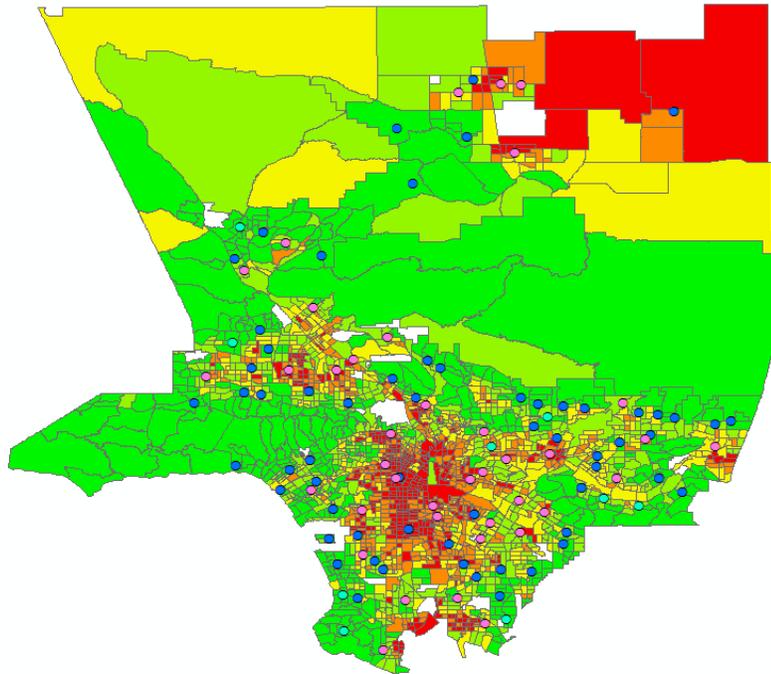Landon Hawes
GIS for PPD
Final Project
11/29/15

The Demographics of LDS Meetinghouses in Los Angeles County

I am a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. I am also an inveterate geographer. For example, my goal is to visit every single neighborhood of Los Angeles before I graduate from USC – ultimately because these neighborhoods simply exist, but also because I want to place myself (and Los Angeles) into a more geographically informed context. Small wonder, then, that I have chosen to map the demographics of Latter-Day Saint (LDS) meetinghouses within Los Angeles County.

This paper will explore the implications of my findings using GIS mapping. First, it will explain my reasons for choosing this topic. Second, it will detail the methods I used to assemble my GIS maps. Third, it will display these maps, along with an interpretation of their data. Finally, it will conclude with a section on limitations faced in researching this project, and reflect on possible research avenues for the future. My thesis is that the Church has constructed its meetinghouses in a diverse economic and racial environment; this hypothesis will be tested using my GIS maps.

Rationale for Topic Selection

I chose this topic because I believe that place is an important part of the way individuals express their faith in a higher power. The experiences of Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the Middle East are fundamentally shaped by place. For instance, the children of Israel wandered forty years to reach a land that became part of their cultural and religious heritage; the consequences of this faith-based geography are still with us today in the form of the seemingly-intractable conflicts between Israel and Palestine.

On a more mundane level, place certainly affects the way that Latter-Day Saints live and worship. Gates and barriers are common features of properties in Los Angeles, and LDS meetinghouses are no exception. The Westwood meetinghouse where I attend church has several gates of varying size which guard all parking lot entrances at night. Similarly, the Vermont meetinghouse near USC has a double-decker parking garage

(something which I have never seen replicated at any other LDS meetinghouses). This garage also has large gates which can be used to block off its entrances. The effect is to say, "Our parking is for us and us alone!" Without entering into an investigation of whether this kind of parking policy is justified or not, it is worth asking: could such an exclusionary policy create feelings of insularity in local Latter-Day Saints? Could it inspire in me and my co-religionists a desire to wall ourselves off from other Angelenos, instead of trying to build bridges of understanding and care? What about a sense of being threatened or attacked by the outside world? The implications for a person of faith are sobering.

So it stands to reason that where LDS meetinghouses are built, and worshipped in, could influence (for good or ill) the way Latter-Day Saints express themselves and live their religion. For a passionately religious amateur geographer such as myself, the opportunity to explore the geography of LDS faith in Los Angeles County is too good to pass up.

Methods

Data

The GIS map layers were assembled using data from the 2013 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, US Census Bureau TIGER Shapefiles, and the LDS.org meetinghouse locator. Meetinghouse data was mostly geocoded; the six meetinghouse addresses that could not be geocoded were mapped using a combination of the "Find" tool and "Editor" toolbar on ArcGIS. Quantiles were used to organize economic data, as this produced a more defined division between income classes. In contrast, natural breaks were used to organize population data because of the more realistic divisions they produced among concentrations of minorities.

This paper views the geography of LDS meetinghouses through four lenses: household median income in Los Angeles County, Hispanic or Latino population in Los Angeles County, Black or African American population in Los Angeles County, and Asian population in Los Angeles County. Household median income has been selected because it helps explain where LDS meetinghouses fall in relation to different economic classes with the county, while the racial data has been selected because it demonstrates whether LDS meetinghouses give sufficient access to minorities. All data is given by census tract; each individual census tract represents one polygon on the GIS map. The blank areas within the map are assumed to be
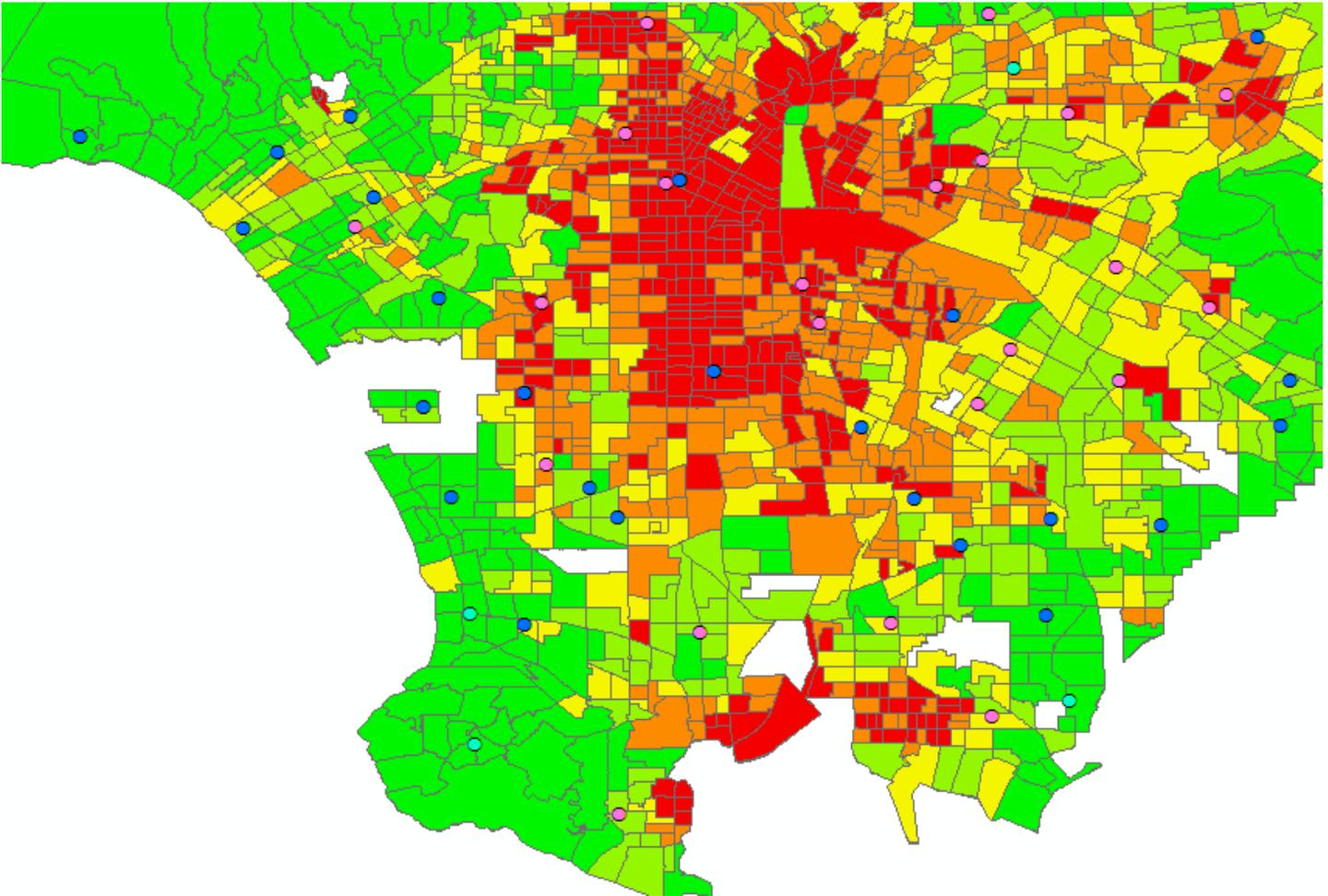
Overview of Regions

