

The Contribution of Religion to Civic Life on Buffalo's East Side

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Description of Project

Does religious participation strengthen the ability of new immigrants to contribute to American community life? Do immigrant religious organizations have the ability to contribute to civic renewal of declining urban areas? How do religious and non-religious civic organizations compare in their abilities to generate civic renewal in economically struggling areas? According to projections based on the 2000 Census, by the middle of this century the United States will be nearly fifty percent non-white, an increase due largely to the influx of immigrants from Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean Basin, who replaced waves of earlier twentieth-century European immigrants (Alba and Nee 2003). While immigration researchers have studied the economic lives of these new immigrants (Nee, Sanders, and Sernau 1994) and religion researchers have examined the characteristics of their religious communities (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Warner and Wittner 1998), there has been little analysis of how their religious commitments connect with their civic lives, the extent to which they will develop identities as American citizens as well as how they understand and participate in American voluntary and political life (Ecklund 2005a; Ecklund 2005b; Ecklund 2006). In an age of what some are calling a declining civil society (Putnam 2000), it is centrally important to ask how changes in the racial, ethnic, and religious composition of the United States will influence how we live together as American citizens, how we experience civic life. While studies of these issues are just beginning in larger immigrant "gateway" cities, such as Houston or Los Angeles, there is currently no analysis of smaller U.S. cities and, in particular, how immigrant religious organizations contribute to civic activities in smaller cities that are struggling economically. The East Side of Buffalo is an ideal location for such a study.

The Study

This study asks to what extent religious participation facilitates other forms of civic life among non-white Americans (particularly new immigrants and their children) and compare their experiences to those of white and black native-born Americans in the East Side of Buffalo. To answer these questions, the study will employ two comparative axes, analyzing similarities and differences in civic activities between immigrants and non-immigrants as well as comparisons of religious with non-religious civic organizations. Religious organizations will be chosen from among those located in the Buffalo East Side Census tract. Initial contacts with immigrants will be made through VIVE Inc. <http://www.vivelacasa.org/> (an organization on Buffalo's East Side, which assists refugees and immigrants and an

organization with which I am in the process of developing contacts). I, or a graduate student research assistant, will complete interviews with the members of each congregation, with a goal of gaining at least three interviews with religious leaders and five interviews with members of the worship center or civic organization who have varying levels of commitment. A semi-structured interview guide will be used for the interviews. Some of the same questions about the connection between religious participation and community service and other civic activities will be asked of all respondents while allowing particular

2

conversation topics to emerge that might be relevant to the experiences of a given ethno-racial group. Specific research questions would include, but not be limited to:

- Does religious participation provide the same resources for civic participation (among new Americans and their children) as it does for white and black Americans?
- How do immigrant and non-immigrant congregations compare in the extent to which sermons and other religious teachings motivate or impede community service, both group-based activities as well as individual acts of caring?
- What are the differences in the ways that religious organizations and non-religious civic organizations (with different ethnic compositions) reach out to and engage with the East Side of Buffalo?

Based on existing research (Putnam 2000), I hypothesize that, when compared to religious organizations, non-religious civic organizations will provide fewer civic activities and have a more difficult time motivating per capita participation in activities. I further expect that immigrants will be more committed to religious organizations than will native-born non-white Americans, because of the resources such organizations provide for the adaptation process *but* that the native-born will be more concerned about urban renewal efforts on the East Side than will immigrants.

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¹ See Community level Census tract information for Buffalo City, NY <http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/>, and retrieved 01/10/07. Whereas Buffalo, NY ranked among the highest violent crime rates for cities of its size, Amherst, NY, merely fifteen minutes away by car, ranked among the lowest crime rates per capita.

See <http://www.amherst.ny.us/police/safestcity.htm>, retrieved 01/10/07.