BEYOND ENGAGING AND RESISTING: RECLAIMING THE CITY’S MORAL VISION AND REIMAGINING THE CHURCH’S POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the story of Englewood Christian Church (ECC) to provide a counternarrative for the ways in which Christians engage in politics. Challenging the false choice of engagement versus resistance, it first proposes that within the Christian tradition, the city is a moral good, functioning as biblical image, theological guide, and support for a common good. It also argues that the move out of cities – or suburbanization – is a moral story, both in its results and in the desires that produced it. The claim is then explored that the church is and should be a politics itself – indeed, the primary politics for Christians. Finally, it narrates the story of ECC and its unique practice of congregational conversation, its theological self-understanding as the Body of Christ, and its convictions about a shared life, examining the ways it meets the definition of a politics proposed above. This thesis concludes by articulating what meaning the singular example of ECC should have for Christians and for churches in other places.
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INTRODUCTION

When you find an issue you care deeply about, the desire to write meaningfully on the subject can be weighed down by a burden to write about it in such a way that perfectly illuminates the problems and challenges, correlates all causes, and identifies clear and comprehensive solutions. Anything less feels like a failure – an incomplete gift to one’s readers and an abandonment of those who continue to face the injustices that have inspired the very work that you do. Regrettably, this is how this project began.

Having experienced the good life that cities are able to offer their residents, and yet also having observed the disarray of most modern cities and seen the injustices of urban poverty in their midst, I wanted to understand the disparity. As I watched the area around my own hometown swell and sprawl at an insatiable pace as development proceeded further and further into suburban monotony, I sought a way to understand the plight of the city and the desire of the suburban ideal in terms of God’s good intentions for humanity and the way we live together. And more than anything, I wanted to know what to do about it.

This paper began with the rather lofty goal of telling the whole history of urban poverty, outlining the challenges it presents to Christians, naming their participation in it, and describing how the church must go about addressing it. It would be difficult to accomplish all this in one lifetime of work, let alone in one thesis; however, the urgency of the injustices I had encountered seemed to demand nothing less. Fortunately, I have been chastened in this search for comprehensive perfection by the words of Stanley
Hauerwas, who declares that “perfection kills community.” Rather, the point of writing is “to write in a manner that invites others to care about what I care about because they sense there is so much to do given the incompleteness of what I have done.” Therefore, this is exactly what this thesis aims to do. It is an invitation to consider why Christians ought to care about cities and what role the church ought to have in light of that commitment. It is an invitation to reconsider in what ways these are “political” problems and what it might mean for Christians to pursue “political” solutions.

This work cannot hope to address a comprehensive review of all the complex factors that have shaped the physical, lived environment of cities and the drive to the suburbs, nor can it offer a fulfilling solution for the failures and devastations of all American cities and their citizens. However, it can begin to tell this story in a way that makes it intelligible to Christians, as well as to illuminate the theological challenges that the disintegration of cities presents to the church, to understand the church as the locus for considering these challenges, and to begin to tell stories of places where thoughtful Christians are attempting to do this, in the hopes that these narratives can create a space in which the church can re-imagine its thinking about politics and perhaps even begin to imagine alternatives.

**Thesis Order**

In pursuit of these goals, this introduction will introduce and clarify concepts that will repeatedly surface throughout the work. First, it will briefly introduce Englewood Christian Church and its own experience in Indianapolis, Indiana. Though their story

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will be explored primarily in chapter four, it will take into account arguments made throughout all the preceding chapters; therefore, it will be beneficial to begin to see how their story may function in relation to the claims of this thesis. And secondly, it will also introduce the concepts of “engagement” and “resistance” as ways of speaking about contemporary Christian approaches to politics.

Chapter one of this thesis will seek to recover the good of the city within the Christian tradition. It will argue for its importance as a fruitful biblical image of Christians’ welfare on earth as well as their eschatological hope; as a theological guide for the practice of the Christian life; and as a constructive way of supporting and maintaining a common good. It will bring together resources from Christian scripture, Christian moral theology, and Catholic social teaching to illuminate the importance of the city as it has played and continues to play a role in God’s salvation economy.

Chapter two will take up the story of the post-war American city, especially the move out of cities and the devastation left behind. It will highlight the moral dimensions of the story of suburbanization, its results, and the disordered desires that produced it. The central claim of this chapter is that not only are the results of suburbanization a matter of concern to Christians, but the story itself is as well. The way one narrates this story is not merely a reporting of reality, but an interpretation of it. The church, I will argue, must serve as that interpretive body for Christians and tell the moral story of the city.

Chapter three follows from this claim and will further explore this role for the church. It will argue that the correct understanding of the church’s role is as a politics

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My intent is not to fully explicate a theology of the city: this task alone would more than consume the time and space constraints of a project of this size. Further, it would leave no room for the particular story of local congregation working out these questions in its own city.
itself – ordering and interpreting the “reality” of the world through its own story. This will require a reimagining of the term “politics,” the local as a political context, and what it might mean for the church to be the primary political reality for Christians within that context. It will return to the ideas of “engagement” and “resistance,” but in so doing, hopes to offer this as a “third way” – an approach to politics that moves beyond these categories. The work of Stanley Hauerwas, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and William Cavanaugh will help to guide this investigation, as well as to shape its proposals.

Finally, these claims about politics and the church will be explored through examining how they may be embodied by a particular congregation in a particular place. Chapter four will return to the story of Englewood Christian Church and will examine their practice of Sunday night discussions, their theological self-understanding as the Body of Christ, and their convictions about a shared life within the church. Englewood’s story will serve to illustrate an attempt to embody the politics described in chapter three, but will also illuminate the ways in which the church’s politics interacts, participates, and cooperates with other politics within the context of the city.

This paper will conclude by offering some clarifying remarks as to what meaning the singular example of Englewood Christian Church can or should have for Christians and for churches in other places. It will propose questions that remain unanswered and will suggest whither the conversation proceeds from here.

Methodology

This thesis draws upon resources from both the sociological and political science fields, especially in the history of suburbanization in chapter two and the metamorphosis
of the local identity in chapter three. As I am neither a sociologist nor a political
scientist, I have relied upon faculty and scholars in these fields to point me to the best,
most helpful resources (though some, such as Jacobs’ *The Death and Life of Great
American Cities* are classic texts and therefore already accepted resources). I draw on the
analyses and histories contained in these sources in order to illustrate population trends,
policy directions, or the evolution of political ideas. First, however, in accordance with
this thesis’ use of Hauerwas’ argument regarding “socially and historically constituted
reality” (rather than “self-evident and given” reality), I want to disabuse the reader of any
notion that these resources give the factual story, over which I may put my theological
gloss.³ My task is not merely to infuse these “facts” with theological “values.” The story
– or stories – we tell about the world are already theological tasks. Second, I must assure
the reader of the academic humility with which I undertake this disciplinary border
crossing. Nonetheless, these aspects are part of this story and I make recourse again to
Hauerwas and his reminder that the urgency of the challenge before the church makes us
bold to risk this kind of intrusion.⁴ Technical and statistical analysis of data are important
components, and to the extent that they help in ordering the world, they are most useful
and welcome; however, the interpretation of these data is not only for experts. To place
these things within a comprehensive narrative and to interpret them in light of the
church’s story is an essential theological task for the church, and one to which I hope I
am contributing in some small way.

³ Arne Rasmusson, *The Church as Polis: From Political Theology to Theological Politics as
Exemplified by Jurgen Moltmann and Stanley Hauerwas* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame
Press, 1995), 212-213. Chapter two will return to this idea and will explicate it more fully.
This thesis is, in one sense, ecclesiological, and as such, it must deal with divisions in the church. Given my Baptist background, as well as the focus on a protestant congregation, some protestant, even Baptist presumptions will be at work, especially regarding the role of the local congregation. However, because the issue of suburbanization and urban poverty is not denominational, but shared, I intend these arguments to be significant for all Christians. As such, the treatment of Englewood Christian Church will not entail great attention to the particulars of its denominational structure or assets. Its story is meant to have meaning for other churches in other traditions, so that hopefully they may discover the political potential in their own particular tradition, with the particular gifts and talents gathered there, and in response to the particular history of their own lived environments.

Englewood Christian Church entered into this project when Dr. Kelly Johnson suggested its relevance. An examination of website resources, church documents, and writings revealed that their experience and the questions they continued to wrestle with very clearly fit the kinds of questions I was concerned with and that were arising through my reading and research. It quickly became clear that this church’s story belonged in the project.

In order to explore my emerging questions about Englewood more fully, I conducted email correspondence with their pastor, Mike Bowling, and arranged further interviews in person. I visited the church in May of 2008, where I interviewed Mike and Lisa Bowling on two separate occasions. I was able to take part in worship and a Sunday School class, share meals with the pastor’s family and other church members, and
facilitate a Sunday night discussion, leading its members through a time of reflection on their unique practice and its meaning.

The surprise for me, however, was that rather than using my theological methodology to illustrate and narrate Englewood’s story, their example actually began to shape my thinking on these questions. Their practice of congregational conversation, but also their understanding of what led them to that practice and how that practice is and must be accompanied by a shared life and shared work all forced me to rethink not only the organization of this thesis, but also its primary questions. They have inspired and opened up new questions for me about the nature of the relationship between the church and the city, especially what the city might need most from the church. The significance of this shift is not that this thesis turned out differently than expected: it is that the lived example of the church can open up theological possibilities – possibilities that cannot be anticipated or known apart from knowing (and taking part in) the life of the church itself.

I was, and continue to be, most grateful for this gift, but the question then became how to do justice to this material that I had been given. It was not my wish (nor would it be theirs) to turn them into a formula or model. I did not want to idealize who they are or what they do; however, I did see great value in the kind of community they are and the work that they do, and felt it had much to teach those of us who may be interested in the life of the church and its connection to the shalom of the city. And so I have chosen to position them as the final chapter of the thesis – as a window on to what it might mean to embrace the claims and hopes of earlier chapters, but also to illustrate the great difficulty that must accompany real people working through these questions in real places. I allot them their own, separate chapter because I feared the incongruity of continually
reinterpreting their story throughout the entire work and was concerned that the weight of its meaning might be likewise dispersed. I also chose to let the members of Englewood speak for themselves as much as possible, and to tell their own story, in the hope that this might produce a truer picture of their life together. This has produced a chapter that relies heavily on quotation, but I hope the reader will find these words as much of an asset for this work as I do.

*Englewood Christian Church*

The story of Englewood Christian Church (ECC) is an ongoing story of a congregation situated on the “near-east” side of center city Indianapolis, the twelfth largest city in the U.S. While their story is indeed unique, the changes in their urban environment closely follow the storyline of suburbanization in America. Indianapolis faces the same problems as many older, large America cities, including “a crumbling inner city infrastructure, disenfranchised neighborhoods, urban sprawl, crime, substance abuse, domestic violence, and health issues,” though it has experienced its fair share of successes and reform. ECC has also faced the fate of many downtown churches, watching their numbers and prestige soar with the growth of the city, only to fall as people left the urban areas of the city for the suburbs, revenues declined, and the physical environment and infrastructure fell into decay.

Their current pastor notes, “By the mid-seventies the urban landscape of Indianapolis was changing rapidly.” He continues, “The neighborhood around

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5 Because some lists include incorporated areas lying within county limits, some rankings place Indianapolis as twelfth and others thirteenth.

Englewood Christian Church, being close to the downtown area, was deteriorating visibly in the seventies and eighties, but the church leadership made a conscious decision to remain.” Many urban churches noticed the trend and relocated to more suburban locales, as did many of the parishioners. Before their turnaround, 80 percent of Englewood’s congregation lived outside the neighborhood. Englewood, however, having decided to stay, was now confronted by the challenges of that decision. The congregation previously marked by “power and prestige” was now struggling and looking for an identity. Changes in the city and in their neighborhood led directly to questions of identity: the particulars of the place shaped what was happening in the church in that place. As their pastor notes, “the church’s theological identity was not prepared for the challenges of the neighborhood’s rapid changes.”

However, if Englewood is an example of a church grappling with the urban decay described in this thesis, then it is also an example of the ‘political’ response it describes: a body of believers who have considered together what it means to indeed be a body. At the point of fewest members and greatest disunity, members of ECC decided that what

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8 See Elfriede Wedam, “The ‘Religious District’ of Elite Congregations: Reproducing Spatial Centrality and Redefining Mission,” Sociology of Religion 64, no. 1 (2003): 47-64. Churches in Indianapolis have followed sprawl patterns similar to those of the city’s residents. According to sociologist Elfriede Wedam, “Where once 49 churches stood in Indianapolis’ central “mile square,” that bounded the original platting of the new capitol city, about ten remain,” (Wedam, 50). The arrangement and composition of churches along Meridian Street provide an example. These placements and movement, she notes, followed the changing shape of the city of Indianapolis over the past 150 years. She explains, “The movement of the elite residents of Indianapolis into the northern party of the city, as the city itself grew spatially, created a continual re-clustering of elite congregations on and adjacent to Meridian Street as they attended to the changing needs and re-locations of their members,” (Wedam, 50). As the congregants went, the neighborhoods went, the churches went. Effects can be seen in membership: “Other spatial factors, such as suburbanization, help membership growth even more [than their location in a visible district]. Those at the farthest north end of the street are more likely to have strong and growing memberships,” (Wedam, 55).
9 Mike and Lisa Bowling, interview by author, 4 May 2008, Indianapolis, Ind., written notes.
was needed was a purposeful – and communal – way of considering who they were and what kind of church they were going to be. The church decided that they “need[ed] to talk” and what followed is the key to their theological self-understanding and their unique response to their neighborhood and their city.\textsuperscript{12} Their weekly Sunday night congregational conversations have been ongoing for 13 years\textsuperscript{13} and are at the heart of the church’s conviction that it is the Body of Christ in that place, their commitment to a shared life with one another, and of all the various manifestations of that life.

It is the claim of this paper that the shape of that shared life – including a commitment to living in the neighborhood, developing housing and employment opportunities, and attempting to discern and embody Christian economic practices – its theological underpinnings, and its practice of communal deliberation constitute an example of a politics as this thesis seeks to define that term. Why this is and how it was accomplished will be treated more fully in later chapters. However, what is crucial to grasp is that theirs is a church shaped politics: it is shaped and given form \textit{by} the church, \textit{as} the church, and also that it is shaped \textit{like} the church. That is, it is enfleshed as a body, within the church, rather than as individuals aiming at a political establishment somewhere “out there.”

However, their political life as the church also intersects and collaborates with many local governmental, social, and economic institutions in their neighborhood and in their city; therefore, it cannot be said that this alternative politics of theirs is truly one of ‘engagement’ or ‘resistance.’ It is an additional goal of this paper to show how this

\textsuperscript{12} James L. Aldrich, et.al., “‘We Need to Talk!’ Restoring the Practice of Congregational Conversation,” \textit{Leaven} 15, no. 1 (First Quarter 2007): 37-39.

\textsuperscript{13} Group interview with Sunday Night Discussion participants, interview by author, 5 May 2008, Indianapolis, Ind., written notes.
congregation, and the consideration of a local context in particular, provides a way to take what is best from these two views, but also to move past them into a new way of thinking about the politics of the church and the city.

*Engagement and Resistance*

Finally, since reference will be made throughout this work to the categories of political engagement and political resistance, it will be important to clarify these terms and to briefly probe the debate from both sides in order to understand the arguments and commitments of each. In doing so, it will become clearer what each position contributes to this discussion, but also what critiques they have for each other. The assets and limits of these two positions will be noted at times throughout the thesis. This section will only offer a description of the range of meanings for these two terms.

This paper cannot hope to tackle all the questions surrounding religion and politics, and all the models for and views on the interaction between the two. The views expressed in this work should not be mistaken as support for the “public church;” in fact, those who insist that the church belongs in the public sphere only reinforce a public/private sphere model, which this paper believes is a false bifurcation and merely serves to further advance the notion of the political as a distinct sphere or entity that may be engaged or not – a politics “out there.” This is precisely the idea this paper hopes to refute.

Neither does it keep company with those who view religion as a social good that can inform and contribute to the common good. In this model, religion and its institutions are merely useful, though benign, according to the utilitarian belief that
religion is good for developing moral citizens and therefore good for democracy. It may
be unnecessary, then, to say that this paper will also reject the view that religion is
dangerous for the common good, but it is important to note its underlying assumptions.
Those who hold this view may oppose religious groups as sectarian (for them, an
inherently pejorative term), or may anchor their opposition in the fear that religion, with
its insistence on absolutes, must always lead to violence.

Rather, this paper attempts to rethink politics in such a way that the models of
political engagement and political resistance are no longer the most helpful way of
describing the political choices and responses available to Christians. However, before
we can move past this distinction, it is important to grasp the ways in which these two
terms are used and understood.

Proponents of each model articulate how their actions are a faithful representation
of the mission of the church and the Christian life. The advocates of political
engagement affirm the value of public, political structures as redeemable and ultimately
ordered to God. These people tend to encourage “engagement” with these structures in
various forms, mostly with a transformational mission. They believe that Christians are
morally obligated to instigate and galvanize social reform, advocate on certain issues or
on behalf of certain groups, pursue legislative reform, and shape public policy.¹⁴

Some discuss this in terms of engaging or resisting the culture,¹⁵ but when the
more nebulous concept of ‘culture’ must be concretized, most usually fix the locus of
cultural power in the ‘state’ and aim its interactions accordingly: the political tends to

¹⁴ For a telling and explicit example, see United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Faithful
encompass the ‘social’ and the ‘cultural’ within its totalizing sphere.\(^\text{16}\) For many, the state is seen as the cause or source of the maladies; therefore, they also look to it as the mechanism for remedies of the same. Moreover, the ‘state’ tends to blend together all levels of government, be they federal, state, or local. This conflation and oversimplification is a further failure of this model to which this paper will return.\(^\text{17}\) For others, the underlying assumption is that if Christians profess that their beliefs about the teachings of Christ and the gospel message are true, then they must want the laws of the land – its structure and practices – to be in harmony with those ideas. And because believers assert that Christianity is true, then the logical conclusion for that belief is to ask how Christians should act and behave ‘politically,’ which amounts to seeking or influencing political power, advocating legislative change, organizing democratic action, or making claims about the responsibilities of citizenship.\(^\text{18}\)

However, this often results in seeing the church as a constituency or even a voting bloc – that is, a collection of individual, but like-minded, believers who harness their collective power to influence public policy or public opinion. This is quite different than the model proposed by this paper: the church as a politics itself.\(^\text{19}\)

So-called resisters, on the other hand, also focus their attention (that is, their critique) primarily on the political sphere and its systems, but their contentions do not

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\(^{16}\) This phenomenon will be treated at greater length in chapter two.

\(^{17}\) Having said this, the term “state” in this case and throughout the work will, unless otherwise noted, refer to the government at all levels, reflecting the trend that, regardless of what jurisdictional form it takes, the move to the ‘political’ will almost always refer to the mechanism of the government in its many forms.


\(^{19}\) For an example of engagement proponents speaking about the church’s political role as a constituency, rather than as a political being of its own, see Bryan Hehir’s description of the role of the church in Heyer’s *Prophetic and Public: the Social Witness of U.S. Catholicism*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 67-8.
address matters of degree (that they are flawed but can be made better, say). Rather, the
state’s values and premises are, prima facie, incompatible with Christian beliefs, as well
as ends. Kristen Heyer, in her book on the subject, regards the attitude of the resister (or
the prophetic, to use her terminology) as one marked by an “evangelical ethic,” with its
adherents representing a “prophetic sect type.”

Its proponents, however, do not see themselves as sectarian, but rather stress the
church’s role as witness, which will “serve as a contrasting model to the state.” This
witness is not rooted in withdrawal or inaction, but depends upon discipleship and
embracing Christian practices. Their fundamental departure from the engagement
model is their belief that the “violent and acquisitive character of the modern state”
requires not cooperation but resistance. The danger of cooperation, according to the
resister critique, is that “if the church participates in the agenda of the state or attempts to
provide an ethic for wider society, it will end up aligning itself with the interests of the
nation at the expense of fidelity to the gospel.”