Four regions of the county are examined: Northern LA County, San Fernando Valley, Core/South Los Angeles, and East LA County. These were selected because the distribution of meetinghouses makes this geographic organization logical.
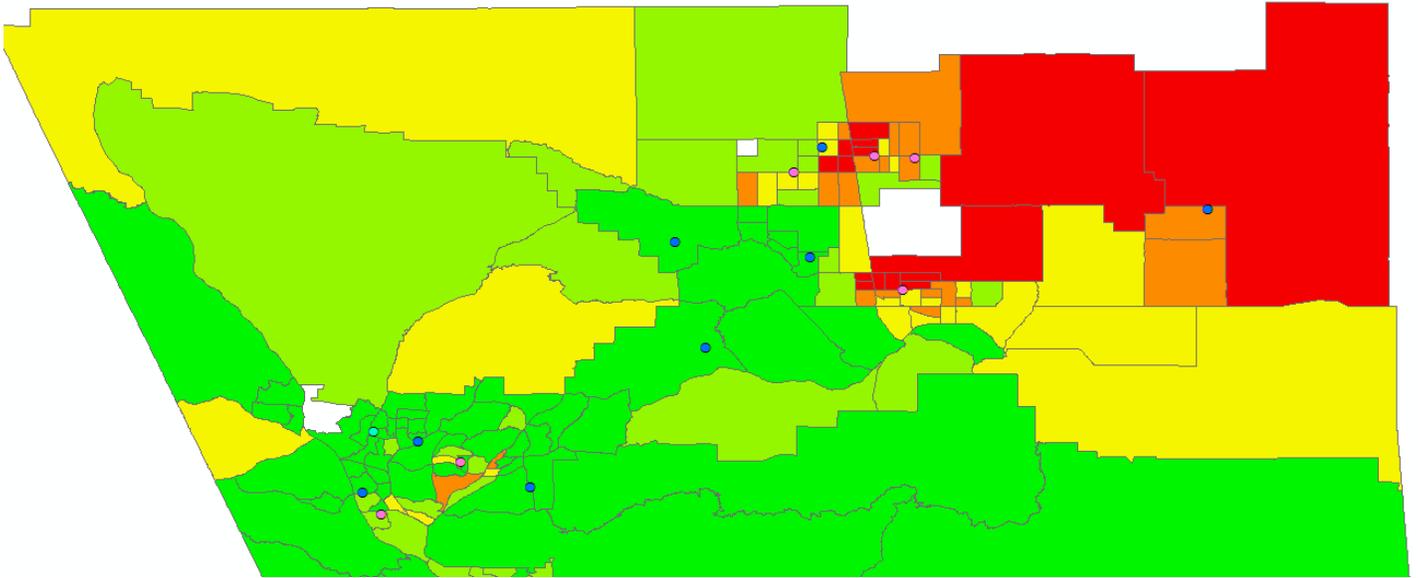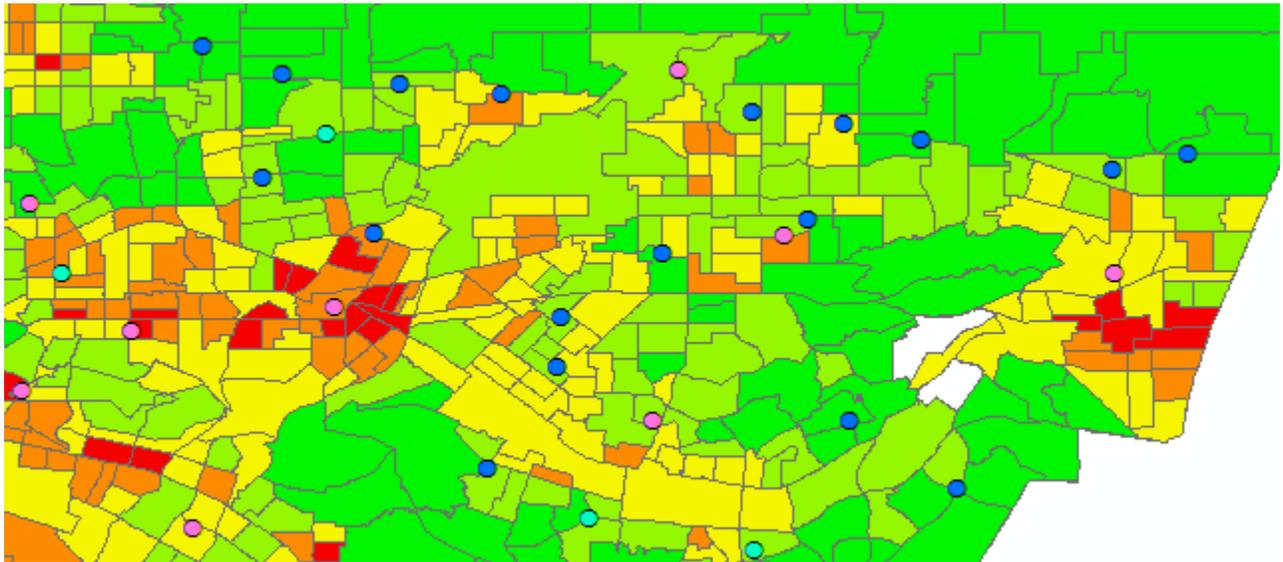
Lancaster/Santa Clarita
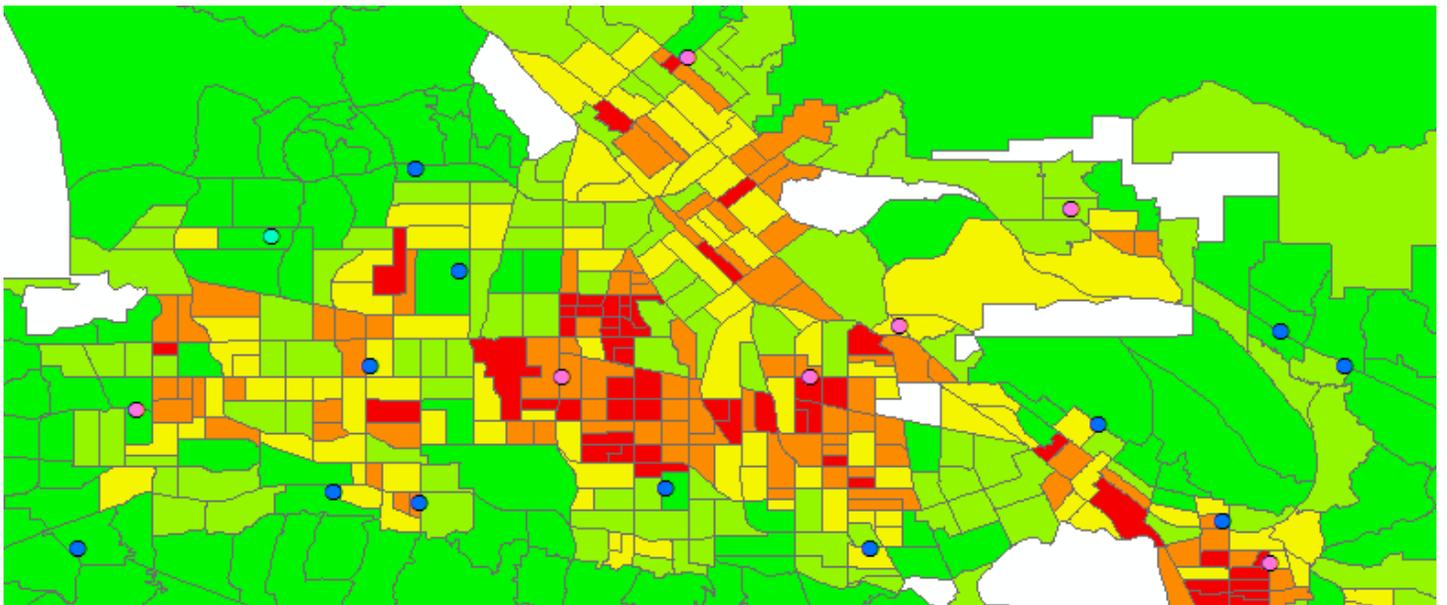

