans due to civil rights activism. Additionally, 1959 saw the passing of a Fair Housing Law that “forbade discrimination in the sale, rental, or lease of housing.” Socioeconomic circumstances and systemic processes that adversely affected African-Americans aided in building the community of Albina.

As Albina became increasingly African-American demographically, it also became a thriving African-American community with North Williams Avenue at its heart. African-American-owned restaurants, barbershops, doctor’s offices, grocery stores, funeral homes, and community centers thrived on North Williams Avenue alongside flourishing and active African-American religious institutions, including a Baptist Church. Reverend Dr. LeRoy Haynes proclaims that when it comes to the African-American community “everything came out of the Black Church.” Albina resident Eddie Wield subsequently remembered the significance of his neighborhood to the African-American community, declaring, “Williams was like a Harlem on the Willamette, everybody all dressed up.” Businesses central to the African-American community existed along North Williams Avenue and the primary commercial hubs of the street were located at the intersections of Russell Street as well as Broadway Street. The Hill Block Building, iconic of Albina’s commercial center, stood at the intersection of North Williams Avenue and Russell Street. The avenues and streets of Albina not only served as the core business district or religious center, but were also the locations of the beloved homes of residents and stood as the heart of the African-American community and its local culture. Journalist Lisa Loving claims that for Albina the year 1956 represented “the height of home ownership, business success, and tightly-bound family connections” before political decisions of urban renewal tore the community apart.

35 Reverend Dr. LeRoy Haynes, Jr., Interview by author, Portland, March 20, 2014.
After Albina became established as Portland’s African-American ghetto, it continued to grow and progress in the face of racial discrimination and socio-economic adversity. However, the neighborhoods that many African-Americans considered home, after becoming victim of realtors’ disinvestment, turned into a target for another major change—urban renewal. In 1956, voters of Portland approved the building of the Memorial Coliseum in the Eliot neighborhood, a part of the Albina district. This project would end up destroying 476 homes, approximately half of which African Americans inhabited, as well as local businesses. In the same year, the Federal Aid Highway Act enabled Portland to begin construction on highways that tore directly through residential neighborhoods. The displacement caused by these programs worsened the poor housing conditions and contributed to the segregation that African Americans experienced in the housing market. Finally, the Housing Act of 1957 made it possible for Portland to perform what is known as “slum clearance” in order to reclaim land to construct buildings that would produce more tax revenue. African-Americans living in Albina never experienced an equal opportunity for economic or residential prosperity before their communities were torn apart at the hands of the city.38

II. Urban Renewal in Albina: 1960s-1980s

In 1957 the City Club of Portland published a report on the living conditions of African Americans, declaring, “a combination of enforced segregation in housing and poor economic opportunities created Negro slum ghettos of the worst order right here in the City of Portland.”39 The report noted higher rates of crime and single-parent households in Albina than in the rest of Portland, a result of poor socio-economic circumstances. The City of Portland finally gave attention to the dilapidated houses in Albina neighborhoods through the implementation of urban

39 McElderry, “Building a West Coast Ghetto,” 137.
renewal projects. Urban renewal is the process whereby cities use public money to redevelop land perceived as “blighted” to raise property value, and which often leads to massive land clearance, destruction of residences, and large-scale displacement.\textsuperscript{40} Urban renewal is a public form of reinvestment, where public money is used to invest into an area to make money for the city by improving its tax base. Developers viewed inner-city neighborhoods as valuable land due to its proximity to a growing downtown and suburban expansion and sprawl. Albina was the major target for urban renewal, because according to the Portland Development Commission’s 1962 Central Albina Study, “urban renewal, largely clearance, appears to be the only solution to, not only the blight that presently exists in central Albina, but also to avoid the spread of that blight to other surrounding areas.”\textsuperscript{41} Albina was effectively rendered the center for Portland’s urban renewal, making the African-American community its target.

