

**Churches in Somerville:  
The Role of Religion in an Immigrant City**

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*Pastor Jean Faustin*  
*Bishop Pierre Raymond*  
*Reverend Dan BK*  
*Mr. Neri deSouza*

## **I. Introduction**

Before I came to college, I had never eaten Nepali food, never visited a Brazilian clothing store and never been inside a Haitian gospel church. I grew up in a small, sheltered suburb of San Francisco, and other than some travel experience, I had a very naïve understanding of other cultures. Because of this, I left California and came to Tufts, in hopes of broadening my horizons and challenging myself in a new environment.

Throughout my first two years of college, I met a wide variety of fascinating individuals, but Somerville wasn't quite the vibrant assortment of people and cultures I had been promised...or so I thought.

What I didn't fully realize until this past summer is that Tufts is definitively located in West Somerville. West Somerville is home to Davis Square and relatively affluent hipsters, and of course, the 5,000+ college students. This summer, through an internship with Tisch College, I finally had the opportunity to explore what lies beyond McGrath Highway, East Somerville. I spent the summer working with the Somerville Homeless Coalition to collect data on service providers (in Somerville) and their clients. In order to do this I, along with two colleagues, interviewed homeless, and at-risk of becoming homeless, individuals. By spending a good portion of our summer in East Somerville, we learned a lot about the diverse populations within Somerville; however, this newly acquired information left me eager to learn more about the outwardly elusive immigrant residents of Somerville.

This desire led me to the anthropology research seminar, *Urban Borderlands*, taught by Professor Deborah Pacini-Hernandez. The course, which started in 2001, was originally designed to integrate academic and experiential learning in a project focused on documenting the history and development of Cambridge and Somerville's Latino communities. This year, however, the research was intended to contribute to a larger project sponsored by the Somerville Community Corporation (SCC). Through interviews with individuals owning or working at immigrant-run businesses in Union Square and East Somerville, we aimed to learn the oral histories of the business owners and how they perceive the Green Line will affect their business.

At the beginning of the course we were instructed to pick a theme that we could base the selection of our narrators upon. Originally, it was presumed that all of us would choose immigrant-run businesses, but in my preliminary travels throughout East Somerville, I became interested in the almost-invisible community of community-run churches.

Although one can see many cultural influences, such as Brazilian clothing shops or Indian restaurants, by walking down any main street in East Somerville, these stores are not the only way in which immigrants can express their connection to their country of origin and retain ties to their home. In fact, one of the most prevalent, but overlooked ways in which immigrant populations maintain relations to their home country, and at the same time, shape their new environment, is through religion (Fox 2004). Through the research I did, in collaboration with the Somerville Community Corporation, I sought to find out if this theory rings true in Somerville's Immigrant City.

The goal of my research project, entitled, *Churches in Somerville: The Role of Religion in an Immigrant City*, is to look at the role churches have in the immigration process. What does the church offer to immigrants? What role do immigrant-run churches have within the Somerville Community and how does the church community engage in the larger Somerville Community? How did these various churches end up in Somerville and do they intend to stay long enough to be affected by the Green Line Extension Project?

My findings will be detailed throughout this paper in five chapters, following the introduction and methodology sections. In the first chapter, “Somerville, an Immigrant City” I will illustrate what I have learned about the increasing immigrant population within Somerville and the high prevalence of churches in the city. In “Immigrants and Religion”, I will divulge what I have learned, through previous publications (by Peggy Levitt, Jonathan Fox and Richard Alba and other accredited authors), about the importance of religion in immigrants’ assimilation into a new environment. In the “Narrator” section, I will then discuss my narrator-based research. I will explain how through engaging my narrators, three Pastors and a gospel bookstore owner, in discussing these topics, I learned a great deal about the role of various immigrant-run churches in Somerville. I will also look into how well the various churches integrate with one another within Somerville. This will bring me to my last chapter, “Immigrants and the Green Line Extension Project”. In this chapter I will explore how immigrants-run businesses may or may not be affected by the arrival of the Green Line. In doing so, I will cover the attitudes of my narrators towards the project, and additionally, will discuss what role the churches may play in the future planning and implementation of the extension project. In

my conclusion, I will argue that the church is an important place in which many immigrants find comfort in being able to maintain ties to their country of origin, but also find support by meeting people, of a similar faith and background, in their new community. I acknowledge that the close-knit community that a church provides sometimes acts to prohibit the integration of various cultures within the larger Somerville community, however, as can be seen in the planning stages of the Green Line extension project, the power of the church has the potential to engage immigrants outside of their immediate church community.

## **II. Methodology**

In order to decide exactly what it was we wanted to spend the Fall 2010 semester conducting research on, we went on a series of “walking tours” of Somerville.

Essentially, the tours were designed to help us orient ourselves within the parts of Somerville that we were not familiar with. It was during these tours that I noticed the extensiveness of churches in Somerville. Not only was the large variety of religions and languages exemplified in the external appearance churches intriguing, but the placement of churches was also interesting.

At first glance, I only noticed a few prominent, recognizable church buildings; however, eventually I began to realize that there is a large number of “store-front” churches scattered throughout Somerville. Before actually starting my research, I had identified six storefront, immigrant-run churches that I could potentially make use of in my research. I ended up only being able to use two of these churches, for procuring an interview turned out to be far more difficult than I originally assumed.

I found that the best way to secure an interview was to meet with them in person. Essentially, I went door to door until someone agreed to talk to me. Most people were willing to at least discuss the possibility of an interview; the hard part was making the initial contact. Because of the small size of most of the churches I visited, services were only held a couple times a week. Of course, the times that services were held, and I would have definitely been able to talk to someone, I was often in class or out of town (on the weekends), so just the initial contact proved to be quite time consuming.

Eventually, through both phone calls and personal visits, I was able to secure three interviews with pastors and one interview with a bookstore owner. I was also able to speak with someone at the Somerville Community Corporation who talked with me about their efforts in getting immigrants involved in the Green Line planning committee.

