

Gentrification in Southwest Atlanta and Its Impact on Attendance and Membership on one  
United Methodist Church

In partial fulfillment  
of  
course 801 – Research Design II

Harriet A. Fairley

### Abstract

This research illustrates the impact of gentrification in Southwest Atlanta and Central United Methodist Church. It will describe the historical movement, the decline in membership, and attendance in Central United Methodist church through gentrification.

## Gentrification in Southwest Atlanta

The effect of gentrification on congregational growth and attendance in Central United Methodist Church has had a dramatic impact on the ministries and effectiveness since the 1980s to present. Central United Methodist Church is located in the heart of Atlanta in the Atlanta College Park District (ACPK). The ACPK consists of approximately 39 churches located from Northeast Atlanta to Fairburn, Georgia. (see Picture 3) Communities such as Vine City, Hunter Hill, Mozley Park, West End, and Westview, where the majority of the parishioners live and have lived, have significantly been impacted by gentrification. Central had a congregation that once boasted of governmental officials and civil rights icons have all but dwindled to a faithful few that continue to support the spiritual and fiduciary obligations of the church.

Rushing (2010) describes gentrification as a process of neighborhood change, which is marked by the renovation of the housing stock, an increase in home values, dramatic demographic shifts. The author states that this process frequently involves the economic and social displacement of existing residents. Central's location downtown Atlanta at the corner of Northside Drive and Mitchell Street is in the ideal location for the sports enthusiast, shopping districts and governmental buildings, and major highways. Gentrification in neighborhoods near city centers that offer both proximity to high-wage employment and supply of older dwellings are good candidates for renovation. Another study illustrated the use of city-defined historic districts in encouraging tourism-driven gentrification.

Additionally, gentrification in the South has focused on the different forces driving "African American communities to nonresidents. These strategies worked in concert with city efforts to use "urban renewal" " [ CITATION Rus \l 1033 ] to remove public housing adjacent to the targeted communities. Such public housing close to Central was University Homes. University Homes was one of the first housing projects in Atlanta that were to house African

## Gentrification in Southwest Atlanta

Americans. The absence of the rent gap in southern cities replaced the creation of publicly funded charter schools in Atlanta. Atlanta's Public school district is a publicly funded charter school district. The lack of traditional triggers of gentrification in southern cities has been overcome with public-sector assistance in Atlanta. The overt corporate participation in gentrification characterizes the process in Atlanta. Smith and Graves (2005) document the efforts of two of the city's largest employers, Bank of America and Wachovia, to initiate downtown revitalization. The banks quickly recognized the absence of a walkable, high-amenity urban center. Beginning in the early 1980s, the banks provided subsidized loans to gentrifiers and legal services, grant assistance, and political encouragement to the city to trigger the gentrification process. The incentives were viewed as necessary to overcome the narrow rent gap and an absence of typical first wave gentrifiers. This corporate participation in gentrification is now frequent in larger cities where the rent gap has shrunk (Rushing, 2010), such as businessmen Arthur Blank and HomeDepot.

. In small-town gentrification seen adjacent to large southern cities. Culbertson et al. (2010) noted "that there are urbanization impacts of cities that extend well beyond the traditional boundaries. Cities are offering amenities to attract sports, all types of entertainment, but not the church that resides in those areas. Proximity to urban centers and their respective amenities are making more remote places desirable residential choices". Culbertson et al. (2010) suggest "that empty nesters, retirees, rural migration, and revitalization of the inner city might be parallel processes; aging populations downsizing to condos in the city may use the equity to purchase second homes in more distant areas with natural amenities. An influx of new residents can cause a change in community dynamics".

## Gentrification in Southwest Atlanta

Gentrification is used to revitalizing urban life by the middle and upper classes. The gentrification process displaces the less affluent. A strong sense of place, lengthy residential tenure, and limited mobility of southerners probably increase the negative impacts of gentrification. However, the social costs of displacement can be overlooked when gentrification occurs on a small scale, increasing commuting costs, and growing cultural preference for urban living promise to increase the value soon.

According to Walsh (2019), Bloomberg issued a report by the U.S. Census Bureau published in a governing magazine, Atlanta is the fifth fastest “gentrifying city, with over 46 percent of census tracts undergoing gentrification”. “This trend has propelled the city to the top spot in income inequality across the United States.” [ CITATION Lef19 \l 1033 ] Walsh also states that gentrification in Atlanta is not something that has not just started to happen. There have been policies put place to prevent the African American population from building wealth through housing. “A lot of white people were able to build wealth through housing because they were able to qualify for loans, and they buy a house, and the house rises in value, and they” [ CITATION Lef19 \l 1033 ] sell it and buy another house.” (Lefkowitz & Jones, 2019) Those policies include redlining, lenders refusing to loan money, or show the property to people in specific neighborhoods. Real estate agents told white people to live in one place and black people to live in another. Communities that were affected by this practice that effect Central United Methodist church congregation were in southwest Atlanta; Ashview Heights, Hunter Hill, Mozley Park, West End, and Westview. Walsh (2019) notes that “not many cities have a highway that runs through the middle of the city. This practice was in the most prominently” African American areas of Southwest Atlanta. The highways divided and demolished African American neighborhoods. However, the Black community since the emancipation Proclamation,

