

A NATIONAL SURVEY OF GOSPEL ACCESS

State of the *Field*

What 83,344 census tracts say about where the church is, where it is not, and which direction the ground is moving.

EVERY TRACT IN THE SURVEY, BY ACCESS TIER



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83,344

ACS 2022 5-year

125,735,554

GDI · GIM v3 · MVI

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Each is expanded in the part that follows.

This paper describes what the GospelGraph data holds about the United States as a whole, rather than about any one neighborhood. It covers 83,344 census tracts, 98.7% of the national index, and 125.7 million households. Eight findings stand out, and they are not all in the same direction.

1.6% TRACTS AT THE BEST ACCESS TIER Watered. Nearly half the country sits at Dry.	10.7% TRACTS WITH NO CONGREGATION 8,899 tracts, 11.6 million households.	2.13:1 OPENING TO HARDENING Where a direction is established at all.	31.4% DIRECTION NOT ESTABLISHED 26,195 tracts the model refuses to call.
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One. Gospel access in America is not bimodal. It is a single hump centred on mediocre. Only 1.6% of tracts reach the best tier and only 1.0% fall into the worst; 46.9% sit at Dry. The interesting variation is in the middle, which is also where nobody looks.

Two. Eight thousand eight hundred and ninety-nine tracts have no congregation inside them at all, holding 11.6 million households. A further 7,938 have none within two miles.

Three. More ground is improving than worsening, by better than two to one. This cuts against the usual telling: 38,861 tracts are confirmed opening against 18,287 confirmed hardening.

Four. The model declines to answer for 31.4% of the country. That is a feature. A measure that always produces a direction is not measuring one.

Five. Improvement and access are correlated in the wrong direction for strategy. The share of tracts opening

falls steadily as access worsens, from 50.7% at Watered to 41.7% at Desert, while hardening rises from 19.6% to 25.1%. The hardest places are also the least likely to be getting better on their own.

Six. Half of American households, 50.6%, fall in a single LifeMode group. Two household guides alone account for 27.3%. Any ministry strategy built around variety is describing a country that does not exist.

Seven. Roughly a fifth of tracts (21.1%) combine high need with low missional viability: the conditions are hard and there is nowhere obvious to gather. These are the places where a conventional plant is least likely to work and are rarely distinguished from ordinary hard ground.

Eight. The emerging deserts are on the suburban growth edge. This is developed in Part VI, and it is the finding with the clearest implication for where people are sent.

I WHAT IS BEING MEASURED

Gospel Desert Index

A standing level, nought to a hundred, where higher means *less* access. Counts congregations inside the tract, distance to the nearest outside it, and the conditions of the households around them.

Tiers: Watered under 25, Sparse to 45, Dry to 60, Arid to 75, Desert above.

Gospel Impact Metric, v3

Direction. Fits a trend across twelve overlapping five-year windows rather than differencing two eras, cutting noise by roughly two thirds.

Reports in composite points per four years. Where the fit cannot separate rising from falling it returns **holding**, which means the direction is not established. It never means the tract held steady.

Missional Viability Index

Whether there is anywhere to meet. Third places at 45%, street intersections at 30%, public rooms at 25%, each scored as a percentile within the tract's built-form archetype.

A tract can be needy, opening and unable to host a gathering.

And two more that describe people rather than places.

Shalom v2 scores five domains into a composite: provision and work, justice and protection, life and health, household and generations, social fabric. Need pressure is its inverse: 100 minus Shalom. It is the level under the movement.

Field Guide v4.5 is the household layer: thirty core guides describing who lives in a tract and in what mix, plus fourteen context modifiers that describe a condition sitting on top of the household type rather than replacing it. Every tract carries a composition rather than a label, and this paper weights by that composition wherever household types are compared.

WHAT EACH LAYER CAN SPEAK FOR • OF 83,344 SCORED TRACTS

LAYER	TRACTS COVERED	SHARE	NOTE
Gospel access (GDI)	83,344	100.0%	1,070 further tracts carry no score at all
Long-baseline movement	83,343	100.0%	of which 31.4% report no established direction
Built form (MVI)	83,344	100.0%	—
Household composition	83,316	100.0%	below the household floor elsewhere
Shalom composite	83,331	100.0%	—
A curated place name	78,679	94.4%	the rest fall back to a tract number
Special-context caveat	18,066	21.7%	campus, senior, mixed: counted, flagged