San Fernando Valley

Core/South LA

East LA

Terminology

   Normal-sized congregations of the LDS Church, generally consisting of 100-200 members, are referred to as "wards." Smaller congregations are called "branches," generally consisting of 25-75 members. The term "young single adult ward," commonly abbreviated as "YSA ward," refers to a congregation specifically for unmarried young adults who are 18 to 30 years old.

Findings

Northern LA County
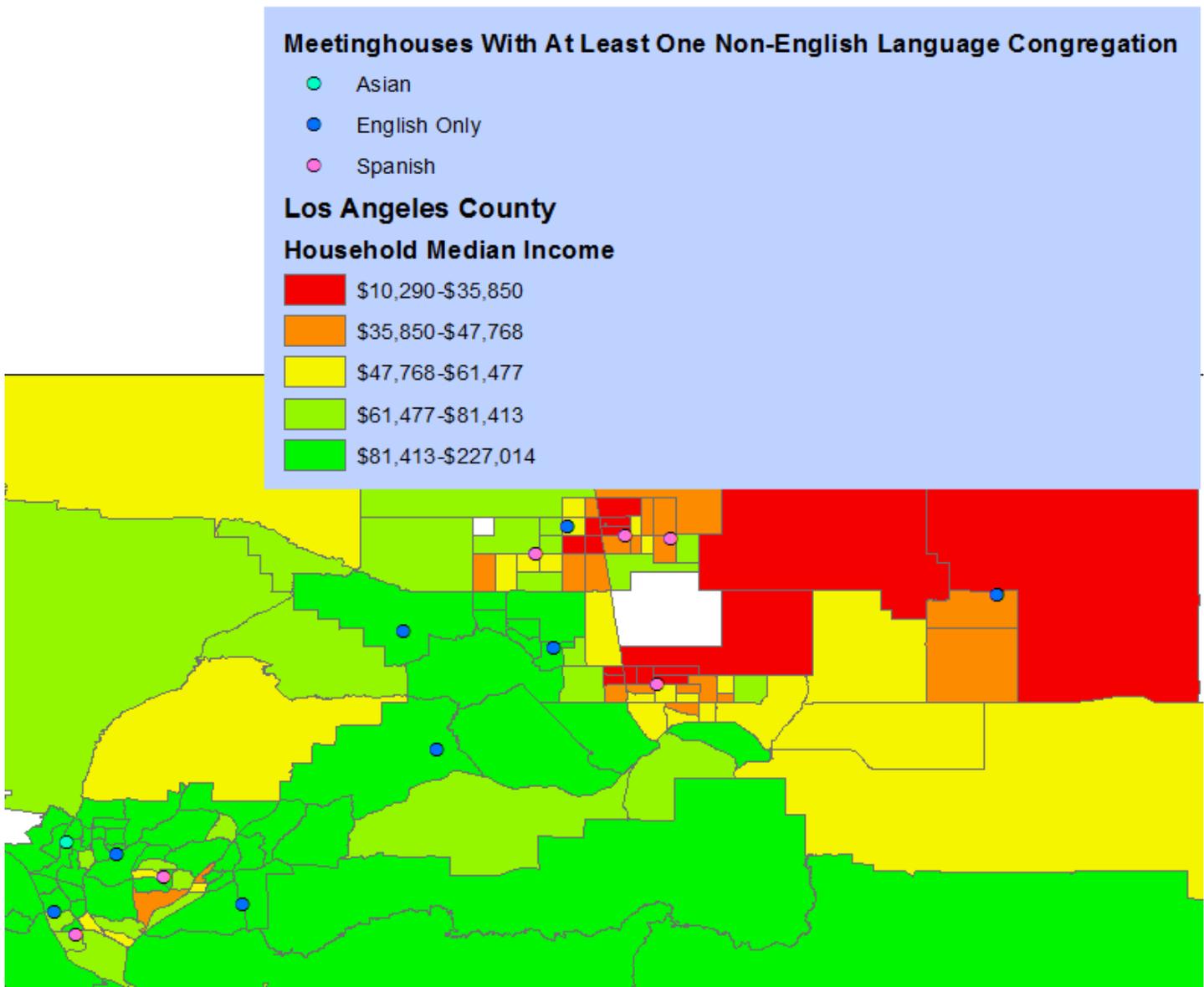
While certainly not as densely populated by Latter-Day Saints as other parts of Los Angeles County, the northern portion of the county is a microcosm of the diverse makeup of the church in the area. There are 30 congregations of the church here, several of which are geared towards specific demographics. For instance, the Lancaster/Palmdale area has one YSA ward, as well as three Spanish-language branches and one Spanish-language ward. In addition to two Spanish branches, the Santa Clarita area also has a YSA ward and a Korean-speaking branch.

