



Accessibility and Role of Churches Within Merced Neighborhoods

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Introduction

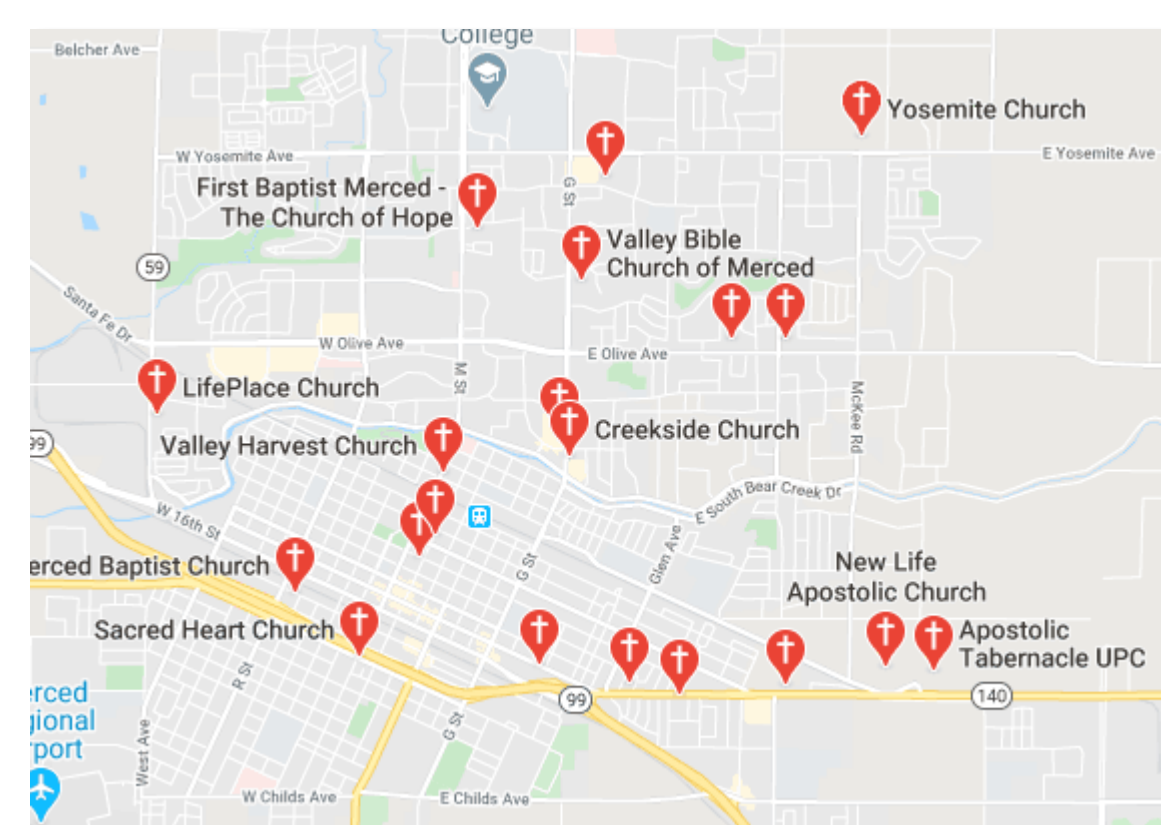
When looking at public service buildings such as schools, clinics, and churches, there is a notable number of churches in the City of Merced. This study seeks to investigate resident attitudes on the accessibility of churches within Merced neighborhoods, with attention to proximity, frequency, and mobility. This study also seeks to examine the role of these churches through the experiences and memories of Merced residents.

Context: Public Buildings

Data on public buildings in Merced was collected onto an Excel sheet modeling the 1985 Merced Historic Building Survey. Using Google Maps, 59 churches were identified in Merced while 24 schools and 18 community clinics were counted, suggesting a predominance of churches within the city of Merced.

Churches	Common name	Historic name	Denomination
	4 Life International Center		Nondenominational Chr
	Alliance Church of Merced		
	Antioch Baptist Church		Baptist
	Apostolic		

Excerpt of the Excel sheets featuring information on churches in Merced



Google Maps search results map for "Churches in Merced"

Interviews

- Merced residents were identified using community contacts.
- Neighborhood delineation was determined using resident perceptions and mental maps.
- Residents were asked questions regarding their experiences and memories of churches in Merced.
- Resident responses were examined using thematic coding analysis.