## Gentrification in Southwest Atlanta

Atlanta, Georgia, was historically the thriving place for black-owned businesses and black education. Atlanta was home to a diverse and resilient black community. Atlanta's black neighborhood was set apart from other southern cities, and it was the select few who were able to achieve positions of political and economic power far beyond the expectations of the black masses in the rest of the South. Atlanta's most affluent blacks fought their way up from the bottom on their own. Blacks in Atlanta flourished because cadres of community educated themselves and carved out a place in the city's business life. They built a black education center for black education not only in Georgia and the rest of the country but also in the entire world. Clark College was founded in the basement of Clark Chapel, which is now Central United Methodist Church for students of African descent from around the world. Atlanta is the home of other schools that were started by Black Churches that also recruited students for all over the world. No other city can boast having several black institutions of higher learning as Atlanta that has attracted African Americans to this area.

Atlanta is now the 2nd largest majority-black metro area in the country. As early as 1850, according to the U. S. census, Atlanta has a total population of 2,569, consisting of 2,058 whites and 511 blacks. However, Atlanta's total population in 2020 is 498,044, with African American: 51.85% White: 40.27%. "African Americans living in the inner Atlanta have been moving to the suburbs over the last ten years, and Atlanta's black population shrank from 61.4% in 2000 to 54% in 2010. Atlanta has the fastest growth of whites in the city than any other U.S. city. The white population grew from 31% to 38% from 2000 to 2010".

(<http://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/atlanta-population/>) What is causing the decline in membership and attendance in Central United Methodist church? Have the African American church looked at where they have come, where they are today to know where to go?

## Gentrification in Southwest Atlanta

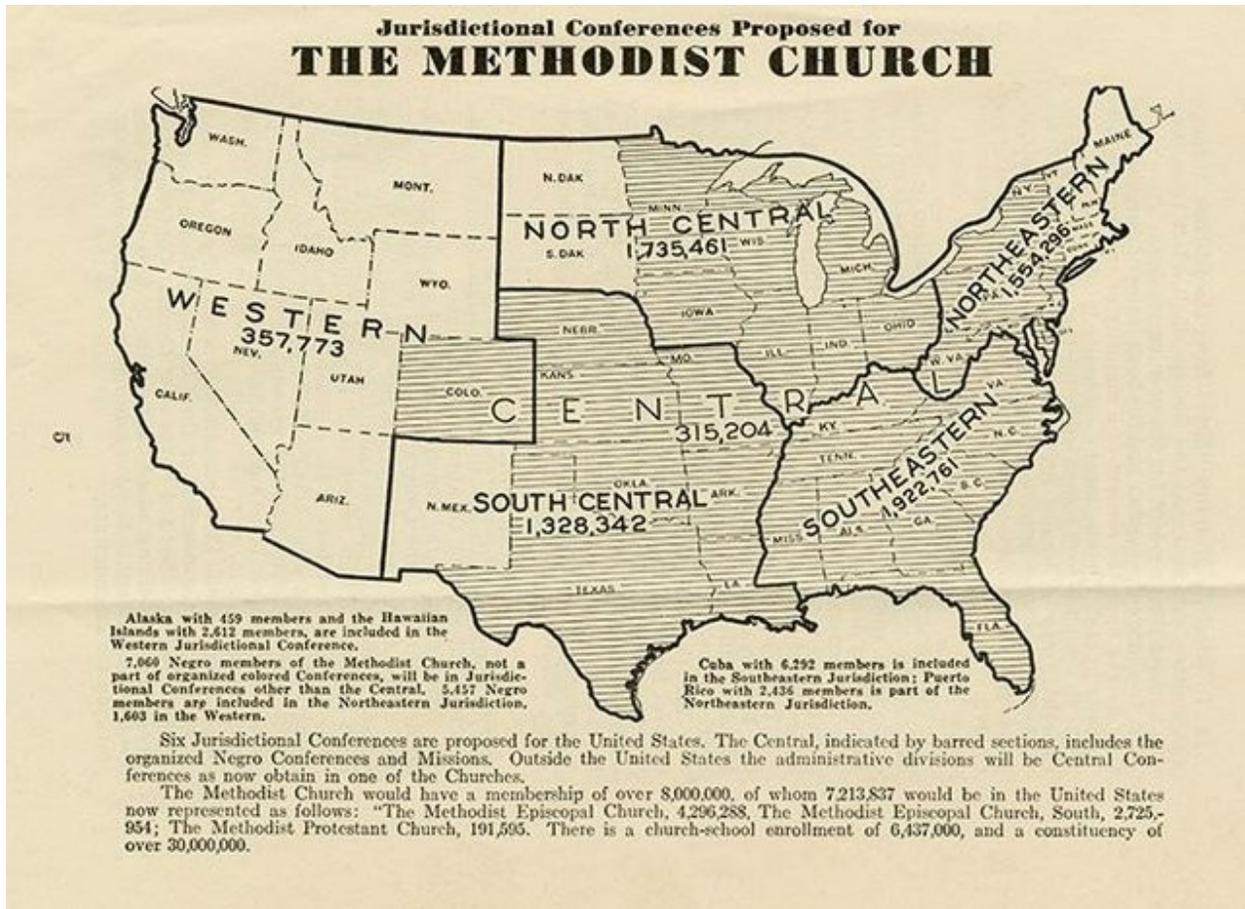
Historically, during slavery, blacks were quasi-members of white churches; however, during the Reconstruction period, Blacks founded their churches. The institution of the church played a vital role in the life of Black people. According to Jackson & Patterson (1989) from E. Franklin Frazier's book "*The Negro Church in America*," the merging of the church an "invisible institution" for enslaved Black people and for Black, who was freed before the Civil War the Negro church organization proliferated. The rapid growth led to the establishment of the Black church as the social, political, and economic center of Black life. The Black American Church was developed within the black community. It was created by a matrix of social, political, spiritual, and economic forces. Central helped to produce a school to teach formerly enslaved persons. Rev. Joseph E. Lowery, civil rights leader, pastored Central United Methodist Church from 1977 to 1986. Central was the place to serve the LORD, socialize, become politically knowledgeable, and serve the community. Because of the church's involvement in abolition, social upheaval economic development, and "answering the call of the downtrodden masses," the church has remained a church with a purpose. During the twentieth century, the Black church served its various purpose well, providing emotional and political sustenance against a still hostile world. (Frazier, 1974)