Many resisters claim the church’s voice and message becomes too easily co-opted
or diluted by the state’s agenda as it is forced to conform to its categories and methods of
rational (that is, tradition-free) inquiry and, in doing so, loses its prophetic role. Others
reject engagement not only because it demands conforming to this so-called tradition-free

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20 Heyer, 59.
21 Heyer, 59.
22 Heyer, 70.
23 Heyer, 70.
24 Heyer, 59. Though this is not a direct quote of Baxter’s, it is Heyer’s attempt to articulate the
views of Catholic theologian Michael Baxter, who she uses to stand in for the “prophetic” over against Rev.
J. Bryan Hehir’s “public” in her work. For this discussion, he is able to articulate a theological position in
favor of resistance of the state, and is thus included here.
25 Even some proponents of engagement accept these terms, claiming that engaging in political or
policy discussions requires that “the religious tradition ought to explain, justify, and present their positions
in terms that others who do not share [that] faith may be persuaded by,” Rev. J. Bryan Hehir, as qtd. in
Heyer, 63. Hehir takes for his model John Courtney Murray, whose method Heyer describes as “respecting
secular disciplines on their own terms and…engaging the world in terms in can understand,” Heyer, 65.
methodology, but also because it imposes secular measurements of success, rather than, as figures like Michael Baxter suggest, gospel standards. This, they believe, silences “the Christ-centered radicalism of prophetic movements within the church.”\textsuperscript{26} In both cases, resisters’ objections do not focus primarily on the limits placed on participating in the public or political arena,\textsuperscript{27} but rather on the ways in which that participation excludes the possibility for a distinctly Christian alternative without cooption, accommodation, or domestication. They argue that nonparticipation (in the politics of the state), on the other hand, is not merely a means of dissent, but also allows Christians to imagine alternatives to the current social order.\textsuperscript{28}

This paper will take on the view that ‘politics’ and what is political is synonymous and coterminous with ‘government.’ The engagement position can be seen as reinforcing this view that what is political is wholly other and therefore can be entered into or withdrawn from, but such a view constitutes an impoverishment of the term and of what politics is or could be. The definition of politics offered by this paper challenges the premise that there is somehow a politics “out there,” and one must negotiate one’s position in relation to it. Redefining politics can help undermine the legitimation of state-centered politics as the real politics.

Secondly, this idea of the “state” is a vast oversimplification of the character, manifestations, and jurisdictions of government in the United States.\textsuperscript{29} The term ‘state’

\begin{footnotes}
\item[26] Heyer, 59.

\item[27] As some do when arguing against the movement to “privatize” the church and bar its relevance to or participation in the “public” sphere.

\item[28] Heyer, 75-76.

\item[29] Heyer’s work is a ready example of this phenomenon. Note how interchangeably terms such as “public,” “society,” “social,” and “state” are used to name and describe that nebulous realm that essentially contains all that is ‘not the church.’ While the argument here is semantic, it is not unimportant. It is meant to expose the associations and assumptions implicit in the arguments for and against political engagement in order to reveal the omissions and shortcomings of said arguments.
\end{footnotes}
almost always connotes the federal government, wielding its national (and international) power, managing (and mismanaging) vast sums of money, and always located somewhere else. It fails to address the nuances and distinctions of levels of government and their respective powers and responsibilities. Discussions of engaging in or resisting politics rarely consider the state or local levels of government. It will continue to be noted that the resistance critique does recognize the potential of the local as a distinctive category that breaks down the monolithic conception of ‘state.’ This paper will add a further dimension, however, claiming that the local allows for, and perhaps even requires, interaction with social, economic/commercial, and governmental entities in the embodiment of an alternative, church-centered politics.

Specifically, it will contend that the local church, as a politics, is located somewhere, and that the embodiment of the Body of Christ (which is a political embodiment) is enacted in a certain place, with certain neighbors, and certain questions of how to live together. By distinguishing the virtues of what is local and particular, it will argue that it indeed matters that the politics of cities do not look like those of the ‘state’ at the federal or even statewide level. These arguments will continue to be in conversation with the commitments of the engagement model and the critiques of the resister position.

Before moving on to these tasks, however, I would like to express my gratitude to Mike and Lisa Bowling, and to all the members and staff of Englewood Christian Church for their hospitality, warmth, and candor. As I become more and more familiar with their convictions about the purpose of the Body and the life it produces, I ought not to be
surprised at their willingness to include me in their life, but I remain humbled and inspired by it. I have also been touched by those I spoke with who are so sincerely and faithfully committed to this way of being the church that they are quite at a loss as to why anyone would be so interested in them that they would make them the subject of a master’s thesis. I would also like to thank Dr. Kelly Johnson for her contributions to this thesis, for her patience with its length as well as its pace, and her willingness to read through pages upon pages of writing that had not yet taken shape and multiple chapter drafts along the way. She has guided me as we have both struggled, labored, and even cried over this work. If there is any accomplishment to be found in its completion, surely much of it belongs to her. Both Dr. Johnson and Bro. Raymond Fitz, S.M., Ph.D., have been two of my greatest teachers during my master’s course of study, and their fingerprints are all over this work, as well as my life and the future of my theological study.
Chapter I: The City as a Moral Good

Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare.

Jeremiah 29:7

Raymond Bakke has argued that despite the fact that there are 1,250 uses of the word “city” in Christian Scripture, more than 130 cities are specifically mentioned, and there are four hundred texts on the poor in the bible, of which sixty-three call for urban justice, most Christians still read the bible through rural lenses. Regardless of the prominence of urban imagery, he observes an anti-urban Christian perception of the bible as “a very rural book about a very rural God who makes gardens and whose favorite people are shepherds and vine growers, and whose least favorite folks are urban dwellers.” This God’s message is “Stay away from Jerusalem. Stay away from Chicago.” To the extent that this perceived bias against cities exists, it ignores the importance of the city to the Christian faith and to the practice of the Christian life. It is the argument of this paper that within the Christian tradition, cities are a moral good.

4 Bakke, “The City,” 22. Though arguments about the city as both good and evil are not new, Bakke’s claims about Christianity’s dark theological history regarding the treatment of cities have more recent targets. He points to the work of Jacques Ellul, specifically, The Meaning of the City, published in 1968, examining the Babel and Babylonian texts in scripture, leading him to the conclusion that Babylon is, according to Bakke, the “archetype of evil in Scripture,” and extrapolating his view that cities themselves are evil (Bakke, “The City,” 186). He believes that this view (and those it has influenced) has profoundly shaped the way many Christians view cities – at least cities in Scripture (Bakke, “The City,” 186). This urban unease is, again, not new, but in Bakke’s view, has profound implications for the ways Christians view their own cities today. Rather than taking on the entire history of Christian thought related to the city, he aims his critique at its contemporary result: the suburban ideal.
Accordingly, this chapter – in an attempt to resurrect this important role for the city – will examine the city as biblical image, theological guide, and support for a common good for human sociality. It will first attend to the biblical image of the city, focusing on its connection both to the welfare of Christians on earth and to their eschatological hope and ultimate telos. Scripture echoes throughout with concern for the city, but especially important is its exhortation that the welfare of Christians is tied to the welfare of the city. Further, it is an image of a city – the New Jerusalem – that is linked to the Christian vision of redemption and the fulfillment of all things. It will then propose that the city can be a theological guide, whereby the ordering of urban life and urban spaces can teach Christians something about the ordering of human relationships and the practice of the Christian life. And finally, it will explore some of the resources of Catholic Social Teaching that assist Christians in understanding the moral good of the city and its ability to support a common good.

_Biblical Symbol_

Scripture echoes throughout with concern for the city. It is a recurring, complex, and diverse image – as lacking in uniformity of size and shape as it is in virtue. Yet, for all its diversity, it is difficult to deny its importance. This is not to impugn the importance of rural settings in scripture – without a doubt, gardens and deserts both play crucial roles in the biblical narrative. Nor is it an attempt to ignore the inconsistencies from city image to city image. As Jacobsen suggests, the city is not always portrayed positively: whether it is a place of refuge and anonymity for the murderous Cain, an experiment in audacity at Babel, or a place of oppression for the Israelites who must build
the city of Ramses, the city is not always a positive image. Jerusalem itself is hardly an altogether happy image of the good life. However, there are signs along the way that the city matters to the Christian life.

Though the Psalms call Christians to “pray for the peace of Jerusalem,” it is not only this “holy” city – where God’s name dwells – that is important for the people of God. In Jeremiah, God’s people are instructed, “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare.” That the welfare of the people of God is directly and explicitly tied to the city’s welfare is a crucial point. Moreover, the city whose welfare they are to address is not their city: it is not Jerusalem. It is a city built by and ruled by others, not by the people of God.

What then can this mean? If, as Gornik argues, “there could be no separate peace for God’s people apart from the general condition of the city as a whole,” and that “the two were bound together,” then it at least suggests that the setting for the Christian life has moral significance to that life itself. And, if so, then not only is the way in which one lives a matter for Christian reflection, but also the place in which one lives. The ordering of life in earthly, physical cities has moral significance and ought to be a concern for Christians.

This claim will be further explored below; however, before examining those constructive elements of cities that have moral significance to Christians, it will be

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5 Eric O. Jacobsen and Eugene H. Peterson Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2003), 36ff. These and following descriptions of the significance of the city in Scripture are taken from his illuminating chapter “From the Garden to Jerusalem,” in Sidewalks, 34-45.

6 Psalm 122:6, Deut 12:11.

7 Jeremiah 29:7

helpful to understand its symbolic role as an image of the human telos – a picture of the final redemption.

The city ultimately plays its most crucial role in Christian eschatology. In prophetic literature, it functions as an image of blessing and the return of justice, an image of resurrected cities and restored streets in which to live.\(^9\) When the year of the LORD’s favor is proclaimed, this picture of hope and wholeness is a picture of a restored city.\(^10\) And the final, and perhaps most instructive, city image in scripture is the New Jerusalem. The image of the Holy City, the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God is perhaps the most often invoked biblical image of the city, and is the basis for much of the rationale for urban theology. Here, the city is both prophecy and an image of redemption. It is the portrayal of the fulfillment of all things in Christ; yet, why is this fulfillment depicted as a city?

Here, the picture of the good life in the revelation given to John is in the form of a city. It is not the telos, yet it is an image of that telos. If a city – the New Jerusalem – shows Christians how all will live together in the coming Kingdom of God, then surely it is possible to suggest that the form of that existence has something to say about how humanity is meant to understand their life on earth.

No doubt the line from scripture’s emphasis on the city to current urban forms of life is not a straight one, nor is it an obvious one. And yet, as Richard Hays suggests, the symbolic world of the text is the source for analogical reflection about the shape of current communities.\(^11\) If scripture exhorts people to seek the welfare of their cities and

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\(^9\) Isaiah 58:12  
\(^10\) Isaiah 61:4  
offers a city as a symbol of the human telos, then these truths call Christians to reconsider the city’s potential and, further, their responsibility to it.

And what does this image of the New Jerusalem reveal about the city’s potential? In Revelation’s eschatological vision, the life to come is shown to John in the image of a city. This is no pastoral, bucolic idyll – not a return to Eden’s garden setting – but an urban vision of redemption.\textsuperscript{12} If a city is where redeemed humanity is heading, what then can be said? While simple, confident answers will not suffice, it is perhaps wise to use that vision of the life to come as a guide and to cautiously posit some lessons that may be drawn from it. These may not be concrete directives, but they may be hints at the importance of place and the shape of one’s manner of living on Christian moral formation and even redemption. And perhaps Christians will understand something about the good ordering of human life by examining what they are told about the coming kingdom, where the redeemed will dwell together for eternity.

First, the city may be seen as a symbol of reconciliation, a gathered diversity. The family of God in eternity, then, is not divided and concentrated by economic status, race, or class, but dwells together. As Robert Lupton has written, “Diverse community is God’s plan, the final destination toward which all the righteous are heading – the City of our God where people of every tribe, every nation, every tongue will take up eternal

\textsuperscript{12} It will be important to clarify here that this paper does not seek to set up a rural setting as the foil for the urban one. The alternative to the urban vision in America today is not the rural life, but the suburban life. Rural America is not leeching populations or resources from our cities – the suburbs are. These suburbs also become parasitic on rural places as well, encroaching on and developing what was (often) previously farmland. According to the American Farmland Trust, one million acres of farmland are lost each year in the U.S. due to sprawl. Jacobsen, 72.
Perhaps Christians should be mindful that their communities now reflect the nature of that community to come.

Also however, there is something to the vision of a city that speaks to its communal nature. This is not a collection of individuals, but a whole system – networks of lives intertwined and cohabiting. Can it be pointing to some larger truth about mutuality and reconciliation? Could God be using this image as a corrective for a narrow, individualistic conception of redemption? This New Jerusalem is a communal reconciliation, announcing that there cannot be the City of God without all of God’s children as its citizens: they will be saved together or not at all. As Hauerwas has written, “The kingdom of God means from its very beginning a togetherness, else it is not kingdom.” Here again, there is plenty to prompt Christians to reexamine their current forms of life in light of this vision of collective, intertwined living.

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14 As this paper is particularly mindful of the importance of the church as the formational and primary “community” for Christians – especially as a political community – it may be necessary to further nuance this claim. Clearly, what is argued here about the good for human living applies to the church – the gathered community of God. Yet, as Nancey Murphy says, “The purpose of the church now is to prefigure the will of God for human sociality as a whole. It is to show the world how all people will live in the kingdom of God.” Murphy, “Using MacIntyre’s Method in Christian Ethics,” in Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre, ed. Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg, and Mark Thiessen Nation (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 32. (Here, Murphy admits to drawing primarily on the work of Hauerwas and J. H. Yoder.) What God has revealed (in Scripture) to Christians as the true end of humanity would obviously be applied to and is most beautifully (but not nearly completely) embodied in the church. However, if Christians’ welfare is linked to the welfare of the cities in which they live (even in exile) and if they are to seek those cities’ welfare, these truths apply – or at least should apply – to one’s larger community as well, be it a block, a neighborhood, or the city at large. As the revealed vision of God, this is not an attempt to do an urban ‘natural theology’ – only to argue that the New Jerusalem is a picture of the ultimate telos, the fulfillment of all things, and where all creation is headed. The church may function as the witness, but the invitation is to all.

15 Stanley Hauerwas, In Good Company: The Church as Polis (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 75. He is here differentiating between a communal salvation and merely an aggregate one.
Perhaps, knowing that the life to come will be life in the New Jerusalem, it is important to practice a form of living commensurate with that which is to come. If humanity’s redeemed existence is envisioned as a city, then it is fair to suggest that the city has at least the potential for teaching Christians something about redemption. Jacobsen believes that cities are from God, and that God “has provided the vision and concrete hope for redemption in the city of New Jerusalem.” That city and cities today are connected, and he cautions that “had God not given John a particular vision of a city in his revelation, we may have been tempted to overlook the form of the city as the context for our redemption, and we may have missed something important in our cities. Because of this significant place in the history of our salvation, we cannot disregard the specific form of the city as a unique context with redemptive possibilities.” While he does not equate earthly cities with the New Jerusalem, he does claim that “John’s vision gives us permission to examine our own cities for such redemptive possibilities, even if they exist only as a shadow form of what is to come.”

Of particular concern to this paper is the proposition that God’s plan of salvation might include using the way humans live together to redeem them. And cities, as will

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16 Jacobsen, 69. This is not to suggest that other places – including rural ones – are not or cannot be places of redemption. It is the claim of this paper that some places are better or worse (i.e., the suburbs) forms of human living, but the claim about cities is that they are places of unique redemptive possibility. Unique, but not singular.

17 It may be charged that this is sacrilegious, or at least what Reinhold Niebuhr has christened “the doctrine of salvation by bricks,” (as qtd. in Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York, NY: Random House, 1961), 29.) I do not believe this is so. Rather, it is an argument that certain kinds of environments and forms of living are more and less suited to preparing Christians for the forms of life to which God calls them and for the kind of community to which they confess they are headed. If cities are part of God’s plan to redeem humanity, then the brokenness of cities not only has disastrous effects on those who suffer its injustices, but it represents a thwarting of God’s redemptive purposes, and all of humanity is suffering its loss. Seeking the renewal of cities, then, can be an effort to return to this plan. It would restore “a healthier, more just, and more joyful life with our neighbors and before God,” (Gornik, 129).

However, as the Conference of Latin American Bishops at Medellin reminds, “we must acknowledge that our attempts to bring about justice, to work toward the New Jerusalem, should not be
be argued further below, have a unique way of developing and sustaining communal relationships and human interaction. These are what George Younger refers to as “the possibilities inherent in the metropolitan community.” He continues, “These are possibilities which the Christian faith affirms have been given by God to all human community. Although broken and divided by sin, the basic intention of God for humanity is ever and again realized where men and women are drawn together in communities.”

For Christians to care about and for the city, then, may be seen as a form of witness. To repair cities and to seek their flourishing, to live in them and to participate in the communal life of the city is “all part of the rhythm of bearing witness to a city without tears.” And the pursuit of justly ordered cities now is work done in light of that future city, as reconciled lives on earth testify to the truth of that reconciled existence yet to come. In Gornik’s words, “Realizing the overarching end for which the world is being redeemed – love and reconciliation – guides the work of seeing relationships rightly ordered.” This vision of the city to come shows Christians what they are headed for, leaning toward, yearning for. And still, witnessing to that end entails a kind of practicing for it - if all will be reconciled in the New Jerusalem, then Christians must be about the business of living reconciled lives today.

understood as the realization of God’s justice in our time. We cannot expect an earthly Kingdom of God, even as we work toward more just systems. The Church declares, “We do not confuse temporal progress and the Kingdom of Christ; nevertheless, the former, ‘to the extent that it can contribute to the better ordering of human society, is of vital concern to the Kingdom of God,’” (Conference of Latin American Bishops. Final Document (Medellin, Columbia. 6 September 1968), no.5. The reference is to Vatican Council II, Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, no.39). And yet, communities of rightly related persons can serve as a testament to the life toward which God is beckoning all humanity.

19 Gornik, 241. Gornik sees this work being fulfilled by people who “stay in the community as neighbors, rebuild houses, teach in local schools, open health centers, think long and hard about local urban policy, and proclaim grace on the street corners,” 241.
20 Gornik, 30.
In this way, the act of witnessing to one’s end actually becomes the preparation for the end itself. As Christians perform reconciling practices in their cities and enact communities of justice and rightly ordered relationships, they ready themselves to be citizens of the City of God. Thus, this telos – this end to which Christian forms of community are witnessing – makes claims on their lives today.21 There is “a connection, then, between the eternal city as the form of our redeemed existence and the temporal city as the crucible in which character is formed for that eternal existence.”22 This point is a crucial one. The city does not and cannot redeem Christians; however, it is a setting within which Christians may more easily understand and enact that redemption. So, Christians must attempt to live in such a way that they practice for the coming kingdom - to act in their earthly, physical cities in ways that leave them expectant for their final home. They practice hospitality, love their neighbors, give aid to the stranger – and in so doing they learn about a redeemed existence by living in holiness, however incompletely.

The key is that the city uniquely presents opportunities for this. It does so by giving them concrete opportunities to practice living now in ways that reflect and hearken to their gathered, reconciled, and redeemed existence together in the New Jerusalem. It is the argument of this paper that in this way, God uses the city to redeem humanity. It just may be that by practicing for redemption, they are redeemed.

Yes, this claim must be supported. How does the city present opportunities that other forms of living do not?

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21 As above (and argued more forcefully in Chapter 3), the church is the primary Christian community and the one that most nearly embodies the beatific vision; however, remarks here about reconciling practices also extend to reconciling with all one’s neighbors – beginning within the church, but moving from there to the whole community as a form of witness to the reconciliation of all creation.

22 Jacobsen, 71.
Theological Guide

The following section will argue that the ordering of urban life can teach Christians something about the ordering of human relationships and the practice of the Christian life. It will support this argument by examining a few of the attributes common to nearly all cities in order to discern what might be instructive, as well as by contrasting these urban structures (and their attendant virtues) with their suburban counterparts.