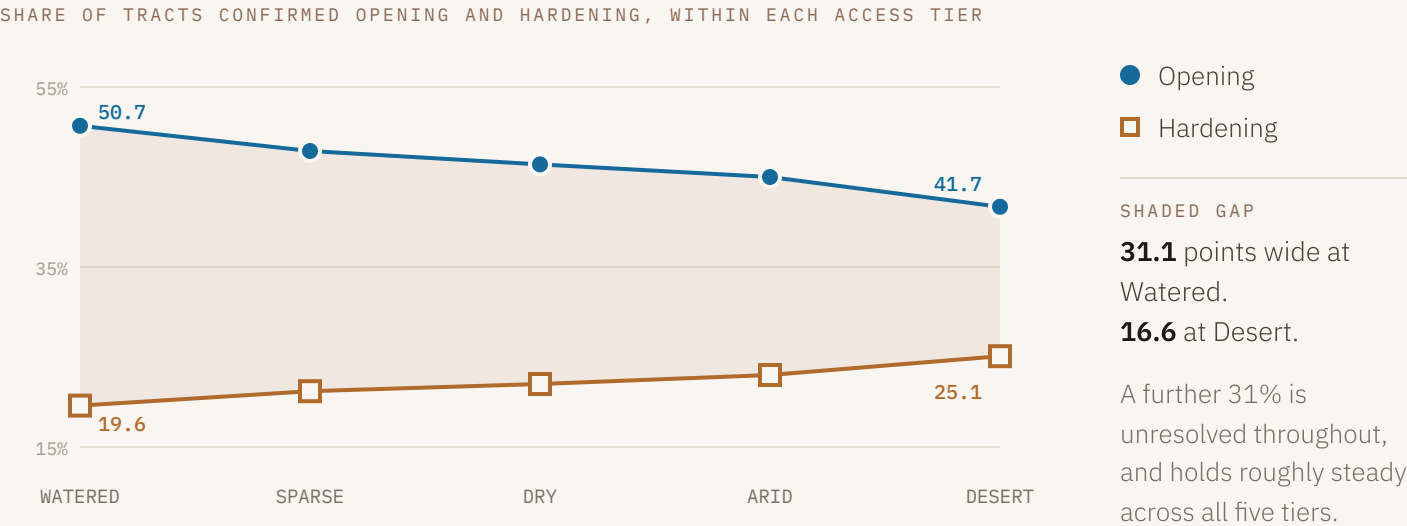
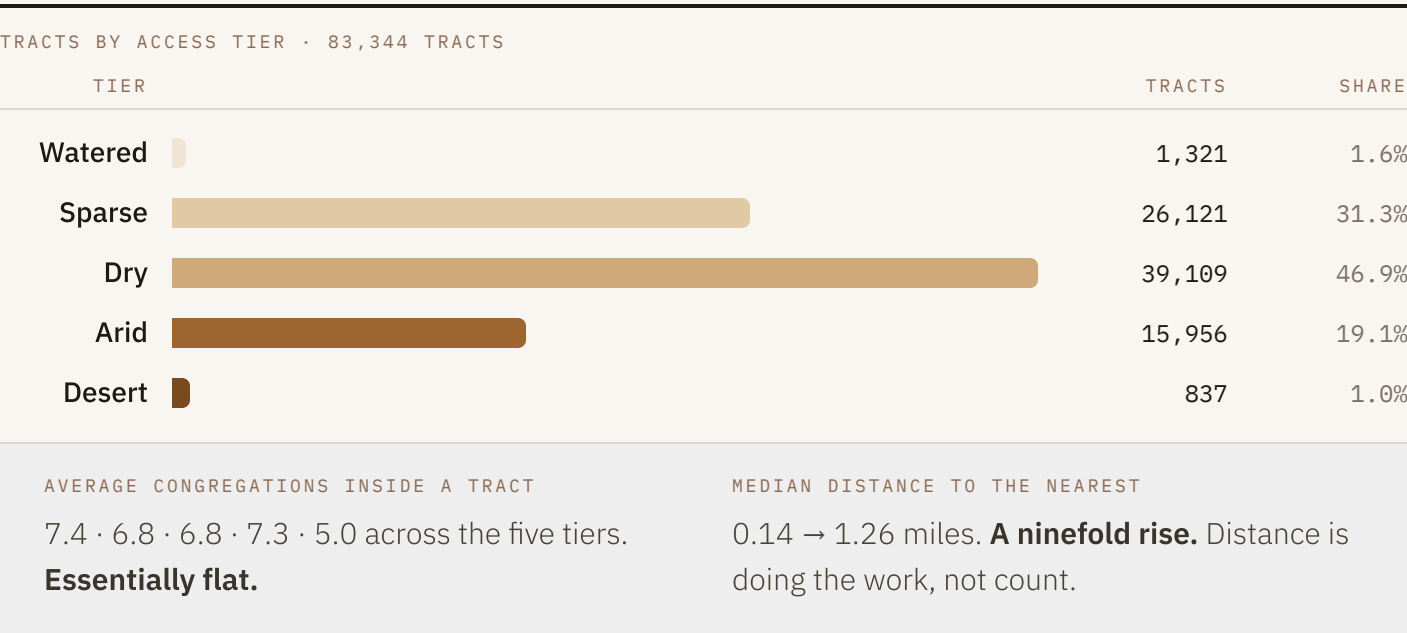
II THE STANDING LEVEL OF ACCESS

A single hump centred on mediocre.

The first thing the distribution says is that the familiar framing is wrong. Gospel access is not a country split between well-churched suburbs and abandoned cores.