In order to be able to interview someone, we first had to make sure that they understood the project and signed the consent form that would later enable us to share the interview audio. For each of the interviews, we had an outline of topics to cover. The interviews were all recorded and then transcribed. Additionally, we wrote interview reports discussing the relevant information learned from each of the narrators. Throughout the entire research period (September through December 2010), the entire class kept an active online blog of their progress. We used this blog to upload our interview reports, and also as a tool that enabled us to share our information with the Somerville Community Corporation as well as our classmates.

In conclusion, we each gave a short presentation on the information we learned through our research. Although the short time frame limited the amount of research we were able to compile, I do think that through this course, we were collectively able to gain a better understanding of the immigrant population within our community.

### **III. Background of Somerville**

Somerville, Massachusetts is a city located in Middle Sex County, just north of Boston. As of 2000, the city's population was 77,478 people, packed into just 4.1 square miles of land. Somerville is the most densely populated city in New England, and the sixth densest city in the United States (STEP 2010). Within that population, there are nearly 6,000 immigrants per square mile.

Somerville, first settled in 1630 as a part of Charlestown, has grown into a city of its own; it has been referred to as "Immigrant City" ("The Immigrant City Exhibit"). There is no definite reason as to why so many immigrants have settled in Somerville, but the trend traces back to the location of Somerville. Although it was located on unattractive railway and industrial land squeezed between the Charles and Mystic Rivers, the city became grounds for industrialization and as a result, fueled the emergence of a blue-collar working class population (Lund 1996).

Today, Somerville is distinctly divided into East and West Somerville. East Somerville is an incredibly diverse, vibrant community filled with immigrants primarily from Haiti, El Salvador, Nepal, India, and Brazil. In East Somerville, there is a large range of ethnicities represented through immigrant-run restaurants, clothing stores, public businesses and churches. There is also a large presence of small factories and autoshops. Conversely, West Somerville is the home to Davis, Teele and Porter Square, and the private college, Tufts University. The rent in West Somerville is more expensive, businesses are more

upscale, and families are more affluent (Lund 1996). Although West Somerville is now considered to be far more homogeneous, this was not always the case.

Davis Square was far less prosperous before the Red Line arrived in the 1990's. It has been said that the Red Line "revitalized" the square. This is true, but it also led to massive gentrification. Gentrification can be defined as "the process of renewal and rebuilding accompanying the influx of middle-class or affluent people into deteriorating areas that often displaces poorer residents" ("Gentrification" 2004). After the arrival of the Red Line, rent in West Somerville increased exponentially. From 1982 to 1996, average rent on a two-bedroom Somerville apartment increased from \$301 to \$821 (Shelton 2010). Due to the state-wide abolishment of rent control in 1996, by 2005, Somerville's house prices were double what they were in 1996, rising nine times faster than median income (Shelton 2010).

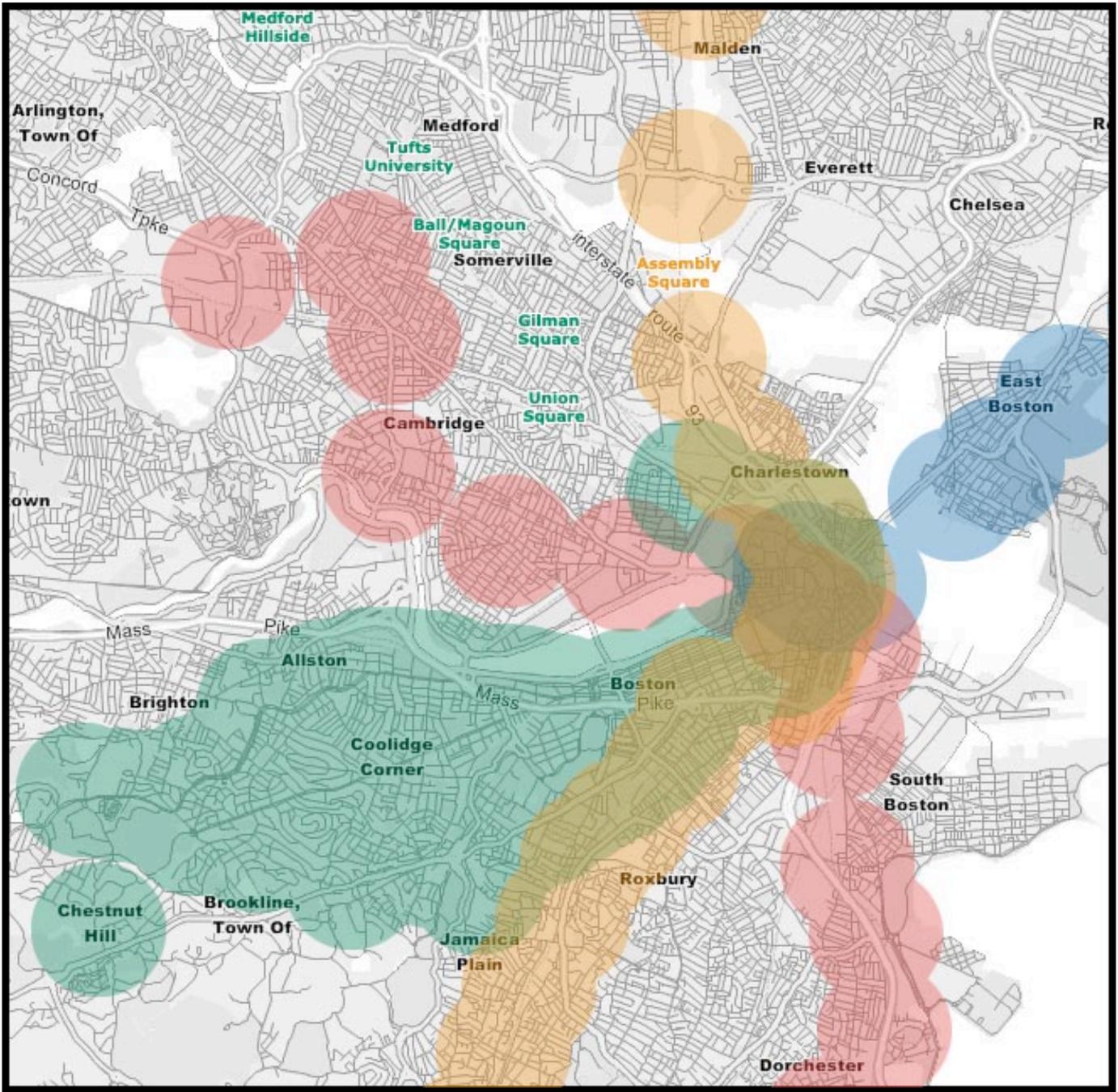
Davis Square and the majority of West Somerville has already suffered the affects of gentrification; however, East Somerville is still home to the immigrant population, but also the less affluent members of the two communities. While most people would hate to see these diverse communities displaced, the arrival of the Green Line in Somerville may question their ability to stay.