Northern LA County also demonstrates the attempts of the church to reach both poor and affluent communities. Contrast Santa Clarita's relative wealth with the low median incomes of Lancaster households; the church has roughly equal proportions of meetinghouses in both areas.
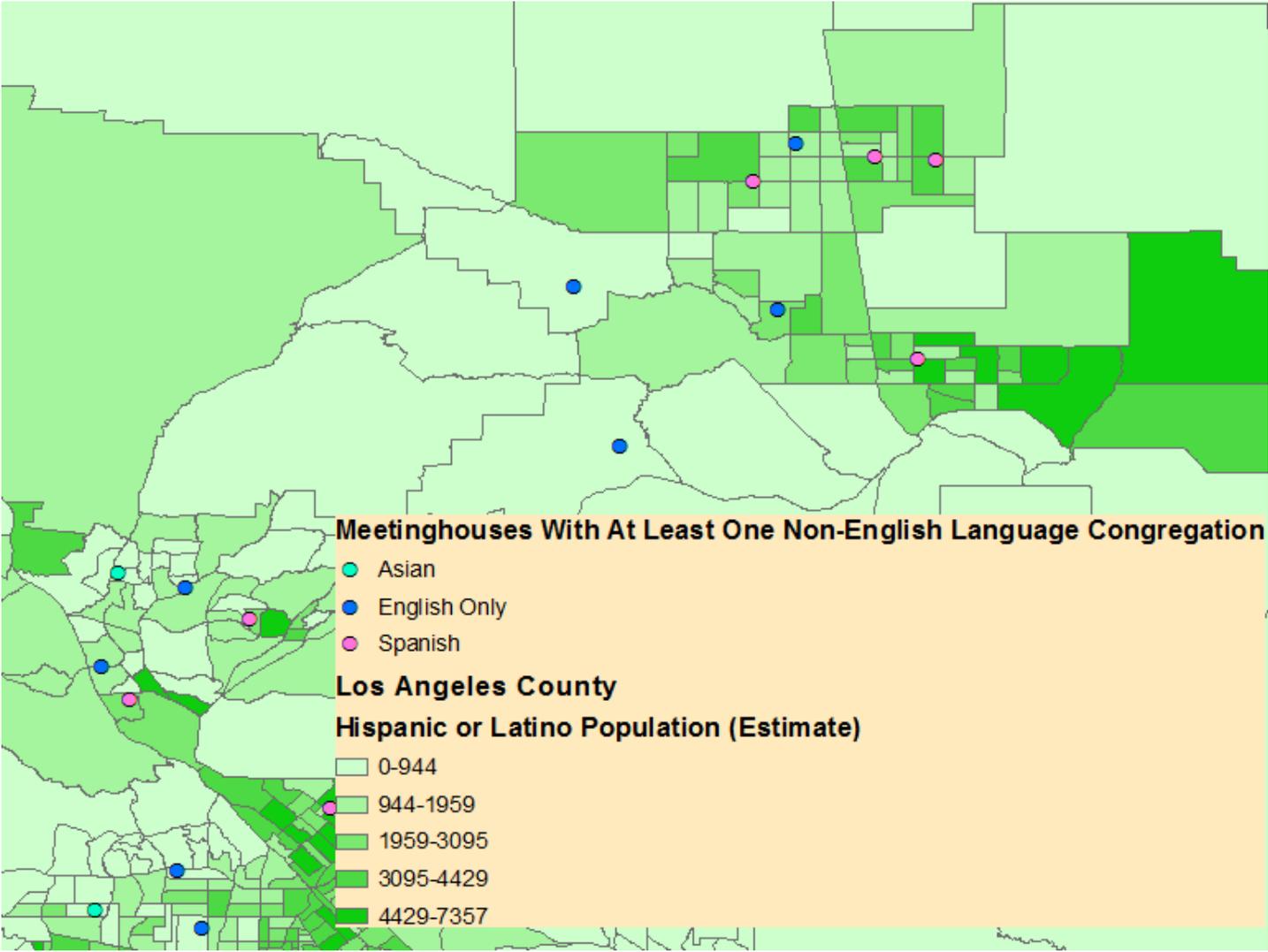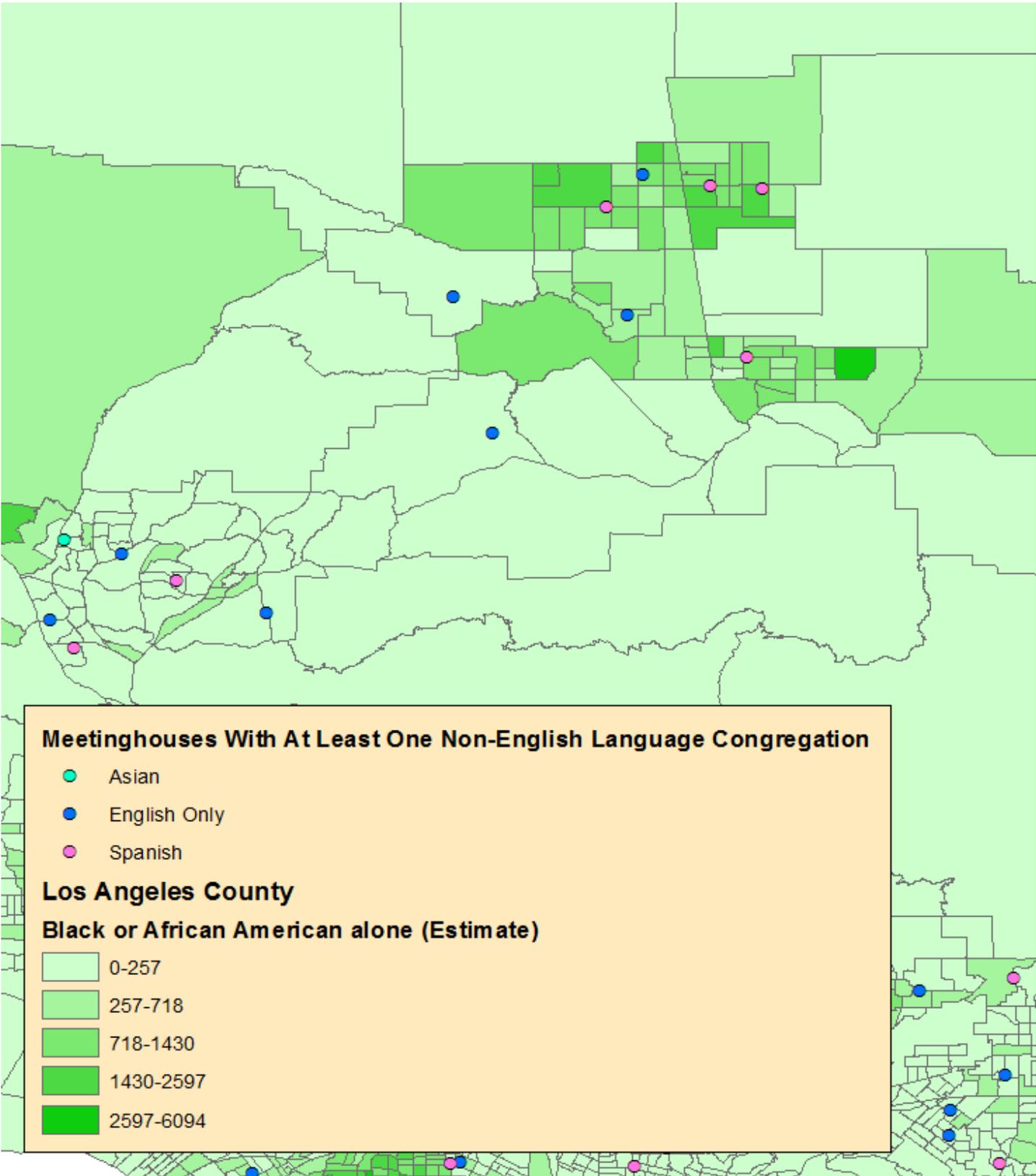
Meetinghouses With At Least One Non-English Language Congregation
- Asian
- English Only
- Spanish

Los Angeles County
Hispanic or Latino Population (Estimate)
- 0-944
- 944-1959
- 1959-3095
- 3095-4429
- 4429-7357

Meetinghouses With At Least One Non-English Language Congregation

- ● Asian
- ● English Only
- ● Spanish

Los Angeles County

Black or African American alone (Estimate)

- 0-257
- 257-718
- 718-1430
- 1430-2597
- 2597-6094

Meetinghouses With At Least One Non-English Language Congregation
- Asian
- English Only
- Spanish