In light of the above arguments that Scripture affirms that the welfare of Christians is tied to the welfare of the city, and also describes the ultimate destination of humanity as a city, reconciled and redeemed, one can ask what theological significance might be found in the city as a form of human living? Is there something redeeming in the city itself? What does the shape of that communal arrangement say about the content of its communal life?

First, the city represents a place where all of humanity is gathered – all ages, all races, all economic statuses. This gathering represents unique opportunities for Christians – the people of God – to live out Christ’s commandment to love thy neighbor as thyself.23 It also, says Gornik, “confronts the church with an obligation to recover the biblical tradition of passionate concern for the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the stranger.”24 That these people can often be found in the city is not the full extent of the city’s significance, however. The ordering and functioning of the city also ensures that these people will be encountered, thus creating spaces for the practice of the Christian moral life.

\[\text{23} \text{ Again, this is not a commandment given to individuals alone, acting alone. As Chapter 3 will remind us, this will be enacted and enfleshed by participation in the Body of Christ.}\]
\[\text{24} \text{ Gornik, 6.}\]
Cities are where strangers are met. Cities have public places, such as sidewalks, plazas, squares, public transportation, and mixed-use zoning areas where people who do not know each other must still interact, as opposed to the privatized spheres of suburbia: the single family home, the office complex, and travel between the two in the privacy of one’s own car. The very act of walking (and having places to do that) makes one more likely to encounter others.

The city, then, can better offer the context for the practice of hospitality. As Maria Russell Kenney has written, “In order to welcome the stranger, one must be near to and available to the stranger.” How can Christians care for a stranger if they never meet one? Likewise, just as one is more likely to meet the stranger in the city than in the suburb, one is also less likely to encounter the poor in these privatized suburban places, not least because of the suburban penchant for (and regular achievement of) economic and racial homogeneity. Because cities are more likely to present opportunities for encountering those whom Christians are called to care for and welcome, they are places where Christians can practice hospitality and love of neighbor, according to their command to do so.

In much the same way that one must encounter the stranger, in order to fulfill the second great commandment to “love thy neighbor as thyself,” a person must know and encounter one’s neighbor. Despite the frequent portrayal of the anonymity of the city, Vince Miller has pointed out the privatizing effects of the rise of the suburban single

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25 Jacobsen, 138-141.
26 That is, places that are not mazes of cul-de-sacs and feeder roads with no sidewalks, that provide a feeling of safety from automobile traffic and speeds, and that have enough mixed use to provide somewhere to go and something at which to look. For more on the importance of all these things, see Jacobsen, 86-98.
27 Maria Russell Kenney, “Hospitality to the Stranger,” in School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism, ed. The Rutba House (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005), 45.
family home and yard as well. Its attendant isolation, as well as the demands on the time, energy, and financial resources of its owners for maintenance and upkeep not only erode a sense of the public or common good, but also isolate them to the point that their neighbor’s need must become an abstraction, unlikely, as they are, ever to be confronted by it, being “so preoccupied with the tasks of maintaining our immediate families that we have little time and resources to offer.”

Living in communities that present the opportunity to practice love of neighbor and care for the stranger or the person in need may not ensure that Christians will do so: these tasks still require what Miller calls the “uncomfortable, challenging, disruptive aspects of face-to-face, shoulder-to-shoulder solidarity.” However, living and moving amidst these persons on a daily basis would certainly seem to make it more likely. Moreover, if Christian virtues – such as love – are not abstractions but rather, as Jacobsen writes, “come to light in specific situations that call for love, kindness, patience, and so forth,” then the opportunity for practicing those virtues becomes crucial. Accordingly, “cities force us to live, work, and play near people to whom we may need to show love, gentleness, and kindness. In the suburban ideal of a large home surrounded by a large lot, we don’t ever have to see others, let alone interact with them.” It is these “conditions of city life” – that is, their “physical, historical, and relational contingencies” – that create such regular opportunities for the practice and embodiment of the Christian life.

29 Vincent Miller, Consuming Religion (New York, N.Y.: Continuum, 2003), 50.
30 Miller, 76.
31 Jacobsen, 71.
32 Jacobsen, 71.
The significance of forming these virtues and of practicing them within a communal form of life is that Christians are then able to practice living together in ways that anticipate and give witness to the redeemed life to which they are headed. To understand the ways in which the city can uniquely provide a “communal” form of life, we will examine some of the resources of Catholic Social Teaching to further elucidate the role of the city in Christian tradition, its moral significance, and its relation to the Christian life.

**The City and the Common Good**

Within the body of Catholic social thought there are many works that regularly take up questions about the city and about the importance of economic decisions and patterns of living to the Christian faith. We will here only examine the contributions of Popes Paul VI and John Paul II to this idea, noting the potential of cities to function as a social environment, a network of relationships, and a communal vision of the good for human society. Their works not only highlight the opportunities for relationship made possible by cities, but also the moral consequences that the destruction of these social environments has for Christians.

In his Apostolic Letter *Octogesima Adveniens*, Pope Paul VI viewed the city as a challenge to seek community, to order human living and human society toward the good for all. He understands the need for wise planning as humans become increasingly urbanized, writing, “Is not the rise of an urban civilization which accompanies the advance of industrial civilization a true challenge to the wisdom of man, to his capacity for organization and to his farseeing imagination?...Urbanization, undoubtedly an

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33 Jacobsen, 71.
irreversible stage in the development of human societies, confronts man with difficult problems. How is he to master its growth, regulate its organization, and successfully accomplish its animation for the good of all?"\(^{34}\) While grasping its challenges, he also views the ordering of city life in light of its intended purpose: the flourishing of all its residents.\(^{35}\) Moreover, echoing the emphasis of this work, he notes the importance of the local context for embodying these opportunities for flourishing, writing of the “urgent need to remake at the level of the street, of the neighborhood…the social fabric whereby man may be able to develop the needs of his personality.”\(^{36}\) In this immediate context, the fundamental elements that either assist or inhibit the ability of persons to flourish are constructed.

And for Paul VI, that flourishing is made possible in the context of a community – by being knit into that “social fabric.” He exhorts Christians to the task of building – and rebuilding – their cities, not merely as an exercise in civic duty or care for the lived environment, but because he understands the connection of that environment to a person’s ability to flourish, as well as that environment’s potential for building and sustaining a collective, Christian moral vision. He writes, “To build up the city, the place where men and their expanded communities exist, to create new modes of neighborliness and relationships, to perceive an original application of social justice and to undertake responsibility for this collective future, which is foreseen as difficult, is a task in which Christians must share.”\(^{37}\) The state of the city is intimately connected not only to the

\(^{34}\) Paul VI, Apostolic Letter *Octogesima Adveniens* (14 May 1971), 10.

\(^{35}\) This is a strongly Aristotelian view, whereby the city (that is, the polis or political community) is ordered toward enabling its citizens to achieve their highest good – *eudaimonia* – which is a common good.

\(^{36}\) Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens*, 11.

\(^{37}\) Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens*, 12.
wellness or shalom of the individual, but also to humanity’s ability to rightly relate to one another. That is, the community that promotes wellness is one constituted by these relationships among neighbors. While forming these communities within the context of cities is the challenge to which he is calling Christians, he also recognizes the role of the city in supporting these relationships.

John Paul II, who writes of “the serious problems of modern urbanization” and of “the need for urban planning which is concerned with how people are to live,” also grasps this connection between place, wholeness, and the potential for community, and adds yet another piece.38 In a section on what he calls the “human environment,”39 he notes that true and authentic living depends upon the structure within which that life occurs. He explains,

Man receives from God his essential dignity and with it the capacity to transcend every social order so as to move toward truth and goodness. But he is also conditioned by the social structure in which he lives, by the education he has received and by his environment. These elements can either help or hinder his living in accordance with the truth. The decisions which create a human environment can give rise to specific structures of sin which impede the full realization of those who are in any way oppressed by them.40

In light of this, he calls upon the faithful “to destroy such structures and replace them with more authentic forms of living in community.”41 Thus, the social structure of one’s environment has great moral implication. Because that environment, when corrupted, has the potential to deny the fullness of life to those who suffer its oppression, the reordering of that environment becomes quite crucial for Christians. However, he seems to say that not only does this concern those who suffer the effects of disordered human

38 John Paul II, Encyclical, Centesimus annus (1 May 1991), 38.
39 John Paul II, Centesimus annus, 38.
40 John Paul II, Centesimus annus, 38.
41 John Paul II, Centesimus annus, 38.
environments (for example, urban poverty), but it also concerns those “decisions which create” them. Because these result in structures which he names sinful, that sin becomes an impediment for all people to realize their full humanity.

Thus, the moral significance of cities is becoming clear. As we have seen, they are uniquely able to provide a structure within which the Christian moral life can be practiced. They are better able to knit all people into the social fabric, form rightly ordered relationships, and create a sense of common good and mutual responsibility than the current suburban climate will allow for. Though cities do not (and certainly have not, in the American experience) guarantee the flourishing of all people, they offer an organizing structure, a sense of common life and common goods, and a form of life more conducive to the enactment and survival of the Christian moral life than their suburban counterparts.

\textit{Conclusion}

This chapter has argued that the image of the city has been used to teach Christians something about where humanity is headed, and that the biblical image of having all things made new and all suffering and sadness passing away looks something like a city. It has claimed that the city can be a place uniquely suited to the practice of the Christian moral life. And it has examined some of the teachings of the Catholic Social Tradition that point to the city’s implications for sustaining human sociality. In light of these arguments, it is reasonable to suggest that urban life in American cities has far to go to reach (or remember) its redemptive, moral, and communal possibilities.

\textsuperscript{42} At least as those two places have been shaped in Post-war America.
\textsuperscript{43} Rev 21:4-5.
God’s plans for this manner of redemptive living are thwarted when cities are broken and are sites of destruction, violence, and hopelessness, rather than opportunities for just relationships. As Gornik describes, “Here we witness urban life gone awry, the entire fabric of existence opposed to God’s good, peaceable, and redemptive intentions for the city.”

If Christians have failed their cities, they have lost those redemptive possibilities and may miss out on God’s plans for the city. In the following chapter, we will examine the destruction of cities and the ways in which the story of that destruction is not only one of economics, policies, and politics. It is a moral story, and one that Christians need to hear, to tell, and to remember if there is to be any hope of changing its trajectory.

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44 Gornik, xvi.
Chapter II: The Story of the City as a Moral Story

_They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations._

*Isaiah 61:4, NRSV*

It is easy to think that the political, economic, and demographic shift known as suburbanization is a given reality – one to which theology may (or even must) respond and relate. However, Christians cannot take this story for granted and merely ask how they (and the church) fit into that story – how to live in it and how to respond to it. Rather, the church must play the role of interpreter, interpreting the story – and indeed, the whole world – in light of its story, the Christian story.\(^1\) Thus, telling this story is itself a crucial theological task.

As Gornik points out, this is thoroughly in keeping with the prophetic tradition offered in Scripture. He writes, “The Hebrew prophets began their vocation with seeing the city through the eyes of the poor and the ways of justice. From this viewpoint, and its underlying assumptions about God, the prophets followed with analysis and critique.”\(^2\)

Thus one understands the story of what has happened in the city in terms of the Christian story, of what is known about God, and what is known about the human telos. As was argued in the last chapter, within Christian tradition, we can see that cities are from God,

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\(^1\) This idea is thoroughly Hauerwasian and not my own. For more development on the importance of narrative and the interpretive task, see Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), and Arne Rasmusson, *The Church as Polis: From Political Theology to Theological Politics as Exemplified by Jurgen Moltmann and Stanley Hauerwas* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), esp. Ch 10. That this interpretive task is for the church – the gathered Body, rather than individual Christians – will be treated more fully in the following two chapters.

that cities are a moral good for Christians, and that God may indeed use the ways in which Christians live together to redeem them. These must be the underlying assumptions and warrants that shape the story of the city and help the church in its task of interpreting the world.

Therefore, this chapter will proceed by first examining the story of the post-war American city and the changes it faced as a result of suburbanization. This is not a new story, and many of the factors, events, and policies that enabled and encouraged this shift in populations and resources are known and elucidated elsewhere. However, the task of this chapter will be to explain how this story of the American city and of suburbanization is a moral story. Rather than prioritizing analysis of the move out of cities in terms of consumption patterns, market pressures, or policy decisions (these things certainly play a role and will be noted throughout), this chapter will seek to interpret this story in terms of its moral dimensions for Christians and the church.

Secondly, it will examine the outcomes of this story – especially the costs of urban poverty. While the wholesale dismissal of urban living and the allure of suburban privacy have both already been called into question by the arguments from the previous chapter, this chapter will also point out the ways in which the move to the suburbs represented moral decisions that had moral consequences. It will examine the ways in which concentrated urban poverty is a unique – and uniquely destructive – form of poverty.

And finally this chapter will argue that the story of suburbanization is a moral story because the attraction to the suburbs was about disordered desire and the prioritizing of goods: the good of nuclear family life over – and opposed to – the good of
the city. This task will require us to submit the good of the suburban ideal and the nuclear family model to scrutiny. And just as importantly, it will prompt us to consider that – to the extent that Christians and Christian churches participated in this story – they acted immorally.

*The Cost of Suburbanization*

“A dead place is not a historic inevitability, it is someone’s failure. A living place is someone’s success.”³ Urban decline is not an accident or a fait accompli, and it is not a given reality. It is part of a story, and for Christians that story must be interpreted and told in light of the Christian story. The decline of cities has a history, and the story of urban decay is – among other stories – the story of sprawl and the process of suburbanization. As populations and resources flee cities, depleted urban centers remain. The results of this story are known: the concentrated poverty, loss of economic opportunity, and racial segregation are regrettable, but are reckoned economic and political failures, rather than moral ones.

The migration out of the city often remains unquestioned: if one can focus on the failure of particular political policies, one can avoid asking the difficult (and uncomfortable) questions about the lifestyle choices that required this exodus or even one’s responsibility for these places and the people who inhabit them. The current situation is regrettable, of course, but no one is responsible for it and the church, rather than becoming the interpretive body through which this situation (and most importantly, its history) is seen and judged, instead is relegated merely to asking how to minister to

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those who remain.\textsuperscript{4} It is not enough to ask what to do with what is left: the interpretive task demands that Christians wrestle with the theological meaning of what happened that produced what is left. In order to understand how suburbanization is a moral story, it is first necessary to understand how it thrived at the expense of the urban centers from which it emerged.

Different scholars may describe different threads in the story of suburbanization, but there is a general consensus regarding many of the contributing factors to the “sacking” of American cities.\textsuperscript{5} The first stage of the move out of cities was middle-class flight, which most experts trace to cities’ aging infrastructures and the newer-construction, lower-cost suburban housing and amenities available in the suburbs.\textsuperscript{6} Two points are crucial, however, to keep in mind.

First, neither the aging urban landscape nor the booming suburban setting were inevitable outcomes, but were occasioned and enabled by policies promoted by the government and utilized by the consumer: the construction of these suburban landscapes, as well as the affordability and financing of housing, amenities, and transportation options encouraged and underwrote this growth. This move was certainly a matter of consumer choice, but that choice was also promoted and subsidized by the federal

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\textsuperscript{4} Surely this is an important question, and I do not mean to impugn any urban ministry or minimize the role of works of mercy as a response to urban poverty; however, the church’s role must be more formative in the lives of Christians if they are to understand their world and their role in that world (including the potential response of works of mercy).

\textsuperscript{5} The “sacking of cities” is terminology adopted from Jane Jacobs, \textit{The Death and Life of Great American Cities} (New York, NY: Random House, 1961), 4. My admiration for Jacobs’ work and observations on cities – their purpose and their function – is unabashed. Though I rarely directly cite her work in this thesis, her teleological understanding of cities (that a city is good when it fulfills its purpose and does well what it exists \textit{for}) has certainly shaped my own understandings of cities and given form to some of my theological arguments about urban spaces, which may be apparent at times in the arguments of this paper. Neglecting to mention this influence would be a gross oversight on my part.

\textsuperscript{6} The division of the story of suburbanization into “stages” is the work of Grogan and Proscio, \textit{Comeback Cities}. Further stages will be addressed in the following section.
government, beginning in earnest after the end of World War II. In 1944, the creation of the V.A. mortgage was a remarkable stimulus for the growth of suburban housing, while the government further contributed to making suburban life both possible and affordable on the public tab (using the tax dollars of the urban dweller as well) by building tens of thousands of miles of highway systems, sewers, and public works in the suburbs, even while the urban infrastructure was aging, and in many places, crumbling. Federal Housing Authority policies ensured that it was easier to get a loan on a newer house in a newer neighborhood than on an older house in an older one – policies which private banks began to adopt as well. These and other policies masked the true economic cost of suburban expansion: while it seemed to be easier and cheaper to build a life in the suburbs, the true costs were borne by others. The home-mortgage deduction (which subsidizes the cost of homeownership while providing no similar economic benefit for

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7 Several factors induced this drive to build up the suburbs, including a desire to decentralize the population (in case of future war and the threat of atomic warfare – now possible, thanks to the United States), the move to use rural land not “needed” anymore due to farm mechanization, and the proposal to use the housing market as an economic stimulus to help the post-war economy and also absorb industrial workers previously employed in war-related factory labor. Joe McNeely, *Timeline: A History of Community Development Policy in America*, Videocassette (Baltimore, M.D.: Development Training Institute, 2001).

8 This decreased the down payment required, lowered the interest rate, and extended the repayment period even further than the mortgages made possible by the creation of the FHA in 1934. McNeely, *Timeline*.

9 According to David Rusk, from 1956 to the mid 1990s, the federal government spent $652 billion (in 1996 dollars) to build 54,714 miles of interstate highway. Despite the original aim of building long-distance roads, over half of the funds had gone into building 22,134 miles of new highways within metro areas. By contrast, under the Urban Mass Transit Act of 1964, federal aid to public bus and subways totaled only $85 billion. This means, in effect, that the government put seven times more money into suburban sprawl than into maintaining urban centers or meeting the needs of those not affluent enough to own private transportation, which in America means an automobile. Rusk, *Inside Game, Outside Game* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), 91. In 1999 alone, federal highway expenditures were in excess of $83 billion; moreover, this level of investment is considered an “unchallengeable practice” while support for public transportation is virtually nil and viewed as more akin to government subsidizing of a private business venture. Further, many of these roads cut right through the center of cities with disastrous consequences for the neighborhoods within them. Eric O. Jacobsen and Eugene H. Peterson *Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2003), 29-30.

renters)\(^{11}\) and even regulation of the telecommunication industry (which charged flat rates even though the cost of suburban build-out was significantly higher than more concentrated city service areas) underwrote the true cost of suburban living, enabling the suburban expansion, heightening its allure, and exacerbating its speed. The consequences of such uneven development would prove pernicious in their effects and trenchant in their duration.

To this point, we have primarily encountered what might be seen as merely “sins of omission”: failing to see the destructive consequences of seemingly benign - or even positive - policies, proposals, and consumption patterns. One might speak of them as unintended consequences resulting from good intentions. They might even be seen as the result of willful ignorance - simply ignoring the true cost of economic decisions - leveling costs artificially, suburban expenditures with urban dollars, or other economic advantages given only to homeowners.