Portland voters approved the establishment of the Portland Development Commission (PDC) in 1958, the organization that governed and orchestrated neighborhood clearance and urban renewal.\textsuperscript{42} Additionally, the PDC was given the power to “acquire such property, real or personal… as the Commission and the Council may find appropriate or convenient.”\textsuperscript{43} Therefore, with the flexible power bestowed upon the PDC by the city, the PDC was allowed to initiate multiple urban renewal projects in Albina neighborhoods without the consent or approval of the residents. Urban renewal displaced members of the African-American community.\textsuperscript{44} Critics of urban renewal referred to it as “negro removal” because African-Americans were most often affected.\textsuperscript{45} Citizens had to relocate away from the places they thought of as home, away from the

\textsuperscript{40} City of Portland Bureau of Planning, \textit{History of Portland’s African-American Community}, 104-109.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid, 111.
\textsuperscript{43} City of Portland Bureau of Planning, \textit{History of Portland’s African-American Community}, 111.
\textsuperscript{44} Gibson, “Bleeding Albina,” 11.
businesses that catered to their needs and the people they loved, and from the churches they attended, usually into “less desirable dwelling units and neighborhoods at higher costs.”\textsuperscript{46} Congressional investigations revealed that Portland’s, as well as other cities’, “displacees did not receive relocation assistance or decent replacement housing. Very little replacement housing was actually built on urban renewal sites” despite the fact that urban renewal and freeway programs were legally required to guarantee replacement housing and assist those forced to relocate.\textsuperscript{47} The various redevelopment plans led to the demolition of many residences and businesses, breaking apart the African-American community.

In the same year, multiple congregations of Albina formed the Albina Ministerial Alliance, which came to be led by Reverend O.B. Williams of Vancouver Avenue First Baptist Church and Reverend John Jackson of Mt. Olivet Baptist Church.\textsuperscript{48} The organization represented a collaboration of Christian congregations in North and Northeast Portland, most of which were African-American, to form a church-based civil rights group. These reverends created the Albina Ministerial Alliance as a response to the problems of low employment and poor housing that had plagued African Americans in the previous decades. The Albina Ministerial Alliance provided support for programs that encouraged educational, economic, and community development.\textsuperscript{49} The Albina Ministerial Alliance exemplified the role of the African-American church as an influential force in the civil rights movement in the mid-twentieth century. Gilkes declares, “the civil rights revolution was the most significant mobilization of the black church; it brought the ethics, traditions, and practices of the black church into the foreground.”\textsuperscript{50} Therefore, the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[47]W. Dennis Keating, The Encyclopedia of Housing, 121.
\item[49]Legacy Health, “Acknowledging the Past, Embracing the Future.”
\item[50]Gilkes, “Plenty Good Room: Adaptation in a Changing Black Church,” 105.
\end{footnotes}
creation of the Albina Ministerial Alliance was the African-American church community’s assertion of social and political activism to combat discrimination. Portland’s African-American churches served as active supporters of civil rights and played roles in the African-American community that promoted social, political, and economic progress.

The city began construction of the Memorial Coliseum at the end of the decade, which meant the demolition of hundreds of homes. Portland invested in a sports arena because it was in economic demand, but also because it would generate revenue. The city designated the Eliot neighborhood, the southern edge of Albina, as a slum whose elimination would be considered as beneficial.\(^\text{51}\) Residents whose houses stood in the path of destruction held different opinions on the project. Apartment resident and mother of five, Mrs. McFarland, struggled to find a house to relocate to, remarking, “I didn’t know there were so many places Negroes can’t live.”\(^\text{52}\) Mrs. McFarland echoed the problem of destroying residences of those with limited housing options in a racist market. However, not every affected person disagreed with the urban renewal project. NAACP president Phil Reynolds lived in an African-American apartment building flagged for demolition. Reynolds optimistically supported the Memorial Coliseum because he believed the construction would “help break up the Negro ghetto… providing the Negroes are not just shifted into a similar area.”\(^\text{53}\) Unfortunately, with such limited housing options African-Americans were forced to relocate to other dilapidated parts of Albina, moving in a northeasterly direction, becoming more distant from established community centers.\(^\text{54}\) Almost immediately afterwards, construction for Interstate 5 and Highway 99 tore through the Eliot neighborhood, heading North through to the Columbia River, leaving a stretch of land cleared of homes. Highway construction