## **History of the Green Line Project**

Boston, Massachusetts is home to the most expensive highway project in the United States, “The Big Dig”. The Big Dig was a project that rerouted the highway system through the heart of Boston. The project was developed in order to address the excessive traffic congestion that persisted throughout Boston’s dated streets. Ultimately, the project redirected traffic to lead to more congestion outside of the city, cost far more than anticipated, and had a negative impact on the environment. As a result, the Clean Air Act was designed to offset the environmental impacts of the Big Dig. In this act, the state of Massachusetts is legally obligated to extend the Green Line by 2014. This deadline has since been pushed back to 2015, but nevertheless, the obligation still stands (Moskowitz 2010).

The Green Line extension will run through Somerville, Massachusetts. Although Somerville is the most densely populated city in all of Massachusetts (and the New England area), there is only one T stop in the city (STEP 2010). Furthermore, Somerville’s residents are the second most reliant, in Massachusetts, on public transportation to get to and from work. But, perhaps most importantly is that Somerville has the most excess lung cancer and heart attack deaths per square mile of any of Massachusetts' 350 cities and towns, and the city has the second greatest exposure to pollution and the least open space in Massachusetts (STEP 2010). The goal of the Green Line extension project is to increase available transportation within Somerville and decrease the pollution; however, there are a number of other things to consider during the project’s planning stages.

**Figure 1**

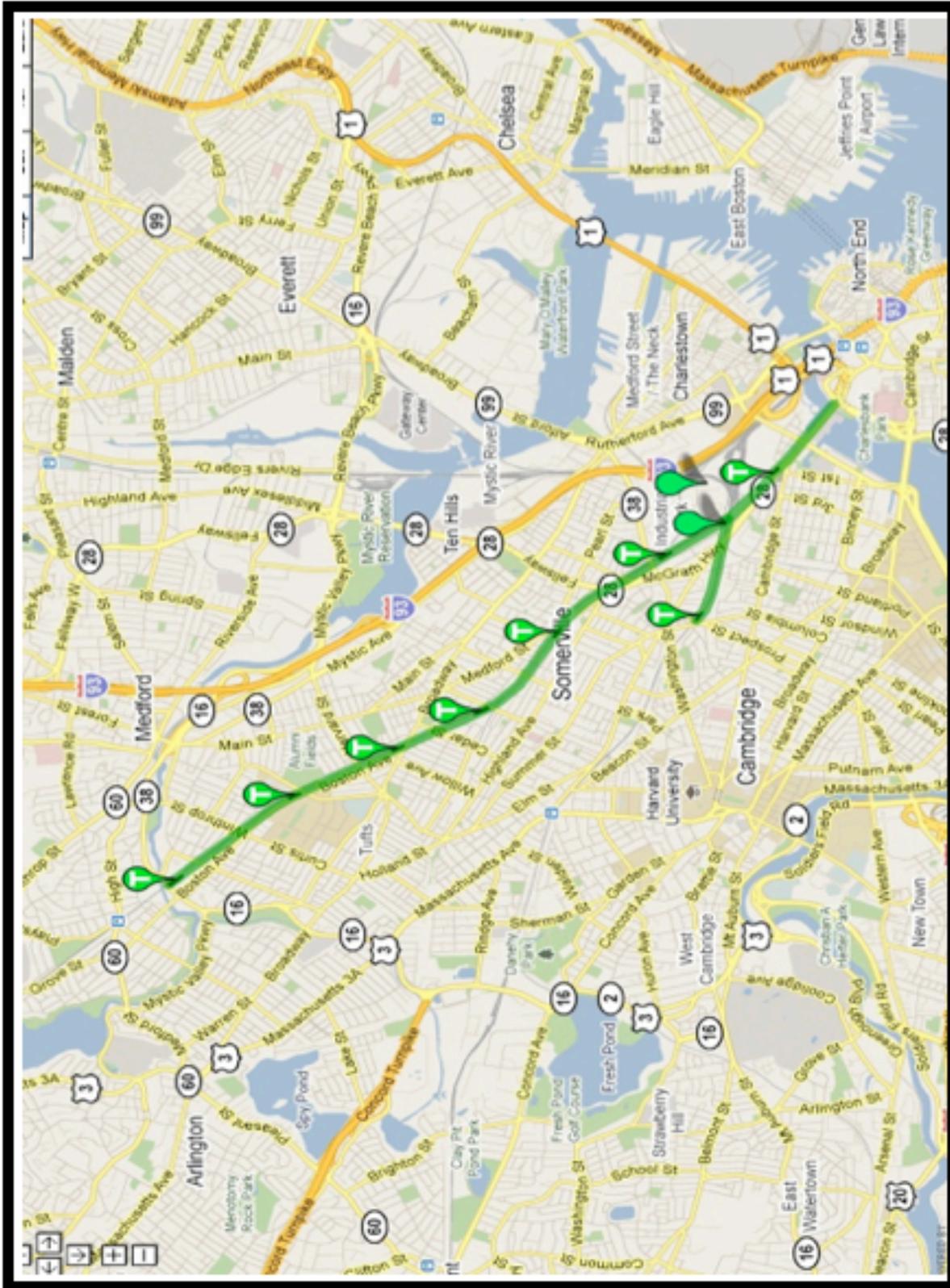


**Map of Current MBTA Service**

Map from STEP

Each circle represents a half-mile walk from a subway stop. Most of Somerville has no coverage because only one line runs through the city.

