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‘White flight’ is landing along Wasatch Front

By Lee Davidson

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Ron Watt says what sold him on his new home in the Daybreak area of South Jordan was the view out his back door: An LDS chapel.

"We walk through the fence there, through the parking lot and into the church," he says about his short Sunday meeting commute.

His wife, Barbara, also liked that the new Oquirrh Mountain LDS Temple is only a mile away — and the retired couple now volunteer there.

There were other reasons for the older couple's relocation, too, such as the desire for a home with fewer stairs and to be nearer to a son.

The Watts are among thousands who in recent years have moved away from Utah's older, larger cities at the same time ethnic minorities moved in.

This phenomenon known as "white flight" is well-established elsewhere but is relatively new to Utah.

In the past decade, West Valley City, the state's second-largest municipality, saw its white, non-Latino population drop by more than 7,000 people. Salt Lake City lost more than 6,000 white people in the same period. Others with significant losses of white residents include Orem, Provo, Taylorsville, Kearns, Ogden, South Salt Lake, Midvale and Sandy.

A Salt Lake Tribune analysis of new census data also shows that each of them concurrently had big increases in minorities that led to overall population growth (details are in the accompanying chart).

Meanwhile, other areas became new magnets for white people, mostly more-distant suburbs with newer and more expensive housing. They included Lehi, South Jordan, Herriman, Eagle Mountain, Saratoga Springs and Draper. Most of them were nearly 90 percent white in 2010.

None of the academics, local officials and others interviewed about the changing concentrations identifies racism as a cause. Instead, most say it's a matter of people, in essence, being pack animals.

"We like being around people who are like us," said University of Utah research economist Pam Perlich. She said decades of research into "white flight" show that.

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‘Pack animals’ •

White flight "has been very common in U.S. metropolitan areas" although not as much in recent decades, said John Iceland, a Pennsylvania State University sociologist who has studied how race affects where people live.

Iceland said about white flight nationally, "It's something that we see less often than we used to, and there are more-diverse neighborhoods and fewer places that are all-white because of the overall racial composition of the country. But we still see it happening. It's not like race has disappeared from the equation. What's happening in Utah wouldn't be unique."

Perlich said that Utah never had big in-migrations of people of color until the 1990s. But the pattern of clustering is not limited to people of the same race. It extends to other factors, such as economics, religion and culture.

Perlich noted that a float in the recent gay pride parade in Salt Lake City was sponsored by a real estate company and "it said to buy into gay neighborhoods. So it's not on the basis of race or ethnicity, it's on the bases of shared culture, shared values, people you feel comfortable with. ... We're pack animals."

Mormons "are an ethnicity by any sociologist's or anthropologist's definition of shared values, cultures and practices," Perlich said. And that may be why many LDS families — most of them white — are relocating to the southern part of the valley, she added, pointing out that a lot of the white population growth is occurring near new LDS temples in South Jordan and Draper.

The Watts were among the whites who moved from West Valley City to South Jordan. Their experience shows that a variety of reasons influenced that shift — and other moves by their extended family that also contributed to white flight.

Ron Watt said that when he retired, he and his wife wanted to move out of their West Valley City home because it has several flights of stairs. "We're getting older, and we wanted a home with pretty much everything on one floor."

He said they also wanted to move near a son in South Jordan — which is why they chose that general area.

That son, in turn, had moved there because his wife, who is Filipino, "is in real estate, and there were some other Filipino families that lived out here. So they moved out here probably to be near other young families, and also to be near some other Filipinos," Ron Watt said.

Watt sold his West Valley City home to another daughter. "She's married to an Argentine," and they live in an area that has a growing Latino population.

West Valley City Mayor Mike Winder said in a recent interview that he also feels that, indeed, minorities are increasingly attracted to his city "to be near minorities who already live there. It makes sense that you want to live near people who are like you."

Ron Mortensen, a founder of the Utah Coalition on Illegal Immigration, says his work has put him in contact with many white people who are not happy when their neighborhoods have become increasingly Latino because of how cultures collide. He said that may be among reasons illegal immigration has become a hot political issue in Utah, not to mention its contribution to white flight.

"The thing I keep hearing from them all is they see the value of the neighborhood go down. They [some Latinos] have multiple families moving into a home. They have cars parked on the lawn. Lawns are not taken care of. The neighborhood starts looking a little scruffy," he said, adding that Latinos in his own neighborhood are opposite of that negative stereotype.

He said that once a critical mass of minorities gathers in an area, "People say, 'Hey, I'm Latino and there's a lot of Latinos there, so that's where I'll go.'" He adds that white people may look at the same area and decide that they fit better elsewhere. "I don't know if it's racism or if people just go where they are comfortable."

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Housing costs •

Perlich notes that the cost of housing in many of the newer areas attracting whites is often out of the economic reach of recent immigrants.

For example, Doug Winder, a real estate agent who specializes in South Jordan where the Watts moved, said most houses there are in the \$250,000 to \$300,000 range — but some townhouses go for much less, and some larger homes are in the half-million-dollar range.

Nicole Martin, public information officer for Herriman, one of the white-magnet areas, said newer housing there over the past decade "historically was in the \$400,000 to \$500,000 range. In today's speak, that is just unattainable" for most people. She said more recently, the city has added more varieties of housing that may attract more people — to the apparent chagrin of some residents.

At The Tribune's request, she asked through the city's Facebook page why residents moved there. No one mentioned anything related to white flight, but many said they simply liked the area and its atmosphere — and several hoped its home prices would remain high and exclusive.

Dustin Serr posted there: "People move here for the more open spaces and low density housing. Do stop allowing all the apartments, condos and townhouses into the community."

Meranda Julian added, "I agree. Keep the open space out here. Pack the houses in West Valley, because that's what it will turn into if you keep allowing all the apartments and cheap houses."

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Generations •

Another demographic factor may be at work in the population shifts: age.

Perlich said the older generations in Utah are heavily white, and as they age or die, their homes may be bought by minorities seeking more affordable housing — helping to decrease the white population and increase that of minorities.

Taylorville Mayor Russ Wall said in a recent interview that his city's loss in white population may come largely from a big increase in "empty-nesters" as whites there age. He knows the phenomenon firsthand.

"My wife and I are examples. We raised three kids in Taylorville. But they grew up and have now moved to West Jordan, South Jordan and Bluffdale," Wall said. "Where we had five people in the house, now we only have two."

Rebecca Sanchez, director of Salt Lake County Mayor Peter Corroon's Office of Diversity, says changes toward diversity can be challenging but also rewarding.

"We are all uncomfortable with change. But unless we want to cross that barrier and reach our hand out to someone who is different than us and say, 'I want to get to know you,' then we're going to stay in that little place of 'I'm afraid,' 'I don't like change,' and 'I want things to stay the same,'" she said.

"That's the challenge for all of us. But the fact is in 2040, the diverse population is going to be the majority," Sanchez said. "If you get to know your neighbors and talk to them, you may find out a lot more about them than just your perception or your bias. ... Diversity opens us up to different ways of viewing the world. It opens us to new ideas, thoughts, new ways of accomplishing things."