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# Discourage sprawl; encourage integration

By THOMAS HYLTON

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In the four decades since Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, America has made extraordinary strides toward racial equality - integration in the workplace, an expanding black middle class, the election of blacks to high political office.

In fact, judging from the recent cries of outrage over Mississippi Republican Sen. Trent Lott's favorable reference to segregation, one might conclude America now wholeheartedly embraces racial diversity.

Unfortunately, when it comes to where we live and send our children to school, our nation - including Wisconsin - is little better than it was in 1963.

Although a recent study by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee suggests segregation in the Milwaukee metropolitan area ranks near the middle of the nation's major metropolitan areas, not at the top as previously thought, the region is still light years away from the racial balance that King envisioned.

Prior to the 1960s, segregation was overt and sanctioned by government policy. The Federal Housing Administration worked hand in glove with the real estate, lending and insurance industries to limit blacks to

## Segregation in Milwaukee



Illustration/KRT

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specific neighborhoods. Despite this, blacks and whites in the Northern United States still shared the same mayor, council, taxes and public services, including public schools, because most people still lived in cities and towns.

But because of the spread of the amorphous, low-density suburb, segregation today is far more spacial. Middle-class whites live in newer suburban municipalities where taxes are lower and schools are better. And minorities, because they have lower incomes on average, live in the cities, such as Milwaukee, where housing is affordable but their access to suburban jobs and opportunities for upward mobility is limited.

In one of his apologies, Lott said that "segregation is a stain on our nation's soul," and it surely is. Unfortunately, it's the way most of us still live.

That's why I'm encouraged that the United Methodist Church, with representatives from Wisconsin and 12 other north-central states, recently addressed suburban sprawl at conference in Kenosha, which I participated in.

Suburban sprawl has been rightly condemned as ugly, inefficient and environmentally harmful. But the moral implications of a system that isolates millions of minorities and poor people have barely been mentioned.

From Henry Ward Beecher to Martin Luther King to James Groppi, the church has always been in the forefront of American social justice movements. Church groups often grapple with the local fallout from suburban-sprawl issues such as neighborhood decline and the lack of affordable housing.

But until recently, congregations haven't banded together to tackle the "big picture" issue itself. The formation of Wisdom, an association of Wisconsin church congregations to influence statewide issues, is one such effort. The United Methodist conference is potentially another.

"We've come to realize that sprawl is a moral issue," said one of the conference organizers, the Rev. Nancy Rethford of Christ United Methodist Church in Elmhurst, Ill. "We need to create communities that house people of all ages, races and incomes."

The main argument in favor of suburban sprawl is that it's what Americans want. People favor living and working at low densities, protected by zoning laws that uphold property values. But few understand the ramifications of that lifestyle for society. If no middle-class person wants poor and working-class people to dwell nearby,

Luther King

 [Gregory Stanford:](#)  
Hypersegregation label still  
applies to area suburbs

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then segregation will live forever.

Suburban sprawl could not have happened without massive government intervention in the marketplace, starting as far back as the 1940s. Lavish spending on highways, subsidized by general taxation, opened up huge areas for development. The mortgage policies of the Federal Housing Administration favored new housing in developing suburbs over existing housing in cities and towns.

Public housing projects were built exclusively in city neighborhoods, virtually guaranteeing their decline. Zoning laws, by segregating land uses, made driving unavoidable.

Integration and social cohesiveness can be strengths of traditional towns, because they consist of walkable neighborhoods that mix stores and workplaces with housing in every price range. But suburbia separates stores from workplaces from housing, and further separates housing by price range. By its nature, suburbia is segregated and disconnected. And highly expensive.

Wisconsin took a major step toward promoting traditional neighborhoods with its 1999 Smart Growth initiative, which requires all municipalities with 12,500 residents or more to allow traditional neighborhood development. But more can be done.

The merger of all local municipalities within the county (or beyond) into one government has taken place in Indianapolis, Nashville and, most recently, Louisville.

It reduces the cost of government and distributes the tax burden more fairly. A municipal merger would make Milwaukee more competitive with its suburbs.

I grew up in a white world, but 30 years of living in an integrated neighborhood have taught me to appreciate people whose race, background, income or education are different from mine. Physical proximity, I think, encourages the personal contact needed to dissolve fear and alienation.

A century ago, Wisconsin's Progressive ideals were the talk of America. Perhaps, with the help of its churches, Wisconsin can be a leader once again.

*Thomas Hylton, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist from Pennsylvania, is author of "Save Our Land, Save Our Towns" and host of a public television documentary based on that book.*

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