It is one broad hump with very little at either end. **Only 1,321 tracts in the United States reach the best tier**, and only 837 fall into the worst. Between them, 81,186 tracts, 97.4% of the country, sit somewhere in the middle three.

Access is not a country split between well-churched suburbs and abandoned cores. It is one broad hump with very little at either end: **97.4% of tracts sit in the middle three tiers.**



The most important table in the paper.

Improvement beats decline across the country by better than two to one, and the shaded band is that margin drawn tier by tier. It is widest where access is best, narrowest where it is worst, and closes at every step between.

Five tiers, and the band narrows the whole way with no step back. The gradient carries more weight than any single figure above it.

ACCESS BY TIER · 83,344 TRACTS, 125.7 MILLION HOUSEHOLDS

TIER	TRACTS	SHARE	HOUSEHOLDS	AVG CHURCHES	MEDIAN NEAREST
Watered	1,321	1.6%	1,320,221	7.4	0.14 mi
Sparse	26,121	31.3%	34,612,298	6.8	0.27 mi
Dry	39,109	46.9%	60,688,972	6.8	0.47 mi
Arid	15,956	19.1%	27,497,751	7.3	0.84 mi
Desert	837	1.0%	1,616,312	5.0	1.26 mi

Average church counts barely move across four of the five tiers. Distance does, and it is the variable doing the work.

Distance is doing the work here, not count.

Read the last two columns together. The average number of congregations inside a tract is essentially flat from Watered to Arid, at 7.4, 6.8, 6.8 and 7.3, and only falls at Desert. Median distance to the nearest congregation, meanwhile, rises ninefold across the same span, from a seventh of a mile to over one and a quarter.

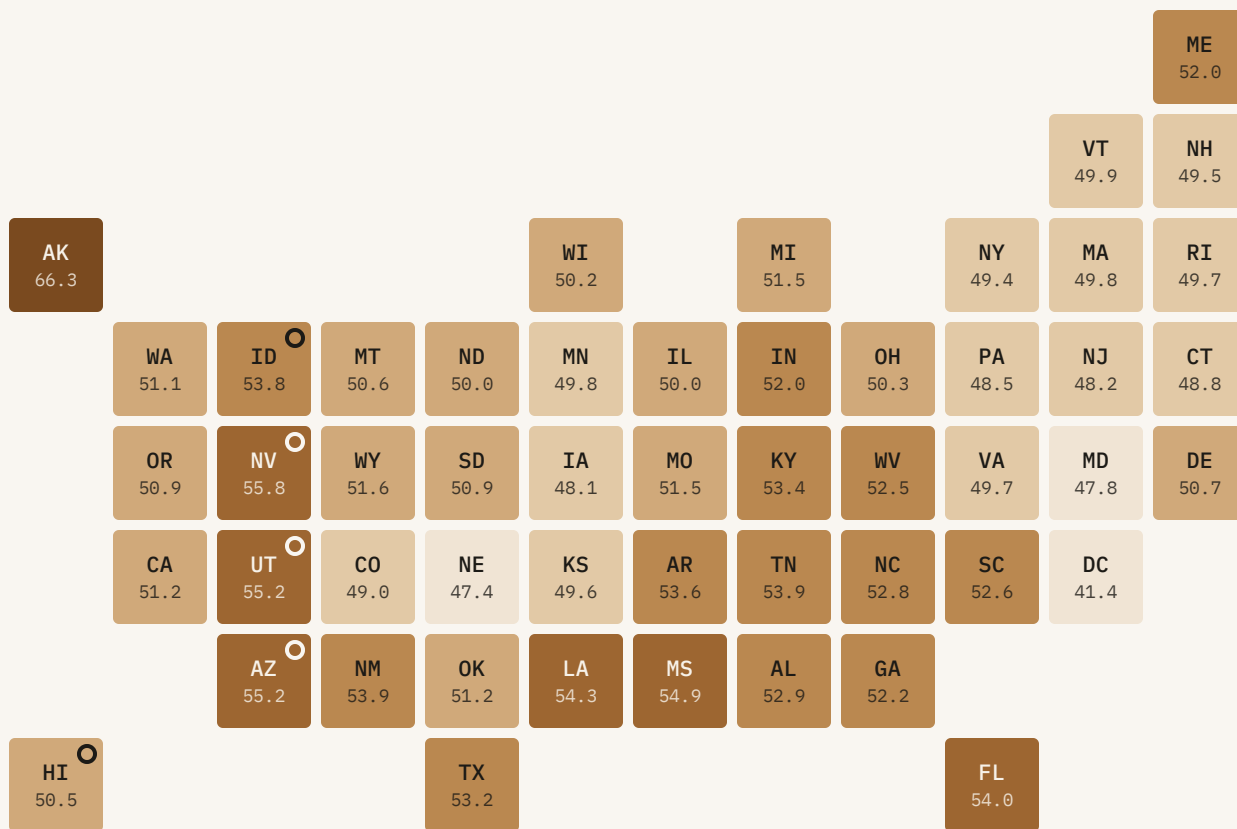
Access is a question of how far apart the churches and the people are, which is a question about how the ground was built.