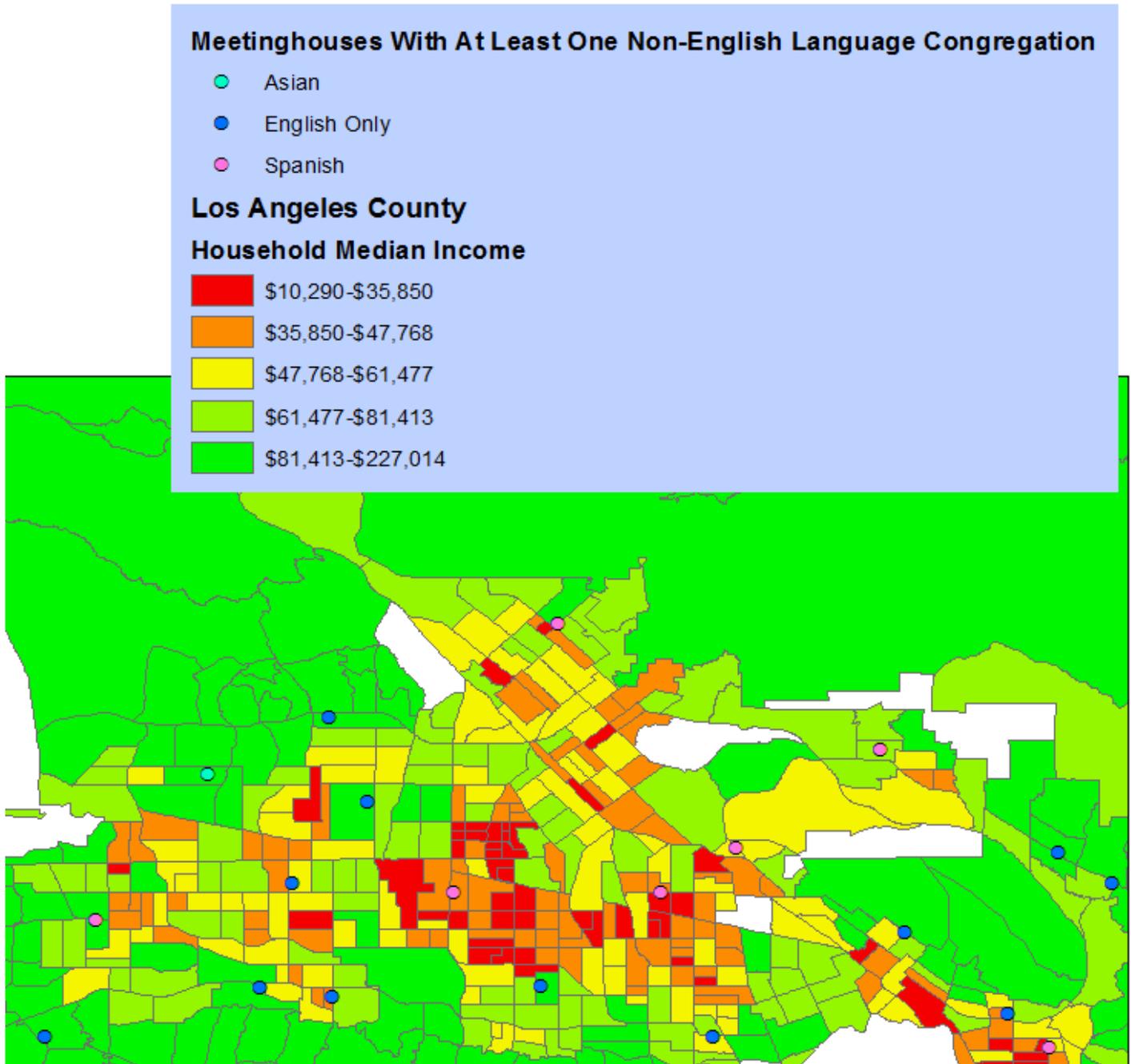**Los Angeles County**

Asian Alone (estimate)
- 0-335
- 335-843
- 843-1592
- 1592-2755
- 2755-5603
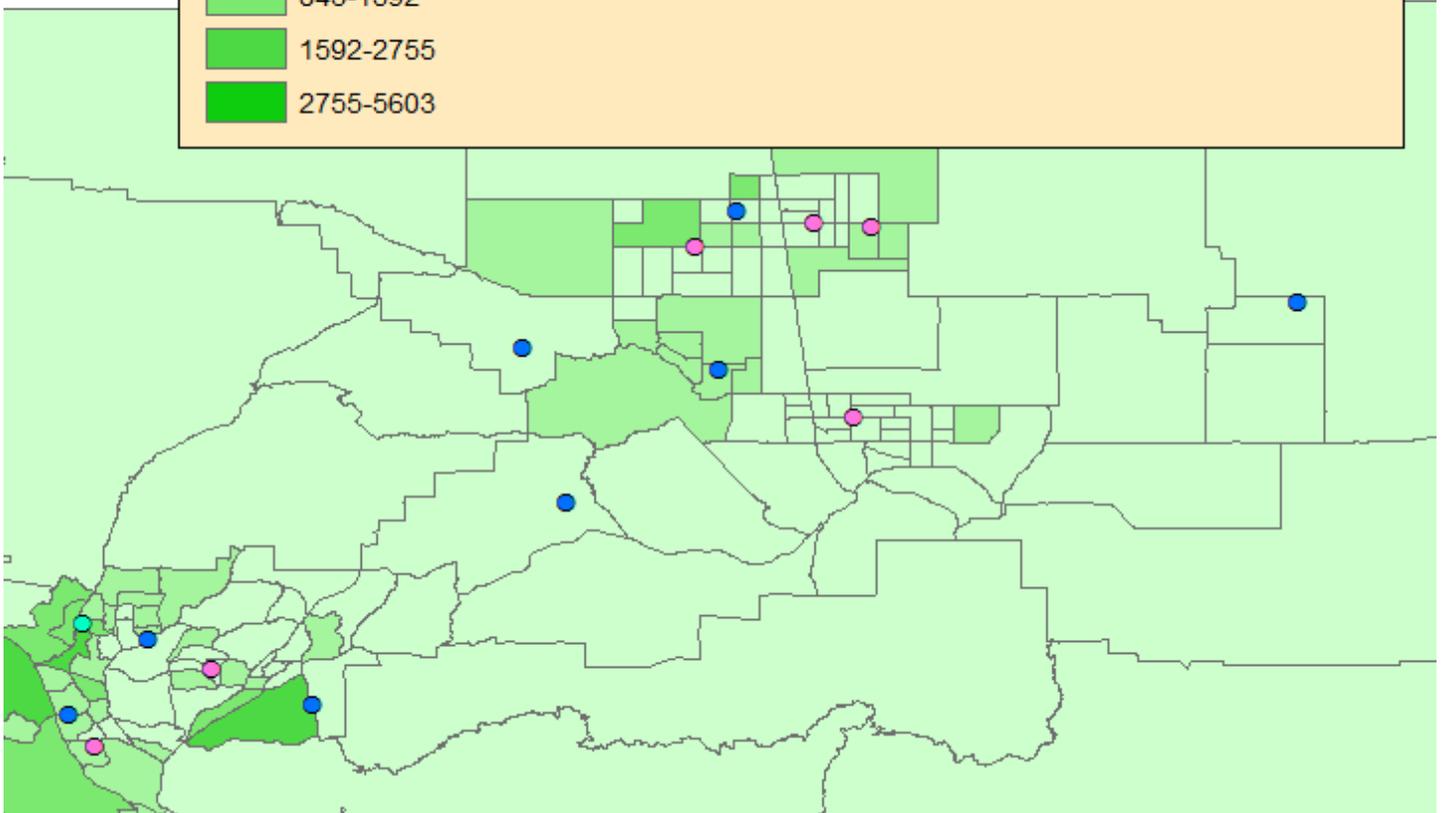
The Church also has a strong presence among minorities in both the Lancaster and Santa Clarita areas, though Hispanics and African-Americans feature more heavily in Lancaster, while Asians are more concentrated in Santa Clarita.

San Fernando Valley

The San Fernando Valley (here including La Canada Flintridge and Glendale) is home to 40 LDS congregations, including three YSA wards, a single adult (age 31+) branch, ten Spanish-speaking wards, a Tagalog-speaking ward, and a Korean-speaking branch. Notably, one of the YSA wards is a Spanish-speaking unit.