\(^{51}\) McElderry, “Building a West Coast Ghetto,” 144.  
\(^{52}\) Gerry Pratt, “Long-Time Residents of E-R Site Reluctant To Leave; Others See Merit in Clearance,” The Oregonian April 7, 1957, microfilm.  
\(^{53}\) Ibid.  
\(^{54}\) Gibson, “Bleeding Albina,” 11.
displaced 585 families and facilitated white flight into the suburbs. African-Americans continually experienced displacement, the consequence of urban renewal.

The Portland Development Commission planned the Emanuel Hospital expansion for years before announcing it to the public. The controversy surrounding expansion of Emanuel Hospital in the Eliot neighborhood began in the 1960s, continued into the 1970s, and impacted victimized communities for decades. The PDC justified the major displacement caused by its urban renewal project, declaring, “There is little doubt that the greatest concentration of Portland’s urban blight can be found in the Albina area encompassing the Emanuel Hospital…

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Conditions will not improve without a concerted effort by urban renewal action.”

Despite widespread protests over the expansion of Emanuel Hospital and the formation of the Emanuel Displaced Persons Association, the PDC acquired property in the neighborhood over seven years. The construction of the Emanuel Hospital caused the destruction of 101 properties, including houses, apartments, businesses and two churches, eliminating the residences and the place of worship for these congregations. Additionally, this urban renewal project destroyed the prominent Hill Block Building, a symbol of the African-American community, replacing the building with an empty lot that now serves as a makeshift parking lot.

Religious groups and civil rights organizations targeted urban renewal projects as one of the greatest injustices to the African-American community in this era. In an effort to minimize victimization of the Eliot neighborhood, in 1971 the Albina Ministerial Alliance collaborated with Emanuel Hospital to create informative materials educating the community about career opportunities that were then distributed to churches and schools. As part of the fight for civil rights, African-American churches responded to displacement that caused the African-American population of the Eliot neighborhood to shrink by two-thirds. Affected residents responded to the adversity that displacement caused, including Lucille Glass, who expressed how her community changed, stating, “It was like one big family. But now everyone’s pretty well scattered.”

As the urban landscape changed around the African-American community, so did the role of the church. As a pillar of the African-American community, the church became increasingly active in politics as the community confronted inequity and injustices. Profoundly inspired by

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56 Legacy Health, “Acknowledging the Past, Embracing the Future.”
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
60 Legacy Health, “Acknowledging the Past, Embracing the Future.”
Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., Reverend John Hiram Jackson of Mt. Olivet Baptist Church spent his career examining “the role of the black minister in the community… [and] religion and social justice.”⁶¹ Co-Chair of the Black United Front and a leader of the Albina Ministerial Alliance, Reverend Jackson championed the African-American community during the civil rights era, believing that the church had an essential part to play in achieving justice. As the city tore down African-American neighborhoods, Reverend Jackson argued, “the spirit of a people cannot advance unless fundamental needs are met.”⁶² As Portland pursued urban renewal, Reverend Jackson “was always on the front lines” on social injustices pertaining to education, jobs, housing, violence, and the Vietnam War, according to former co-chairman of the Black United Front Richard Brown.⁶³ Reverend Jackson actively supported Portland’s African-American community through his retirement in the late 1980s, which was also the height of residential blight and decay in Albina. At this time Albina was on the cusp of another transformation, for both its residents and its churches.