"The experience of African Americans within the Methodist Church was one of segregation" (<http://pitts.emory.edu/archives/text/rg025aghist.html>) and gentrification. In 1864 the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal church, mainly white leaders and members, created the Mission Conference to serve African Americans. "It was an earlier 1939 merger that created The Methodist Church from the Methodist Episcopal Church, Methodist Episcopal Church South, and Methodist Protestant Church. The southern church only agreed to the union after a compromise" [ CITATION But18 \l 1033 ] created a jurisdiction based exclusively on

## Gentrification in Southwest Atlanta

race, not geography. The Central Jurisdiction segregated African Americans from their Methodist brethren. Central Episcopal Church (Central United Methodist) was in the Central Jurisdiction. (See Picture 2) The Central Jurisdiction expanded from as far west as Colorado, Midwest North to Minnesota, South to Texas and all the other southern states and all of the Eastern states above and below the Mason Dixon line. Central United Methodist and African American Methodist churches reopened in other jurisdictions. Other African American conferences, a total of nineteen conferences were geographically located in the Central Jurisdiction (Savannah and Atlanta Conferences from 1876 & 1895). The Central Jurisdictional Conference existed simultaneously with the five regional jurisdictional conferences. (see map) The Savannah and Atlanta conference united in 1952 to create the Georgia Conference. “These merged from 1964 to 1973, with the Georgia Conference uniting with the North Georgia Conference in 1971 and the South Georgia Conference in 1972”.(Retrieved from <http://pitts.emory.edu/archives/text/rg025aghist.html>) Nineteen black conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church were in the Central Jurisdiction, and the white conferences were in five regional jurisdictions. Seventeen of the 19 black conferences voted against the 1939 Plan of Union. [CITATION But18 \l 1033 ]

## Gentrification in Southwest Atlanta



Picture 2 Map highlighted the “jurisdictional conferences for the 1939 merger. Creating the Methodist Church. Five of the jurisdictions are based on geography, while the shaded area representing the Central Jurisdiction would segregate” African American Methodists from the white denomination. [ CITATION But18 \l 1033 ]

Map from Pitts Theology Library, Emory University. The Central Jurisdiction establishment was not accepted, and attempts began to get rid of it. [ CITATION But18 \l 1033 ]

