

The impact of churches on urban sprawl sparks debate

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=5484>

In the September 29 edition of the Tulsa Beacon I referred to an article entitled “Churches kickstart suburban sprawl, study shows,” in which the author (Stuart Laidlaw) of the article opened by saying, “Fast-growing churches, frustrated with the slow pace of municipal planning, often find themselves pushed into setting up shop in rural areas on the edge of town, where they end up contributing to suburban sprawl, a Ryerson University study has found.”

Laidlaw then quoted a line from the study which said, “They rapidly gobble up prime agricultural land, adding to the sprawl and causing burden on the city’s infrastructure.”

The study entitled “New Ethnic Places of Worship and Planning Challenges” was written by Professor Sandeep Kumar Agrawal of Ryerson University, who was kind enough to send me a copy of the complete study.

After reading the study, it was clear that it did not refer to mainstream churches in the context of the title of Laidlaw’s article or its opening remark.

The clue that the study did not refer to churches in general is the word “Ethnic” in the title of Professor Agrawal’s study.

The study focused on four places of worship, all in the Toronto, Canada, region. They included the Hindu Sabha Temple in Brampton, the Ahmadiyya Bai-tul-Muslim Mosque in Vaughan, the Nanaksar Satsang Sabha (a gurdwara of the Nanaksar sect of Sikhism), and the Saint Clair of Assisi Catholic Church (an Italian church) in the Woodridge area of Vaughan.

Professor Agrawal gave a short synopsis of each example, pointing out the problems that occurred between the examples and city planners, and discussing the impact that each had on their neighborhoods.

Except for the Catholic example, the places of worship had begun small, but had grown very large over time. In all cases, the presence of new and larger worship facilities had attracted people of their respective ethnicity to build or relocate in the areas immediately surrounding the facilities.

In the case of the Hindu Sabha Temple in Brampton, Agrawal said that “built within the last two to three years, somewhat isolated subdivisions that house mainly South Asians now surround the temple.”

In the case of the Ahmadiyya Bai-tul-Muslim Mosque in Vaughan he wrote, “a subdivision comprising of more than 200 single family detached homes, known as Peace Village, now flanks the north side of the mosque.”

Regarding the Catholic church he wrote, “a number of small to medium size subdivisions of several thousand homes now surround the church,” and about the Sikh facilities, “since the construction of the gurdwara, the demographics of the surrounding neighborhoods have shifted. Many white residents have moved out and have been replaced by Sikhs, many of whom are congregants of the gurdwara.”

The conclusion that these places of worship, all apparently in presumably agricultural areas, had influenced the demographics of growth was indeed correct. All four examples, including the (Italian) Catholic Church, were examples of strong ethnic associations within the context of a place of worship. Three of the examples were not of mainstream religions found in the United States, and the fourth was apparently unique among Catholic churches. Yet Laidlaw’s article will leave the reader believing that all churches must be expected to produce the same effects as Agrawal’s examples, perhaps because he attended a conference where the professor spoke about churches and municipal planning.

Professor Agrawal does draw some conclusions in his analysis at the end of his study that could be interpreted to include all churches, except for two things. First, he begins the Analysis Section by writing, “considering problems from these four case studies, new ethnic (emphasis mine) places of worship face these planning issues:” and second, he begins his Conclusions Section (with policy recommendations) by referring to “ethnic places of worship.” In the context of his study, he was clearly writing about places of worship with strong ethnic characteristics.

When was the last time you noticed that after a Baptist church was built in a rural or suburban area that all the new homes built around it were inhabited by its Baptist congregants? How about a Methodist church? Catholic or Lutheran? It simply doesn’t happen that way in the United States with mainstream churches. Churches move to locations where land is available or to areas where they know growth will occur with or without them.

To conclude that all churches somehow cause sprawl because of these four examples is simply incorrect and could prejudice the public against the construction of churches.

©2011 Randy W. Bright

Randy W. Bright, AIA, NCARB, is an architect who specializes in church and church-related projects. You may contact him at 918-582-3972, rwbrightchurcharch@sbcglobal.net or www.churcharchitect.net.

This entry was posted on Thursday, October 13th, 2011 and is filed under [Columns](#).