At other times, however, this story includes blatantly malicious practices and desires, motivated by racial and economic prejudice, and codified in discriminatory laws and regulations. The phenomenon known as “white flight” is a demographically documented shift from city to first-ring suburb to outer-ring suburbs, as white residents flee further and further from the minority presence in urban cores.\(^{12}\)

\(^{11}\) The inequities in spending (or more accurately, lost revenue) between urban renter and suburban owner created by the home mortgage deduction are staggering: recent estimates indicate that the federal government forgoes $72 billion in taxes each year as a result of this deduction, compared with the mere $18 billion it spends on the public housing subsidy program which largely benefits urban residents. Meanwhile, suburban homeowners are led to believe (or choose to believe?) that this deduction is their right, and that this is not the government’s money in the first place, but their own. McNeely, *Timeline.*

\(^{12}\) Studies have shown that “white neighborhoods closest to majority black neighborhoods emptied of whites more rapidly than neighborhoods far from concentrations of minorities,” Grogan and Proscio, 37. In other studies, anywhere between 25 to 41 percent of white respondents would be willing to live in a neighborhood that was one-third black, as quoted in Grogan and Proscio, 37. David Rusk cites a study by Leinberger where “Research has shown that the white population has an aversion to shopping or living in a
This racism became institutionalized in normative housing and banking practices. Almost from its inception, the Federal Housing Administration – created by the National Housing Act of 1934 to stabilize and expand homeownership, and to insure mortgages – began to use rating standards that systematically discriminated against poorer urban populations. As a matter of regular policy, they refused to insure homes below a certain value threshold (anti-poor) or homes in a neighborhood where more than 15% of its residents were African-American – codifying and absolutizing racial and economic prejudice.\(^\text{13}\) Insuring mortgages only in ‘racially homogenous’ neighborhoods came to be known as ‘redlining,’ marking off certain city areas (though none in the suburbs) within which no mortgage could be obtained for any property.\(^\text{14}\) This not only kept center city dwellers from obtaining mortgages, but also from other economic opportunities, such as equity accrual or the home-mortgage tax deduction discussed above.\(^\text{15}\)

This practice was only building on the practice of its institutional forerunner – the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC), whose practices included the “laying out of elaborate, color-coded maps of metropolitan areas across the United States, with their neighborhoods graded according to their suitability for mortgage lending. In the worst areas, typically shaded in red, HOLC noted ‘detrimental influences’ including the ‘infiltration of a lower-grade population’ or an ‘undesirable population.’” Needless to say, HOLC extended almost no mortgages in these areas.\(^\text{16}\) Additionally, changes in zoning laws enabled municipalities to prevent the construction of multifamily structures

\(^{13}\)McNeely, *Timeline*.
\(^{14}\)Rusk, *Inside Game*, 86-87.
\(^{15}\)Grogan and Proscio, 36.
\(^{16}\)Grogan and Proscio, 115.
near single family housing, or even to exclude commercial structures from residential areas entirely – practices that not only further isolated residential areas, but also ensured that poorer residents would not find their way into wealthier areas.\(^\text{17}\)

Thus far we have seen the policies, practices, and patterns that produced and facilitated the process of suburbanization at the expense of urban life; however, the outcomes that this process produced are yet another moral dimension to the story of the city.

*The Outcomes of Suburbanization*

Part of understanding the story of suburbanization is correlating the process with its outcomes. In order to fully understand the move to the suburbs, one must acknowledge its costs and its harms. Exposing these costs (and their causes) will further clarify the moral implications of this story. As this chapter has claimed that urban poverty is a unique kind of poverty, it will also be necessary to understand the ways in which urban poverty is a distinct and particularly harmful kind of poverty in its concentration and isolation. In order to accomplish this, we will examine the devastating consequences that suburbanization has had for cities, in the hopes of understanding its undermining effect on both individual persons and the larger community itself.

The story of suburbanization – of the move *out* of cities – is also the story of what was left behind. As populations left the city, the evaporation of inner-city jobs and businesses ensued as jobs followed the skilled workers to the suburbs, and zoning laws and lack of suburban public transportation prevented urban poor job seekers from

\(^{17}\) A 1926 Supreme Court ruling in *Village of Euclid v. Ambler Realty Co.* helped make these changes possible at the local level. Jacobsen, 32.
following those jobs. Businesses leaving the city also meant that city tax revenues left with them, and both the lack of city worker access to suburban jobs and the decline of urban schools (from that lost revenue stream) contribute to less skilled and educated workers, causing unemployment increases on both counts.

But the litany of the resulting ills hardly ends there: cities began to experience lower median incomes, a high percentage of households living in poverty, a high percentage of households with children headed by single mothers, and a high percentage of the adult population who have not completed high school. Further, population loss within neighborhoods has various correlative harms, and has been shown to result in increases in crime, the creation of greater concentrations of poverty and segregation, and large scale vacant housing and housing abandonment, with decreasing housing values and the decline of neighborhood quality as its result. This condition is sometimes referred to as undercrowding, or “the absence of the population base that fills a thriving neighborhood.” Gornik notes the manifold implications for undercrowded cities and neighborhoods, writing that “undercrowding means more than abandoned houses and vacant lots; it means tears in the fabric of the community…Feeding this vulnerability of the poor is the rise in housing costs, government pullbacks from a commitment to

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18 Grogan and Proscio, 38.
affordable housing, a growing reliance on market-driven investment, and a post-welfare disregard for the poor."\textsuperscript{22}

Unfortunately, this story is not merely one told in past tense. The period from the 1980s to the present has been called the “fastest, most aggressive period of suburbanization in [American] history,” with more people leaving and more people moving further out than ever before. Business, retail, and job creation also continue the trend, each taking a vector out of the city and into the suburbs, where, during the economic recovery period from the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s, it is estimated that 90% of new jobs were created.\textsuperscript{23} Moreover, not only urban areas can be affected by this constant drive further and further outward. As Grogan and Proscio mark, blight continues to creep outward as well, affecting first-ring suburbs and beginning the cycle of sprawl and decline all over again.

But what of this paper’s claim that urban blight is a unique form of injustice? The concentration and isolation of both poverty and race in these abandoned urban cores have implications of their own, and the disastrous effects of large tracts of deep poverty, cut off from social systems and economic opportunity, are more concretely known now than ever before.\textsuperscript{24} In short, concentrated poverty exacerbates the effects of poverty, isolates

\textsuperscript{22} Gornik, 202-203. Throughout the decade from 1990 to 2000, some American cities did experience growth, but fully one-half lost population, experienced no growth, or experienced only modest growth during this time. For the cities that did experience growth, the majority of that growth occurred on the edges of cities, while population loss in the center city persisted. Brophy and Burnett, 4.

\textsuperscript{23} McNeely, Timeline.

\textsuperscript{24} High poverty concentration is generally described as occurring in places where 40 percent of residents’ family income is at or below the federal poverty level (Alan Berube, “Concentrated Poverty in America: An Overview,” in The Enduring Challenge of Concentrated Poverty in America: Case Studies from Communities Across the U.S., The Federal Reserve System and The Brookings Institution, 2008, 5.), but some sources consider places where the threshold exceeds 30 percent (Margery Austin Turner, “Rising Poverty Threatens Neighborhood Vitality,” The Urban Institute, 10 Sep 2009, http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=901285, accessed 11 Mar 2010).
low-income people from economic opportunity, and creates an image of insuperable challenges that leads to hopelessness.

The reinforcing cycle of concentrated poverty contributes to this sense of hopelessness. As has been noted above, deteriorating and vacant housing stock can lead to losses in home value and equity accrual. This loss of value, plus the loss of taxpaying residents results in a declining tax base. With lower revenues, cities are able to provide fewer public services, while those that remain are lower in quality and quantity – a distinct disincentive for those who remain to stay. Municipalities are also unable to make needed infrastructure repairs or invest in economic growth initiatives for the future. On top of declining services, tax rates must be raised to counterbalance the declining revenues in order to pay for these services – a further disincentive to remain in the city, driving down revenues to an even greater extent. As more people leave, more property is vacant or abandoned, and thus the cycle continues. The higher costs, lower home values, loss of equity building opportunity, and absence of quality city services only insures that anyone who can afford to leave will most likely do so. This “continued exodus” will only “resul[t] in an increasing concentration of the poor in distressed areas and a loss of opportunity and access to jobs.”

This can be partially explained by noting that large concentrations of low-income and low-skilled populations (as well as higher tax burdens) disincentivize private-sector investment and the relocation of businesses and potential employers to urban areas, further liming job opportunities and retail options for city dwellers. Not only do urbanites have fewer retail options, but research has shown that poor residents end up paying more for the same goods and services, thanks to this limited availability, while

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25 Brophy and Burnett, 6-7, and Berube, 11-15.
also facing a decline in the quality of those goods and services from lack of business
competition and higher costs for doing business in poor neighborhoods. These additional
financial burdens can inhibit the ability of city residents to better their long-term
economic situation.  

Concentrated poverty is further reinforced as “people are isolated from economic,
cultural, and social networks and opportunities,” which often function as support
networks. And in high-poverty locations, with lower levels of labor force participation,
those searching for jobs will be inhibited by these weaker informal networks. Both the
concentration of poverty and isolation from support networks exacerbate the already
destructive aspects of poverty. In light of this, increases in poverty, such as those
experienced in the decade from 2000 to 2010, are far more disastrous in these places, as
opposed to neighborhoods where incidence of poverty is more dispersed.

Moreover, a “substantial body of social science research” has shown the
disastrous effects of concentrated poverty on human flourishing. Consider the
following report:

Living in profoundly poor neighborhoods seriously undermines people’s well-
being and long-term life chances. Preschool children living in low-income
neighborhoods exhibit more aggressive behavior when interacting with others…
Young people from high-poverty neighborhoods are less successful in school than
their counterparts from more affluent communities; they earn lower grades, are
more likely to drop out, and are less likely to go on to college… Studies have also
documented that neighborhood environment influences teens’ sexual activity and
the likelihood that girls will become pregnant during their teen years… Young
people who live in high-crime areas are more likely to commit crimes themselves,
other things being equal… And finally, living in disadvantaged neighborhoods

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26 Berube, 13.
27 Fitz, “Urban Sprawl.”
28 Berube, 13.
29 Turner, “Rising Poverty.”
30 Turner, “Rising Poverty.”
increases the risk of disease and mortality among both children and adults.\textsuperscript{31} The negative health outcomes for these residents have many factors, including higher rates of stress, living in an environment with dilapidated housing and high crime, higher risk of exposures to environmental hazards (lead-based paint, cigarette smoke, pollution from nearby traffic), and the limited availability and inferior quality of medical care.\textsuperscript{32}

The concentration of race is also connected to the concentration of poverty, and social scientists have demonstrated that “the persistence of residential segregation… stunts house price appreciation and, hence, wealth accumulation among minority home owners… undermines school quality and minority educational attainment… limits employment opportunities and earnings for minority workers… and damages the health of children and adults.”\textsuperscript{33} Thus, the harms of poverty do not end with being poor. As Dr. Raymond L. Fitz, S.M., reminds, the true cost of poverty must take into account its other disastrous effects, as it inhibits educational opportunity, contributes to poor physical and mental health, stimulates higher levels of crime, reduces private sector activity, raises prices for low-income households, limits job networks and employment ambitions, hinders wealth-building, burdens local government services and fiscal capacities, and creates political and societal divisions.\textsuperscript{34}

Indeed, the story of suburbanization is fraught with moral import. First, as we have seen, even well intentioned decisions and actions have produced destructive outcomes. Secondly, there were indeed parts of the suburbanization process that were

\textsuperscript{31} Margery Austin Turner and Lynette Rawlings, \textit{Promoting Neighborhood Diversity: Benefits, Barriers, and Strategies}, The Urban Institute, Aug 2009, 3. Some scholars attribute the educational effects of concentrated poverty to “downward pressures” from weakened classroom stability (due to higher student mobility), inability to attract good personnel, and increased needs of students paired with limited resources to address them. Berube, 13.

\textsuperscript{32} Berube, 14.

\textsuperscript{33} Turner and Rawlings, 3.

\textsuperscript{34} Fitz, “Advancing.”
motivated by economic and racial prejudice. And finally, the disastrous outcomes that have resulted from the move out of cities represent a particularly harmful kind of poverty and isolation.

While the previous sections have drawn upon policies and statistics to create a narrative, this alone is an insufficient way for Christians to understand this story. They must come to understand it in light of the Christian story. Suburbanization cannot only be a story of market pressures, consumer demands, and government policies. It is also—and for the Christian, primarily—a story about goods and desires, about the ordering of human living and a commitment to the flourishing of all.

*Suburbanization and Disordered Desire*

The story of sprawl is a story about the shaping of desire and a particular conception of the good, especially the good for human living, which has come to mean the suburban ideal. To understand how this is a moral story, we must understand how the suburban ideal is not self-evident, but represents a shift from prioritizing a communal good to the protection of the individual good. Or perhaps more accurately in this case, it represents a disordered desire whereby the good of the nuclear family is pursued and protected to the exclusion of the good of the larger community (here, the city).

As such, suburban sprawl as a moral story is a story about consumer desires and the vision of the good in which they are based. In *Centesimus annus*, Pope John Paul II articulates the argument that the economic choices people make correlate to their understanding of the good, writing, “A given culture reveals its overall understanding of
life through the choices it makes in production and consumption.” Consequently, suburban sprawl is not only about the geographical migration out of cities (and the policies and laws that enabled this move on the city dweller’s tab): it is about the shaping of the suburban ideal, the cultivation of a desire without scrutinizing its intrinsic value or the goods on which it is based. Suburban living and the single family home with lawn and fence are not inherently idyllic, nor were they always a normative good, but rather, can be attributed to a specific vision of human living that is shaped by certain desires and certain assumptions about human goods. The good that this suburban ideal was seeking has been called a “middle-class consumer taste for detached houses, larger lots, and (at least among whites) homogenous racial and ethnic environments.” Various theories exist to explain the construction of this ideal. Urban scholar Jane Jacobs points to various schools of urban aesthetics, but notes that the ideal of the Garden City, with its limited density and its “suburbany privacy,” not to mention the allure of “grass, grass, grass” are not indigenous to the human condition, but were the result of schools of city planning (or anti-city planning) that gained in popularity and shaped housing and home financing legislation, planning, and architecture. On the other hand, scholars Grogan and Proscio focus on economic, rather than aesthetic factors, observing that “[f]or the American middle class, the lure of suburban living has been tightly bound up with a desire to be

35 John Paul II, Encyclical, Centesimus annus (1 May 1991), 36.
36 Grogan and Proscio, 35.
37 Jacobs, 20.
38 Jacobs, 22.
39 She artfully describes one planner’s “morbid and biased catalog of ills” of the city, 20.
40 For a fascinating exegesis of various schools of “orthodox city planning theory” that illuminates the social, political, and cultural values, assumptions, and desires underlying and shaping the organizing and planning of the physical environment of the city, see Jacobs, 16-25.
surrounded by people of comparable means, hence the growing concentration of wealth in suburbs. Yet, all these factors have moral import.

How the people of any given culture order and arrange the way they live corresponds to their desires and to the good(s) at which they aim. This is why the story of suburbanization is truly a moral story: it reveals the goods toward which suburban life is oriented. However, this is cause for concern in two important ways. In the first case, it is not a matter of the inherent value of the goods themselves, but rather, who has access to these goods. The suburbs do indeed offer a certain number of goods – economic security, attractive and affordable housing, quality education, employment, retail services, recreation opportunities, and quality city services. But, as we have seen, these goods have been obtained at the exclusion of goods for others. Those leaving cities in search of these goods have often been the reason that city dwellers do not have them. Thus, in order to secure these goods for one’s own (nuclear) family, one has denied them to one’s larger community.

In the second case, there are certain suburban goods that are perhaps not consistent with Christian goods. For instance, consider the ways that privacy (a suburban good) may not reflect the good for the Christian life. As discussed in the previous chapter, the rise of the single-family home has also had effects that endanger a common good and love of neighbor. The “luxury of privacy” can be built upon a denial of mutual need or dependence on one another, on neighbor, on community. In this case, the moral

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41 Grogan and Proscio, 35.
42 This phrase is from Kelly Johnson’s The Fear of Beggars: Stewardship and Poverty in Christian Ethics (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007), 134. In this work, Johnson beautifully and provocatively traces the role of begging and poverty in the Christian tradition, challenging us to reconsider how dependence on one another – and on God – are and have been marks of the Christian life and the teachings and example of Jesus. Privacy and isolation eschew this dependence, and also create very limited conditions for the concept of Gift – which Johnson illuminates as a unique economic category, and also a
implications for Christians are the extent to which they have accepted this vision (and the good it represents) without asking whether it conforms to a Christian vision for human living. They have tended to be unreflective in their embrace of the suburban ideal, at least as far as they have followed the population and consumption trends of society at large.

And many Christians and many churches have joined the exodus from cities. They have supported the decisions that enabled that move (and also endangered those left behind). Many Christians and churches have done so unreflectively. They followed population patterns, prioritized the goods of the nuclear family over common goods, and they accepted the ideal of suburban living without questioning its motivations or its consequences. It is the argument of this paper that insofar as Christians and churches participated in this trend, they share in the guilt of it. They have participated in a way of life that exists – at times literally – at the expense of others.

Therefore, telling this story (as a moral story) is key: it helps Christians unmask the seeming innocence of the ways in which they live – how they were produced through and are sustained by unjust means and also they ways in which they continue to profit from injustice. And by interpreting the story of the city (and the suburb) in light of the Christian story, Christians can begin to order their world and their ways of living.

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43 Though most of the blatantly racist policies have since been abolished, their legacies live on in other ways, including the property value adjudication process, which systematically disenfranchises low-income and minority communities, and is a process in which all homeowners participate and from which most accrue benefits. And, as Turner and Rawlings report, private lenders continue to be less likely to lend or invest in predominantly minority areas, and are more likely to practice predatory lending in these communities when they do, 2. At the time of this thesis’ writing, we are keenly aware of the devastating effects that predatory lending practices can have on neighborhood stability in the places least equipped to bear the strain.
according to that story. They can understand the ways in which broken cities do not fulfill God’s redemptive purposes for the city (as seen in the previous chapter), do not reflect the goods and purposes of the human life (as told by the Christian story), and do not grant all of God’s children access to those goods, for the flourishing and reconciliation of all creation.

If the city as a moral story reveals that this brokenness is a result of disordered desires and also the extent to which Christians ignored this disorder or even accepted it, then what shall we do with the claim that it is the church’s job to interpret and to tell this story? The next chapter will explore how the church functions as this interpretive body and, as Hauerwas suggests, goes even further to provide a “counter story” to the world.44 In this counter story, the church is the Christian’s political home – a charge which will prompt a reassessment of the definition of politics and a consideration of what it might mean for the church to be the Christian’s primary politics.

All of this will serve as both the context within which the story of Englewood unfolds and will also function as the key to that story. The story of what has happened in American cities generally (and in the cities of the Midwest in particular) gives context for the particular story in center city Indianapolis.45 Yet, more than merely providing context for the story of ECC, the vision of the city and its history given in chapters one and two, and the explanation of the church’s political and interpretive role in chapter three will

44 Hauerwas, In Good Company, 6.
45 That their city, Indianapolis, follows this trend is implicit in this argument. In fact, compared with national averages, Indianapolis has lower average family and individual incomes, higher percentages of families and individuals below the poverty level, lower owner-occupied housing rates, and a higher percentage of vacant housing. All statistics come from 2006 data, which can be found in the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey. See http://factfinder.census.gov, accessed 9 Sep 2008. Further, Englewood’s pastor claims that their area of the city has the highest rates of abandoned housing in Indiana. Michael and Lisa Bowling, interview by author, 4 May 2008, Indianapolis, Ind., written notes.
help elucidate the call that the city has upon that church, as well as the reason that their struggle to embody Christ in that place has taken on such a ‘political’ shape.
Chapter III: The Church as Politics and the Politics of the Local

You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.
Isaiah 58:12b

According to Walter Brueggemann, although the prophetic task begins with criticism and dismantling, the other function of the prophetic is to offer an alternative vision to the people and to energize them to work toward that new vision.\(^1\) The previous two chapters have shown the moral import of the city and the church’s stake in its welfare; however, given the current state of American cities, how do Christians begin the task of rebuilding and reclaiming a vision for the future of the city? How do they pursue its welfare? Given prevailing assumptions about the nature, meaning, and purpose of politics, these appear to be political questions, and the way to proceed, politically, brings the conversation back to the debate between engagement and resistance. Should Christians harness the resources of the state for the good of the city? Or can they risk entanglement with the usurping power of the politics of the nation-state? Clearly, this seems to be a choice fraught with peril: happily, however, it is also a false choice. One need not ignore the dangers of the “engagement” approach, but neither should one assume that avoiding the resources and mechanisms of the nation-state means avoiding political action and institutions altogether.