The valley is fairly diverse economically; as can be seen, the Church has distributed its meetinghouses evenly through the area.
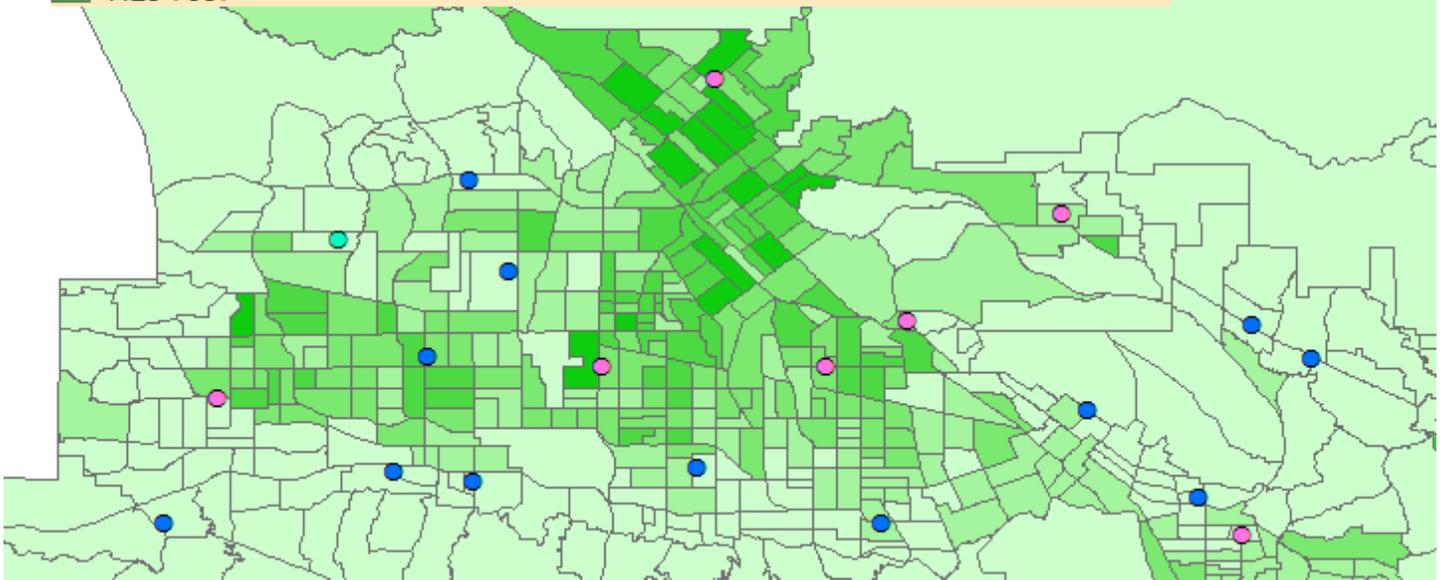
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Los Angeles County

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- 944-1959
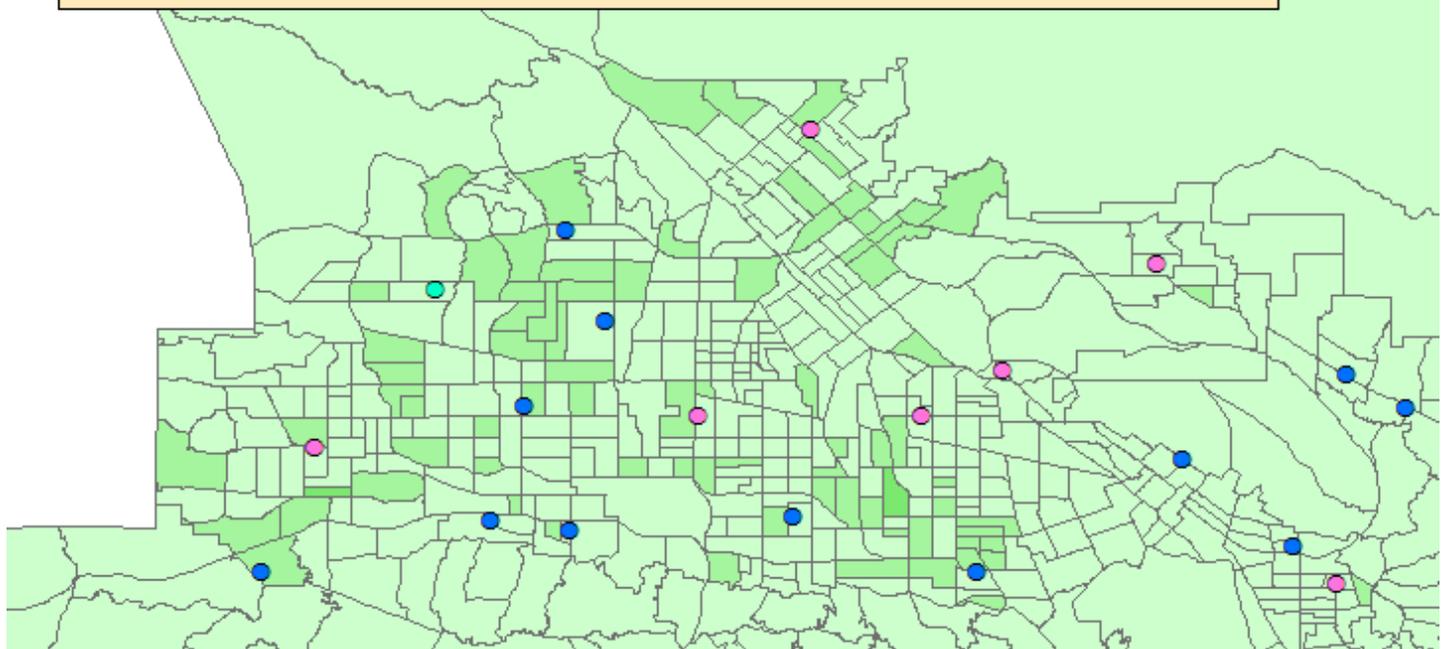- 1959-3095
- 3095-4429
- 4429-7357