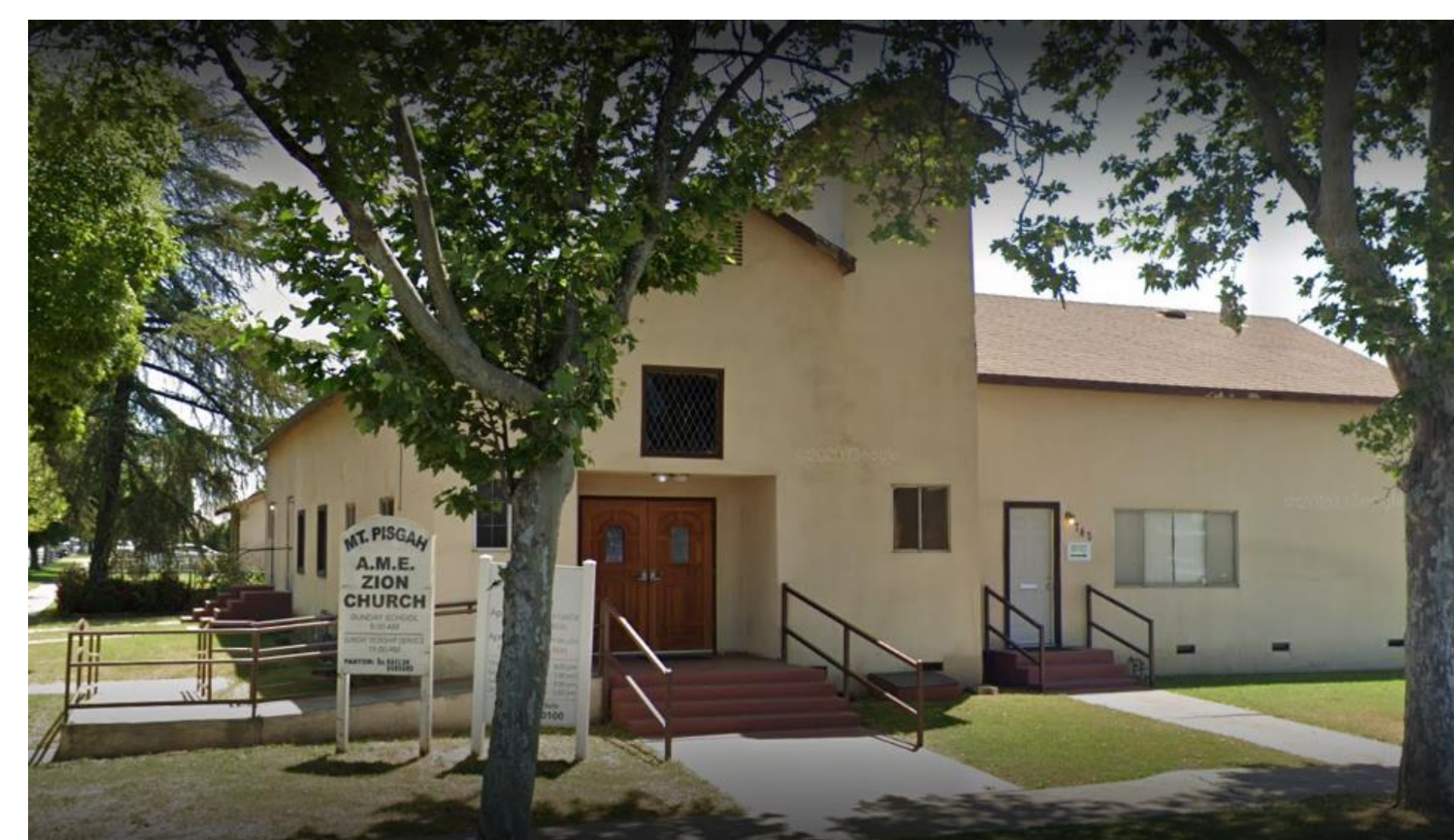
Responses

Accessibility

- *Proximity and frequency:* Participants identified at least 2 churches in their neighborhoods that were within walking distance. The highest number reported was 4.
- *Mobility:* Participants answered that driving was their choice of transportation to arrive at churches.
- *Social distancing:* Participants reported that social distancing has impacted attendance and communication with other members of their church ("Even though at times we would still talk, but it wasn't the same. It wasn't the same conversation.").

Role: Experiences and Memories

- Residents described (1) a sense of community, (2) feelings of acceptance, and (3) family attendance as motivators for choosing a church to attend and aspects of their experiences with Merced churches.
- *Community:* "We are the church, the people inside the church, we're the church. So in order for me— I couldn't wait to see my brothers and sisters in Christ because you know, we all believe the same, we worship God, we praise him."
- *Acceptance:* "These churches are really diverse. I'm talking race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status. I've seen people who may or may not identify as homeless attend churches here, and you just didn't see that where I'm from, and I love that. I love that whole, come-as-you-are, safe space of a church experience."
- *Family:* "I think my sister was going there for a while, her and her two sons, and then one Sunday I went with her, with her and her boys, and I continued just going."



Two of the churches mentioned during interviews with Merced residents: AME Zion Church (left) and Merced First Assembly of God (right).

Conclusion

- Merced residents were readily able to identify more than one church in their neighborhood.
- Merced residents highlighted feeling a sense of belonging and identifying with a community within the churches they attended.
- Merced residents reported challenges to feeling connected with fellow churchgoers due to social distancing.
- Resident responses suggest that churches in Merced are present in neighborhoods, facilitate social connections, and have a positive impact on the social and emotional well-being of attendees.

Importance

By examining the role of churches in Merced's community and the significance behind their predominance, it is possible that future steps can be taken to bridge the gap between the Merced community and UC Merced through church-based programs or activities.

References

- [1] Deng, Y. (2016). Challenges and complications in neighborhood mapping: From neighborhood concept to operationalization. *Journal of Geographical Systems*, 18, 229–248.
- [2] Savas, E. S. (1978). On equity in providing public services. *Management Science*, 24(8), 800-808.
- [3] City of Merced Redevelopment Agency, City of Merced Historic Building Survey

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