III. Where the Church Stands: Reinvestment and Gentrification of Albina: 1990-2014

After urban blight, crime, and housing abandonment rose in the 1980s, Albina’s population grew in the 1990s; but the people who moved into Albina’s neighborhoods were different from the majority of already-present residents. Gentrification began after residential disinvestment peaked, when private investors began to market and reinvest into houses in the Albina district, making low-price homes attractive and raising demand to live in neighborhoods that were previously perceived as blighted. As demand for housing continued to rise in Northeast neighborhoods, the people with higher incomes who moved into these growing neighborhoods

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⁶² Ibid.
brought expectations of increased amenities and more upscale businesses. The retail sector in these African-American neighborhoods, often owned by residents of the neighborhood, changed to cater to the newcomers’ higher incomes and different needs, but in doing so alienated long-term residents and brought stiff competition for established businesses. Long-term residents with lower incomes struggled to compete in the face of increasing rents, new businesses, and housing bids, often causing them to move out of their home neighborhoods. Portland’s gentrification in the 1990s occurred most acutely in inner-Northeast Portland, affecting the African-American community most significantly. Displacement as a result of this gentrification struck African-Americans who moved further to the periphery of the city, or beyond to Gresham, Beaverton, Lents, and Vancouver. Displacement accelerated so rapidly in the 1990s that by the end of the decade African-Americans owned 36 percent fewer homes, while white ownership increased 43 percent.

Scholars identify gentrifying neighborhoods as typically possessing these characteristics: exists in the central city, previously housed residents with a median income significantly lower than the median for the rest of the city, possesses older buildings, is experiencing an increase in educational attainment among in-movers, and is experiencing an increase in housing prices. The City of Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability designated neighborhoods in Albina gentrifying based on these measures and due to findings of increased levels of education for new

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69 Freeman, “Displacement or Succession?,” 472.
residents along with increasing property values.\textsuperscript{70} While gentrification is an identifiable process, scholars debate whether it actually leads to displacement or not and if it is beneficial or harmful to low-income residents. LeGates and Hartman argue that gentrification forces “low-income minority groups out of desirable inner city neighborhoods to less desirable areas, thus reducing their quality of life and diffusing their political power.”\textsuperscript{71}

While gentrification appears to be linked to displacement in this manner, especially when relating African-Americans to Albina and their church communities, scholars contest whether displacement is a byproduct of gentrification. Lance Freeman, in a study attempting to find the rates of displacement in gentrifying neighborhoods, declares that his study “that sought to capture evidence of displacement… did not reveal a link to gentrification.”\textsuperscript{72} However, Freeman’s study was limited to Boston and New York City, two cities with demographics extremely different from Portland. Portland differs because African-Americans constituted only 6.6 percent of the population, towards its highest point, significantly lower than other major cities, especially Boston and New York City.\textsuperscript{73} Portland’s small proportion of African-Americans accelerates the process of displacement and racial transition, which has led to the decrease of Portland’s African-American population by 10,000 between the years 2000 and 2010, despite an increase of African-Americans in the Portland Metropolitan area.\textsuperscript{74} Additionally, in 1990, 50 percent of Oregon’s African-American population lived in Albina, but by 2007, the number dropped to 23 percent, meaning that many were displaced beyond their own

\textsuperscript{71} Richard T. Legates and Chester Hartman, “Gentrification-Caused Displacement,” 50.
\textsuperscript{72} Freeman, “Displacement or Succession?,” 483.
neighborhoods. Recent data analyzing residential distribution reveals that the African-American population has shifted away from Albina, toward Gresham and outer Southeast Portland.

Another point of contention is that some scholars argue that residing in a gentrifying neighborhood is more beneficial for low-income people than living in non-gentrifying neighborhoods. Research economist Daniel Hartley conducted a nation-wide study that revealed residents in gentrifying neighborhoods experienced an increase in their credit scores by eight points compared to those living in non-gentrifying neighborhoods. However, while this study reveals a positive correlation, the data spans 55 cities with varying demographics and rates of gentrification, making it difficult to apply this data to any one city in particular. Additionally an increase of eight points seems relatively low as it takes over 50 points to qualify a credit score into an improved score category. While gentrification brings neighborhood improvements and an increase in public amenities, many long-term residents feel stuck wondering why it took until the neighborhoods racially transitioned to see improvements. The former director of the Northeast Coalition of Neighborhoods remarked about long-term residents’ responses to new neighborhood funding and resources, reporting, “The question we’re hearing now is ‘why now?’ and ‘where were you then?’”