Figure 2

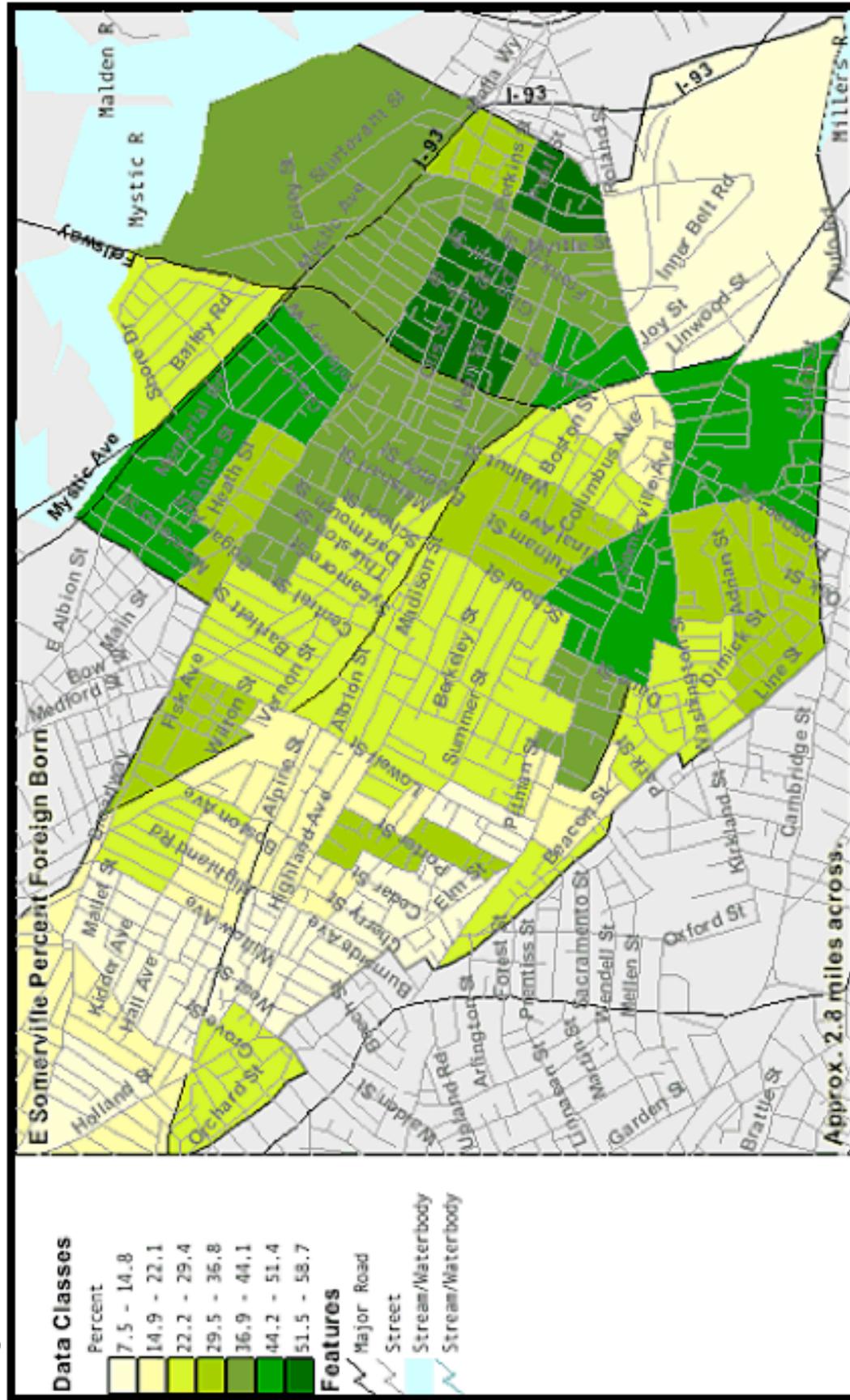


**Planned Green Line Extension**

Map from STEP

The "T" icons represent potential subway stops. The extension route primarily runs down Boston Avenue.

**Figure 3**



**Map of East Somerville and Corresponding Foreign Born Demographics**  
Map from STEP

The darker shades correlate to larger percentages of foreign-born individuals in the specified areas. The map shows a considerable number of immigrants where the Green Line extension is planned to run.

The Green Line extension project is designed to extend from College Avenue down Boston Avenue and into Union Square and East Somerville (Figure 2). The communities that will be most affected by the arrival of the Green Line are composed of many immigrant families (Figure 3). Along with gentrification, the extension of the Green Line is also likely to bring about other problems including estimated noise impacts to 168 buildings, vibration impacts to 95 buildings, and traffic impacts to 43 intersections (STEP 2010). The construction will have an enormous affect on the businesses in the surrounding areas.

## **Including the Immigrant Population**

Although we can do little to change that fact that construction will take place, we can have an affect on the possible gentrification of the area. In order to do this, we must be able to ensure that some portion of Somerville's housing remains affordable. The only way that this can be possible is to permanently remove that portion of housing from the inflationary cycle (Shelton 2010). The Somerville Community Corporation (SCC) is one organization that works to make this happen. The SCC works to increase the number of units they (a community-based nonprofit) own. The Somerville Community Corporation keeps housing permanently affordable through deed restrictions. They also work to get minority communities involved in the Green Line Extension project planning. They have committees dedicated to public housing and local job advocacy that they are currently to get the immigrant population involved in.

Through interviewing local, immigrant-run businesses, our goal was to discuss whether or not people, with some influence within their community, have knowledge of the Green Line expansion. Of course, the companies picked were ones in the areas that will theoretically be most affected by the extension. Along with asking the narrators their thoughts on the Green Line coming to their area, we also asked about topics such as their background, how they came to Somerville, and what they perceived to be their role within the community.

