How much do neighborhoods affect our life outcomes? This question, which has been long debated and researched, is especially significant when assessing problems and solutions related to residential segregation.

Since post-WWII suburbanization, the segregation of black and white households has been a staple of U.S. residential patterns. One of the major issues related to segregation is not simply where households are segregated from, but where they are segregated to. Patterns of residential segregation are often associated with stark inequalities related to housing, education, health, labor opportunities, safety, and local resources and amenities. To summarize, many believe that location matters. Further, if segregation is a problem, many have assumed that integration is a solution.

Support for residential integration rests on two primary assumptions. The first assumption is the belief that low-income minorities are exposed to social ills as a function of their segregation. In other words, if segregated minority families are disadvantaged, we are assuming that where they live is a source of that disadvantage. This has come to be known as a “neighborhood” effect. The idea that neighborhoods cause additional disadvantage has a long history, but was heavily emphasized in the popular book *The Truly Disadvantaged* by William Julius Wilson. Economists, of course, point to the fact that it is difficult to unpack whether place causes disadvantage or merely reflects it.

The second assumption is that households would fare better if they were dispersed, or integrated, within better neighborhoods that reflect a greater diversity of race and income. Despite a consistent imperative of “moving toward the goal of integrated living” that exists among a host of social scientists, there is a range of evidence in support of, and against, these aforementioned assumptions (Hartman and Squires 2010, p. 7).

Given this, the story of Mount Laurel offers an interesting case study. In 1970, a group of African Americans led by a young woman named Ethel Lawrence petitioned for the town of Mount Laurel, New Jersey, to build low-income garden apartments. The answer was a resounding “no” due to
the fact that the apartments would violate Mount Laurel’s zoning policies and land-use regulations. Shortly after, a lawsuit was filed arguing that the existing regulations effectively “zoned out” low-income minorities from the area and relegated them to the more crime-ridden metropolitan environment of Camden. Zoning regulations considered “exclusionary” include acreage minimums, lot frontage, width requirements, and square footage requirements.

In 1972, the trial court judge overseeing the case ordered that local officials work with the plaintiffs in meeting the housing needs of low-income families. This rather ambiguous ruling led the Mount Laurel municipalities to do nothing, and in 1975, the New Jersey Supreme Court upheld the lower court decisions. This was a historic decision in land use reform, as there was no precedent for state intervention related to residential integration in local municipalities. This ruling, referred to as Mount Laurel I, may have been historic on paper, but it was widely disregarded in practice. For nearly a decade after the ruling, most municipalities openly refused to implement the dictates of Mount Laurel I. This led to Mount Laurel II, a ruling in 1985 specifying that every town must provide a “fair share” of low- to moderate-income housing. Finally, in the year 2000, one hundred new affordable housing units were built in Mount Laurel with an additional forty units added in 2004. The complex was named after the lead plaintiff, Ethel Lawrence.

In *Climbing Mount Laurel*, the authors provide “the first systematic, comprehensive effort to determine as rigorously as possible the degree to which the manifold hopes and fears associated with the Mount Laurel project were realized” (p. 5). The book itself consists of nine chapters and is a relatively short read at just under 200 pages (prior to appendices). After discussing the importance of location and “the political economy of place” in the first chapter, in chapter 2 the authors provide the tumultuous history of the Mount Laurel legislative battles and the resistance displayed by many existing residents. Drawing on court documents and transcripts, the authors provide an array of examples demonstrating the existing residential fear that seemed to consume the small town. They write: “Witnesses before the board offered up images of urban dysfunction coming to Mount Laurel and disrupting its tranquil suburban way of life” (p. 44). While many objections related to economic concerns such as lower property values and higher taxes, others focused on the “presumed moral defects” of their new potential neighbors (p. 44). More than once in the book, the authors suggest that such fears were animated by racial hostility.

Despite resistance, and over a quarter-century after the initial suit was
filed, affordable housing finally came to Mount Laurel. Chapter 3 of the book describes the nature of the housing, its location, and the application process. In addition to townhouse-style homes, the housing units primarily consisted of detached single-family homes. The site also included an 8,000 square foot management and maintenance building, with plans for a 4.1 acre outdoor recreation area and a 10,000 square foot education/recreation building (which, as of 2012, had not yet been developed). Of particular interest in this chapter is the screening process for applicants, which the authors describe as rigorous. Specifically, the process was meant to identify people “who would be good tenants and respectful neighbors” (p. 57). Screening also included third-party income verification, a criminal background check, a detailed credit history, and a five-year residence history.