An issue remains with the matter of displacement and the fact that those who are displaced as a result of gentrification do not benefit from the improvements. Additionally, scholars usually only consider quantitative measurements to form arguments as opposed to the

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quality of life for long-term residents who experience the loss of community. Charles Ford, resident of the Boise neighborhood in Albina since 1951 remarked that his experience due to the change in his neighborhood “has been most disappointing, most uncomfortable. It’s like the revitalization of racism.”

Gentrification studies overlook the opinions of people affected by changes, especially relating to religious and church life and community. In Portland, African-Americans are leaving gentrifying neighborhoods at rates that suggest that displacement is occurring as a result. In a report on local gentrification, The City of Portland’s Bureau of Planning and Sustainability argues, “the harm of gentrification is tangible and measurable. This includes loss of access to desirable locations; displacement of individuals and businesses to less desirable locations… [and] the loss of the ability for current residents to enjoy the benefits of revitalization.” This assertion reveals that the City of Portland, after research and analysis, believes that displacement is a harmful phenomenon occurring in Portland as a result of gentrification. Displacement caused by gentrification has been occurring in Portland since the 1990s and has effectively separated people from their communities and churches.

Additionally, construction of housing projects has directly affected the African-American church community. Pastor Ed Williams of Mt. Olivet Baptist Church notes that the Hope VI project that cleared Columbia Villa to create a mixed-housing neighborhood in North Portland affected the neighborhood around the church. Pastor Williams asserts, “the mixture of people who were here before the project compared to the people here after is quite different… There are more Caucasians in the neighborhood than there were before.”

The demolition of affordable housing to construct housing of varying levels led to the displacement of the initial residents who

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80 Gibson, “Bleeding Albina,” 19.
were priced out of their former neighborhood.83 While the two trends are unrelated in Pastor Williams’ opinion, he notes, “there has been a shift in the complexion of the makeup of the congregation. We now have more Caucasians coming.”84 Reinvestment has both directly and indirectly affected neighborhoods and African-American church communities.

Involvement in the African-American church fosters a significant impact on community life and political resources. Scholars of African-American studies argue that for the African-American community “church attendance has played a significant role in facilitating political mobilization and participation. Blacks who consistently attend church belong to a larger number of politically relevant organizations, harbor more positive political and racial attitudes, and vote

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83 Ibid.
84 Ibid.
at higher levels.”\textsuperscript{85} The church consistently remains important to the African-American community, retaining congregants and participants, whereas mainline Protestant white churches have experienced declines in attendance.\textsuperscript{86} Studies reveal that the African-American church continues to benefit communities and serve as a resource for socioeconomic and political benefit. Barnes’ findings support that prayer in African-American church, gospel music, and “sermonic references to Black Liberation Theology/Womanist issues,” positively influence and encourage community action.\textsuperscript{87} While the African-American church helps to bind the community, displacement and poverty interfere with the ability to access churches as a resource. Displaced individuals encounter obstacles that prevent them from obtaining their church’s benefits. Yvette Alex-Assensoh and A.B. Assensoh’s study reveals, “neighborhood poverty … and perceived social isolation—undermine church attendance and the associated political benefits of psychological engagement, organizational membership, and voting participation.”\textsuperscript{88}

Displacement has interfered with the African-American community’s ability to attend church and has led to feelings of isolation. For many displaced residents the African-American church is the last place they are able to experience their community. Mary Grace, an elderly resident who relocated to Beaverton years ago explained her feelings about her living situation, remarking, “People won’t visit me ‘cuz I’m too far out. I don’t know many people anymore. So I go back for church, because everyone knows your name.”\textsuperscript{89} The church remains the cornerstone of the African-American community despite the splintering of congregants’ locations. Many


\textsuperscript{86} Gilkes, “Plenty Good Room: Adaptation in a Changing Black Church,” 106.