#### **IV. Immigrants and Religion: Why Churches?**

As a part of Urban Borderlands, we were supposed to research a topic that would enable us to learn more about the immigrant communities within Somerville. In studying the immigrant population, our aim was to better understand how immigrants assimilate in the United States and how they are able to create a community in an entirely new environment. I was most interested in seeing how immigrants establish avenues of expression. How do they develop means of retaining connections with their country of origin? In my original explorations of Somerville, I noticed the large presence of churches in the city. In the yellow pages alone, there are over forty churches listed in Somerville. This number, though already quite large, does not include any of the churches I researched, which leads me to believe that a good portion of small, likely immigrant-run, churches are not listed. With the seemingly dominant existence of churches, I began to wonder what role churches play in the immigrant experience.

In the *International Studies Review*, Jonathan Fox states that religion is one of the most overlooked factors in the study of international relations and the shaping of new environments (2004: 54). Although immigrants can express their origins through language and tradition, Jose Casanova, a sociologist in the field, claims that religion is the one truly valid form of expressing ethnic difference in the United States (1994). Religion not only ties immigrants to their home country, but also can emphasize the importance of immigrant communities and their homelands for second and third generations of immigrant families.

Before compiling my research, I was under this impression, that religion provided a means of community for immigrants coming to a new environment. I believed that religion was not only a means of becoming acclimated to one's new environment, but also a way of retaining connections to one's homeland and a way to form new social connections. My goal in focusing on churches was to find out to what extent these assumptions were (or were not) true within Somerville's incredibly diverse immigrant population.

## V. Narrators

### **Gospel Assembly on Albion Street**

*Pastor Jean Baptiste Faustin is an immigrant who came from Haiti in 1987. He currently lives in Somerville with his wife. His two daughters live in the United States as well, but his sons live in Haiti. He is the Pastor of the Gospel Assembly Haitian church on Albion Street. The church is located in a residential area that also includes a variety of factories and shops. The gospel assembly is adjacent to an auto-body shop, and actually operates out of what used to be a garage.*

I asked Pastor Faustin about his role within the Somerville community, and he went into detail about how difficult it was to become integrated. In Haiti, finding people to come to church was easy, but in Somerville it is difficult, especially in this economy, where people have to work all of the time and don't have the finances to support a church.

Though he doesn't have much monetary stability, Pastor Faustin explained how it was his responsibility to help anyone around him who needed help. He told me one story in which a boy fell into Mystic River and unfortunately, ended up passing away as a result of the trauma. In addition to the emotional suffering, the family did not have the means to pay for the hospital bills. The Pastor felt it was his duty to involve the community in fundraising efforts. He told me how he worked with a variety of other local, Haitian fellowships and a Haitian organization to fundraise enough money to help the family.

Pastor Faustin explained that his church is his life, and the members, his family. He described how the strong Haitian faith is wonderful in one sense, but also makes his job very difficult because members of his church rely on him for everything. Instead of going to a food pantry when they are hungry, or a doctor when they have a headache, they come to him. He is grateful for the help that he is able to give them, but expressed his desire to be able to do more for the members of his church.

In regards to the Green Line, Pastor Faustin was actually quite confused when I first mentioned it. I had to explain what I meant, by referring to the “T” and the Redline. Once he knew what I was talking about, he explained that he had not heard anything about the new anticipated Green Line stops. He was, however, excited that the new stops would help some of the members of his church travel to Albion Street more easily.

### **Foursquare Gospel Assembly Church**

*Bishop Pierre J. Raymond is a Haitian immigrant who is a Bishop (and preacher) at the Four Square Gospel Assembly Church in Union Square, Somerville. He came to the United States in 1980 to study theology. All of his immediate family lives in Somerville and goes to his church, which he started in 1987. His congregation consists of about 150 people, and he is responsible for overlooking Haitian Pentecostal churches in Somerville. His church is the largest, out of its fellowship, in Somerville and is located in the heart of Union Square. The building seems small from the outside, but once you enter there is both an upstairs (with a few offices and a large worship room) and a downstairs (with another, smaller worship room).*

One of the most interesting things that Pastor Raymond told me was that he is actually a Bishop. He explained that as a Bishop, he oversees other churches in the Somerville area. In Somerville, there are ten churches that he supervises, all of which, have their own pastor and church location. He explained that as a Bishop, he brings these churches (and other churches in the Boston area) together for big events and celebrations.

He started his church, a Pentecostal Gospel Assembly, in 1987, but it has been in the Union Square location for just two years. They have about 150 members, and the congregation is only continuing to grow. People from Somerville, Medford, Waltham, Belmont, and Cambridge come to Union Square for services. He told me about all of the

opportunities they give their members to come to church: they hold services Sunday morning, and have bible studies most weeknights. Additionally, they hold larger events at the church, such as the church anniversary celebration they had the previous week. His members are all evangelicals, most of whom are Haitian. Because people come from many different towns, the church provides a transportation service to and from Union Square. Essentially, if someone needs a ride to church, they can simply call Pastor Pierre and he will send someone to pick up the church member. Because of this, the Bishop is excited for the arrival of the Green line.

When I asked if he knew about the green line, Bishop Raymond did not hesitate. He definitely knew about the proposed extension into Union Square, but he seemed to think that process on the project had been stalled indefinitely. When I asked him how he knew about the Green Line, I learned that he is a friend of the Mayor of Somerville, Joseph Curtatone. The Bishop even knew about the Tuesday night public planning meetings; however, he explained that he isn't ever able to attend. He was also familiar with the SCC; he had talked to Lisa Gimbel, but again, he had never been able to partake in any of the Green Line planning meetings.

## **Greater Boston Nepali Church**

*Reverend Dan BK is a Nepalese immigrant. He came to the United States in 2001, and to Boston in 2008. He has a wife and two children and lives in Belmont, Ma. Dan BK is a Pastor at the Greater Boston Nepali Church; the church has four locations, two of which, Manchester and Sullivan Station, he preaches at. Although the interview did not take place at the church, the main church location is across from Sullivan Station, at 24 Cambridge Street. They use a room, actually rented by a Brazilian Church, that fits around 50 people. The space is large, open, white room and is set up with rows of chairs, each with a bible placed upon the seat.*

Dan BK is originally from Nepal. Being from Nepal, one may expect him to be Hindu, but he is actually Christian. When he converted, Christianity was illegal in Nepal. At age 30 he finished high school and in 2001, he came to America for school. Shortly after he moved here, his wife and youngest child moved from Nepal as well. His family, including his mother and five siblings, still lives in Nepal. Although, since 2008 (when Christianity became legal in Nepal), his mother and three sisters have all converted to Christianity as well.

