

Church as parish: The East Harlem Protestant Parish

by [Lowell W. Livezey](#) in the [December 9, 1998](#) issue

Fifty years ago, some graduates of Union Theological Seminary in New York, steeped in postwar ecumenism and idealism, decided to do something about the suburban migration of Protestant laity and the propensity of urban clergy to live a comfortable distance from their congregations. As Don Benedict recalls, "We wanted to return Protestantism to the idea of serving everyone in a given geographical community rather than staying with the concept of church as the central place of worship attracting like-minded people from anywhere."

These young ministers focused their attention on East Harlem, which was covered by Catholic parishes and dotted with Pentecostal and fundamentalist churches, but had virtually no mainline Protestant presence. So these pastors moved in, seeking to create a ministry that was not simply located in East Harlem, but was built with and for the residents of East Harlem and for East Harlem itself. Of necessity the project secured resources from several denominations, benefiting from the ecumenical spirit of the times.

In October more than 400 men and women who were involved in the East Harlem Protestant Parish during its 20-year ministry attended a jubilee reunion and celebration. They had been ministers and ministry couples, student interns (mostly from Union or Yale Divinity School), "parish kids" who grew up in East Harlem while their parents ministered there, and parishioners themselves. Many of the laypeople still live in the old tenements, the public housing blocks, or the newer, middle-class co-ops east of Third Avenue and north of 99th Street. Some are now stalwarts of the congregations and community organizations initiated by the parish. Several of the original ministers still live in the neighborhood.

Others at the reunion knew the parish mainly through its satellites in other cities. There was the Cleveland Inner City Protestant Parish, where Don and Ann Benedict applied what they had learned through the first six years of group ministry in East

Harlem. In Chicago, J. Archie Hargraves, another East Harlem Protestant Parish original, created the West Side Christian Parish and the West Side Organization, the seat of Martin Luther King's Chicago campaign a decade later. The Wider City Parish of New Haven, Connecticut, and the Denver Inner City Parish, both off-shoots of the EHPP, were said to be going strong, and participants from London and Glasgow gave glowing reports of continuing ministries based on the parish in those cities.

A few early members of the East Harlem parish testified that the skills and disciplines honed in East Harlem prepared them for ministry in national and global contexts. George Todd, for example, assumed the Urban Desk position at the World Council of Churches, and Chris Hartmire helped the National Council of Churches' California Migrant Ministry join Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers movement.

Ministry training programs, such as the Urban Training Center for Christian Mission in Chicago, as well as seminary urban ministry courses, have conveyed much of the East Harlem experiment to ministry students since the 1960s. New York Theological Seminary became devoted entirely to urban ministry education under the presidency of George W. "Bill" Webber, another of the EHPP founders.

Everyone at the anniversary event had a story to tell, and to a remarkable degree the many stories came down to one: the parish had made a huge impact on their lives. Some of the most poignant testimonies came from lay members. An elderly African-American woman who carried herself with exceptional dignity told me, "I don't know how I could have made it without the parish. I had five kids when my husband died in 1948, and these people just made it possible. The parish vacation Bible school came just in time, and I've been involved ever since." Others identified more with the parish's activism--the marches for better housing or for heat and water in the old tenements, the protests against police brutality, and the confrontations with Mayor Wagner for public recognition of the neighborhood organizations.

A walk through the neighborhood with Norman Eddy, who has lived there since joining the group ministry in 1951, revealed that something remains of the dense texture of relationships and commitments historically associated with the parish form of church organization. On each and every one of the 20 or 25 city blocks we walked, people called out to Eddy. One wanted to discuss a community issue and make a plan. A shopkeeper let him know that business was OK, "but my brother

went back to Puerto Rico to take care of our mother." Another reminisced about a long-gone storefront church that had housed both a daily gathering for worship and an addiction recovery program. The program became a model for a state-level policy shift from punishment to treatment for substance abusers.

Although there were eventually six different congregations within the parish, they shared one ministry team, one budget, one discipline. Underlying it all was a shared commitment to know, initially through door-to-door visitation, as many as possible of the people and organizations, of the needs and resources, of central East Harlem-- and to build a unified ministry team.

The common discipline of the ministry staff was essential. First was the joint Bible study, worship and Eucharist, and the fact that these activities were enacted repeatedly, not only in the churches but in residents' homes, expressing God's pervasive presence in the neighborhood. Second, all the ministers accepted an economic discipline: they were paid equally except for variations based on the number of children in each family.

The vocational discipline required the pastors to agree that they would not leave the ministry without mutual discussion and a serious attempt at consensus--and not until a replacement had been found. The political discipline required them to engage in action on public issues, but only after discussion with each other and a prayerful attempt to reach consensus. Yet political action was not collective, and the ministers were never to claim or imply that they spoke for the parish.

At a standing-room-only worship and memorial service in the dramatic new sanctuary of the Church of the Resurrection on East 101st Street (a merger of several parish organizations), these disciplines were recalled, ritualized and celebrated. Many prayers were offered--prayers of praise, of thanksgiving for the parish, of remembrance for parish ministers, students and members who had died, and of "intercession for the concerns of East Harlem today and tomorrow."

The intercessions for East Harlem, led by Eddy, brought into focus challenges still facing a neighborhood that is less crowded, better organized and in many respects much improved from the early days of the parish--no doubt partly as a result of its ministry. At a deeper level, the fact that prayers for East Harlem were a designated part of the order of worship implied a continuing understanding of East Harlem as a parish--as a sacred place in which God's presence and authority are manifest

through the church and in which God's love is mediated for all.

Yet as I joined in these prayers, I was haunted by the fact--hardly mentioned throughout the reunion--that the East Harlem Protestant Parish no longer exists. The vital congregations represented at the reunion are perhaps the most concrete and direct manifestations of ministries initiated by EHHP. But the fact that these ministries take the form of individual congregations, not a parish, has to be considered. Perhaps ministry has creatively adapted to the mobile lifestyle and fluid urban forms that mark the late industrial era. Perhaps the congregational model can better tap into the denominational commitments of Protestant judicatories, thus adjusting to the loss of the ecumenical spirit since the time of the parish's innovative ministry. Perhaps a higher level, or a different kind, of vitality can be generated when different congregations attract "like-minded people from anywhere" and engage them in ministries of justice and service.

There had to be reasons that, as one participant put it, "the parish morphed into congregations and projects." For the future of urban ministry it will be important to examine the metamorphosis, to see what has been gained, what was lost, and why.