8,899 tracts have no congregation inside them at all, which is 10.7% of the country, holding 11.6 million households. Another 7,938 have nothing within two miles.

ACCESS BY STATE · HOUSEHOLD-WEIGHTED, STATES WITH 40 OR MORE TRACTS

DRIEST TWELVE	GDI	TRACTS	NO CHURCH INSIDE	MOST WATERED SIX	GDI	NO CHURCH INSIDE
Alaska	66.3	175	9.7%	District of Columbia	41.4	8.8%
Nevada	55.8	770	28.4%	Nebraska	47.4	8.0%
Utah	55.2	709	41.0%	Maryland	47.8	6.0%
Arizona	55.2	1,733	23.4%	Iowa	48.1	2.7%
Mississippi	54.8	871	2.5%	New Jersey	48.2	11.0%
Louisiana	54.3	1,365	5.1%	Pennsylvania	48.5	5.7%
Florida	54.0	5,069	15.8%			
New Mexico	53.9	599	11.5%			
Tennessee	53.9	1,678	2.3%			
Idaho	53.8	456	22.6%			
Arkansas	53.6	820	2.0%			
Kentucky	53.4	1,297	4.7%			

Household-weighted gospel access, every state and the District. Higher means less access. A ring marks a state where more than a fifth of tracts contain no congregation at all.



GOSPEL DESERT INDEX, HOUSEHOLD-WEIGHTED



○ Over a fifth of tracts hold no congregation

*Two deserts, needing
opposite people.*

The rings sit almost entirely in the Mountain West. Utah, Nevada, Arizona, Idaho and Hawaii are dry *and* empty: between a fifth and two fifths of their tracts contain no congregation. Utah alone runs to 41 percent.

Mississippi, Tennessee, Arkansas and Kentucky score almost as dry with virtually every tract churched, at 2 to 5 percent empty. These are not variations on one problem.

Both groups sit in the same few shades on this map, which is the trouble with reading it as a single ranking. The colour says how much access a state lacks. Only the ring says whether the shortage is of churches or of something the churches already there are not doing.

Two different deserts, and they need different answers.

The state table contains a distinction the single score hides. Utah, Nevada, Arizona and Idaho are dry *and* empty: between a fifth and two fifths of their tracts contain no congregation at all. Mississippi, Tennessee, Arkansas and Kentucky score almost as dry with virtually every tract churched, at 2 to 5% empty.

These are not the same problem. The Mountain West needs presence where there is none. The upper South has presence everywhere and access that is still poor, which means the constraint is something other than the number of buildings. Any national strategy that treats a GDI of 54 as one condition will send the wrong worker to one of the two.

Send a pioneer to Tennessee and they plant church number nine on a road that needed something else. Send a revitalizer to Utah and they arrive to find nothing to revitalize. The two vocations are not interchangeable and the people who hold them are usually not interchangeable either.

The distance figures carry a second implication that is easy to miss. Where the median nearest congregation is over a mile away, walking to church has stopped being possible for anyone without a car. That silently excludes the elderly, the young, the carless and the recently arrived, which is to say a large share of the households a church in a hard place most wants to reach.

The model declines to name a direction for thirty-one percent of the country. That is the most trustworthy thing about it.

III DIRECTION OF TRAVEL

More is improving than worsening. This is not the usual telling.

Across the country, where a direction can be established at all, **improvement outnumbers decline by better than two to one**: 38,861 tracts confirmed opening against 18,287 confirmed hardening.

LONG-BASELINE MOVEMENT • 83,343 TRACTS

The sector's default posture is decline, and the data does not support that as a general claim. It does carry the qualification that follows.

TIER	TRACTS	SHARE	MEANING
Opening	31,195	37.4%	Confirmed improvement
Opening, fast	7,666	9.2%	Confirmed, steep
Holding	26,195	31.4%	Direction NOT established
Hardening	14,710	17.6%	Confirmed decline
Hardening, fast	3,577	4.3%	Confirmed, steep

Holding is the unresolved bucket, not a finding of stability. Every tract in it carries an explicit unresolved flag.

MOVEMENT WITHIN EACH ACCESS TIER · THE GRADIENT THAT MATTERS

ACCESS TIER	OPENING	UNRESOLVED	HARDENING	TRACTS
Watered	50.7%	29.7%	19.6%	1,321
Sparse	47.9%	30.8%	21.2%	26,120
Dry	46.4%	31.6%	22.0%	39,109
Arid	45.0%	32.1%	23.0%	15,956
Desert	41.7%	33.2%	25.1%	837

Monotonic in both directions. As access worsens, improvement becomes less likely and decline more likely.

The qualification that matters more than the headline.

The cross-tabulation is the most important table in this paper. The share of tracts improving falls at every step as access worsens, from 50.7% to 41.7%, and the share declining rises at every step, from 19.6% to 25.1%. There is no reversal anywhere in the sequence.