Chapters 4 through 8 provide a comprehensive detailing of the “Monitoring Mount Laurel Study”—the research the authors carried out as a means to provide an objective assessment “of exactly how the project’s opening did affect local trends [in] crime, property values, and taxes, or how the insertion of tenants into the community influenced the tenor of suburban life” (p. 65; italics in original). The study combines quantitative research (time-series and cross-sectional regression) with supplemental qualitative data based upon in-depth interviews of Ethel Lawrence Housing (ELH) residents. Secondary data sources, such as ELH Neighborhood Watch Meeting transcripts, were obtained and utilized.

After a summary of the research methods utilized in chapter 4, the authors share their findings. Overall, results were positive. Contrary to some of the early fears of existing residents, ELH housing did not increase crime, decrease property values, or raise property taxes in the township or adjacent neighborhoods (chapter 5). Chapter 6 explores the attitudes of neighbors a decade after ELH housing was put in place, in which “reactions were…surprisingly muted” (p. 118).

While affordable housing in Mount Laurel did not seem to have the negative consequences upon others that many predicted, chapter 7 explores the effect of affordable housing on ELH residents. Specifically, did it “improve their lives and provide a path out of poverty?” (p. 122). In response to this question, the study concluded that moving into the ELH neighborhood improved the residential environment experienced by project residents. After detailing in chapter 8 the new life trajectory of ELH residents, the final chapter of the book concludes with the suggestion that affordable housing for low- to moderate-income families can indeed be built in an affluent, white neighborhood and improve the lives and
prospects of project residents without imposing significant costs on others (p. 196).

Insofar as achieving the book’s aim, the authors have seemingly put together a successful project. Yet questions remain. First, it is not clear that the study successfully overcomes the problem of self-selection bias in their measurements. Even though comparisons were made between ELH residents and non-ELH residents, this cannot account for the fact that many ELH residents likely possessed attributes that distinguished them from non-ELH residents. Because housing assignments were not random (recall that ELH residents were rigorously screened), the authors conclude that “it is impossible to make a definitive attribution of causality with respect to the project’s effects on the lives of ELH tenants and their children” (p. 78).

Beyond this, there is a much larger issue for people of faith. What, we might ask, is morally objectionable about segregation? In line with Climbing Mount Laurel, most of the literature tends to decry segregation on social and economic terms. For example, many would say that segregation is wrong because low-income minorities are subjected to greater social ills (e.g., crime) and economic hardship (e.g., job mismatch) as a function of their segregation.

Yet is this all? Mount Laurel is unique in that from its inception, one of its core objectives was to “ameliorate racial and ethnic segregation” (Wish and Eisdorfer 1997, p. 1276). Indeed, one of the driving goals of Ethel Lawrence, the champion behind Mount Laurel’s affordable housing, was racial integration (xiii). Scripture tells us that the sacrifice of Christ was for “every tribe, every tongue, and every nation”—and all will stand together before the throne of God in worship (Revelation 5:9; 7:9). Moreover, the trajectory of New Testament theology speaks to integrated arrangements. The apostle Paul writes that Christ breaks down the “dividing wall of hostility” between Jews and Gentiles (Ephesians 2:14), and Paul adds that in Christ Jesus, there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female (Galatians 3:28). All are one.

Although I had no expectation for the authors to share this vision, the book did not seem to directly address the issue of social integration within the community. While they conclude that poverty-dispersal programs can be an effective policy tool to “ameliorate existing patterns of racial and class segregation,” such integration is, at best, spatial not social (p. 99). In fact, in conducting interviews, the authors found that many ELH residents experienced social isolation. They write: “most tenants were racial minorities in an overwhelmingly white suburban environment”
While most residents claimed that they did not experience prejudice or discrimination, most described feelings of discomfort, “feeling out of place,” and being viewed with suspicion (p. 145).

While the authors point to an array of benefits relative to the integration of ELH residents in Mount Laurel, other residential mobility programs have not shared the same success (particularly given the costs). So on the one hand, the findings in the Mount Laurel study suggest that mobility programs can ameliorate some of the social and economic ills that otherwise segregated minority households are prone to experience. However, as mentioned, individuals are also relational and desire human engagement, social capital, affiliation, membership, and solidarity. Further, contemporary findings in social capital theory suggest that relational engagement in both homogeneous as well as heterogeneous arrangements produce various social benefits. Finally, as people of faith, we recognize the inherent value in all people as image bearers of a loving and relational God. Thus, when we know more of others, we know something more of our Creator. In light of these comments, the faith-based economist may rightly discern the opportunity for a larger conversation regarding segregation and residential mobility—one that incorporates other social and spiritual considerations.

References