He came to the Boston area because there are a lot of Nepalese here, especially in Somerville. He explained the most Nepalese come here to study and work, or as Bhutan refugee immigrants. Originally, in 2001, he started a bible study for Nepalese Christians in his home, but within a few months, the number of people coming to bible studies was too large to fit in one small room. Thus, a few years ago, he started a relationship with the Brazilian Church located at 24 Cambridge Street. The church is in a large brick building located directly across from Sullivan Station. The room in which Pastor BK has his services is a large, open, white room. There are rows of school chairs lined up, and on each chair rests a Nepalese Bible and a songbook. Pastor BK uses a music stand as his

platform, and stands on a ground level to that on which the church members sit. Other than the Pastor's apparel, the scene seems very informal. Luckily for the Nepalese, the Brazilian Church allows them to use the space for free to hold services on Sundays. Dan BK explained that he believes he has a good relationship with the owner of the Brazilian church, so he doesn't think he will lose the space anytime soon. However, he would like to get his own space, but at the time, he doesn't have enough money to do so. In the past two years, he has also started holding services in Manchester, Lynn and Springfield. He has two other Pastors that he oversees, one man who actually spent fifteen months in jail for being a Christian in Nepal.

Although he is Southern Baptist, and went to school following this faith, he tries not to emphasize his denomination during his services. As he put it, most people don't understand the differences between denominations, and he prefers to include everyone. In fact, in hopes of including all Nepalese people, he named his church the Nepali Church of the Greater Boston Area . When I asked about the number of Christian Nepalese in Somerville, I was surprised to learn that he actually has a pretty large following. At his Somerville location he has about 50 members, but within the last two years he has opened three more churches in the area because of the increasing membership.

As a Reverend and a settled Nepali in the United States, he thinks of it as his duty to help Nepalese people who are new to the area. He told me of agreeing to let a family stay in his home for two months, without ever meeting them, because he knew they were from Nepal and needed a place to stay. He also told me of another man whom he had just

found a job for at a local Nepalese restaurant. Although he was not welcomed as a Christian in Nepal until 2008, Pastor BK still seemed to think highly of his country of origin. He said he visits Nepal once or twice a year; within the past two years, numerous Christian churches have developed in Nepal. In the Boston area, there are thousands of Nepalese, hundreds of which are in Somerville.

### **CPAD Bookstore in the Coble Hill Shopping Center**

*Mr. Neri deSouza is originally from Brazil. In 1986, after losing his job in his home country, he came to the United States. He stayed for two years and then returned back home to Brazil. After securing a US visa in 2001, de Souza returned to United States where he has remained ever since. He owns the CPAD bookstore in Somerville, a gospel bookstore that serves the Portuguese, Brazilian and Cape Verde populations. He lives here with his family: his daughter and wife. His sister lives in America as well, but the rest of his family has stayed in (or returned to) Brazil. His store is located in the Cobble Hill shopping center, one of the sites most vulnerable to the Green Line construction plans. The CPAD Bookstore is a small store tucked into the corner of the shopping area. The inside of the store is filled with books, CD's and gifts, all pertaining to Christianity.*

After returning to the United States in 2001, Mr. deSouza bought the CPAD Bookstore from an older woman who opened the store in 1994. Neri explained that the longevity of the store has made for an incredibly loyal and expansive clientele. He does business with people in Medford, Arlington and Somerville, but also Florida, Chicago and California – people can place orders both online and on the phone.

I was most interested in Mr. deSouza's role within the religious community. He stated that his products were geared towards the Portuguese, Brazilian and Cape Verde communities, so although there were a few products in English, native English speakers

are clearly not his target audience. Neri explained how before he owned his store, he did not know very many people outside of his own church congregation (he goes to church in Everett). However, since opening the store, his social network, or clientele, has drastically increased. He said that the people who buy from his store are from all over the country, but quite a few of them go to church in Somerville. Although he reasoned that many of his clients have been loyal to the store for years, most of his clients find out about the store via word of mouth. He does some radio advertising, but the churches themselves serve as a great means of communication.

Unlike most of the other narrators I spoke with, Neri deSouza was actually able to have a dialogue with me about the Green Line project. Neri knew about the project from talking to Lisa Gimbel, and had clearly discussed the issue with some of his neighbors. He explained that although he initially thought having a T stop next to his store would be great for business, he now thinks otherwise. Mr. de Souza believes that the area in which his store is located will be torn in favor of new apartment buildings and commercial spaces. Although he notices that this is just speculation, regardless of what will happen with the space, business owners in the Cobble Hill center are having difficulties with signing leases because of the supposed arrival and construction of the Green Line. Mr. deSouza had no ideas on how anyone could prevent this from happening, or how small businesses would be able to stay put; however, he did acknowledge that although he wants to stay in his location in Somerville, if something doesn't change, he will soon have to relocate.

## **VI. Reflections**

### **Building a Community**

In talking to four narrators that were somehow deeply involved in religion, I found the theme of immigrants relying on a religious community to be a common one. Of course, taking into consideration that preachers have a biased opinion on the importance of religion, they were still able to illustrate the many ways in which religion helps shape immigrant communities. Perhaps Pastor Faustin put this sentiment best in referring to his congregation as “his family”.

In his book, *Immigration and Religion in America*, Richard Alba notes, “the sense of (immigrants) being vulnerable strangers, has heightened protective roles of religious institutions. There is a theme of religious institutions as refuge and as sites of community building” (2009: 18). I can only imagine how difficult it would be to move to a new country where I don’t know the language or my neighbors. However, religion ensures a place that immigrants will be welcomed regardless of whether or not they know anyone. In a completely new environment, religion is something familiar.

