

Boston: A Case Study

Donald Brickley, Ph.D.

Background

The city of Boston is made up of many religious and ethnic communities including Irish, Italian, Chinese, Jewish, Black American, and Hispanic. The city's population includes the typical socio-economic divisions. In the early days of Colonial New England, religious life was dominated by the Congregational Church. Later, the immigration of large numbers of Irish and Italians made the Roman Catholic Church the dominant religious influence in the city. Boston's political scene is dominated by the Irish who exert a strong parochial influence.

Port Norfolk

The special case I want to present for your consideration is the Port Norfolk section of Boston. Port Norfolk is a small peninsula with only three streets and 600 residents. The houses are large old homes that have largely been converted into two and three-family dwellings. At one time, the community was considered to be a desirable residential area but most of its original residents have sold their homes and moved to the suburbs. Most of the multiple dwellings that exist today are owner-occupied and/or rented to friends and relatives. Port Norfolk is surrounded by water on three sides and has only two access roads. These physical boundaries have made the community isolated and its residents protective of their life-style. They are a closely-knit and in-grown group. The shipbuilding industry made use of the waterfront during World War II because of the community's access to the sea. When the shipyard closed after World War II, the facilities were taken over by the other industries that allowed them to deteriorate. Deterioration of the waterfront and the community's housing stock over the years has made the neighborhood a substandard area in which to live. The loss of job opportunities in the community has made many families dependent upon various welfare programs and there are large numbers of single-parent households. Drug and alcohol abuse are common problems in the community.

My Involvement with the Community

I became interested in this community some eighteen years ago when I was asked to become the interim pastor at the community church, located at the entrance to this peninsula. After a few weeks in this role, I became the part-time pastor and have been serving with pleasure until now. When I first came to the church it was struggling to survive. It has few members and no money. The church has survived and, in fact, flourished with its mission to serve the people of the inner-city. It has a budget of almost \$100,000, with giving to missions of some \$40,000. It has a current monthly balance of nearly \$45,000. The church has purchased and paid the mortgage on a three-family house next door to it. This house will be used for expansion purposes. It is also negotiating to purchase a nearby two-family house for further expansion.

The Problem for Consideration

The Port Norfolk area is undergoing major changes. The area is about to undergo rapid growth. Growth that will bring a new type of resident into the community. The waterfront dilapidated industrial buildings are being replaced by several hundred units of expensive townhouses and condominiums which will cause the population to divide in a very short time. This influx of new people will create two diverse groups for the church's ministry to serve. One group will include the old residents who are resistant to the changes taking place in the community. They are, for the most part, a mixture of lower-middle to lower-lower class. The other group of new residents is more upscale- the type who can afford to purchase this new waterfront housing at a cost of \$150,000 to \$250,000 per unit.

For 125 years the church has been ministering to the old time inhabitants of the community who have suffered through all the social changes that have created a pattern of living in the community characterized by broken homes, single-parent families, welfare families, undisciplined children, and young people dependent on drugs and alcohol.

It has been pointed out by some church growth specialists that the best climate for church growth is one characterized by a homogeneous population. Some claim that a heterogeneous group cannot function in a social setting like a church body.

The church has suddenly been confronted by these rapid social changes and it must ask itself what course it should take.