The purpose of this chapter is not to dismantle either the engagement or resistance position, but to suggest that they are not necessarily helpful ways for considering the

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work that lies before Christians in their cities.\(^2\) The goal of this chapter is instead to articulate a third way, proposing that the church is itself a politics and should be the primary politics for Christians. It will also propose that within a local context (here, a city), this new political understanding may then make it possible to understand the church’s relationship to other forms of politics in a more constructive way.

To show how this is a more helpful way to approach the challenges that the city presents to Christians, it will propose three consequences that would result if the church (especially the local church) were to be the true political home of Christians. First, it would unmask the alluring but crippling view that the politics of the nation-state is the “real” politics, and would force Christians to *reimagine* what a politics actually is. Second, it would require them to *reenvision* the church as a politics and what that might mean. And finally, it would necessitate that they *revisit* the local as a legitimate political setting and attend to the ways in which it represents a unique political category.

*Reimagining*

If the church were truly the primary politics for Christians, they would be forced to abandon their tendency to think of the politics of the state as the “real” politics (and to act accordingly). This is, arguably, the major shortcoming of the engagement model. Their practices support the assumption that the political machinery of the state in the

\(^2\) Before proceeding further, some clarification of scholarly humility may be required. I am full of respect for gifted thinkers and faithful Christians who are proponents of both positions. I do, however, hope to do two things throughout this chapter. In the first place, I will suggest the ways in which engagement often fails to consider what the church can do *as* church, rather than as merely a collection of individual Christians pointing their efforts toward a political machinery elsewhere. In the second place, I want to be clear that I am not trying to find something that resisters have missed. I do not imagine that I have thought of something that William Cavanaugh and Michael Baxter have overlooked. Rather, I hope to point to something in their critique that is underdeveloped thus far – namely, that though they have grasped the promise of the local, it remains unclear what we are supposed to do with it.
modern liberal order is the real politics – that it is the ruling power of a reality “out there” – one which a Christian must determine how to live in and interact with. Yet, in order to unmask this myth, one must understand what view of politics the state employs so that he or she may investigate and discover what other views of politics may exist (and may be better suited to questions of how to order human living).

One way to discern what politics is operative in any case is to ask, “What constitutes a political act?” In the case of the politics of the state – at least in America and in other procedural democracies – political acts tend to focus on ideas and agendas, as well as the power to get those ideas and agendas enforced by the political institutions of the nation-state. Political acts are therefore limited to activities such as lawmaking and policy implementation, the marshalling of sufficient numbers and support, and the exchange of power. When Christians are ruled by this model, which Rasmusson has called political theology, what is “assumed by almost everyone is that Christian ethics and politics is concerned with devising positions and then asking or pressing (often through the mobilization of “public opinion”) the government to support these.” The implications of this model is that the “state is thus the main actor, the subject from which basic social change is expected, while the church becomes a pressure group.”

This model leaves little room for the interpreting and reality-naming role of the church, and its assumptions have contributed to impoverishing the church’s political imagination. Christians may have the kingdom of God as their end, but reform of the state’s agenda and policies are the primary means to that end. If the mechanism of the state is the “real” politics – whose power, resources, and institutions must be harnessed

3 Arne Rasmusson, The Church as Polis: From Political Theology to Theological Politics as Exemplified by Jurgen Molmann and Stanley Hauerwas (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 224.
for good – those become the only means by which the Christian acts in the world.

Michael Baxter has warned that “this kind of reformist agenda only serves to reinforce the assumption that the only effective mechanism for implementing justice in the modern world is the modern state.”¹ So often, the church has failed to imagine itself as the vessel for these theological convictions about the good for human life. But what if a “political” act began with the church and what if that act ultimately looked like the church?

What would this mean for the church? It is the argument of this chapter that the church is – and must be understood as – a politics itself. This will indeed require a reimagining of what it means to be a politics. Rather than accepting a definition of politics that is circumscribed by the particular, contemporary political experiment in America, the church must reconsider what is meant by this term politics.⁵ Scholars like Hauerwas have attempted to cast a broader net for this term, suggesting that politics is and can be about more than simply the mechanisms for advancing ideas within the modern liberal order. He has written that politics can be seen as the “conversation necessary for a people across time to discover the goods they have in common.”⁶ This gets much closer to the idea of the Aristotelian polis, where politics was more than about laws and policies, but rather, where citizens gathered to discuss questions of identity,

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⁵ This will most certainly require a renewal of the impoverished Christian imagination, but Cavanaugh is most helpful on this idea as well. In his work *Theopolitical Imagination*, especially the Introduction on disciplined imaginations and his chapter on “The Myth of the State as Savior,” he helps pierce this myth, pointing to the imagined construct of the nation-state, which is contingent upon our assent. The stakes of understanding the constructed nature of the state’s politics are great: we are free to imagine newness, to imagine other ways to be political – and indeed, imagine what it even means to be political. This, says Cavanaugh, can “give hope that things do not necessarily have to be the way they are.” William Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination* (New York, NY: T&T Clark Ltd., 2002), 3.

⁶ As qtd. in Rasmusson, *The Church as Polis*, 188.
ends and purposes, loyalties, rights and responsibilities, and the common good. In this model, politics is less about consensus building and policy making, and more about the conversations necessary to achieve a shared identity, a common understanding of the goods and ends of human life, and a way to determine how to live according to those. This kind of discussion would, in fact, constitute a political act under this second model.

In the political model of the modern nation-state, these conversations do not happen. There is no political or communal mechanism for discovering how to act in light of one’s identity, purpose, and the goal toward which one is heading. In fact, liberalism is quite bold in its assertion that it is merely procedural and leaves questions of value judgments, truth claims, and ultimate ends to individuals. It is therefore necessary, if one is to imagine the kind of interpretive role that has been proposed thus far for ordering one’s world, to reimagine what politics could mean and how a politics could exist that would allow for these kinds of conversations and could provide the common narrative under which they could occur. Can the church really be this kind of politics?

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7 Granted, only a very small percentage of the polis’ population were deemed worthy to participate in these conversations, but the same can be said for participation in the American political process for much of its history, too. This argument is instead focused on the difference between politics as procedural democracy and politics as substantive conversations about what it means to be a politics.

8 As Alasdair MacIntyre has noted, “What is lacking in modern political societies is any type of institutional arena in which plain persons – neither engaged in academic pursuits nor professionals of the political life – are able to engage together in systematic reasoned debate, designed to arrive at a rationally well-founded common mind on how to answer questions about the relationship of politics to the claims of rival and alternative ways of life, each with its own conception of the virtues and of the common good.” MacIntyre, “Politics, Philosophy, and the Common Good,” in The MacIntyre Reader, ed. Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 239.

9 For a fuller description of this argument regarding liberalism as merely procedural, see Stanley Fish, “Why We Can’t All Just Get Along,” First Things 60 (Feb 1996): 18-26.
Re-envisioning

The argument that the church is a kind of politics is not new to this paper. It has been proposed elsewhere, especially in the work of Stanley Hauerwas and his students. Arne Rasmusson has characterized this strain of Hauerwas’ work as a pivotal turn from political theology to a theological politics. In his work, *The Church as Polis*, he offers these two helpful categories as descriptions of the ways theologians have treated the relationship between politics and the church. He characterizes the first model, political theology, as a theology with the political sphere as its context and its “frame,” with politics functioning as the means by which the future is changed. In fact, contributing to “liberating social change” toward freedom and justice is its objective, and praxis is its end result. For the purposes of this paper, one could say that the engagement position largely embraces the assumptions of this model. The second model, theological politics, gets closer to the claim of this paper. Rather than “politics understood as the struggle for control over the processes of social change (the politics of the world),” it is “the politics of the church as an alternative polis.” But what does it mean to claim that the church is (or can or ought to be) a politics – indeed, an alternative politics to the politics of the nation-state? This section will articulate two images that may assist in understanding this claim: first, the church as a political body and second, the church as an interpretive body.

In the simplest terms, the church is political because it is a gathered, social body. John Howard Yoder argues that the very word from which we get “church” – *ecclesia* – has political meaning. He says, “it is literally a ‘called meeting,’ an assembly, such as a

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11 Rasmusson, 43-45. Rasmusson uses Moltmann as exemplar for political theology.
12 Rasmusson, 46-49.
13 Rasmusson, 17.
town meeting, convened to do business, to deliberate on behalf of the entire society.”

He further defines what makes this a “political reality” by claiming that “the church has the character of a polis (the Greek word from which we get the adjective political), namely, a structured social body. It has its ways of making decisions, defining membership, and carrying out common tasks. That makes the Christian community a political entity in the simplest meaning of the term.” These socially embodied organizing practices constitute a political body.

However, these thinkers are not merely making an organizational or procedural distinction. Rasmusson contends that the proponents of theological politics believe that the church is political because God has “creat[ed] a people as the social manifestation of the new alternative history determined by the kingdom of God that has come in Jesus Christ.” Gerhard Lohfink similarly points to Jesus’ mission as a sign of this social embodiment, insisting that his work and teachings were not merely about a change in attitude or belief, but were also meant “to address concrete practices within a new social order.” He continues, “Jesus understood the people of God which he sought to gather as a contrast-society. This in no way means that he envisioned the people of God as a state or a nation, but he did understand it as a community which forms its own sphere of life, a community in which one lives in a different way and treats others in a different way than is usual elsewhere in the world.” Though he does not here specifically call the church a politics, he describes in unmistakably social and political terms.

15 Yoder, viii.
16 Rasmusson, 190. The referent for this quote is a summary of Hauerwas’ thoughts on the political nature of the church, but the terminology is his.
If, as Hauerwas has claimed, politics is constituted by conversations about common goods, then surely the church – this contrast society with its alternative worldview – is the place to have these conversations. Indeed, for Hauerwas, the church is the community – constituted by the story of God’s work in history, especially in the life and work of Jesus Christ – having that conversation about those goods, and through the practices of the church becoming people who are better formed for and better skilled at having that conversation. This is inescapably political.

However, though much has been made of the polis, it is crucial to grasp that the church is not simply one more kind of polis, but an entirely different kind of politics and polity. The church is not simply to be a politics for Christians, but it is to be their primary politics. To say that the church is the primary politics for Christians means that – as the previous chapter described – the church is the interpretive body through which Christians understand their world. Thus, in order for the church to become their primary political reality, Christians must accept that one’s political, public, social world must be mediated through and by the church, its story, and its practices. In Hauerwas’ terminology, the church “stories” the world, arguing, “Church, moreover, but names those practices through which the world is known and given a history.” The church, as

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18 There is enough contained in these sentences to write multiple theses about Hauerwas’ understanding and use of these terms and ideas – they are rich, thick images that do a lot of work throughout his writing. However, given the scope and space of this project, I hope it is enough merely to gesture toward his considerable body of work and suggest that further study on what he means by these arguments be taken up there. I only mean to use this reference to suggest that established scholars in the field have made this claim and bring their insights to bear on this idea of politics.

19 For an edifying treatment of Richard Hutter’s description of the church, the ekklesia, standing between the polis and the household (oikos), see Hauerwas, In Good Company, 28.

20 Stanley Hauerwas, In Good Company, 33. Though Hauerwas uses this statement to make larger claims about anti-foundationalism, his argument, I believe, can stand on its own to point to the truth that it is through the church (its practices and its life) that Christians understand what the world is and how to respond. I do acknowledge that Hauerwas may not agree with some of the conclusions I extend this argument toward regarding the work of the church in the city, given his emphasis on the church as a
a political reality, narrates the story of how Christians are to understand the city’s history and how they are to think about its future. It is through participation in the church – in these conversations about identity and shared goods – that Christians may then understand or interpret the world (and its political forms) in light of this other kind of politics. Only after they have understood the goods of the Christian life and the end toward which humanity is groaning can they discover why the manner and forms of human living matter and can discern what is amiss in the social world of the city. Moreover, it is only through the political life of the church that they can begin to imagine alternatives.

In this way, the church, as the primary politics for Christians, becomes not only “a medium through which one sees reality” but also “a set of skills for living the Christian life.” It both orders and makes sense of the world and also prepares Christians with the skills needed to live in, work in, and shape that world. This can help chasten against the mindset that one takes what one has learned in the church and steps out into the world to apply those truths to the real political realm. It is, instead, the real and primary political world that encompasses and orders all else. The way one acts and works in that world, then, will find its purpose, its end, and – most importantly – its shape from the politics of the church.

In other words, the church makes the world intelligible to Christians, in part, by the way in which it enacts its own politics and orders its life. The church, as a social body, becomes the measure of the good of human living. For Yoder, “the will of God for

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contrast or alternative ethic/politics, but I do think he would agree that a response would have the shape of the church.

21 Rasmusson, 203. Rasmusson is here characterizing Hauerwas’ understanding of Christianity and its story.
human socialness as a whole is prefigured by the shape to which the Body of Christ is called,” and “the people of God is called to be today what the world is called to be ultimately.” The church is therefore an embodied social reality that proclaims what humanity is made for and where it is headed.

Hauerwas and his student, William Cavanaugh, both point to the gathering of the church as a crucial marker of this proclamation – one in which the human telos is already achieved, albeit always imperfectly. In this sense, gathering together as a church is itself a political act, even an eschatological one, because it points to a future life where all will be unified, even as it stands as a witness to the world (and the city!), declaring the ways it is not unified, is not gathered, is not a community. It tells an alternative story – that humans are both made for and heading toward community.

Cavanaugh (with a nod to Augustine) insists that this is “the true politics” since it is “the public performance of the City of God in the midst of another city that is passing away.” In every gathering, he says, the church “enact[s] a politics of reconciliation that makes the Church a counter-performance to the politics of the world.” The church not only tells but is a counter-story to the world’s story.

Yet, with all this talk about an alternative story and the church as primary politics, what is to become of this work’s claim that the church’s politics may have much to do

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22 Yoder, ix.
23 The eschatological claim is Hauerwas’, see In Good Company, 157.
24 William Cavanaugh, “Discerning: Politics and Reconciliation,” in The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2006), 202. In this and following quotes, he bases his claims about gathering on a rich development of what constitutes that gathering – that is, the church’s liturgy. This paper’s claims about the church as the Christian’s primary politics could be infinitely bolstered by a more constructive treatment of the practices of the church that make it so, especially the formational potential of the liturgy, but time and space would not allow for this. For further development on this, see the entire Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics, containing Cavanaugh’s “Discerning: Politics and Reconciliation,” the work of Hauerwas, especially In Good Company, and Yoder’s Body Politics.
with other politics, at least within the context of the city? It is, in fact, a central claim of this work that while the politics of the church may be distinct from other politics, it need not, cannot, and even perhaps should not be isolated from them. This charge, however, must be modified in two important ways.

First, this claim is only put forth as true within the proper context, which, as argued above, means a local context, such as that of a city. Second, the idea of the church as the primary politics for Christians is crucial. When the church’s politics is a real politics for Christians, when it is an encompassing worldview or interpretive framework, and when it is the primary political realm in which Christians think, work, and act, then it can free the Christian imagination to consider ‘political’ questions and ‘political’ solutions without confusing the work of the church with the agendas and political mechanisms of other political realities. As a body politic, the church can forge ways of working with other bodies and institutions as resources, but without being naïve about the fundamental differences between them and without compromising their distinctive identity, practices, and theological convictions that constitute their being a politics. Understanding and retaining those distinctive elements also helps avoid the temptation for the church to “imitate the habits of those in power.”

When church is the lens or interpretive model for the world in which they live, Christians are freed to imagine alternatives to unjust cities and broken communities. When the church is the primary politics for Christians, they can also begin to enact and enflesh these alternatives as the church; however, if this paper’s arguments about the local context are true, then these alternatives occur in the midst of cities and neighborhoods where – by virtue of the nature of cities and their neighborhoods – one’s

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26 Hauerwas, In Good Company, 27.
neighbors are known and one’s relationship to them and responsibility for them are tangible and visible. In this sense, it is possible to say that these alternatives are not isolated embodiments, but will and must interact with other politics.

This interaction is only possible, however, because Christians understand the church as their primary politics. This means that the church is the place where Christians together consider and imagine the relationship between the Christian telos and one’s everyday life and world. Translating that telos into ways of living and acting is a complex task that will require all the formation and cooperation that the church can afford; however, it is clear that the church is indeed the place for this work, rather than the “public sphere” or the Senate floor or similar. When these actions and forms of life are considered, imagined, and embodied in particular places, they will surely touch on these other political realms and interact with them in that embodiment, but this process of translation, imagination, and embodiment can only be at home – for Christians – in the church.

Understanding the church as a politics helps Christians pierce the myth that the “real” politics is the politics of the state. However, acknowledging the city as a distinct political realm can also help deconstruct this delusion that has hampered the Christian political imagination and has, arguably, led to the impasse surrounding the engagement versus resistance debate that is currently in place.

Revisiting

This final section revisits the city as a local political setting, exploring the ramifications for the church as a politics in the city, focusing primarily on the ways in
which that local setting “complexifies” the notion of politics, mediates many of the dangers presented by the nation-state that the resistance critique has identified, and presents a unique opportunity for the church to embody a real politics. Cities have long functioned as the context for ethical questions of what truly promotes a good and right existence. This thesis has examined the city’s relevance to Christian scripture and its primacy in Aristotelian philosophy. Others have noted that, from its inception, Christianity has viewed the city as “the standard trope denoting the shared practices, dispositions, and relationships that enable a people to flourish in accordance with their highest good.”

It is a symbol of redemption, the context for eudaimonia, and, in the American context, a vast failure for the building up of human community.

Though this chapter has proposed that the political context of the city is substantially different than a state-centered politics, this remains as yet an unexamined claim. The question remains whether and how the city changes the stakes for discussing politics, especially that of the church’s politics. In what way might a local political setting look different than a national or international one? And can a church embody a politics differently in a city – that is, can it interact with other politics in a way that does not compromise itself? The answer to these questions will begin with the claim that while the church is an alternative polis, in the context of the city, it is not an isolated one. When the church enacts its politics, though it must not be confused with the politics of the world and of the nation-state, it can and will have much to do with other politics at the local level without compromising what it means to be the politics of the church.

First, in order to understand what the local means and what it accomplishes, it will be necessary to differentiate the local political sphere from the all encompassing politics

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of the “state.” In order to accomplish this, a brief historical perspective will be offered on how the local – in this case, the city or the polis – has evolved from its original form of a meaningful political body with complex loyalties, responsibilities, and spheres, to its current status as an invisible subset of the all consuming nation-state. Retrieving this image of the city prior to its diminution within the current historical setting may help rescue the city as a rich context in which the Christian imagination can flourish. The work of political philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain and theologian William Cavanaugh will assist in this reconstruction.

Elshtain helps trace this trajectory, beginning with the ancient city. She notes that thinkers like Aristotle had “a strongly teleological appreciation of the city as the supremely authoritative association that encompasses all others.” In her estimation, the ancient city shaped much of classical Western political thought about the “civic”: to be a citizen was to have both rights and responsibilities.

The medieval city was also a complex entity. Though it was in some senses independent, it was also contained within other jurisdictions – the larger Empire and the church’s bishoprics. One had rights (even women, it seems), but also duties toward what was considered public or common to the whole civic body. Elshtain describes this as “the communitarian morality of the city-ideal” and argues that the distinctions between what and who was public and private were not as distinct as they are now, and only became so “with the triumph of the nation-state.” She continues, “Cities established their own communal rules and their power to do so was part of a cluster of shared recognitions

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29 Elshtain, 162-3.
in the medieval period. Patriotism was local. All inhabitants share in the peace of the city.”