So the encouraging national ratio is unevenly distributed. The places with the best gospel access are also the places most likely to be improving on their own, and the places with the worst are the least likely. Whatever is producing improvement across the country is doing least where it is needed most.

The gradient is not enormous, nine points of spread from best to worst, and it should not be over-read. But it runs the same way at every step, which is what makes it worth trusting.

The unresolved third of the country deserves particular care in how it is spoken about. A pastor told that their tract is “holding” will hear *stable*, and will plan accordingly. The word means the model cannot tell. Those are opposite instructions: one says carry on, the other says the instrument has nothing for you and you should decide by looking out of the window.

The gradient itself has a hard edge. It says that hard ground is, on average, getting harder, and gently improving ground is improving faster. That is the ordinary shape of the world and it is the shape the church exists to interrupt. Nothing in it is a reason for despair; all of it is a reason not to expect the drift to do the work.

IV CONDITIONS, AND WHETHER THERE IS ANYWHERE TO MEET

Need pressure is 100 minus Shalom.

Need pressure across the country has a median of **50.3**, with a quarter of tracts below 39.9 and a quarter above 60.9. The tenth and ninetieth percentiles are 31.9 and 69.3. **7,568 tracts sit at 70 or above**, which is 9.1% of the country and 9.5 million households. That is the range where several domains are usually failing at once.

Crossing need against viability produces four situations, and they are more evenly balanced than one might

expect.

NEED AGAINST MISSIONAL VIABILITY

QUADRANT	TRACTS	SHARE
High need, high viability	24,774	29.7%
Low need, high viability	21,229	25.5%
Low need, low viability	19,783	23.7%
High need, low viability	17,545	21.1%

BUILT-FORM ARCHETYPE

ARCHETYPE	TRACTS	SHARE
Suburban	35,788	42.9%
Urban, sparse	26,997	32.4%
Exurban	10,485	12.6%
Urban, dense	6,680	8.0%
Rural	3,394	4.1%

The quadrant nobody separates out.

The quadrant worth naming is **high need with low viability**: 17,545 tracts, one in five. Conditions are hard and there is no third place, no walkable intersection, no public room. A conventional plant, which rents a space, advertises a service and gathers a crowd, has the least to work with here. These tracts are almost never distinguished from ordinary hard ground in the way work is assigned.

V WHO ACTUALLY LIVES THERE

Half the country is one LifeMode group.

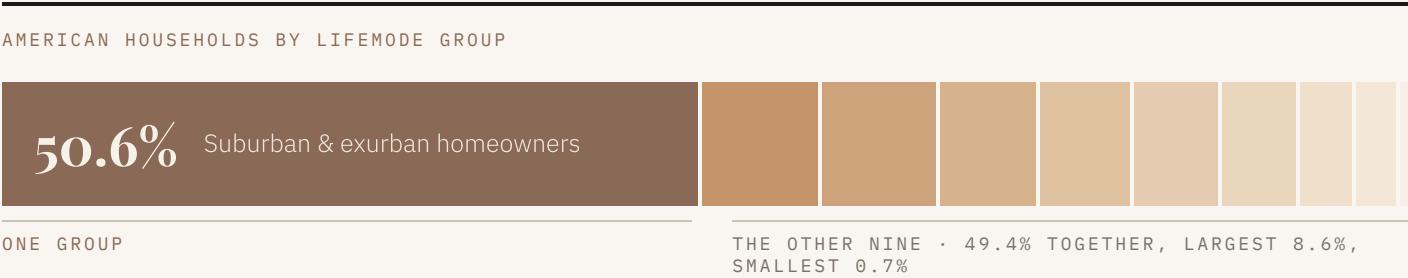
The household layer produces the most lopsided distribution in the paper. **50.6% of American households fall in LifeMode group L1**, and the two largest guides, Affluent Owner Family Suburbs and Exurban Working Homeowners, account for 27.3% between them. The four largest cover 46.9%.

Its opposite, high need with high viability, is nearly thirty percent of the country and is the largest single quadrant. Hard conditions, but somewhere to gather. If there is a place where conventional planting is most likely to succeed against real need, that is where it is.

Note also that three quarters of American tracts are suburban or sparse-urban. Dense urban ground, the setting most church-planting literature assumes when it talks about cities, is 8.0% of the country.

This has a blunt implication. A ministry strategy that imagines itself serving a wide variety of household types is, in practice, mostly serving suburban homeowners, whether or not it says so. And a resource built for the tail will rarely be the one that gets used. The L3 group is 0.7% of households.

The household layer produces the most lopsided distribution in the survey. Half of American households fall in a single LifeMode group, and the two largest guides account for 27.3% between them.



Half the country is one group.

The largest group runs nearly six times the second largest. The nine that follow divide the other half of the country between them and not one of them reaches 9%, so a strategy that pictures itself serving a broad mix of household types is in practice serving suburban homeowners with a long tail attached.