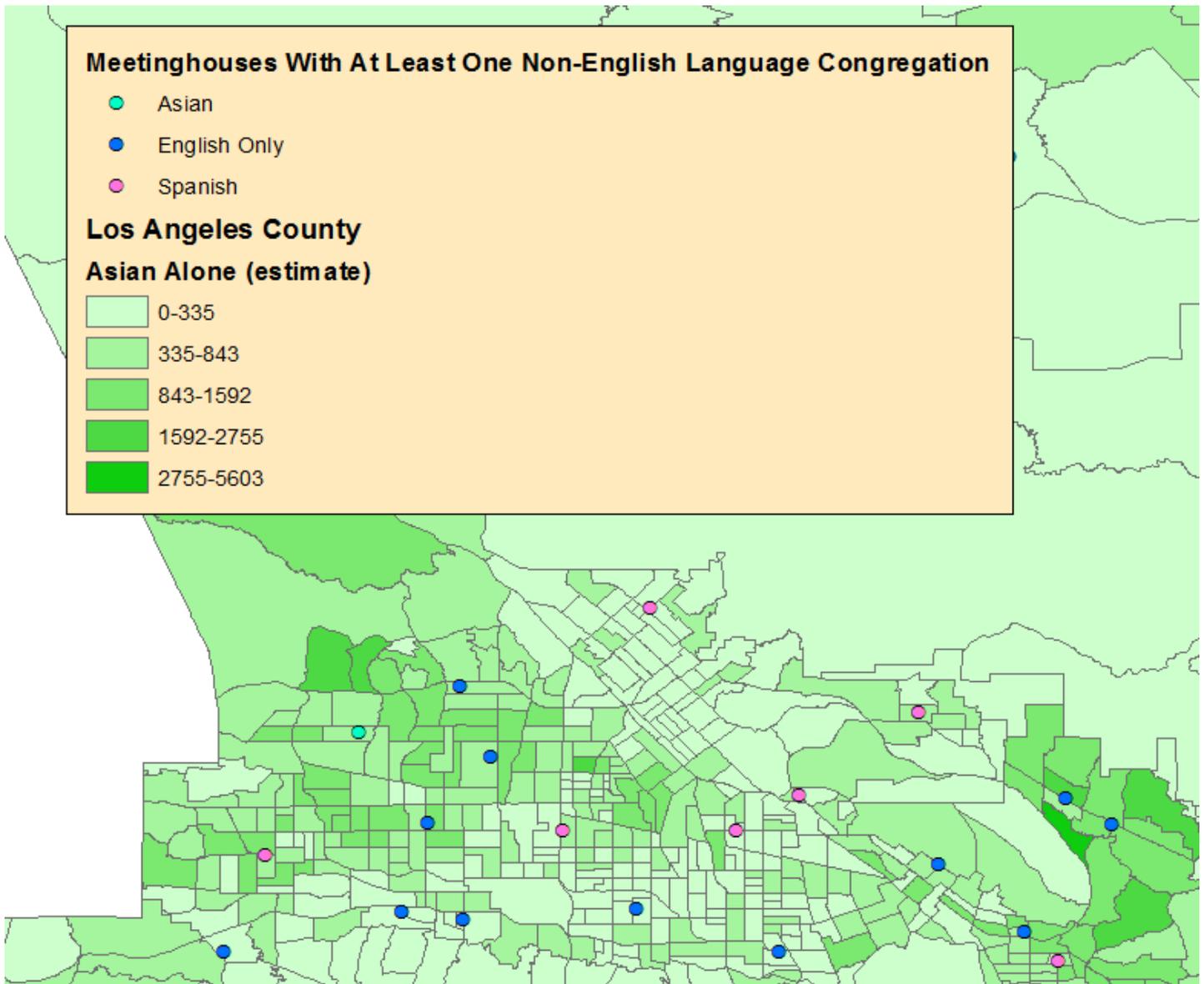**Meetinghouses With At Least One Non-English Language Congregation**

- ● Asian
- ● English Only
- ● Spanish

Los Angeles County

Black or African American alone (Estimate)

- 0-257
- 257-718
- 718-1430
- 1430-2597
- 2597-6094

Interestingly for a church that has so many Spanish-speaking congregations in the area, there is only one meetinghouse in the most heavily Hispanic/Latino area of the San Fernando Valley. Conversely, there is not a sizable African-American population in the valley, but the church's meetinghouses are evenly distributed among them. Finally, the Asian population (especially in the Glendale area) has ready access to meetinghouses.

Core/South Los Angeles

This is the geographically the largest area of Los Angeles County covered in this paper, and the area with the most congregations and meetinghouses. This part of the county has 105 LDS congregations, many of which are extremely diverse: besides the 24 Spanish-speaking units, there are the 6 non-Spanish-speaking YSA wards, 3 YSA branches, 1 Korean-speaking ward, 2 Korean-speaking branches, 1 Sign Language-speaking branch, 1 specifically Mandarin-speaking branch, 1 Chinese branch, 1 Chinese ward, 1 Cambodian ward, 3 Tongan wards, and 4 Samoan wards. This area is characterized by extreme swings in household median income over short geographic distances, as well as significant populations of Hispanics and African-Americans.
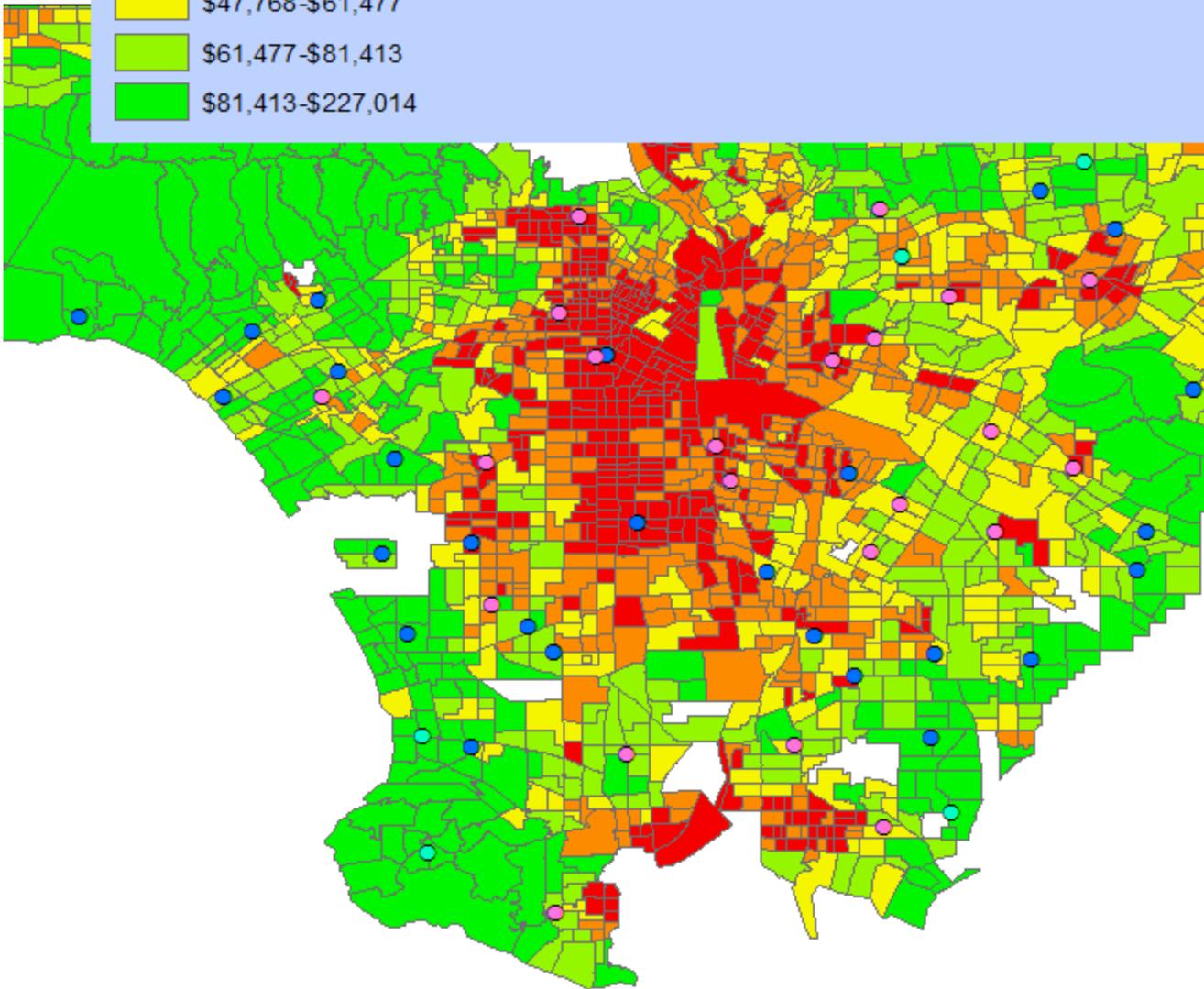
Meetinghouses With At Least One Non-English Language Congregation
○ Asian
● English Only
● Spanish

Los Angeles County
Household Median Income
- $10,290-$35,850
- $35,850-$47,768
- $47,768-$61,477
- $61,477-$81,413
- $81,413-$227,014