### The effects of gentrification on Central United Methodist Church

The Methodist Episcopal church was organized by the Freedmen Aid Society for ministry to the educational and social needs of the formerly enslaved persons in the south. The Freedmen Aid Society established a primary school and a teacher training program at Clark Chapel. Clark Chapel (the first black Methodist Episcopal church in Atlanta) was initially located on Frazier Street in southwest Atlanta in the Summerhill community. The church was situated in Summerhill for ten years before moving to a new site at Hunter and Lloyd streets. The Clark Chapel purchased the predominantly white Lloyd Street Church, and the two churches merged. Clark Chapel lost its name, becoming Lloyd Street Methodist Episcopal church. The merger resulted in the formation of one of the most prominent black churches in Atlanta. In 1901 the name of Lloyd Street was changed due to a move (gentrification) to Central Avenue, the name changed again to Central Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1928, Central Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church moved due to gentrification in the downtown area from Lloyd Street to the present location on Mitchell Street to now Martin Luther King Jr. Dr. and the word Avenue as dropped from the church's name. The merger of the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren in 1958 resulted in the current name of Central United Methodist Church. (Jackson & Patterson, 1989)



## Conclusion

Discriminatory real estate practices define “much of Atlanta’s early urban development, such as redlining, the dividing of neighborhoods with highways, and the transition of street names, as streets cross neighborhood boundaries, to” [ CITATION Lef19 \l 1033 ] separate the communities. Major projects such as the Beltline and the construction of the Mercedes Benz Stadium (located on the Westside of Atlanta) directly across from Central United Methodist church that replaced the Georgia Dome in 2017 were an economic boost for the city, not for its citizens or the congregation of Central United Methodist Church. Many Sundays, the members are not able to come to church due to sports activities. The number of members and attendance in Central has dropped drastically over the years due to gentrification. A congregation of 800 to 1000 for many years to now member around 500. Church attendance averages around 200 per Sunday, and new members and retaining members has been a challenge. The housing market has skyrocketed in price to rent and purchase. African American citizens have not been allowed to have affordable and above standard housing. Much of the city’s growth and development kept its distance from African American neighborhoods. The United Methodist Churches profoundly for Central United Methodist is suffering from a decline in attendance and membership due to the lack of resources available to the homeowners to maintain and keep their property and the revitalization of communities by rehabilitating low to high-income housing.

Many scholars have disagreed on the causes of neighborhood change. Rushing (2010) states that “scholars assume that the lessons from studies conducted in established global cities

## Gentrification in Southwest Atlanta

such as New York, London, and Vancouver can be applied” in other cities. Atlanta’s leaders recognized after the Black community outcry of the unfairness of gentrification of their neighborhoods again. In May 2016, the City of Atlanta opened Atlanta City Studio, the city's first "pop-up urban design laboratory. The laboratories focus is on how to shape the future of city neighborhoods." The studio hosts "lectures, open forums, urban art presentations, and other neighborhood and design components." “Atlanta City Studio will relocate twice per year” for residents to interact with staff and share their ideas about improving city design. The studio located on the Westside on Cascade Road. This action of the city of Atlanta indicates that there is a need for further research on gentrification in the Black community, the dislocation of Black churches, and the causes of church attendance and membership.



Picture 3 Central United Methodist Church located in the Atlanta College Park District – Superintendent Rev. Dr. Bernice Kirkland.

## References

- Butler, J. (2018). 50 Years on. The Central Jurisdictions' Shadow Still Looms. United Methodist Insight: A Forum for discerning God's Will for the United Methodist Church. Retrieved from <https://um-insight.net/in-the-church/50-years-on-the-central-jurisdictions-shadow-still-looms/>
- Harris, A. S. (1992). Success, Power, and Wealth City Profile. THE SOUTHERN MAGNET, 22(11), 1-12.
- Hobson, M. J. (2019). The Legend of the Black Mecca: Politics and Class in the Making of Modern Atlanta. The University of North Carolina Press. Chapel Hill Retrieved from [https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469635361\\_hobson](https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469635361_hobson)
- Jackson, R., Patterson, R. (1989). A Brief History of Selected Black Churches in Atlanta, Georgia. *The Journal of Negro History*, 74(1/4), 31-54. Retrieved from [www.jstor.org/stable/3031497](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3031497)
- Lefkowitz, G., and Jones, T. (2019). Gentrification: Atlanta's Displacement Game. Atlanta Daily World, 1-5. Retrieved from <https://atlantadailyworld.com/2019/05/09/gentrification-atlantas-displacement-game/>
- Maccabee, E. (2018). An analysis of Gentrification in Atlanta: How building up Atlanta also has its downfalls. Emory University.

## Gentrification in Southwest Atlanta

### References

Pitts Theology Library Archives and Manuscripts Department. United Methodist Church (U.S.)

North Georgia Conference. Retrieved from

[pitts.emory.edu/archives/text/org025aghist.html](http://pitts.emory.edu/archives/text/org025aghist.html)

Rushing, W. (2010). The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 15: Urbanization. In

C. R. Wilson (Ed.), The University of North Carolina Press. Project MUSE> Retrieved

from [muse.jhu.edu/book/44037](http://muse.jhu.edu/book/44037)