\textsuperscript{87} Barnes, “Black Church Culture and Community Action,” 981-984.

\textsuperscript{88} Yvette Alex-Assensoh and A.B. Assensoh, “Inner-City Contexts, Church Attendance, and African-American Political Participation,” 896.

displaced African-Americans cling to the church community that coincided with their previous neighborhoods, going to great lengths to commute. Melba Annoh, a native of Portland who eventually moved to Vancouver, commuted to church in Portland because “church keeps me tied to the community and keeps my spirits up… If it weren’t for church, I’d just be alone.”

However, displaced residents experience difficulties commuting regularly when living so far away. Reverend Fred Woods of Calvary Christian Church, recalled, “[I’ve] had individuals saying: ‘I didn’t show up Pastor, I just didn’t have the gas to make the trip.’” Reverend Woods also noted that social activism, a focus of Calvary Christian Church, was tougher to achieve when so much distance separates congregants. While African-American churches remain important, many displaced individuals experience greater difficulty interacting with their church community.

Reverend Arthur Carter of Bethel A.M.E. Church described the changes in the neighborhood surrounding the church as “devastating” to the congregants. Many of his church’s congregants no longer reside in the immediate neighborhood of the church. Instead displaced individuals end up in low-income affordable housing of “inferior quality” according to Reverend Dr. W. G. Hardy of Highland Christian Center. Displaced individuals moved to distant neighborhoods with high crime and poverty, such as outer East Portland, which experienced a population increase of 166 percent among African-Americans between the 2000 and 2010 census.

Rita Ishmael, a woman who once lived where Memorial Coliseum now stands, commented on her move to outer East Portland where she currently resides, “I moved thinking I was coming to a better world… But I came to the same thing and worse.” Many

90 Ibid.
93 Reverend Dr. W. G. Hardy, Jr., Interview by author, Portland, March 5, 2014.
displaced African-Americans remain displeased with new residences, the feelings of isolation from community, and the difficulties of commuting to church.

To combat the hardships caused by displacement, some African-American churches have established bus services to pick up congregants in distant neighborhoods. Depending on the congregation, church-operated shuttles take hours navigating through various suburbs and neighborhoods beyond city limits to pick up church attendants for Sunday service. Johnny Bradford of Emmanuel Church of God in Christ drives vans to retrieve church members as part of maintaining his church’s community. He notes that many congregants currently live further east than in previous decades due to displacement, declaring, “[it] used to be that nobody lived past 42nd… Now everybody stays out here because rent is cheap. But we’ll get God’s children wherever they’re at.”96 Local African-American churches created bus services as a direct response to displacement, proving that the African-American church actively provides resources for its communities. However, churches note an increase in demand for help due to adverse circumstances caused by displacement and worsened by additional economic hardships. Youth minister Cecil Prescod of Ainsworth United Church of Christ, states, “Responding and helping families within the church is something we have always done. Now it’s more difficult in that we see an increased demand.”97 African-American churches remain constant in that they advocate social activism and support their communities with beneficial resources, including amenities to specifically aid displaced congregants.

In 2006, Reverend Hardy moved his congregation, Highland Christian Center, from Albina five miles east to outer East Portland. Highland Christian Center experienced a rapid growth in attendance in the 1990s and moved partially for a bigger location, but also because a

