

Churches need to be more aware of their physical locations

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by [Randy Bright](#)

This year I intend to argue the point that churches need to become more aware of their surroundings in terms of the places where their physical facilities exist now and where they want them to be in the future.

This is because there is great competition and debate behind two fundamentally opposed ideas: one is that the population, especially millennials (those born after 1983), are moving back to urban areas, and the other is that they are moving to the suburbs.

Who is actually correct is important because urban planners have already made up their minds that young people, that demographic of 20-somethings who are the creative class with technological skills, will define our future by moving to and staying in the urban cores of our cities.

I routinely read opposing articles about this topic, and it has been my observation that those who believe that millennials are choosing urban areas are a bit more cynical and agenda-driven than their counterparts.

For example, blogger Shane Phillips writes, “As cities race to attract urban Millennials and empty-nesters – flooding the market with small apartments, approving dozens of new restaurants and bars in every neighborhood, and building streetcars, bike lanes, and pedestrian plazas – families are being pushed out or left behind. Cities are rapidly changing and, these days, they’re just not any good for raising kids...Right? Famed city-haters like Joel Kotkin would certainly like you to believe this is the case...”

He further explains his belief that families are not really leaving cities, they are just having fewer children: “...families generally aren’t leaving cities, they’re just getting smaller”, he wrote, “many cities continue to attract more families as they grow, but those families are trending toward fewer children on average – low-car leads to low-kid, it seems.” (Phillips describes himself as a Masters student at the University of Southern California and an advocate for cities where cars are optional, housing is affordable, and residents are safe and healthy.)

On the other hand, Kotkin writes in an article entitled *The Geography of Aging: Why Millennials Are Headed to the Suburbs* “People are most likely to move to the core cities in their early 20’s, but this migration peters out as people enter the end of that often tumultuous decade. By their 30s, they move increasingly to the suburbs, as well as outside the major metropolitan areas...” He also cites a study that shows that “married millennials found their desire to own a home was actually stronger than in previous generations” and that “millennials prefer suburbs long-term as “their ideal place to live” by a margin of 2 to 1 over cities”. (Kotkin is the executive editor of NewGeography.com and Distinguished Presidential Fellow in Urban Futures at Chapman University.)

When I found myself becoming a student of urban planning, one thing that became immediately obvious to me was that there are those who plan with an agenda, and those who plan for realities.

Several years ago urban planner John Fregonese came to Tulsa to conduct our master plan, PlaniTulsa, and he came to our local AIA (American Institute of Architects) chapter to explain his philosophy. In his presentation, he claimed that Tulsa needed to plan for the new reality that cities were becoming places for single people and less for families with children. Later, as I recall, the surveys his team conducted were conclusive that Tulsa was a family city, even in its urban core, yet the final version of PlaniTulsa still focuses on attracting young people downtown.

Kotkin writes about this topic in an article entitled *The Childless City*, “Families abandoned cities for the suburbs, driven away by policies that failed to keep streets safe, allowed decent schools to decline, and made living spaces unaffordable” and “Schools, churches, and neighborhood associations no longer form the city’s foundation. Instead, the city revolves around recreation, arts, culture, and restaurants – a system built for the newly liberated individual.”

So why is this debate important? And who is correct? What difference does it make for churches to understand this debate?

The reality is that cities that inadvertently or purposely plan for childlessness may, in fact, get what they wish for, at least for a while. How a church exists in an urban core or the suburbs, how it deals with existing and changing demographics, or how a church can plant a new congregation within either setting may be entirely dependent upon how well those who do so understand the dynamics involved. It is not as simple as choosing a side.

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