What is also important to note is that, after going to two separate church services, one with Pastor Faustin, and one with Bishop Raymond, I was overwhelmed by the sense of joy each of the church members found in being at church. Maybe it was the just the Gospel environment, but in any case, everyone present at the service was mentally and physically engaged throughout the entire service. As opposed to the church services I used to attend, during which I would write notes and daydream, members of these two

churches seemed captivated by the experience. The members in the audience swayed, sang and clapped along with him. The music was so loud; you could literally feel the music reverberating in your body. This environment led me to understand why one would actually want to go to church at the end of a long day's work. I don't know of anyone, religious or not, who could sit through a "bible study" like Bishop Raymond's and not, in some way, feel uplifted. The preachers were not the only ones to partake in the service; other members were encouraged to lead the church in song as well; the atmosphere seemed to be a very welcoming one in which anyone's contributions to the service were embraced.

When immigrants arrive in a new country, they are (unfortunately) likely to experience racial discrimination. Alba explains the church's role in "powerfully countering the oppression from which immigrants suffer" (2009: 20). In a tight-knit community in which everyone has suffered through similar difficulties in assimilating, a common identity and bond can immediately be formed. Not only can the church foster social relationships in this way, but it also acts as a safe haven where immigrants know they will feel like they belong.

Although many immigrant-run churches in Somerville are located in storefront buildings, and may seem as though they do not have a large presence, word of mouth effectively connects people of similar ethnicities and religions. For example, all of the narrators I talked to explained how they had members, or clients, from all over Boston, not just Somerville. Their religious "community" did not just pertain to their church, but rather,

the larger congregation, including numerous other churches. Bishop Raymond was able to articulate this when he explained how he has the responsibility to oversee over ten churches in Somerville. He and Reverend Dan BK both explained their duties in overseeing other churches, and how this enables them to integrate a larger realm of immigrants.

Outside of a specific church, it is interesting to look at the broader religious community. The gospel bookstore owner, Neri deSouza was able to shed some light on this subject. DeSouza explained that although his clientele is reasonably confined to the Portuguese-speaking community (immigrants from Brazil, Portugal and Cape Verde), the opening of his store has greatly increased his social network. He further described the importance of the church in getting the word out about his store. He seemed to have a good relationship with surrounding churches. The general willingness of churches to help other religious businesses or institutions did not just pertain to Neri deSouza, it was a common theme in the interviews I conducted.

All three of the preachers I interviewed had, at some point or another, shared their church space with another church. Pastor Faustin found his worship space through a Brazilian church that had previously rented the building. Bishop Raymond owned his building, but rented the space out to two other pastors, both Spanish-speaking. And lastly, Reverend Dan BK and his Nepalese church actually were allowed to use their worship room for free; a Brazilian church owns the building and does not charge them rent. It seems that outside of one's immediate church, there exists a larger religious community not confined

to one's specific ethnic group. Although churches of various ethnic groups may not actively engage with one another, it is clear that in general, churches willingly help other churches within the boarder immigrant population, in an effort to make immigrants' acclimation process a smoother one.

### **Keeping Ties to the Homeland**

There seemed to be a range of opinions on the presence of one's homeland in an immigrant's American life. On one extreme, Pastor Faustin expressed his genuine fear of his country of origin, Haiti, and explained that he had no intention of every going back. On the other extreme, Reverend BK told me how he visits Nepal every year, even though for years, the country rejected his choice to practice Christianity.

The importance of having a religious environment that connects immigrants to the home they know is revealed by the pattern expressed by Robert A. Orsi, a professor of religious studies at Harvard University: "one of the first activities of immigrants who settle in compact concentrations in American cities is to collect funds to erect a religious center and to recruit the clergy to lead it" (Orsi 1985). Often times, immigrants set up their own congregations rather than joining existing ones. This theme was shown by all three of the preachers I interviewed, all of whom started their own churches.

The narrators, specifically Reverend BK, emphasized the importance of speaking the language of their homeland during services. "Mother tongue as the secular language of communication between clergy and laity serves as a visible representation of

establishment of an ethnic community” (Alba 2009: 6). Reverend BK explained that before he came to Somerville, there were no Nepalese Reverends in the area. Thus, even if individuals tried to go to a Christian church service, often times they could not understand what was being said, and as a result, did not benefit from the service. Alba further explains that even if churches are in some way Americanized, a connection to the homeland can still be fostered through a “straightforward institutional logic, since, for instance, the recruitment of clerics who speak the mother tongue requires it” (2009:7).

When I went to the various services, they were conducted, for the most part, in languages that I do not speak. So, although the Pastors were very welcoming to me, I still felt like an outsider because I could not understand what was being said. This did not make for the most comfortable environment, but at the same time, I felt that it was a good barrier; I did not want to be intruding on what I thought to be a very personal experience. Because the service was conducted in the mother tongue, members of the congregation could still feel a connection to each other regardless of my presence. What I found was that whether the church service was in a converted garage or a three-story worship center, religions are transnational institutions that link places separated by great distances on the earth’s surface in fraternal embrace (Levitt, 2007).

## **The Church's Many Roles**

While the church clearly provides an environment in which members can connect with God, I would argue that in an immigrant's assimilation process, this is not the most important role that the church plays. Immigrant congregations are social spaces where an "overloaded palette of purposes and needs are served: these can be instrumental, sociocultural, or psychological and spiritual" (Alba 2009: 23). Many of the narrators described the various roles they played as instrumental plays within the church.

Reverend BK explained that as a settled Nepali in the United States, he thinks of it as his duty to help Nepalese people who are new to the area. He told me of agreeing to let a family stay in his home for two months, without ever meeting them, because he knew they were from Nepal and needed a place to stay. He also told me of another man whom he had just found a job for at a local Nepalese restaurant.

Pastor Faustin told me how it was his responsibility to help anyone around him who needed assistance. In addition to the story he told me about helping the boy who fell into the Mystic River, he also told me how one time he had to help a young member of his church who had been arrested. She called him because she had no one else to turn to, and because she trusted that whatever her problem was, her Pastor would help her. This story, along with the other, demonstrates the large expanse of responsibilities Pastor Faustin has outside of the church. While Pastor Faustin was very happy that the members of his church felt they could turn to him for help, he also expressed that the added responsibilities make his job very difficult. Members of the congregation rely on him

(and the church) for “everything”: instead of going to a food pantry when they are hungry, or a doctor when they have a headache, they come to him.