CONTEXT MODIFIERS • A CONDITION ON TOP OF THE HOUSEHOLD TYPE, NOT INSTEAD OF IT

MODIFIER	SHARE	TRACTS
Public housing	15.4%	12,804
Long commute	14.1%	11,771
Health burden	12.8%	10,696
Displacement pressure	11.7%	9,776
Household crowding	11.4%	9,534
Military adjacent	11.2%	9,364
Limited-English concentration	5.4%	4,493
Renter cost pressure	2.9%	2,429

SIX MORE, EACH UNDER 2.5% UNIVERSITY TOWN • HBCU ADJACENT • SENIOR LIVING • FARMWORKER • INSTITUTIONAL • APPALACHIAN

One tract in seven.

The largest modifier is public housing, in 12,804 tracts and covering 9.9 million households. That is close to one American tract in seven, and it is worth sitting with, because public housing is discussed almost everywhere as a special ministry rather than as ordinary parish geography.

THE TEN LARGEST HOUSEHOLD GUIDES, BY HOUSEHOLDS

GUIDE	SHARE
Affluent Owner Family Suburbs	13.7%
Exurban Working Homeowners	13.6%
Dense Professional & Solo Households	10.3%
Cost-Pressed Family Suburbs	9.3%
Highway Corridor Commuters	6.6%
High-Achievement Homeowners	3.7%
Established Blue-Collar Homeowners	2.9%
Affluent Mature Owner Couples	2.7%
Middle-Income Established Homeowners	2.5%
Urban Residential Block Holdouts	2.5%

BY LIFEMODE GROUP • L1 IS THE SUBURBAN HOMEOWNER GROUP; THIS PAPER DOES NOT CHARACTERISE THE OTHER NINE

GROUP	SHARE
L1	50.6%
L5	8.6%
L6	8.2%
L2	7.0%
L9	6.6%
L7	6.1%
L10	5.5%
L4	3.7%
L8	3.0%
L3	0.7%

THE FOURTEEN CONTEXT MODIFIERS · A CONDITION ON TOP OF THE HOUSEHOLD TYPE, NOT INSTEAD OF IT

MODIFIER	TRACTS	SHARE	HOUSEHOLDS	READS AS
Public housing	12,804	15.4%	9,930,423	A neighbour, not a category
Long commute	11,771	14.1%	8,782,072	Time, not distance
Health burden	10,696	12.8%	14,004,023	Modelled, held loosely
Displacement pressure	9,776	11.7%	15,301,480	Who is leaving, not who arrived
Household crowding	9,534	11.4%	6,708,400	Space per person
Military adjacent	9,364	11.2%	13,073,335	Rotation and readiness
Limited-English concentration	4,493	5.4%	2,955,721	Language of the household
Renter cost pressure	2,429	2.9%	1,747,239	Rent against income
University town	1,890	2.3%	2,315,521	Term-time population
HBCU adjacent	1,860	2.2%	2,113,735	Institution and neighbourhood
Senior living	1,612	1.9%	1,068,001	Age-restricted community
Farmworker concentration	1,602	1.9%	1,564,179	Seasonal and housed on site
Institutional population	532	0.6%	146,214	Counted, rarely resident
Appalachian persistent poverty	477	0.6%	555,990	Generational, regional

Households are prevalence-weighted, so a modifier present in part of a tract counts for part of it.

One in seven tracts.

The largest modifier is public housing, present in 12,804 tracts and covering 9.9 million households. That is close to one American tract in seven, and it is worth sitting with, because public housing is usually discussed as an exception rather than as a seventh of the country.

Displacement pressure and health burden between them touch nearly 30 million households. Military adjacency, at 11.2% of tracts, is larger than most denominations' entire strategic attention to it.

The concentration in L1 has an uncomfortable reading. If half of American households are suburban homeowners, then a denomination that believes it serves a broad cross-section is a suburban homeowners' denomination that has not noticed. Those households are half the country and they are not reached, so the question is whether anything in the budget is aimed at the other half.

The modifiers cut the other way, and public housing is the case. Present in one tract in seven, covering 9.9 million households, it is nonetheless discussed almost everywhere as a special ministry rather than as ordinary parish geography. A seventh of the country is not a special ministry.

VI THREE CROSSINGS

The parts above describe layers one at a time. Crossing them produces claims none of them

makes alone. Three were run; all three land on the same ground.

Opening deserts

2,168 tracts are confirmed opening, at Arid or Desert access, with an MVI above the midpoint. The steepest are Jacksonville, La Vergne, Waynesboro, Flagstaff, Oxford, Auburn, Greer, Murrieta.

Almost none is an inner city. The dominant household guides are new-subdivision, new-build and exurban.

The mirror

3,875 tracts are confirmed hardening at the same access floor, and 3,160 of them, 82%, already have a congregation inside.

A revitalization list, larger than the planting list, and a harder conversation.

The reach gap

Growth-edge household types run 1.3 to 1.8× their national share among unreached tracts. Only three of thirty guides are scarce among both kinds of unreached.

