

The immigrant church as a symbol of
community and place in the Upper
Midwest.

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The Immigrant Church As A Symbol Of Community In The Upper Midwest

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Abstract

There can be little doubt that the church as an institution played a major role in the organization and development of community on nineteenth-century midwestern frontier populations. Zealous missionary activity was especially in the Middle West. Protestantism in the nineteenth century, and a good portion of that activity was on midwestern frontier populations. Thus the region emerged as a center of competition between the established American denominations and the new immigrant churches.

was fertile ground for the establishment of new denominations in the Upper Midwest region were immigrants who came directly from Europe. The result was a heavily churching of the region with the formal churches of Europe and created a need in America for a variety of ethnic denominations.

The result was a heavily churching landscape, especially in the Upper Midwest settlement that stretched across the Upper Midwest from northern Wisconsin to the eastern parts of the Dakotas and Nebraska. A study of the population based on county data from the 1890 federal census shows a high intensity.¹ It shows that a high proportion of the population in the Upper Midwest settlement was affiliated with religious organizations and that church membership existed in the German and Scandinavian areas of Wisconsin and central Minnesota. Indeed, by the end of the century, church leaders considered the Midwest to be "overchurching" and later felt that the overly competitive efforts to establish churches had been a mistake.

The competition among denominations in the nineteenth century attracted the attention of scholars and a sizable literature has emerged on the subject. It reaches to reach and gather the unchurching souls of pioneer population and focus on the denomination, chronicling the process of denomination and the struggle to establish the new ethnic denominations, and the ways in which the denominations distinctive and competitive.³ Less attention has been paid to the role of religious organization at the level of the individual pioneer settlement. At this level that the church was most relevant to the new settlement. The denomination was a structural and purposive organization, devoted to the preservation and propagation of a theological point of view, the church as a social institution that fulfilled the pioneers' more immediate needs for social belonging and for community leadership.

My purpose here is to examine the functional roles of the immigrant church in the Upper Midwest in defining community and in preserving cultural identity. The emphasis on the way in which the physical presence and architecture of the church may have symbolized these roles. While the functional roles of the church may be fairly well understood, its place on the cultural landscape remains a passing comment. Historians of American immigration, for instance, tend to characterize the church as a symbolic place but do not define its role. This symbolism is evident on the landscape. Geographers who map religious landscapes argue that religion can make a substantial difference in the conditions of low diversity. Yet they have done relatively little to explore the role of the church in the United States.⁴ In his book on American cultural geography, V. G. Chittenden says that the church has been "scandalously neglected" in studies of the cultural landscape.⁵

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