

MARK E. STRONG

WHO MOVED MY NEIGHBORHOOD

FOREWORD BY
HAROLD CALVIN RAY

?

**LEADING
CONGREGATIONS
THROUGH
GENTRIFICATION
AND ECONOMIC
CHANGE**



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Who Moved My Neighborhood?* by Mark E. Strong.
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Downers Grove, IL. www.ivpress.com.

CHAPTER 1

WHO MOVED MY NEIGHBORHOOD?

I'll admit my bias up front: I think Life Change Church is an awesome local church. We are a racially diverse church with wonderful people who love one another and are seeking to initiate what I call a “divine merger” between the work of the church and the work of Christ in our city for Jesus. My wife, Marla, and I have been serving as the lead pastors of Life Change Church since 1988, and over the years we, along with our congregation, have experienced a myriad of joys, pains, and sorrows. However, we've never experienced anything that has impacted our church quite as much as figuring out how to navigate our church in a radically different neighborhood. For everyone who is a part of Life Change, the struggle is long, painful at times, and exasperating. And, if I'm being honest, sometimes we feel hopeless.

Since the early 1960s our church has been located in the heart of North and Northeast Portland, Oregon—in the neighborhood formerly known as “the



Hood.” For years this neighborhood had been home to the majority of African Americans living in Oregon. In the Hood, our church’s first building was a small A-frame structure tucked away in a hidden cul-de-sac on Ivy Street. It was a simple rustic structure where many precious “God moments” were woven into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. In fact, it was in this sacred space that I personally came to faith in Christ. In 1996, we purchased an old shopping complex and moved our church to its current home. During those years the only moving our church had to deal with was geographical—and it was just a four-block journey!

A few years back, giving directions to our church was a cinch. All we had to say was, “It’s the big building between Williams Avenue and Vancouver, one block south of Fremont Street. You can’t miss it!” But nowadays directions require a bit more explanation, or else people will drive past the church. It’s amazing to think at one time our building was the largest structure on our block—you couldn’t miss it. But now, our building is dwarfed by several new developments.

Our church is not the only entity hidden by the changes that have occurred in our neighborhood. Over the last fifteen years, many other beloved fixtures have not just been hidden but have been gone forever. This is a reality that is hard to come to terms with. While all neighborhoods shift over time, there are some scenarios that accelerate these shifts—sometimes at a pace so rapid that we don’t even see the change coming.

MISSING PERSONS

I was born at Emmanuel Hospital, only several blocks from our church. Until age four or five, my family, which at the time consisted of my father, my mother, and me, lived less than a half a mile from the church I currently pastor and the hospital where I was born. My grandparents on both my mother’s and father’s

sides lived only a short walking distance away from us as well. All my aunts, uncles, and cousins were close too. When my father landed a different job, we moved to Bellevue, Washington, where we lived for about twelve years. However, every holiday vacation, every summer, and in every other window of opportunity, we traveled to Portland. It was our home away from home.

My sophomore year in high school, our family moved back to Northeast Portland for good. Even though we had visited frequently, moving back was a culture shock for me. Bellevue had been predominately White—our family was pretty much the only Black family in the neighborhood. My brother and I and two or three others were the only Black kids in the elementary school, in the junior high school, on the sports teams, and so on. In fact, we were the only Black family in the church we attended. Northeast Portland was drastically different.

In our new home, African American people were our next-door neighbors. Hundreds of Black kids went to the school we attended. On our sports teams, at least three quarters of our teammates were Black and Brown kids. And we also competed against teams with similar demographics. If we walked to the corner store to buy a bottle of pop, the owner was Black, and the people standing in front of and behind us in line were too. Many Black businesses were sprinkled throughout the neighborhood: cleaners, dentists' and doctors' offices, stores, insurance and tax representatives, record shops, car dealerships, restaurants, beauty salons, newspapers, nonprofit agencies, and art studios, just to name a few.

On a sunny day, our community parks were filled with throngs of Black residents. Occasionally there were special events held there. So many people from the neighborhood would attend, you couldn't find a place to park—it was a fantastic time! Not only that, but African American churches thrived. Blacks filled the

pews in churches of all denominations and stripes. Almost every church had a full choir, and the community had an innate love and respect for God's house.

The most beautiful feature of our neighborhood during that time was a special relational connectivity—everybody knew everybody. Or, if they didn't know you, they knew a relative or someone else who did know you. This connectivity made it virtually impossible to drive down any street in our neighborhood and not know at least two or three families living on the block. Though our neighborhood had its issues, we were connected, and mutual love and respect were generally present. This camaraderie gave us all a strong sense of identity and belonging. We were proud to live in the North and Northeast Portland neighborhood.

Sorrowfully, those days are a memory. Only a faint sweet aroma lingers. African American businesses are now few and far between in the neighborhood. Many of our community-wide events have dismal African American presence. And we can now drive street after street without knowing a single soul who lives on any block. Gone, displaced, and moved are the majority of the African American people who once made up our beloved community.