VII PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS

Everything above is description. This part is the argument, and it is the only part of the paper that asks anyone to do anything. It is organized around the people the numbers describe rather than around the instruments, because that is the order in which the decisions get made.

i · Sending

The recruiting language points away from the need

Church planting recruits with urban imagery: the storefront, the walk-up, the transit stop, the neighborhood with a main street. That is a real need and it is **eight percent of American census tracts**. Three quarters of the country is suburban or sparse-urban ground, and the fastest-opening deserts in this dataset are exurban subdivisions and university-town build-outs.

Unreached splits two ways, beside a church or with none at all, and reading one column alone inverts the answer.

The one methodological point worth carrying out of this paper.

The reach gap contains a trap worth naming on its own. High-Achievement Homeowners are under-represented among tracts that are unreached *beside a church*, at 0.54× their national share. Read alone, that says they are well covered. Their figure among tracts with *no* congregation at all is 1.62×.

They are not reached. They are concentrated where there is nothing to be misaligned with, so they never enter the first count. Transit-Dependent Gateway Households show the same inversion at 0.59 and 1.78.

Any single table in this paper, read without its complement, will say something confidently untrue. That is not a defect in the data. It is what it means to measure two different things.

The effect on a young person with a genuine call and no fixed geography is predictable. They hear that the frontier is downtown, they go, and they arrive in the most churchied ground in the sample. Meanwhile a subdivision forty minutes out, holding eleven thousand households and one congregation, has nobody making its case because nobody has written the appeal. Somebody has to be willing to say from a platform that some of the hardest and most open ground in America looks like a cul-de-sac.

The corollary is about who is sent, not only where. Pioneer work in a place with no institutions, no memory and no crowd is a different vocation from revitalizing a congregation that has been declining for thirty years. Both are needed at scale, 2,168 tracts for the first and 3,875 for the second, and the two are treated as one job description.

*ii · Money and time***The funding clock does not fit the ground it funds**

Support is typically built on a three-year runway with attendance milestones from year one. On the growth edge that is close to the worst available arrangement. A neighborhood with no institutions has no existing crowd to draw on, so the first two years yield relationships and very little attendance. That is the pattern a metrics-driven funder reads as failure, in the places this data says are opening fastest.

What the household guides prescribe for these places is unfundable under most current arrangements, and is nonetheless correct. Hold one gathering on one date, unchanged, for three years, because a place with no institutions cannot distinguish a church from a pop-up until something has survived long enough to become predictable. Stand at the school pickup line weekly, because it is the only moment the neighborhood is gathered and out of its cars. Find the households who arrived in phase one and give them real information to pass on, because in a place with no memory the earliest residents are the nearest thing to elders it has.

Milestones for years one and two should be countable in a different currency: households known by name, consecutive weeks the gathering held its date, phase-one residents who will carry accurate information. None of those is soft, and all of them are countable. What none of them is, is attendance.

*iii · The hour of the day***Ninety minutes, and what the income figure hides**

The household guide for the type most over-represented among the unreached warns against a specific misreading: a median income near a hundred thousand dollars, on the growth edge, is servicing a new mortgage, two cars, childcare and a fifty-minute commute. *Upper-middle income here does not mean slack.* Two commutes and small children compress the usable evening to roughly ninety minutes.

A church that schedules midweek at seven o'clock in a place like this is not competing with indifference. It is competing with the drive home, and it will lose, and it will conclude that the neighborhood is hard to reach. The guides' instruction is mundane and load-bearing: move everything to half past eight in the evening, or to Saturday morning.

A related warning is worth repeating because it is so easy to get wrong with the best intentions. Do not admire the commute. Calling a man's fifty-minute drive heroic makes it harder for him to say that it is grinding him down.

*iv · Where the model does not fit***A fifth of the country cannot host a conventional plant**

17,545 tracts, 21.1%, combine high need with low missional viability. Hard conditions, and no third place, no walkable intersection, no public room. The standard approach assumes an infrastructure that is not there.

These tracts are almost never separated out when work is assigned. They receive the same playbook as a tract with a main street, the playbook fails, and the failure is attributed to the planter rather than to the assignment. That is a category error with a human cost, and it is visible in advance for anyone who looks.

What fits instead is not a secret: work that travels rather than gathers, that meets in houses rather than rooms, that accepts a longer horizon and smaller numbers. What is missing is permission to plan that way from the beginning rather than arriving at it after two years of trying to rent a storefront that does not exist.

| *v · The comfortable misreading*

Affluence mistaken for reach

High-Achievement Homeowners are scarce among tracts unreached beside a church (0.54×) and over-represented among tracts with no church at all (1.62×). The natural reading of the first figure, that these households are covered, is wrong. It is wrong in a direction that costs nothing to believe, which is why it persists.

The guide for these households locates the mechanism somewhere other than programming. It warns against taking the money first, because it is the fastest way to fund anything and it settles what those households are understood to be for, which is what they were already assuming. It warns against thanking them from the front, because public gratitude confirms the arrangement and makes it harder for anyone to approach them in any other role. It warns that the sermon against materialism is the expected one, costs the preacher nothing, and lands as noise.