96 Ibid.
majority of the congregation had been displaced, many of whom relocated to outer East Portland. 98 Highland Christian Center’s move exemplifies how the African-American church serves and benefits its community, in that a large portion of congregants lived in outer East Portland so the church followed where attendants resided. This also appears to be a trend among a few other African-American churches originally located in Albina, which established satellite churches in places where displaced congregants live. This includes Mt. Olivet Baptist Church, which now has a second church location in Aloha, Oregon to the west of Portland. 99 Multiple churches have opened secondary community and worship centers outside of Portland to benefit displaced community members and serve an increasing demand in places outside of Albina. Reverend Hardy declared, “It used to be you could walk to church, and with the economy the way it is, you have very few discretionary dollars… so people are going to want to worship close to home, so I can only imagine churches will probably follow the herd.”100 African-American churches have been moving beyond historically African-American neighborhoods due to displacement and a subsequent demand coming from growing populations outside of Albina. Not only have some African-American churches in Portland begun relocating or expanding locations, but some churches have also become more integrated. As neighborhoods gentrify and transition into more racially integrated communities, a few churches have experienced demographic shifts among congregants. Although in most cases, in-moving whites did not attend or join the African-American church community, some churches have changed the way they present themselves. Reverend Hardy explained that in recent years “diversity increased” for Highland Christian Center and other traditionally African-American churches. 101

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98 Reverend Dr. W. G. Hardy, Jr., Interview by author, Portland, March 5, 2014.
100 Reverend Dr. W. G. Hardy, Jr., Interview by author, Portland, March 5, 2014.
101 Ibid.
Some African-American churches have more recently presented themselves as multicultural rather than historically African-American. This includes Ainsworth United Church of Christ in Northeast Portland, which welcomes people as a “multi-cultural, multi-racial, [and] open & affirming” church. Additionally, Emmanuel Temple Church, which remains in a North Portland neighborhood that has undergone racial transition for the past few decades, presents itself as “a church that moves beyond the boundaries of culture and status.” African-American churches have displayed welcoming and open communities to newcomers in Albina’s neighborhoods, despite the fact that it is often times not returned. Reverend Dr. Haynes states further that “churches interested in growth and developing outreach have a major goal of engaging broader demographics including whites and secular or anti-institutional [people].” Bishop Pollard of Emmanuel Church of God in Christ United proclaimed about his congregation, “I don’t look to see if it’s dominant black or white—those are things that have blinded us… We’re a community of a lot of different people with a lot of different beliefs, and my job is to affect my community for the Kingdom of God.” African-American churches have maintained a consistent role as a pillar of the African-American community, but have also addressed demographic shifts in neighborhoods in ways that benefit the community regardless of race—with open arms.

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104 Reverend Dr. LeRoy Haynes, Jr., Interview by author, Portland, March 20, 2014.
Conclusion

The African-American church has served as foundational to the African-American community in Portland through the formation of segregated neighborhoods, urban renewal’s splintering of the community, and through today when gentrification has displaced African-Americans out of their traditional neighborhoods. The African-American church constantly responded to the needs of the African-American community, functioning as an essential advocate for civil rights. The neighborhood around Gethsemane Church of God in Christ lacks demand to keep that particular church open. However, the owner has refused to sell the church to developers in hope of keeping it as a community center, revealing the ceaseless importance of the church to serve the community. The demand for a resource center for the community in the form of an African-American church may not exist in the same way that it used to in that particular neighborhood. Instead, the need for the resources and benefits that a church community provides is growing in neighborhoods outside of Albina where displaced people have moved.

The African-American church has stood at the front of the struggle for civil rights for decades in Portland. The church continues to fight for the rights of the African-American community today, through responses to contemporary issues that surround displacement. The African-American church thrives in order to serve the community. Churches blossom in neighborhoods and communities where African-American populations are growing through the relocation of churches or the opening of satellite community centers. Additionally, churches remaining in Albina reach out to members who live in distant places, through support networks such as bus systems, to maintain a sense of community. Churches in Albina recognize the

importance of serving all residents in the neighborhood, welcoming people from all backgrounds to join the church community. While demand in certain neighborhoods diminishes, there are multiple other communities that need the benefits that African-American churches provide. The African-American church is constantly active in responding to contemporary civil rights struggles and functions to help communities in need, establishing the church as a faithful cornerstone to the community throughout generations.
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