Abstract  Critics usually decry urban sprawl's impact on the natural geography—polluted air and water, vanishing farmlands, forests and open spaces. However, urban sprawl's effect on human geography has been even greater, as exemplified in metro St. Louis. With the region's urbanized land growing at seven times the rate of urbanized population, sprawl accelerated the decline of the central city and older, built-out suburbs (St. Louis lost over half its population since mid-century), increased economic segregation and stagnation (10 percent in 20 years by one measure) even as racial barriers were slowly lowered, and widened fiscal disparities among local governments (St. Louis City's property evaluation shrank by over 70 percent in 35 years). Inner-city and older-suburb coalitions, like Metropolitan Congregations United for St. Louis, are now joining environmental advocates to lobby for new state growth management laws. “We cannot win the ‘inside game’ without winning the ‘outside game,’” church leader explained.

This is God's world.
We are God's people.

The voices of several hundred church members—black and white, Protestant and Catholic—somewhat tentatively followed the lead of the choir members from St. Peter’s African Methodist Episcopal Church.

We’ve been entrusted.
The land is in our hands.

By the second run-through of the new song, the assemblage sang with greater assurance. Joining hands, swaying in rhythm, they flung themselves into the final bars.

We must live together,
Our children are calling.
Black, white, rich, or poor,
For our future let’s do more.
It was the debut of “Our Song,” the battle cry of Metropolitan Congregations United for St. Louis. As the composer and lyricist, the Rev. Sylvester Laudermill Jr., MCU’s chairman, jokingly confessed, “You can’t really sing ‘control urban sprawl.’”

Yet controlling urban sprawl was the goal of the umbrella organization of 60 churches gathered together from St. Louis City and suburban St. Louis County on a warm June evening in 1997. The occasion was the group’s Second Metropolitan Summit on Urban Sprawl. The first summit had been held the previous February on the downtown campus of St. Louis University. This second summit, held at Incarnate Word Academy in suburban Normandy, symbolized the group’s growing political support in the city’s suburbs.

Why urban sprawl? Why had this coalition of central city and older suburban church congregations targeted regional land use planning as its priority goal? “Growth management” had been almost the exclusive concern of farmland preservation and environmental organizations elsewhere in the country. Growth management had not developed much support in Missouri.

“We’ve come to realize that we can’t win the ‘inside game’ without winning the ‘outside game,’” explained Father Mitch Doyen, administrator of St. Mary’s High School, the interfaith coalition’s vice president.

For a long time our churches have been discussing sprawl without knowing it, [Father Doyen continued]. Gut level conversations about membership decline, fear of crime, our children lost to drugs and gangs, shopping centers closing, hospitals closing, middle class flight, abandoned homes. Sprawl was at the heart of this decay. It just took an educational process for us to realize that.²

That educational process had begun in August 1996 when three existing interfaith organizations—Churches United for Community Action (North St. Louis County), Congregations Allied for Community Improvement (North St. Louis City), and Churches Committed to Community Concerns (South St. Louis City)—invited Minnesota State Representative Myron Orfield and the author to conduct a workshop for their leadership on regional issues.

Critics usually decry the impact of urban sprawl on the natural geography - polluted air and water, vanishing farmlands, shrinking forests and open spaces. However, I told the group, urban sprawl’s effect on the human geography of urban areas has been even greater. Sprawl has accelerated the decline of central cities and older, built-out suburbs, increased economic segregation (even as racial barriers are slowly lowered), and widened fiscal disparities among local governments.