Its prescribed action is a direct rebuke to standard practice: decline one offer of funding this quarter and ask for a year of somebody's Tuesdays instead. Give a young person here a job that can fail, and let it. Say something unfinished about your own life at a table where nobody does that.

A congregation that has only ever asked its wealthy households for money has not reached them. It has billed them, and both parties have found the arrangement comfortable.

| *vi · The three thousand*

What to say to a pastor on the hardening list

3,160 congregations sit inside a tract that is confirmed to be getting worse. Handed carelessly, that figure says: you were here and it declined. That is not what it says, and anyone who presents it that way has misunderstood the measurement and the ministry alike.

What it says is that faithfulness and outcome came apart. The tradition has always insisted those are different things, right up until somebody produces a chart. A congregation is not a labour market or a housing policy, and most of what moves a tract's conditions over a decade is outside any church's reach.

The honest use of this list is *company*. Three thousand congregations are in the same position, which means no pastor in one of them is the anomaly they believe themselves to be. That is the first thing to say, and it should be said before any number is.

The second is a question about posture rather than effort. A church that has been in a declining neighborhood for a generation organizes itself around holding on: keep the building, keep the schedule, keep the remaining members. Each instinct is reasonable and together they produce a congregation that is present but no longer reachable, which is the gap between presence and access this measurement exposes. The Sunday service survives and the front door narrows.

So the question is *whether anything we do is still addressed to the people who now live here*. In a tract that has hardened over ten years, the households outside are frequently not the households the congregation was built for. Nobody chose that. It happened at the speed of a housing market, which is faster than a church changes.

*vii · Naming***Nobody prays for a tract number**

94.4% of tracts now carry a curated name. This looks like presentation and is not. Every act of ministry this data exists to serve happens under a name: what is prayed for, preached about, printed in a bulletin, said by a person asked where they are from.

The growth edge sharpens the point. A neighborhood named for a century carries meaning and every accumulated offence: Eastport, Southmost, Warrendale. A subdivision carries a name a developer chose to sell houses, arriving before any of the shared life that usually produces one. Both kinds sit in the tables above. Turning the second sort of name into the first is a fair description of what planting on the growth edge consists of.

You are not the savior of your street. You are a neighbor who keeps showing up, because Someone kept showing up for you.

One use of this paper that would do damage.

A pastor handed a tract score, a movement tier and a viability index can conclude that their neighborhood has been graded and that they have been graded along with it. That reading is available in every figure in this paper and it is false in all of them.

None of this measures faith. None of it measures whether a congregation is good, whether a pastor is faithful, or whether God is at work on a particular street. It measures how far people are from a church, which

direction the conditions around them are moving, and whether there is a room. Those things are worth knowing. They are not the thing anyone cares about, and a paper like this one is only useful to the degree that it keeps that distinction in front of the reader.

Numbers can do one narrow thing. They can stop a denomination looking only where it already was, and they can tell a tired pastor that three thousand others are standing in the same place. That is the whole of it, and it is not nothing.

VIII LIMITS OF THE METHOD*Both were caught by printing a distribution before trusting a ranking.*

Two choices in the method shape every count above, and both belong before the caveats.

Movement is read across both confirmed tiers. The long-baseline model reports opening and hardening each at two speeds, and the fast tiers are not small:

`opening_fast`

holds 7,666 tracts and

`hardening_fast`

holds 3,577. A query that reads only the base tier stops at roughly +6.8 points per four years and loses the

steepest movement in the country.

Special-context tracts are counted. 18,066 tracts, 21.7% of the country, carry a flag naming them as campuses, senior communities, or mixed and institutional populations. The map prints a caveat beside those tracts and then shows them, and this paper does the same. People live in all of them. Excluding them would also drop three of the fourteen context modifiers to almost nothing, since farmworker concentration, senior living and university town live largely inside those tracts.

None of this measures faith, conversion, discipleship or the health of any congregation. It measures access, meaning whether a church is near enough and stable enough to be reachable, and it measures the movement of the conditions people live under. A tract can be full of believers and score badly.

The five-year American Community Survey trails reality by roughly three years at the midpoint. A subdivision finished in 2023 is thinly represented. Where this paper says a place is new, it is likely to be newer than the figures show.

Congregation presence comes from a compiled index rather than a census of churches. It will miss house churches, campus ministries and congregations meeting in rented rooms, all of which bias access downward in the places most likely to have them.

The access score counts church presence, so any statement of the form “a church is here and access is still poor” is partly self-referential. Comparisons between household guides survive it, because the circularity is identical for all thirty. Absolute rates should be treated with more suspicion.

Tier boundaries, the desert floor of 60, the unreached cut of 55 and the viability midpoint of 50 are choices. Moving them moves every count in this paper. None of the directions or gradients depend on them.

Church-plant announcements, to compare where planting goes with where the need is. A closures database crossed with trajectory, to learn what the years before a closure look like. Both are event data; almost everything here is state data, and events are what give direction.

Numbers cannot tell you where God is working. They can stop you looking only where you already were.