Eventually, however, the nation-state prevailed, state sovereignty was given near-
divine justification, and the division between private (family, home) and public is
complete. This gets further codified in the American context, Elshtain believes, due to
Jefferson’s Enlightenment-shaped emphasis on the (landed) individual, resulting in “the
fear that cities…could easily become ulcers on the body politic, sites of squalor, vice, the
city of darkness, the city as the dearth of the civic.” She goes on to say that “for many
American thinkers, the city becomes a problem rather than presaging a possibility.” In
response, the line from individual to state becomes even straighter as “state control of
cities came to be seen as a defense of, rather than a restriction of, freedom and became
incoded (sic) as such in American constitutional law.” The stakes are nothing less than
terminal, as she declares, “The city as a real civic space was lost; the city as a site which
needs to be administered by the state triumphed.”

Cavanaugh has written that the “rise of the modern nation-state is marked by the
triumph of the universal over the local in the sovereign state’s usurpation of power from
the Church, the nobility, guilds, clans, and towns.” This results in a “direct relationship,
or ‘simple space’ between the sovereign and the individual.” Related consequences of
this “flattening of complex social space by the modern state” are that the local becomes
an illusory phantasm, loses any formative power for identity or allegiance, and ultimately

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30 Elshtain, 164.
31 Elshtain, 164.
32 Elshtain, 165.
33 Elshtain, 165.
    Globalization,” Modern Theology 15, no. 2 (April 1999): 182. This article goes on to extend the critique of
    the nation-state to the phenomenon of globalization, which, instead of conquering the state and its national
    claims and boundaries, merely “hyperextends” its project, 185.
disappears as a concrete reality.\textsuperscript{35} When the universal triumphs over, consumes, and makes impotent the local, Cavanaugh argues that this ultimately results in “detachment from any particular space.”\textsuperscript{36} One can see the fruits of this manifest in the uncanny resemblance of one suburban locale to the other. It has also had dire consequences for the church.

Losing the city – the local environment – as a constructive, formative political sphere helps impoverish the Christian imagination, destroying the web of imagined relationships between oneself and one’s neighbor. If these relationships are not visible or acknowledged in concrete ways, it becomes all too easy to accede to the individualism offered by post-Enlightenment liberal society. This is what Pope Pius XI referred to as “the evil of what we have termed ‘individualism’ that, following upon the overthrow and near extinction of that rich social life which was once highly developed through associations of various kinds, there remain virtually only individuals and the State.”\textsuperscript{37} This notion of the unmediated self and state is certainly a poor foundation upon which to build an understanding of the church as one’s primary politics, one that mediates between self and world in the most fundamental ways possible, shaping and translating the world according to the church’s story, rather than the other way around. If, as Cavanaugh asserts, “Politics is a practice of the imagination,” then the Christian imagination must be retrained to envision the church as the primary political reality through which Christians see the world and in which they learn how to act in it.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{37} Pius XI, Encyclical, \textit{Quadragesimo Anno} (15 May 1931), 78.
\textsuperscript{38} Cavanaugh, \textit{Theopolitical Imagination}, 1.
Thinking differently, contemplating the particularities of the local political context can be a way to break into this centralizing nation-state. It can “complexify” that space, open up new ways of imagining the potential for the Christian life, and it can also protect against this detachment by strengthening ties to particular places, people, and communities.

Moreover, the local political context does not have to mean the city or county municipality. It is the city, but it is also the neighborhood association, the block club, the parent teacher organization, the VFW hall, or the Rotary. A political institution is not just the mayor’s office, but also a community bank or mortgage lender, a 501©3 organization, a union, a regional planning commission, a hospital, university, or the Elk’s Lodge. This in no way implies that the church is like these other political bodies in kind, but to suggest, first, that local politics are distinctive in many ways from national and global politics, and second, that when one talks of the church engaging in (or resisting) politics, it is not only crucial to nuance that term with these images, but it is actually subversive to do so.

The city, then, is uniquely able to achieve what Elshtain calls the “recognition of multiple loyalties and responsibilities.” This is not to detract from the Christian’s ultimate loyalties and citizenship, but filling the vacuum between individual and state can take what is best from engagement (or a move beyond the individual) and from resistance (recognizing the often harmful or even destructive overreaches of the state), and hold

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39 Of course, all of these will employ different views of what a politics is, as we saw in section 1. We cannot here define the various ways in which all these bodies constitute “politics” or explore the kinds of politics they embody; rather, the point of these lists is to suggest that the Christian political imagination – with the church as its primary political home and in the context of the city – can begin to do this kind of work for itself and can begin to explore what that means for the church’s politics in these places, with these neighbors.

40 Elshtain, 169.
them in productive tension. It can avoid a selfish individualism and also defend against the abstraction of state-talk – both of which ignore concrete injustices persisting in manifest ways throughout the city. What is of greatest important for this thesis is that, for Cavanaugh, the Body of Christ in each local place is the ultimate “complex space.”

While the “resister” position presciently calls attention to the totalizing and compromising nature of the politics of the nation-state, it is worthwhile to view the city as a separate political realm and to at least consider how that might change the conditions within which the church acts as a politics. First of all, for the polis, scale matters. Equating the polis with the nation-state, confusing its institutions with real community can, according to Hauerwas, produce totalitarian forms. Drawing on MacIntyre, he argues that Aristotelian forms of community, at least “in the modern world are small-scale and local.” Therefore, in order for the polis to function as the formative society Aristotle imagines it to be and to support the forms of life suggested by this paper, the nation-state does not meet the criteria. It is too large, too abstract, too dispersed, and too impersonal. For these (and other) reasons, it is incapable of achieving real agreement around a common good and cannot cultivate true community.

Second, the visibility (and therefore concreteness) of the city often means that political questions are no longer theoretical. Questions about nations and policies are not unimportant (in fact, many are matters of life and death), yet they often result only in

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41 Cavanaugh, “The World in a Wafer,” 182. In this quote, his meaning for “the body of Christ” is tied directly to the Eucharist, but I think it does not distract from his meaning or his argument to use the phrase to talk about the local church as Christ’s body in that place, without specific reference to the Eucharistic meal.


43 This is the view of MacIntyre on the role of the polis and the modern state, but it is employed by Michael Baxter not only to disqualify the nation-state, but also to encourage Christians (especially Catholics) to think about local political forms, and to suggest the ways in which the church should and does act as a polis. See Heyer, 79, 88f.
abstract discussions. “Political” problems are somewhere else, happening to someone else. They are most often left to those persons who are professionally tasked with dealing with them, or to persons of extreme piety or concern for “social justice.” However, many of the issues and questions facing Christians and churches in cities are quite immediate, inherently personal, and are unavoidable if the commandment to love one’s neighbor as oneself is taken seriously – a commandment given to all Christians, not simply the saints.

Attending to the reality of one’s local context and one’s particular neighbors and the particular issues encountered there can also mean that one may be less likely or less able to avoid responding to them. Being confronted by a neighbor’s need or an issue that adversely affects the members of one’s own community makes them harder to dismiss. Responses to these issues may indeed involve public structures and political entities, as will be seen in the case of Englewood, but within the context of the city, those look a lot more like one’s neighbors than does the “state” as it is imagined on a national (or even international) level.

It is even possible that this kind of political interaction might be likened to Aristotle’s understanding of friendship. MacIntyre describes this as “a shared recognition of and pursuit of a good,” and states that, for Aristotle, “it is this sharing which is essential and primary to the constitution of any form of community, whether that of a household or that of a city.”

Now, it might be rightly argued that the church cannot wholly share a “common allegiance to and a common pursuit of goods” with these other political bodies or even those neighbors who do not share Christian claims about

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heavenly, rather than earthly, allegiances and citizenship.\textsuperscript{45} If these are separate politics, one cannot assume the single, unifying \textit{polis} that Aristotle assumes.\textsuperscript{46} This is a worthy critique. However, there may be bonds developed between these persons and these entities that are constructed on some semblance of this friendship model, where the church, while not abdicating its own politics, can find common cause and common work with other politics in pursuit of those goods that they do share. Because the world is, foundationally and by definition, “not the church,” it cannot understand the good for human life as that is confessed by the Christian church. But in a local setting, where theoretical becomes concrete, where people can see and know one another, and where the scale of goals and impediments is much more manageable and able to be comprehended than those of national or global scale, it may just be that it is easier to find human goods held in common than one might think. While they may not share all, the scale and the personal connections within a city may enable a hint of Aristotle’s idea, where “friendship [is] the sharing of all in the common project of creating and sustaining the life of the city, a sharing incorporated in the immediacy of an individual’s particular friendships.”\textsuperscript{47}

It will be readily admitted that the resistance model is right to claim that the politics of the nation state are, in many ways, incompatible with foundational Christian beliefs. Warmaking; the development, purchasing, and sales of lethal weaponry; and the death penalty can all be seen as forms of violence antithetical to the life and teaching of

\textsuperscript{45} MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, 156.

\textsuperscript{46} The idea that this friendship presupposes the \textit{polis} is taken from Brad Kallenberg’s article, “The Master Argument of MacIntyre’s \textit{After Virtue},” \textit{Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre}, ed. Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg, and Mark Thiessen Nation (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997). This article is what originally led me to this section of MacIntyre’s thought.

\textsuperscript{47} MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, 156.
Jesus Christ and Christ’s church. However, what happens when “politics” no longer means only “nation-state”? Can their objections really be overcome? In order to answer that, one must consider the ways that the politics of the nation-state are not the same as the politics of the city, county, neighborhood association, block club, and so on. These are real political institutions with political issues, yet they do not have the same violent capabilities as the national or international political power has.

Those who are careful to draw a fundamental distinction between the politics of nations and the politics of the church often object to the former’s use of violent, coercive power and its incompatibility with kingdom politics, as Christians understand that term. Is it possible, then, for these other political forms to exist without violence or coercion? It can at least be said that because they have less money, less power, and less violent means, the politics of the local can perhaps have fewer illusions about the power and possibilities of their politics. This, according to Hauerwas, would mean they might more closely resemble the church’s politics. Again, this is not confusing the world’s politics – be it city, local, or otherwise – with the church’s politics. It is only to suggest the ways in which the various forms of local politics might serve as a resource for, have some collaborative potential for, or even find solidarity with the politics of the church.

48 There is of course the issue of police force and access to deadly weaponry. This is a valid objection that deserves further discussion in order to parse. Unfortunately, that will require more focused analysis and attention than can be conducted here. I will, however, point out that the official city governance structure is only one of the local political forms offered here. I hope it will be enough merely to acknowledge this objection and suggest that it is a good one, as it means we are already on the way to a more nuanced understanding of government and politics than simply that of nation-states.

49 For insight on Hauerwas’ thought on power, control, and illusion, see Rasmusson, 216.
Conclusion

No doubt the ability to parse these questions and learn to see the different political spheres in which one lives will require ethical training and reasoning skills in order to be able to determine how to act in each. This is surely a difficult task, but two conclusions are suggested: first, that the church is certainly the place where this vision and interpretive ability will be formed and honed, and second, that however complex and inexact it may be, it is a better ethical task than the stalemate one often reaches if the only two choices are “engagement” or “resistance.”

It will hopefully have been clear up to this point that both positions offer worthy critiques and valuable insights for theological reflection on Christian understandings of politics; however, this final section has argued that the particular and contingent realities of the local context renders the choice between one or the other as a false (and unhelpful) choice. The fatal flaw of engagement is that it cedes too much to the world – viewing it (and therefore confirming it) as the real mechanism for pursuing God’s kingdom reign on earth. Resisters have grasped the dangers of this position, and their observations are the crucial first steps toward seeing the church as a politics. Indeed, they have even grasped the importance of the local as a political category; however, their major shortcoming is that, though they acknowledge that the local holds the key to much good work, they have as yet failed to articulate how the church’s politics participates in the world of other politics. What is needed, then, is an articulation of how and when this politics (of being church) interacts with other politics. Their thoughtful critique of the usurping power of the nation-state has prompted much theological reflection regarding the political role of the church and the concrete reality of the local, but in their attempt to be theological, they
have not given an adequate account of how to act in that local setting – of how the church is to be the church among its neighbors who are not the church.

It is to this task we now turn. Making sense of the world is an interpretive task that must attend to the historical contingencies of one’s social and political context. Moreover, even when these realities are accounted for, the church’s “agenda” is not to be confused with the world’s: the church, as its own politics, has a task of its own.\textsuperscript{50} The other argument of this paper, however, has been that this task, when enacted and realized in actual, local circumstances, will be able to involve itself with other political institutions and practices, and perhaps find common cause and common work with its neighbors. Once the Christian imagination has been trained to see the church as its primary political reality, it may be freed to imagine many different kinds of good work, and perhaps even good political partners. At the very least, the scale of the city, its ability to present the concrete reality of one’s immediate neighbors and their needs, its limited resources, and its restricted potential for violence and coercion present a singular context for considering this possibility. Though its task is not synonymous with these other politics, it may be possible that the church can be involved in imagining and working with other local politics without naively compromising the their own politics. Enacting this politics – as an embodied reality – can challenge the politics of liberal society without being reduced to merely seeking relevance to or influence over a politics elsewhere.

The following chapter will consider how this has been embodied in ECC and their experience in center city Indianapolis, whether they have met this definition of a “politics,” and the ways in which ECC’s politics do and must interact with other politics.

\textsuperscript{50} See Rasmusson’s description of this strain of Hauerwas’ thought, \textit{Church as Polis}, 215.
in their neighborhood, community, and city (without compromise or accommodation of their political identity). It is hoped that this will be a very small, first step toward that articulation that is needed from (and hoped for in) the resister critique.
Chapter IV: The Politics of Englewood Christian Church

Thus says the Lord of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets.

Zechariah 8:4-5

Thus far, it has been argued that the church is a politics, and that, when it functions as a primary politics for Christians, it shapes the Christian imagination around that truth. When the “reality” of the world is seen and ordered through the story and the life of the church, the Christian imagination can be set free to imagine an alternative way of living and acting in that world – a way defined by the Christian telos and embodied in the shape of the church. It has also been argued that the city is a moral good for Christians, that the welfare of Christians is linked to the welfare of the city, that it provides a unique context in which to practice the Christian life, and that it has a redemptive role to play in the history of God’s salvation economy. Moreover, when the church is this kind of politics, and when it is enacted in the midst of this local context, Christians may be freed to imagine their ‘political’ life in new and creative ways.

With all of this as the context for and underlying meaning of this argument, this chapter will propose that Englewood Christian Church is an example of the church as this kind of politics, and that the forms of life and work that have emerged within this life as a politics are working toward the shalom of their neighborhood and their city, while still avoiding aiming at, and legitimizing, the politics of the state (or any other politics) over the church’s politics – the engager’s temptation and the resister’s fear.
Englewood can certainly be said to be involved in the political life of their city, yet they understand that role as undertaken by the congregation, as a body, rather than as assembled individuals, as a voting bloc, a constituency, or as an aggregate of advocates for various policies or programs. That involvement is not the church’s goal, but it is the natural result of their theological and ecclesial convictions. They understand that their primary political activity is participation in the shared life of the church, and that through modeling this alternative life together as the Body of Christ, they are fulfilling their purpose as the church. This life, however, extends into many parts of the lives of its members, of its neighbors, and of the other political institutions within their city.

However, it is impossible to understand their present situation without telling the story of how they reached these conclusions and how they began to conceive of the shape that their life and work now take. Therefore, this chapter will attempt to narrate this story, fleshing out each of the above claims in turn, drawing on the history of Englewood as told by its pastor and members. To tell this story, this chapter will examine their practice of congregational conversation and discernment, their professed identity as the Body of Christ, and their convictions about the shared life of the church.¹ The difficulty will be that these three aspects of their story are not separate, but are intimately connected and function together to produce the shape of their politics. However, by understanding their theological convictions and their ecclesial practice of communal discernment, it will

¹This can be by no means a complete telling of the story of Englewood – even if that were possible, it is not the goal of this project. Neither will it stand in as a replicable model that can be extracted from its context and placed inside another. Rather, their story will help illuminate many of the claims from the previous chapter regarding what it might mean for the church to be a politics. It will attend to the story of a particular church in a particular urban area, making concrete what has been somewhat theoretical until now. Since it is the argument of this paper that a city provides a singular context for the church’s politics by doing just this work (making political problems and solutions concrete, giving them faces and thus exacting certain demands on the church by their proximity and urgency), it may prove to be a valuable theological exercise – not to mention sound methodology – to consider these political claims as they have been embodied by particular people in real places with unique histories.
be clear that Englewood Christian Church is, indeed, a politics, and that as a politics, they are discovering how to reclaim the redemptive potential of their own city. The chapter will conclude by characterizing the nature of Englewood’s interaction with other politics in their city.

*Congregational Conversation*

Englewood’s practice of congregational conversation and discernment is at once a way of being a politics and also the way the members of the church have understood that they are such a thing. By assembling together regularly to discern together who and what they are, as well as how best to live, work, and act together in light of who they are, they have become a people with a shared identity, a common history, and an ongoing argument about the goods they hold in common and the end toward which they are headed. And in the process of learning how to do this together, they have become better able to recognize those goods, better able to participate in discussion and make arguments about them, and better able to imagine what forms of life might best reflect and move them toward that end. The organization of this section will follow this trajectory.

As it has been outlined in the introduction, changes in the city affected the church – its identity changing alongside the rapid physical, economic, and population shifts

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2 This is, of course, the very definition of politics offered in the previous chapter as an alternative – and truer – way to understand politics. This section will give glimpses of how difficult these conversations are, but will hopefully show how the church can be (and ought to be) the home for these conversations, as the previous chapter suggested.