In her article on dwindling diversity, Nikole Hannah-Jones writes, "Portland, already the whitest major city in the country, has become whiter at its core even as surrounding areas have grown more diverse." She goes on to say,

The city core didn't become whiter simply because lots of white residents moved in, the data show. Nearly ten thousand people of color, mostly African Americans, also moved out. And those who left didn't move to nicer areas. Pushed out by gentrification, most settled on the city's eastern edges, according to the census data, where the sidewalks, grocery stores and parks grow sparse, and access to public transit is limited.¹

Those ten thousand who have been pushed out by gentrification are people who once lived in our church's neighborhood. Statistically, our neighborhood, North and Northeast Portland, is where the largest population of Blacks historically have lived in Oregon, although in comparison to many other major cities, the overall Black population is small. But we are there no more.

Here's a historical snapshot of the peak and current decline of the African American population of my neighborhood. This data is from a study by the Portland Housing Bureau, utilizing 2010 US Census information.

- 1980 total population of Blacks in North/Northeast Portland was 22,387, equaling 28 percent.
- 1990 total population of Blacks in North/Northeast Portland was 23,724, equaling 31 percent.
- 2000 total population of Blacks in North/Northeast Portland was 19,922, equaling 25 percent.
- 2010 total population of Blacks in North/Northeast Portland was 12,274, equaling 15 percent.

In my estimation, our population numbers have declined even more since 2010. It will be interesting to see what the next wave of data shows. Now our church is the only building left on our block from yesterday—and the only place where longtime residents of yesterday's neighborhood gather.

On a painfully comical note, recently I came across a news clip that listed the ten "hippest" cities to live in the United States. It caught my curiosity, so I cruised through the list. To my amazement, the hippest city was Portland, Oregon. That by itself, however, was not the kicker. The kicker was that the picture the article used to show the hotspot in Portland was taken right across the street from our church—I could see it out of my office window. I thought to myself, "Wow, what was once the Hood is now a national Hipsterville!"

MOVED PRICES

Living in “Hipsterville” is expensive, and the movement in the cost of living is one reason why many long-term members of our community have been pushed out. Most people simply cannot afford to live in their old neighborhood anymore. Rents and mortgages cost too much, and there are numerous factors that figure into this unjust equation. To assume the price hikes are just the result of the progression of time is naive. Historical practices such as red-lining, city policies and planning, employment disadvantages, lack of quality educational opportunities, and racism are all, to some degree, culprits. All these factors contribute to why people with dollars are moving in and people without dollars are moving out.

In 1996, our church paid \$365,000 for our current building. Today that same property is worth multiple millions of dollars. Currently, there is a fourteen-unit luxury environmental living complex being built a half block from our church called the Carbon 12. The price range for the units is \$730,000 to \$1.55 million. Directly opposite of our church parking lot and across the street are complexes that cost tens of millions of dollars to build—so you can imagine how high the rent is. If someone’s income is far below the median level, it’s impossible to live in an apartment where rent is between \$1,500 and \$2,800 a month, or to buy a house where the average price is \$500,000. Truly, someone has moved our church’s neighborhood.

A BIGGER ISSUE

Though our church is racially diverse, our dilemma centers around the gentrification of an African American neighborhood. The issue of moved neighborhoods is not exclusively a Black neighborhood problem, though! I’ve been around the block enough times to know that in many instances, when race is mentioned, people either tune in or tune out. Please resist the temptation to disengage.

Churches in other diverse contexts are experiencing moving neighborhoods. And from a biblical standpoint we understand Jesus is equally concerned about each neighborhood! All we have to do is follow the footsteps of Jesus into the various cities he ministered in to see his love and concern for their communities. For example, he had to go through a racially divided Samaria to pour out his love on the city of Sychar (Jn 4). And in an expression of deep, compassionate motherly love, he wept over Jerusalem saying that he longed to gather them as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings (Mt 23:37). Jesus' heart hasn't changed: your neighborhood still has an affectionate place in his heart!

And Jesus desires for his church to faithfully fulfill the call he has entrusted to them—even in a changing environment.

In 2017, *USA Today* did a piece titled, “Houses of Worship Do Some Soul-Searching as Their Neighborhoods Change.”² The article discusses how churches all over the nation are facing the challenging of surviving in rapidly changing or changed neighborhoods. It highlights the fact that this phenomenon is not exclusive to African American neighborhoods but applies to others as well. Churches everywhere are getting caught in the quagmire of neighborhood transition. Whether the cause is gentrification, congregational aging, redevelopment projects, or a cultural swing, churches are left unable to grab the rope. The truth of the matter is, if your church is going to navigate your new neighborhood, it will have to walk through a healing process and do some hard work on multiple levels.

Has your church's neighborhood moved? Is your church now part of a new or a different neighborhood? Is your neighborhood experiencing a metamorphosis? If your answer to these questions is yes, the next chapter will help you better understand the impact of what has happened to you and your church. You will discover you have suffered something you may not have expected.

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