All of the narrators I spoke to discussed the importance of fostering social relationships through religion. Even Neri deSouza, the bookstore owner, explained how, through religious institutions, his social network has grown. His bookstore engenders relationships through the similarities in religion and language that most of his clients share. The other narrators discussed how often times, after services, the church members congregate in order to be able socialize outside of worship time. Through my interviews, I got the impression that the church acts as institution where immigrants can not only seek shelter from the stresses they face in their new environment, but where they can also share knowledge about jobs and business opportunities, and introduce their children to the ethnic community.

### **Assimilation or Alienation?**

I started this project with the impression that religion was an incredibly beneficial aspect of an immigrant’s assimilation into a new country. Although I still believe that religion plays an incredibly influential role, I do not think it is entirely beneficial in helping immigrants integrate themselves into their new community.

After talking to the four narrators I realized that none of them described any involvement in the Somerville community outside of religion. One aspect of this is clearly the fact that outside of their long work hours, logistically, there isn’t enough time in the day to be

involved in other activities or organizations. But besides this, I found that many people are active in a church community give their “free” time to church. When I went to the church services, they were during the week and in the evening so people could come straight from work. If people’s days consist of work, followed by church, then church is the arena in which the social aspects of their day must take place. Thus, although the church does provide this for them, the tight-knit community formed within the church congregation doesn’t foster much outside involvement or associations. In fact, I would go so far as to say that in a sense, religious communities actually limit the amount of assimilation that can take place within an immigrant’s new environment. Although religion allows for new communities to form, the intimacy of the religious, immigrant groups alienates them from the larger, host community.

### **The Immigrant Population and the Green Line**

One area in which this alienation is present is in the discourse about the Green Line extension project. As I stated earlier, it is primarily immigrant populations that will be affected by the arrival of the Green Line, but when I asked about the Green Line, the narrators’ knowledge of the plans was very limited.

Neri deSouza was the only narrator whom could knowledgeably articulate his feelings about the project. The other narrators had very minimal knowledge of the project, and although thought the project would be good for increased transportation, I do not think they fully understood the possible negative effects of the expansion. Neri deSouza, however, did express some concerns with the arrival of the Green Line in East

Somerville. He has come to be highly skeptical of the project, for he fears it will cause problems for he and his business. Neri explained how businesses next to him are already have trouble resigning leases because the owner of the buildings shows signs of anticipating a future buy-out of the entire area. DeSouza was all too aware what will happen to his business if the extension project does want to take over the Cobble Hill shopping area. Even though Neri doesn't want to move locations, he rents the building, so is subject to the owner's economic decisions. He didn't know how this seemingly inevitable future could be avoided, but at the same time, he undoubtedly feared the consequences of the Green Line. For an owner like Neri de Souza, whose company has been in the same location for many years, and who relies on his steadfast location to attract past customers, moving locations could be incredibly detrimental to his business.

Neri deSouza's testimony expresses three main concerns. One, the possibility of rent inflection, the construction that will take place, and lastly, the lack of knowledge on how to remedy the situation.

### **Future Directions and The Somerville Community Corporation**

The Somerville Community Corporation is actively trying to combat all of these issues. Through planning and advocacy committees, they are trying to secure local buildings and jobs. Furthermore, they are attempting to increase knowledge of the possible outcomes of the extension program in order to empower Somerville's immigrant communities. Unfortunately, although many immigrants have been invited to public planning meetings, often times, with their busy schedule, getting there is out of the question. I talked to

Cecily Harwitt, a community director at the Somerville Community Corporation, about what the organization is doing to get immigrants involved. She explained that they are just in the beginning stages of their campaign to empower immigrants in the planning process.

They are attempting to tap into existing relationships that they have with people, however, they have only had some success thus far. While they have had more luck with the Spanish-speaking population, they have had less success with Portuguese speakers, and even less with Creole, as they have no staff that speak Creole. While this is clearly debilitating, they are doing their best to get out into the community. One idea they have recently started to investigate, is working with the religious community leaders. Because churches already have a dominant role within the Somerville immigrant community, and because religious leaders are typically trusted by their congregations, Harwitt explained how this could likely be an effective way to get more immigrants involved. Clearly, immigrants, and native Americans understand the importance and influence religion has.

## **VI. Conclusions**

In conclusion, the role that religion plays in immigrants' habituation to their new environment far exceeds any preconceived notions I had. Although I interviewed people from four different countries, their narrations all led me to the same conclusions.

I do believe that religion can be a factor that lends itself to the further alienation of immigrants within a US city. However, I would also argue that the positive impacts religion has on the immigration process substantially outweigh any negative effects of alienation. Without religion, coming to a new country would be a completely blind experience. A religious institution provides immigrants with a place they can go to without any hesitation about whether or not they will be accepted. As I found through my interviews, church leaders can also be instrumental in other vital processes such as finding housing and employment. Lastly, while the church allows members to retain ties to their country of origin, it also allows them to cultivate new (though likely ethnically limited) relationships within their new community.

In regards to the Green Line, the arrival of the extended subway line could negatively impact the presence of churches within Somerville. As I stated, the church plays a vital role in welcoming immigrants into a community; without religion many people would likely have a much harder time adapting in a new environment. The arrival of the Green Line could potentially displace a lot of storefront churches if nothing is done to combat the anticipated rent increases and property demolition via eminent domain. As a result, the presence of welcoming communities that religious institutions provide will greatly

diminish within Somerville. If church leaders and members are not advised of these possibilities, they will do nothing to resist the adverse effects of the Green Line extension.

I do not think that enough has been done to engage the immigrant community yet. This is a very difficult task, as it is often an isolated population that is incredibly hard to reach; however, I believe it is possible to get immigrants involved in advocating for the future of Somerville. I think that the Somerville Community Corporation is heading in the right direction by targeting religious leaders; preachers obviously have a large say within the immigrant population, are respected by their congregation, and care about the wellbeing of the members of their religious community.

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