3 This is obviously a MacIntyrian perspective; namely, that these congregational conversations meet the definition of a practice, which he defines as a “coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended,” Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2nd ed., 1984), 187. Certainly ECC’s practice of Sunday night discussions, as defined above and in the following paragraphs, can be said to fulfill this definition.
occurring around it. Not surprisingly, the impetus for the original conversations was an emerging realization that the church was fractured theologically. Members, as well as pastoral staff, realized the extent to which they had disagreements about the church’s theological identity, its purpose, and its teachings, and also that had an “inability to communicate, to talk [to] and understand each other.”⁴ They needed a way to learn how to talk to one another, to talk together, and to reason through many of the questions they had. They needed, but were lacking, “a space, a practice to sort these things out.”⁵ Thus, in 1996, members began to meet on Sunday nights to participate in a congregational conversation “for the purpose of sorting out congregational differences.”⁶ The format has changed little over the years: chairs are set up in a circle in a common room, and many, though not all, members gather to talk and reason together.⁷

The early days were difficult. Discussions were “minimally directed” and were guided by three convictions, established in advance: the church must pursue one-mindedness (1 Cor 1:10; Eph. 4:3; Phil.1:27; 2:2; I Pet 3:8); assembly is for the purpose of edification (1 Cor 14:26); and Godly discernment must take place in the assembly (1 Cor 14:26-33).⁸ Though it was imagined that these discussions would be a place “where

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⁴ Group interview with Sunday Night Discussion participants, interview by author, 5 May 2008, Indianapolis, Ind., written notes.
⁵ Group interview, Sunday Night Discussion participants, 5 May 2008.
⁷ Originally there were about 50 participants (James L. Aldrich, et.al., “We Need to Talk! Restoring the Practice of Congregational Conversation,” Leaven 15, no. 1 (First Quarter 2007): 38.), and according to member estimates, around one-quarter to one-third of church members participate on a regular, ongoing basis. They estimate that regular church attendance varies from 120 to 140 persons, and 40 to 45 people are usually present at each meeting. Group interview, Sunday Night Discussion participants, 5 May 2008.
⁸ Not only do they utilize Christian scripture as a guide for this task, but they also claim a history for this as a Christian practice, citing a “rich tradition” of Christian dialogue drawing on a vast range of resources from Christian history. They read Paul as “prescrib[ing] the practice of congregational conversation to the Corinthian church (1 Cor 14:26-40) as a means of ordering their assemblies” and argue for the role of debate in Acts. They cite Cyprian, who declares that the kingdom of God is in “the faith of
these convictions were practiced,” they found that they lacked the skills to do this well.\(^9\)

According to the pastor, the church had no prior practice of real, deep conversation – and no rules.\(^{10}\) It is not surprising, then, to hear members talk of how tense those early meetings were. Pastor Bowling describes the process as unlike anything he had ever been a part of, even recalling a couple of Sunday nights that he wanted “to throw up beforehand, just anticipating the tension.”\(^{11}\) Participants remember that “[s]ometimes people would storm out; other times we would be denounced and encouraged to quit talking and get on with doing the church’s business.”\(^{12}\) Much of the disconnect emerged not only from their divergent views, but also (and perhaps primarily) because they had not yet learned how to talk together. Disagreements arose not only due to the conversation’s subject matter, but also the manner of questioning. Participants now admit to being insensitive, even without meaning to be. Rather than achieving the unity they sought, they had created an environment that was “unpeaceable.”\(^{13}\)

The church recognizes the ways they have failed as much as they own their successes. In the beginning they were much “like a toddler taking its first steps – more falling than walking.”\(^{14}\) And the cost was great: some people left the church over it, and many others left the conversation itself. Some note that it was “widely condemned by

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10 Mike and Lisa Bowling, interview by author, 5 May 2008, Indianapolis, Ind., written notes.
12 Aldrich, et.al., “We Need to Talk!”, 38.
those who only heard about it and by many who found it too intense and intrusive."\textsuperscript{15} If they can claim any unity now, they acknowledge that has been “hard fought, agonized over, suffered for.”\textsuperscript{16}

Englewood has discovered that the practice of politics is difficult; yet, its yield is rich. Even throughout all the tension and volatility – and meetings admittedly continue to be “intense” – those involved note that the number of conversation participants has stayed “fairly constant” over the last fourteen years and point to its continuation today as a testimony to their mutual devotion.\textsuperscript{17} Members believe the longevity can be attributed to their growth in the practice and in their commitment to one another: they have learned to listen to each other, to “stick it out,” and “to care about each other enough to stick with it.”\textsuperscript{18}

Though there has been some agreement about many issues, they note that “the list of issues upon which we cannot agree is lengthy.”\textsuperscript{19} “But,” they claim, “we have come to realize that our relationship with one another is more important than those differences.”\textsuperscript{20} The practice of assembling and talking together has forged a unity that can withstand these pressures. Gathering regularly and working through questions about their own identity, their beliefs, and their purpose has not only enabled them to attempt to answer those questions, but it has created a body of people who now see themselves as a community in a deeper way. The practice of congregational conversation has helped teach them what it means to be a congregation. As they have talked, they say that they

\textsuperscript{15} Aldrich, et.al., “We Need to Talk!”, 38.
\textsuperscript{16} Bowling, interview, 5 May 2008.
\textsuperscript{17} Aldrich, et.al., “We Need to Talk!”, 38. The reference to the intensity of meetings came from a discussion member, Group interview, Sunday Night Discussion participants, 5 May 2008.
\textsuperscript{18} Group interview, Sunday Night Discussion participants, 5 May 2008.
\textsuperscript{19} Aldrich, et.al., “We Need to Talk!”, 38.
\textsuperscript{20} Group interview, Sunday Night Discussion participants, 5 May 2008.
have “learned to respect each other, to value each other and each other’s talents,” and as they have done so, they have also better learned how to talk to one another.21

Even those who continue to have questions about the practice remain because, “they know they are loved, so they feel part of it, even if they don’t understand it.”22 Thus, the political act of assembling and reasoning together, and articulating and seeking agreement about what is held in common among them, has, in fact, produced a political body. This body has grown in its ability to reason together, but also in its understanding of the ways in which it is a body. One member calls this understanding “a sense that we really are family and the commitments we have to each other are very real and deep. I guess it’s what communion is…it gives us a chance to renew our vows to each other each week.”23

It is within this framework and context that the church has been able to discuss those questions of identity and belief that originally prompted the conversation. They have also delved into questions about what kind of church life might best embody their identity and purpose. Over the years, they have taken on topics ranging from the nature of Scripture (including a two year-long study of Ephesians 4, never even getting past the

21 Group interview, Sunday Night Discussion participants, 5 May 2008. Richard Mouw, in his work Pluralisms and Horizons, claims that dialogue is a “crucial means” of creating and facilitating covenant partnerships among Christians – partnerships for which humans are created and which fulfill a “profound human need,” 105. He sees this kind of “dialogic community” or “community of discernment,” at least in the church, as God’s provision for the “mandat[e] to work together at discerning God’s will…an ongoing process whose end point will be reached only in the eschaton.” Mouw, Pluralisms and Horizons: An Essay in Christian Public Philosophy (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 103-104.

22 [Lisa] Bowling, interview, 5 May 2008. Lisa cites the example of an elder and his wife who have said they wanted to leave (multiple times, in fact) but decided to stay because “they had never been in a place where people really loved each other.” What a crucial insight this couple has discovered. Even if they have not grasped the way that this practice constitutes a political community – a polis – they have perceived the community that has resulted from it. They are members of that community because they participate in its political practices, but also because they have experienced an engrafting – being loved and reconciled into a body that finds their identity in their commitment to one another.

23 Group interview, Sunday Night Discussion participants, 5 May 2008.
first sixteen verses)\textsuperscript{24} to God’s mission for the church, and even the tension between the
kingdom of God and U.S. citizenship.\textsuperscript{25} However, they sum up the recurring themes of
their conversation as “the gospel, the church, the mission of God, the nature of man and
even the meaning and practice of congregational conversations.”\textsuperscript{26}

And if this practice has enabled them to better discuss and answer questions
together about who they are and what they believe, it has also helped them imagine
together what forms of life might best express and embody these truths. In this way, these
conversations construct an alternative space where the church can enact their politics.
They can consider and imagine together what this alternative political life might involve,
and in the process achieve – as Englewood has done – a shared understanding of the
church as this politics, becoming formed by and according to its political story (rather
than the political history of the nation-state).

What is also occurring through this process of learning to love and value each
other – and to speak to and listen to one another because of that love – is the difficult
work of reconciliation. It is no doubt an arduous task, but it is one to which Christians,
and specifically the church, is called. Although they cannot claim unity, it is what they
seek – and the process of being reconciled is both a step toward unity and also a
statement of their commitment to one another even where unity and one-mindedness are
not yet possible. Though they seek to be of one mind, they declare it is more important
that they are being reconciled, even as their differences persist, claiming that they “have

\textsuperscript{24} [Lisa] Bowling, interview, 5 May 2008.
\textsuperscript{25} Bowling, “Turnaround,” 5.
\textsuperscript{26} Aldrich, et.al., “We Need to Talk!”, 38. Exclusive language in original.
gained the awareness that God has brought us together, and so our mutual submission and care take priority over agreement.”

As they work together toward this goal, witnessing the “uniting power of the Spirit,” which they experience “only to the extent that we have died to our selfish natures and are willing to let God speak and work through us,” they are being formed according to this alternative politics. They are both shaped by it and are transformed into people who can participate in it. As they are formed, they become people who can see the whole of their lives – their worship, their work, their city, and their neighborhood – in light of that story and its telos.

Thus, the Sunday night congregational conversation represents a political act of assembling and reasoning together about the identity, goods, and purpose of one’s political community, but in the process of talking, listening, and reasoning together, they have become reconciled – a people gathered and shaped by a common story and a common life – in short, a politics. The practice produces a politics. While conversation participants do not necessarily use this political terminology, they have grasped its significance. Though they believe that all churches have “been given the ‘ministry of reconciliation’ (2 Cor 5:17-20),” for Englewood, it has been through this practice of

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27 Aldrich, et.al., “We Need to Talk!”, 38. It perhaps needs to be said that the church is quite aware of the darker tones that an emphasis on “unity” can conjure. Rather than producing a kind of ‘group-think,’ or a false homogeneity that stifles dissent, members believe that this practice actually produces a true political unity, where people are forced to confront the ways in which they disagree and they become aware of the different perspectives among them. In fact, members believe that this diversity exists not in spite of this work, but because of it. One member posited, “Having conversations like this over time allows for a real diversity of opinion, rather than is the case with those who do not have these conversations (and therefore try to find a church that is most like you so that “agreement” or “understanding” is possible).” Group interview, Sunday Night Discussion participants, 5 May 2008.

28 It is also important to note that the church understands this reconciliation to be part of their work in the neighborhood, drawing largely upon the theology of Gerhard Lohfink, especially in Jesus and Community, trans. John P. Galvin (Philadelphia, Penn.: Fortress Press, 1984), and his arguments concerning the calling and gathering of God’s people, through which God’s work in the world is accomplished. This is also apparent in their emphasis on “the reconciling of all things,” a concept prominent throughout Jesus and Community, and which they believe names the work they are doing.
congregational conversation that it has been realized.\textsuperscript{29} By becoming a reconciled community, they witness to the politics called church, which claims that all humans are made for and are heading toward this life of persons-in-community. It is already a political statement simply to be the church, the reconciled body. Yet it is also the place where they begin to understand what it means to be the church and where they imagine how to embody it. In their own words, they have learned to see this gathering, or “the assembly,” as “the place in which we imagine and discern the will of God and in which we are energized to undertake the fulfillment of God’s redemptive purposes. Indeed, we are finding that our conversation is not an end in itself, but rather it shapes the way in which we actively bear witness together to the gospel of Christ.”\textsuperscript{30}

And, in turn, the shape of that witness reflects both the unity they have found through this “messy, painful, and costly” process of seeking (and finding) reconciliation through conversation, and also a shared understanding of what it means to be the church.\textsuperscript{31} Specifically, they say that “the purpose of the Sunday night meetings is to talk about what it means to be the church in this place and time.”\textsuperscript{32} Together they have pursued and named a shared identity – the Body of Christ.

\textit{The Body of Christ}

Their identity as Body began as an attempt to locate a theology that could describe the unity they were seeking, one that would express their convictions about “the

\textsuperscript{29} Aldrich, et.al., “We Need to Talk,” 38.
\textsuperscript{30} Aldrich, et.al., “We Need to Talk,” 38.
\textsuperscript{31} Bowling, “Turnaround,” 5. Though costly, Englewood’s pastor claims that “the unity which does exist is real and valued highly because it is costly,” 5.
\textsuperscript{32} Group interview, Sunday Night Discussion participants, 5 May 2008.
essential unity found in Christ.” The image of the Body of Christ became an expression of that unity, and served as a powerful image for them, first, as an image of their reconciliation; second, as an image of their witness; and third, as a reminder of their connection to the place where they enact and enflesh this Body.

As an illustration of reconciliation, the biblical image of the Body of Christ was a more fitting image of the hard-fought unity they were pursuing – its complexity well representing their desire to express a unity that was deeper than getting along or seeking superficial forms of community. The image of a body connotes a means of binding disparate elements together – a picture of a unity that depends upon reconciliation. They began to view the church not “as an institution or an organization” but as “a living organism.” For them, “this distinction required this fragmented congregation to identify the natural ways of real love which actually holds [sic] a ‘body’ together (Eph. 4:16).” Because this understanding of the church created an awareness of the need for these binding elements, “members began to look for ways to deepen relationships with one another, instead of looking for superficial, quick and useless organization fixes.” The image enabled them to see the ways in which they were not yet a Body, and also pointed to what was needed in order to do so.

Furthermore, this reconciled Body becomes a witness to the world because it is reconciled. They believe that the church is called to proclaim the gospel, but “the real

33 Bowling, “Turnaround,” 4. Robert Schreiter’s argument that theology is intended for “the community itself, to enhance its own self-understanding” is helpful here (Schreiter, Constructing Local Theologies (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 16.). It is in this sense that Pastor Bowling speaks about their search for a theology for their church body. Schreiter goes on to argue that when a community participates in the development of theology that “arises from the reflections of the people upon their experience and the Scriptures,” then that theology “becomes more than words; it becomes also a pedagogical process liberating consciousness and inciting to action,” Constructing, 16-17. This is a most helpful model for understanding the role that the theology of the Body has played in the life of Englewood Christian Church.

good news must be God’s kingdom rule on display through the life of fellowship in the Church."  

Their unity is their witness to the one whose Body they enact – the Lord of reconciliation and peace – and they hope to find ways of living and working together that are indicative of that peace and reconciling love.

In one sense, Englewood is nowhere more this Body than when they are gathered in worship, reconciled around the communion table, which, as Cavanaugh argues, “calls us to be now what we will be perfectly later: the Body of Christ.”

The people of Englewood, however, also believe that this embodiment is concerned with the whole of life and is “immersed in the real stuff of life.” Thus, this witness gets worked out in their daily lives, and they believe that they enact this Body whenever the church and its life function as the locus of meaning for their lives, where their practices are ordered by that meaning, and their daily life becomes a place for thinking about what it means to enact the politics of being the church. They believe that this entails both “individual salvation,” as well as “the redemption of all things in Christ (Col. 1:19, 20),” and for them, “living and proclaiming” this witness has come to mean “church involvement in every area of life.”

At Englewood, to ask what it means to be Christ’s Body also means

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35 Bowling, “Turnaround,” 2. Bowling writes that this life ought to include “the victory of love over selfishness, the victory of hope over despair, the victory of peace over violence, the victory of family over alienation, the victory of sufficiency over poverty and the victory of contentment over want,” 2.


37 William Cavanaugh, “Discerning: Politics and Reconciliation,” in The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2006), 202. In this essay, he focuses on liturgy, with the Eucharist as the central reconciling act of that liturgy. Time and space will not allow a fuller treatment here of the differences between the Eucharist as a sacrament and communion as an ordinance; however, a Protestant view of communion will still suffice for this argument about reconciliation and enacting the Body of Christ.


39 Bowling, “Turnaround,” 6. Lohfink is instrumental to their understanding of themselves as a contrast community (see Lohfink, Jesus and Community).
to ask, “Where do you live, what do you eat, where do you work?” And they believe the answers to those questions should be taken up by the church, as the church.

Their ecclesial understanding of the church as a Body is also connected to their convictions about place, including their awareness of and commitment to their surrounding neighborhood, city, and physical environment. They understand themselves to be “a manifestation of Christ in this location” and “a tangible presence of Christ in this place.” Body and place are inextricably linked. The church as Body cannot be an abstraction: if the church is a Body, it must be embodied, and that must occur somewhere in time and in space.

As Bowling declares, “the Body of Christ language in scripture is more than metaphor – it’s reality.” If so, the church is not a disembodied idea, but a reconciled reality that attends to – as Bowling reminds – the particular place and the particular people through whom God is working. Accordingly, he contends that Englewood now has to ask itself, “Do we embody the life God intends for our neighborhood?”

Therefore, the forms of life and work that this identity assumes – including their presence and work in the neighborhood and in the city of Indianapolis – is not an outgrowth or application of this theological identity, but rather (one form of) its fulfillment. In this, they are greatly influenced by Lohfink’s insistence that “the church as Body of Christ is a social reality…with concrete social consequences for the people of God.” This theological understanding both determines the shape that their politics (as a

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40 Mike and Lisa Bowling, interview by author, 4 May 2008, Indianapolis, Ind., written notes.
42 Bowling, interview, 4 May 2008. Bowling acknowledges the influence of Ernst Kasemann on this idea.
44 Lohfink, 93. Emphasis in original. The connection to Lohfink was made by the church, both its pastor and its members.
Body) takes, and also insists that it must occupy some certain space, with a certain history, and amongst certain neighbors. This place will also help shape that politics as it will and must respond to all its particularities and to the gifts and people represented there.45

Thus far, these first two aspects have worked together to shape Englewood’s story: they understand themselves as a Body, and the congregational conversation enables them to be of one mind about this identity. In their own words, this unity is important to ensure “that all the parts in the Body of Christ are getting the same signal – so that the leg and arm are getting the same signal so that you can do work as a body – as the mature man in Christ.” Their identity as Body, and their one-mindedness about that identity, is the “so that” – it is what enables the work of the church. And the third aspect – their life together – is what makes it possible.

A Shared Life

The church’s identity as the Body of Christ, along with the shared life and common work that have emerged alongside their weekly conversations, have enabled Englewood to imagine – together – what kind of life might be required by that identity.46

45 As to this conviction about particular gifts, the church is guided by 1 Cor. 12 (esp. vv. 13-14), and “taking seriously that this was written to a specific congregation in a specific place,” Bowling believes that Paul’s logic is that the life/presence/spirit of God indwells each person, and that this is made manifest in gifts (in and for each member). That manifestation is directed as God wills it, in particular directions at particular times in particular people. To pretend to know what that will is and what it looks like is arrogance; rather, the church should seek to become more and more aware of the particular gifts present in particular people. These gifts will determine the shape of the church’s politics as well. Bowling, interview, 5 May 2008. This is a particularly fruitful place to talk about the virtue of prudence, and much work could be done here that cannot be properly or comprehensively taken up in this paper.

46 It is perhaps important to note that this shared life and the activities and practices that follow (including the creation of Englewood CDC) did not emerge as a direct result of the conversations, but according to church members, happened in parallel with the Sunday night discussions and were “mutually reinforcing.” They do believe that “the same spirit produced both: asking tough questions.” Group interview, Sunday Night Discussion participants, 5 May 2008. As Bowling states, “When members of a
They have found many creative ways to enact this Body, and all have grown out of this commitment to a shared life as a Body. Members are asked to participate in the life and activities of the church as much as is possible—a commitment that provides the time and space within which their political body is constituted, and where they can begin to imagine and embody what forms of life and everyday practices might be required by this call to be the Body of Christ in their neighborhood. These can be generally organized under three headings: proximity, shared work, and alternative economics.

As a Body they began to ask, “What does it really mean to love our neighborhood? Do we really want them to be our brothers and sisters…to sit at our tables…to be in our homes?” For most of them, this commitment has meant relocation—moving back into the neighborhood around the church: today, eighty percent of the church now lives in the neighborhood. It has meant hours and hours of sweat equity to help each other make those homes habitable—not to gentrify, but to bring life back into their neighborhood. They have grasped that in order to understand a neighbor’s need, they must live together in such a way that they confront need, committing to living and working alongside one another, participating in each other’s lives to the extent that they can know one another’s problems. Thus, for them, a shared life means proximity—

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church begin to honestly talk with one another, conversation becomes contagious and life together becomes intentional.” Bowling, “Turnaround,” 5.

Bowling, interview, 5 May 2008. In the following pages, all quotes and church information are woven together from in-person interviews with pastor Mike Bowling, his wife Lisa (an Englewood CDC employee), and various church members over two days of interviews from 4–5 May 2008, unless otherwise noted. Noting which claims came from which place at what time would become unduly burdensome. If the context is important for the meaning of the claim or quote, it will be cited.

Recall from the Introduction that before ECC’s turnaround, eighty percent of church members lived outside the neighborhood. This can truly be called a reversal.

In a Sunday School discussion about tithing as a Christian practice and the faithful use of church resources, talk was not only about how to prioritize keeping up the maintenance on the church building versus helping people in need (“What does it mean to keep the sanctuary heated at 65 degrees when a dear old person in the church is only heating his or her house to 45 degrees in order to eat and afford their
especially for those who need the most care. They have committed to moving elderly members and families with children into homes closest to the church so that they can be seen, visited, and cared for on a daily basis. In many cases, they rehab doubles for senior members, who live in one half and rent the other as income.

For many in the church, it has also meant rethinking the purpose of work, as they have considered how to use their gifts and talents as part of the church. Under the umbrella of Englewood CDC, members have begun to use their skills to find work they can do together, in order to serve the church and be around each other even more: one using her accounting skills to do bookwork for other churches, one starting a church bookstore, some starting a childcare program, and others working in lawncare services.

What is important here is not that this is a jobs program for church members; rather, they are attempting to ask, “What would an economics based on love look like?” The lawncare arose out of a desire to connect area churches and local parks; the low-cost childcare arose to fill a need for low-income mothers facing new “Welfare to Work” regulations. And their way of organizing this work was also a practice in this economics of love. As they tell it, their answer to the question of what an economics of love would look like is: “You need a service. We love you. How can we, in our love, do that service medication?”), but also about what it means to live together in such a way that you know that this person only heats his or her house to 45 degrees. Group interview, Sunday School class participants, 5 May 2008.

It is also worth noting that none of these positions are luring people for their payscale. As Lisa Bowling says, “Nobody makes lots of money, but we all make enough “to do.”” Rather, these jobs make it possible to embody their conviction that the Body of Christ, as expressed in a shared congregational life, entails a commitment to shared work whenever possible. And because of this, their work is ordered toward a different end, and they understand it accordingly. Says Pastor Bowling, “Our work is for the kingdom of God. Our work is part of being the Body of Christ in this place. Our work is an opportunity to support our brothers and sisters because we have an abundance. We work in order to share,” interview, 5 May 2008.
for you?” This raised complex questions and required difficult decisions on issues like a livable wage – what do people need to live on? How much is ‘enough’? But the number that they came to was well below market rate, and thus, both parties needs were met based on an economics other than maximized profits.52

They have begun to look to one another for help and assistance, eschewing what they call the “service provider” model. As they describe it, “The church community is involved with things that other churches may not be – helping with kids, fixing hot water heaters, finding you a place to live…a lot of things that people would rely on service providers to do and we rely on our brothers and sisters.”53 Rethinking a family’s needs and how they are met is a mark of this life together as a Body, as well as the alternative economics required by this political life as the church.

This alternative economics is no theoretical ideal: it often comes at personal financial risk and significant personal cost. One of the most striking examples of this is the widespread practice of drawing on one’s own personal or retirement savings to contribute to the purchase of another unit of housing. Many times, three or four members will come together and pool the equity in their homes in order to secure a mortgage for another household, to be repaid only as the new homeowner pays down their mortgage. In very real ways, members of this local congregation are building their lives around this alternative economics.54

52 Bowling, interview, 5 May 2008.
54 According to Lisa and Mike Bowling, almost everyone with a ‘neighborhood house’ has contributed in some way, and many have done so multiple times.
Thus, their theological convictions about who and what they are not only make claims on them to live accordingly, but their beliefs about themselves as a Body enable them to see the shape of that life – its proximity, shared work, and alternative economic practices. This work is what D. Stephen Long calls “the doctrinal task of envisioning the world, including the world of economic exchange, in terms of the Church’s teaching.”

It has been the sharing of all parts of their lives that allows them the requisite vision for this labor, and it has been the practice of talking together that has given them the shared language and identity to help express it. Indeed, their congregational conversation and common life together has enabled them to imagine what it might look like to have their social, political, and economic practices shaped not only by their faith, but by the church itself.

However, given this paper’s emphasis on the pressing needs of the city and its residents, it may well be objected that their work tends to focus on the members of the church and does not primarily focus on outreach in the neighborhood and city. This argument may indeed miss the point. The church takes seriously Hauerwas’ argument that it can do nothing more important nor central for their city than to be the church in

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56 This unique practice of congregational conversation and communal deliberation often serves as the conduit between what they have struggled to understand themselves to be, as the church, as the Body of Christ, and the forms of life and ways of being and acting that most faithfully embody that identity. As Stephen Fowl and Gregory Jones argue, “Communal discernment…provides the contexts for learning the judgments and rules by which Christians ascertain how we ought to live and what we ought to do.” It does not necessarily provide the answers for how best to embody those beliefs, but it is the way in which members of the Body learn how to ask those questions. Through perseverance in this practice, conversation participants become more skilled in these ‘judgments and rules’ and can better translate them into practice. Stephen F. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, “Scripture, Exegesis, and Discernment in Christian Ethics,” in Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre, ed. Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg, and Mark Thiessen Nation (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 118.
that place. In fact, they believe that sharing their lives, and becoming community to one another, is both the way they are church, and also the way they point to God’s purposes for humanity. Says Bowling, “If we took seriously the salvation of God, the coming kingdom of God – what do we really think is going on? Is there any sense in our heads that the church as real community might be pointing the way?”

What Englewood has to offer others is none other than participation in its own shared life. This life together teaches them about what it means to live well, and as Hauerwas explains, “Obviously, Christians think what we have learned from our worship about living well is true for everyone.” But, as he rightly notes, the very thing that can teach Christians about living well is that gathering itself. By coming together as the church – for worship (which Hauerwas takes to mean all aspects of the church’s life) – those gathered learn to see the world for what it is (that is, not the church). Therefore, by being gathered in unity, in a shared life, as a Body, Christians learn the goods and end of human life and may grasp the ways in which they do not live out that reality in their neighborhoods and in their cities.

This gathering, then, is both a witness to others and also training for Christians themselves. It is a both of these things because their shared life – worshipping together, living and working together, and even reasoning and discussing together – is already a political act. It is a witness to a unity and a form of common life that is just the thing that the false community of suburbia and decimated community of urban life are missing. And it is in doing this – in being the church, the Body of Christ in this place – that they

57 See In Good Company for a fuller development of this argument.
58 Bowling, interview, 4 May 2008.
59 Hauerwas, In Good Company, 158.
60 See Hauerwas, In Good Company, 248, nt. 4.
are able to recognize what is wrong in the city and can then begin to imagine the life that might be required of them in response.

“Political” Interaction

However, it is a central argument of this paper that the church’s politics need not be an isolated one. That is, when it is the primary politics for Christians, and within a local context, the church may be able to interact with other political bodies without incurring the same threats related to the engagement position or the dangers observed by the resistance position. Englewood can be an instructive example on this point.\(^{61}\)

As their pastor unapologetically claims, “we find ourselves up to our eyeballs in local politics.”\(^{62}\) It is Englewood’s conviction that their shared life and shared work recognizes that the story of their church is bound up in the story of their community. It is influenced by and overlaps with their city’s physical and economic changes, governmental policies, social patterns of population growth and movement, and other concerns such as mortgages from banks, zoning issues, (lawncare) contracts with the city, memberships in neighborhood organizations, and many other connections that have been forged as a result of their work in and around their neighborhood.

The church works with women recently released from a nearby women’s correctional facility, helping them secure housing (near the church) for themselves and for their families. They also directly assist these women with financial literacy and

\(^{61}\) In some cases, it may be difficult to distinguish between what work is being done by Englewood Christian Church and which is originating from Englewood CDC. This nuance would require more technical differentiation than I believe is necessary here for this point, especially considering ECC’s convictions about the vast array of activities and work that they believe fall under what it means to be the church.

\(^{62}\) Bowling, interview, 4 May 2008.
management skills, job training, and rental assistance in order for them to become eligible to apply for a mortgage. These direct forms of service help knit these women and their families back into the fabric of the community, and even to the church; however, these tasks are undertaken in partnership with a nearby community center and funded by a local foundation, as well as city funds.63

One church member is the coordinator for the Great Indy Neighborhoods Initiative (GINI), which focuses on neighborhood development, seeking to improve neighborhood assets and quality of life without doing damage to those assets or causing gentrification. Church members involved with this project consider how to improve housing stock, while being very cautious and even fearful about pricing out low- to moderate-income families, or even contributing to a socioeconomic monoculture. While this ‘political’ view of what makes a ‘good’ neighborhood is shaped and employed by the politics called church, there is still interaction with the politics of the city and others. Being concerned about the quality of life in these neighborhoods and about home ownership potential for low- and moderate- income residents means many things: as already discussed, members of the church put forth their own money and stake their own financial assets and security on these projects. In other cases, however, it involves thinking about city policies and mechanisms for maintaining the affordability of housing over the long term. Even as they work directly on “sweat equity” projects, they are brainstorming about city tax policies that incentivize vacant property sales to stable homeowners, rather than investors. They think and talk about the housing needs of homeless and mentally challenged neighborhood residents, prepared to put forth their

own resources and welcome them into their own homes, but also wondering if that work could be leveraged to help yet more people through the use of Community Development Block Grants. They have moved their families into the neighborhoods, but also discuss how land grants might be utilized to stabilize home values, and thus, property taxes in order to keep their neighborhood(s) affordable enough places in which all people can live.⁶⁴ For Englewood, all these tasks are part of being the politics that is the church.

The vision for how they want to live – for how communities of people may and ought to live with one another – has been born of and shaped by the ways in which their conversations and life together as the church have taught them about the good of the human life; however, it is sometimes embodied as the church-in-partnership. For instance, they think, talk, and write about what it might mean for the church to confess its greed, use their own resources sacrificially, and begin to take on responsibility for the poor themselves, rather than ask the government for assistance or tell it how best to spend its money.⁶⁵ And yet, at other times, it also involves seeking the resources of the city government, local nonprofits, and other forms of public financial investment. It sometimes includes weighing in on matters of policy, such as advocating for mixed-use zoning in new commercial development areas.⁶⁶ These other political forms and institutions are not the way that their vision is enacted, but they are thoughtfully considered as ways to make the realization of that vision possible. They are not

appealing to these as the ‘real’ politics, as if they were the mechanism for justice and renewal; yet, they do not shy away from considering them an ally in their attempts to create places where the sharing in Christ’s body can be made manifest.

They are proud that the church’s resources and counsel are sought by city officials, business and banking leaders, educators, law enforcement, neighborhood organizations, and other churches.67 In fact, they see these interactions in missional terms, claiming that “it puts us out there for our neighbors to see us, be curious about us, ask questions about us…why we operate the way we do.”68 In this way, they hope that they can “present a contrast” to these other politics – “a contrast that looks like Jesus.”69 It is through statements like these that one can know that these various actions and enterprises undertaken by Englewood, as a body or by its various members, are political actions of the church qua church and point directly to the politics of the church and its missional activity in the world, rather than actions which point outward to the ‘real’ politics, within which the church participates and cooperates (according to the engagement model), but risks cooption and domestication (the warning from the resistance position). Whenever members can begin to see the church, especially their local congregation, as their primary political (and economic) home, the church is able to equip its members to be able to embody its own political response as church – an important and needed third way, and an alternative to the false bifurcation of engagement and resistance.

68 Group interview, Sunday Night Discussion participants, 5 May 2008.
69 Group interview, Sunday Night Discussion participants, 5 May 2008.
The following conclusion will examine how and why the singular story of Englewood matters to Christians in other churches, in other cities. Given the particularity of this story, what is its significance to the larger theological questions about the politics of other churches in other places?
Conclusion

And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them. Revelation 21:2-3

The story of Englewood is both a challenge to the church and also a glimmer of hope for broken urban places. Therefore, the purpose of this conclusion is two-fold. First, we must wrestle with what to do with their story. How is it useful and what can be learned from it? What meaning does their experience on the near-east side of center city Indianapolis have for other Christians in other places? Second, we will look at those issues and questions that the claims in this paper inevitably raise, but which cannot be undertaken or answered in a project of this scope.

The “Example” of ECC

It seems rather indulgent to go to the trouble of telling the story of a single congregation and its life and work in one city unless there is meaning for other churches in other places. However, one cannot counteract this indulgence by blithely assuming that its meaning is directly applicable in all places or can be easily grasped without the complex work of translation. First, it must be acknowledge that Englewood cannot be a model in the sense that it is not a ‘program’ and is not replicable in all places. Their story depends on their attentiveness to the needs of their particular circumstances, in their neighborhood, with its particular history, and with the particular gifts of the people of
ECC. Their path was prayerfully, painstakingly, and even painfully discerned through careful attention to the realities of their place, and their response is directly tied to those realities and is directly accountable to them.

The city, as I have argued, demands just this kind of attention. In the unavoidable daily encounters with otherness – with both neighbor and stranger – one is forced into a deeper knowledge of the world around one’s self and of the needs of those who are encountered there. Always a lover of place, Wendell Berry has written that “good work is always modestly scaled, for it cannot ignore either the nature of individual places or the differences between places, and it always involves a sort of religious humility, for not everything is known. Good work can only be defined in particularity, for it must be defined a little differently for every one of the places on earth.”¹

Here, Michel de Certeau’s categories of “itinerary” and “map” may be useful. Whereas a map makes uniform (and therefore relativizes) all space, and all the places within that space, viewing a map is an act that is “detached and universal.”² By contrast, an “itinerary” tells “spatial stories,” refusing to allow for a detached, impersonal view and inviting the subject to participate in the story and in the journey it describes. If it is a story, rather than a map, one cannot view it but must perform it. As Cavanaugh describes it, “The itinerary implies not seeing but going.”³ We would do well to heed this distinction. Clearly, a “map” perspective will not do. If, as has been argued above, one cannot and should not attempt to lift the example of Englewood out of its particular place

¹ Kyle Childress, “Good Work: Learning About Ministry from Wendell Berry,” *The Christian Century* 122, no. 5 (8 March 2005): 30. Childress does not cite the original source for the Berry quote. As Childress also reminds us, good work “is work that fits with the purpose of God in this particular place.” Childress, 29.


and simply lay it over another place (replicating the assumption of the “map” model that all space is uniform), neither is it possible to view their story from a detached point of view. If the itinerary is a story that calls the subject to perform it, then reading Englewood’s story as an itinerary is dangerous, indeed, for its “meaning” is, in part, a calling to the reader to begin a journey of her own, performing a politics in her own church, in her own city (or suburb or town), with all the history and gifts gathered there. The story of Englewood does not offer up a static model, but rather, as Cavanaugh says, “give[s] us a way to walk.”

No doubt the prospect of being asked to begin a journey for which there is no master plan is unsettling. Johnson surveys this situation, writing, "We know something of the ends toward which we must be oriented: the civilization of love, solidarity, that justice that is not mere equality in exchange but that is rich in mercy, restorative. We certainly know something about unjust means and disordered appetites. But we lack the blueprint that would console us with its certainty. A blueprint for “building the city of God” would be comforting, but we know that such architecture is mistaken from the outset.”

She also offers hope: knowing how to proceed is not so much a matter of preparation as transformation. It is a matter of asking, “What kind of life would we have to live to be ready to engage in such a conversation, to be ready to be bound and freed by the conclusions we reached? The prudence we need is not just another topic we can brush up on. It is an accumulation of ways of seeing and speaking learned in a certain

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5 Kelly Johnson, “Economic Beatitude, or How I Learned to Stop Being Miserable and Love Economic Ethics,” in New Wine, New Wineskins: a New Generation Reflects on Key Issues in Catholic Moral Theology, ed. William C. Mattison III (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 174. I trust the reader will overlook the mixed metaphor I am creating here between itinerary and blueprint, and will acknowledge that Johnson’s quotes are too beautiful to be missed over such a minor infraction.
kind of common life."\(^6\) This is not, then, a matter of finding the solutions that will restore our cities; rather, it is about becoming people who live and work and worship together in such a way that they can know what the good for those cities truly is. It is not so much about seeking the blueprints for building the City of God right here on earth, but of practicing the New Jerusalem as a means of preparation for its eventuality.

Other Questions

Rather than using this conclusion to summarize this thesis’ arguments and assertions, I have deemed it preferable to use it to clarify its omissions – the first being any attention paid to the condition of rural places in America. That urban poverty is a unique form of poverty is not synonymous with the claim that it is a singular form of poverty. Rural poverty, in particular, has its own causes, its own history, and its own devastating effects. What I have attempted to do in this work is to describe a particular place, and to attempt to do theology in relation to that place – to examine the goods of the city and what it has to teach Christians and the church about forms of human living, as well as what the gathered Body of the church has to offer the city. However, drawing attention to the city as a place does not prevent others from doing theology rooted in other places, with other forms of human living. By setting up a foil between urban and suburban, I did not mean to exclude the rural as just such a place; on the contrary, it was omitted from the critique because it is not parasitic on other places for its survival and may therefore be a very fruitful category for a theology of place.

Additionally, it will be readily admitted that the city is not enough, and that urban analysis alone is insufficient. The city is but one factor in the economics of any given

region, and regional thinking is necessary for any healthy and holistic planning of human spaces. Part of the current mess in cities stems from this supposition that one’s responsibilities end at one’s own geographic boundaries and the unwillingness to grasp how the welfare of city, suburb, and rural town are linked. For surely, there is no such thing as thriving suburbs without a thriving center city: their destinies are intertwined.

Regional planning, governance, and revenue sharing will all be necessary parts of future conversations; however, I hope that this work will help Christians be better prepared to have those conversations.

It may also be objected that I have not made much attempt to gauge the “success” or “effectiveness” of the work of ECC. I grant this fully and without reservation. I did not even begin to try to quantify the work of the church or of its CDC. I did not seek to measure the inputs or outputs of time, money, or labor; nor have I tried to estimate the number of people in the community who come into contact with ECC and its many programs or the percent of the people in the neighborhood who have become involved with the church as a result of that contact. Given the nature of the work that Englewood is doing, I believe that any attempt to measure their “success” in these ways would miss the theological meaning of what they do. Becoming a politics may mean that the church must reconsider how to measure their success. Surely they are not uninterested in results: as Lohfink (an ECC favorite) has written, “the final goal is indeed the eschatological transformation of the entire world,” but he rightly cautions that “this transformation presupposes that the people of God first lives the new reality in its own midst.”

With what rubric shall we measure this? Not only is it difficult to quantify a measurement of

this kind, we must also acknowledge that perhaps we do not even know what
measurements we should use. The work of repairing cities is God’s work, and that work
is not apart from or in addition to our understanding of God and the church’s life in God.
That is, it is given by God, and thus must be achieved through God, and accomplished
according to God’s ways and means. We are human, and cannot, therefore, be immune
to wanting to see our labors multiplied, but multiplying the fruits of our labors belongs to
God.

I also did not interview people outside the church who work with them to
determine how they are viewed by the community, and by their political and business
partners. This was not an unconscious oversight on my part; rather, it was a conscious
effort to focus on Englewood’s self-understanding, and the way in which that shared
identity formed the political shape of the church and informed their understanding of
what it meant to be the Body of Christ in that place. It would, indeed, be interesting to
solicit the impressions of their partners and contacts across the city, and to attempt to
gauge the extent to which those partners understand the meaning of the work that they do,
but these were not questions for this project.

And finally, I must anticipate (and answer) the probable objection to my focus on
the local church as a distinct body. This thesis’ focus on the local church should not be
taken to mean that the church as a politics can (or should) only consist of individual
churches. The local church is not an isolated and individual body unconnected to a larger
whole. Though the scope of this project would not allow such a treatment, each church’s
connection to its denomination, synod, diocese, or other organizational structure, as well
as the connection between churches themselves raises complex questions about the political role of the church.

Moreover, not only is the local church connected to a larger structure and organization of churches in its own time, but through its participation in the church universal, it is part of a Body that is past, present, and future. As Robert Schreiter reminds, “Church is a complex of those cultural patterns in which the gospel has taken on flesh, at once enmeshed in the local situation, extending through communities in our own time and in the past, and reaching out to the eschatological realization of the fullness of God’s reign.” The church is the connection to the local – how the gospel is incarnated in certain bodies in particular places and, as Schreiter declares, intimately bound up in the realities of those places. It is also, he argues, the connection linking the present body to the church in all other places throughout history, and forward to its place in the city that is to come. This connection – or at least the awareness of this connection – can guard against provincialism and keep at bay the fear that work at the local level is too small and “ineffective.” It also opens up the vast resources, wisdom, and gifts of the whole church in all places, for all times, and in its many manifestations, as both a humbling and encouraging reminder to the present community facing its present struggles to be the people of God in their local and particular places.

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9 Schreiter refers to the connection to the Christian “tradition” but it does not alter his argument to call this, more properly, the church. As he reminds, it is this connection to the tradition that affirms the authenticity of the response of the local church. *Constructing*, 22-23. William Cavanaugh also poses the provocative claim that the practices of the church (though he specifically refers to the Eucharist), by their nature, connect believers to the universal but can only be enacted at the local level. This, he says, means that “one becomes more united to the universal the more one is tied to the life of a particular local community.” Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, Ltd., 2002), 5.
The rather stark picture of the city (and of the suburb) painted by this thesis is not meant to discourage Christians who live in these places. Indeed, the picture of the church that it offers is meant to be a challenge, but also an image of hope. If there is to be hope, Christians must take seriously the church’s role as the locus of meaning for their lives and the place where their politics is practiced. It must “provid[e] the devout a space to imagine life and the world differently.”10 If there is to be an alternative way to order their lives, it will happen within its spaces, will exist in its community, will be sustained by its practices that declare a new order that has both arrived and has yet to come, and will be fleshed out by the continued struggles of believers who ask what it means to live according to this reality.

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