   Interestingly, the geographic distribution is much less even in this area of the county. Most bottom-quartile income-earning areas are relatively far from meetinghouses, and there is even a stretch of land running from near Compton to the Pasadena area that has no meetinghouses whatsoever. In contrast, most of the wealthier areas have meetinghouses – though in fairness, it must also be added that a large stretch of Beverly Hills running towards NoHo also lacks meetinghouses.
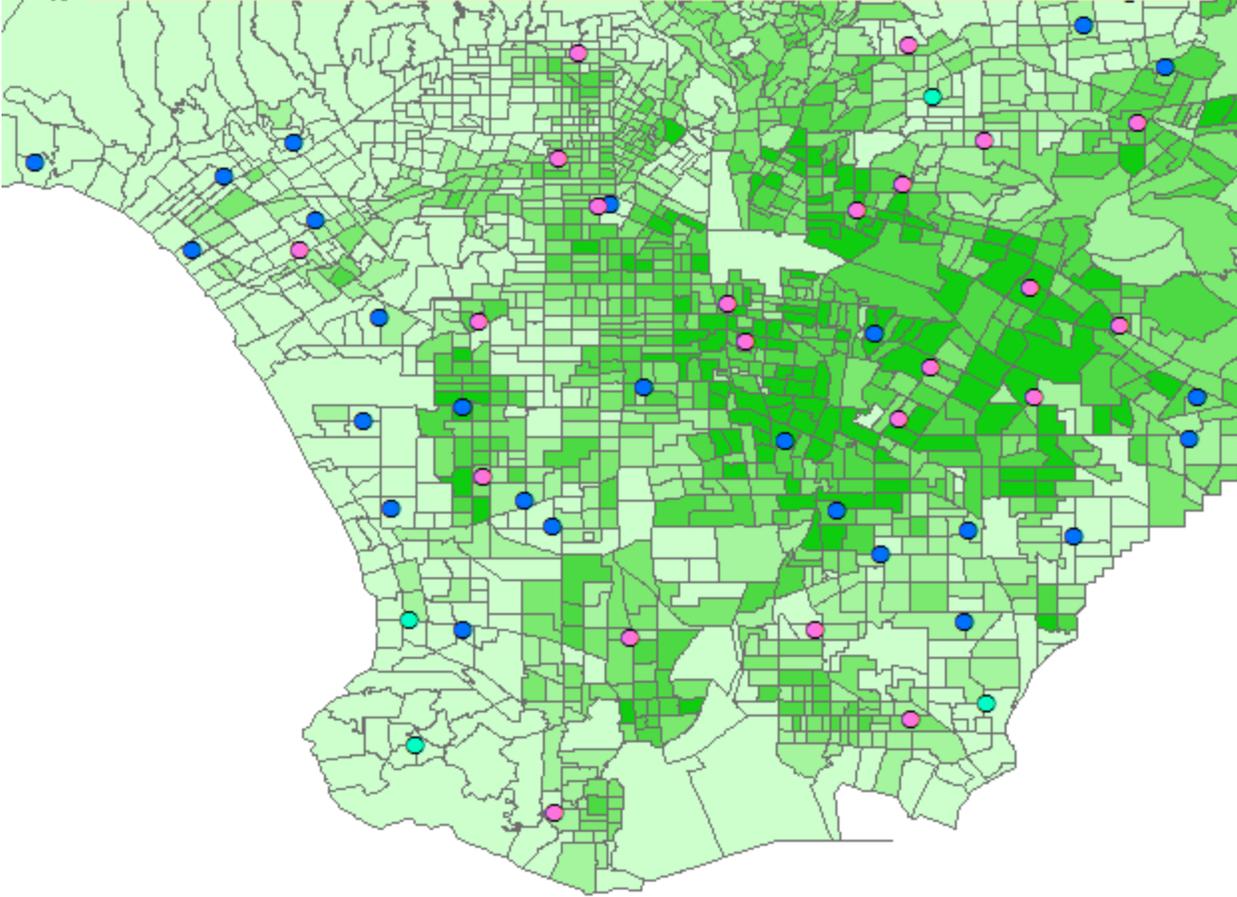
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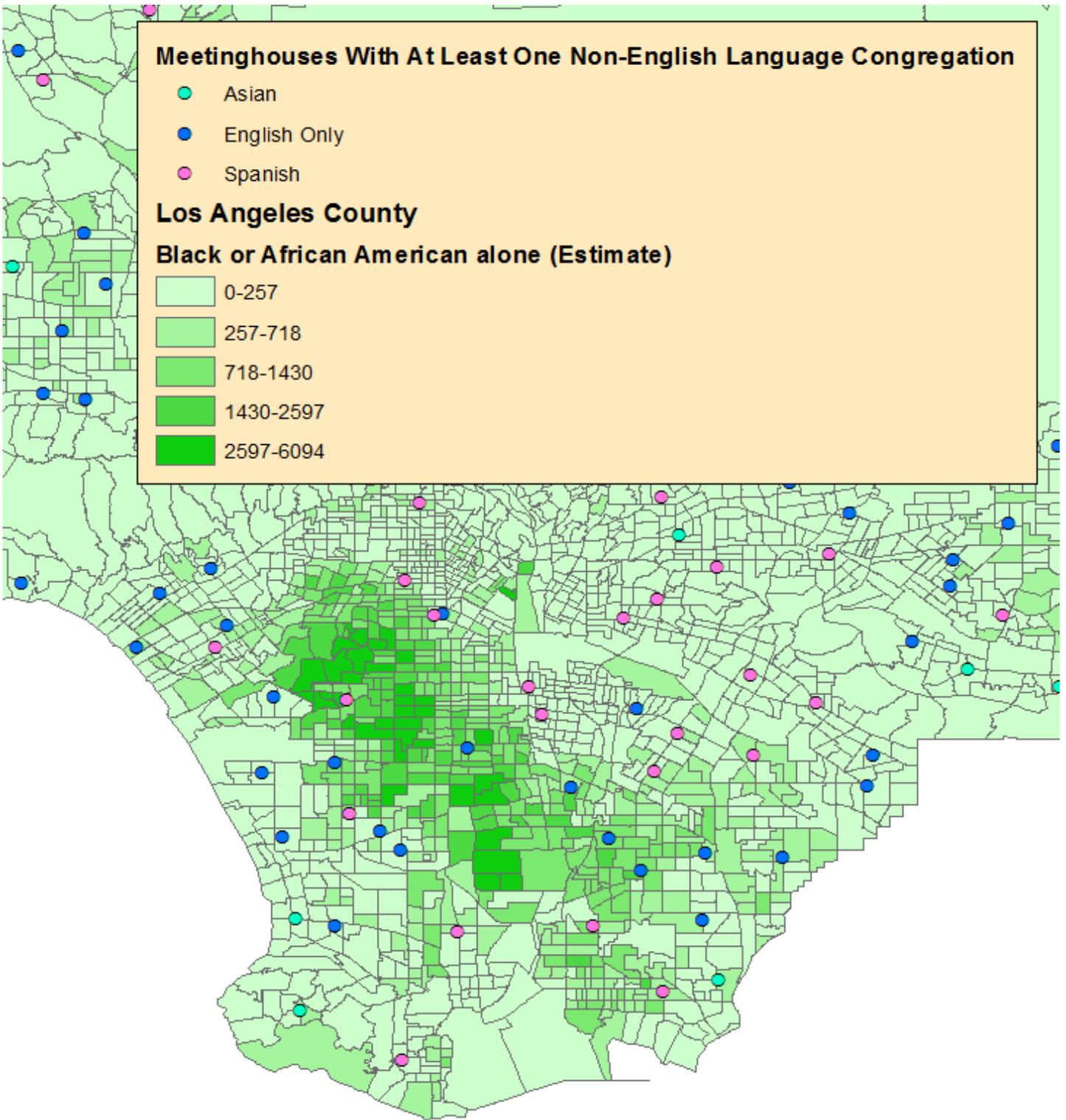- 4429-7357

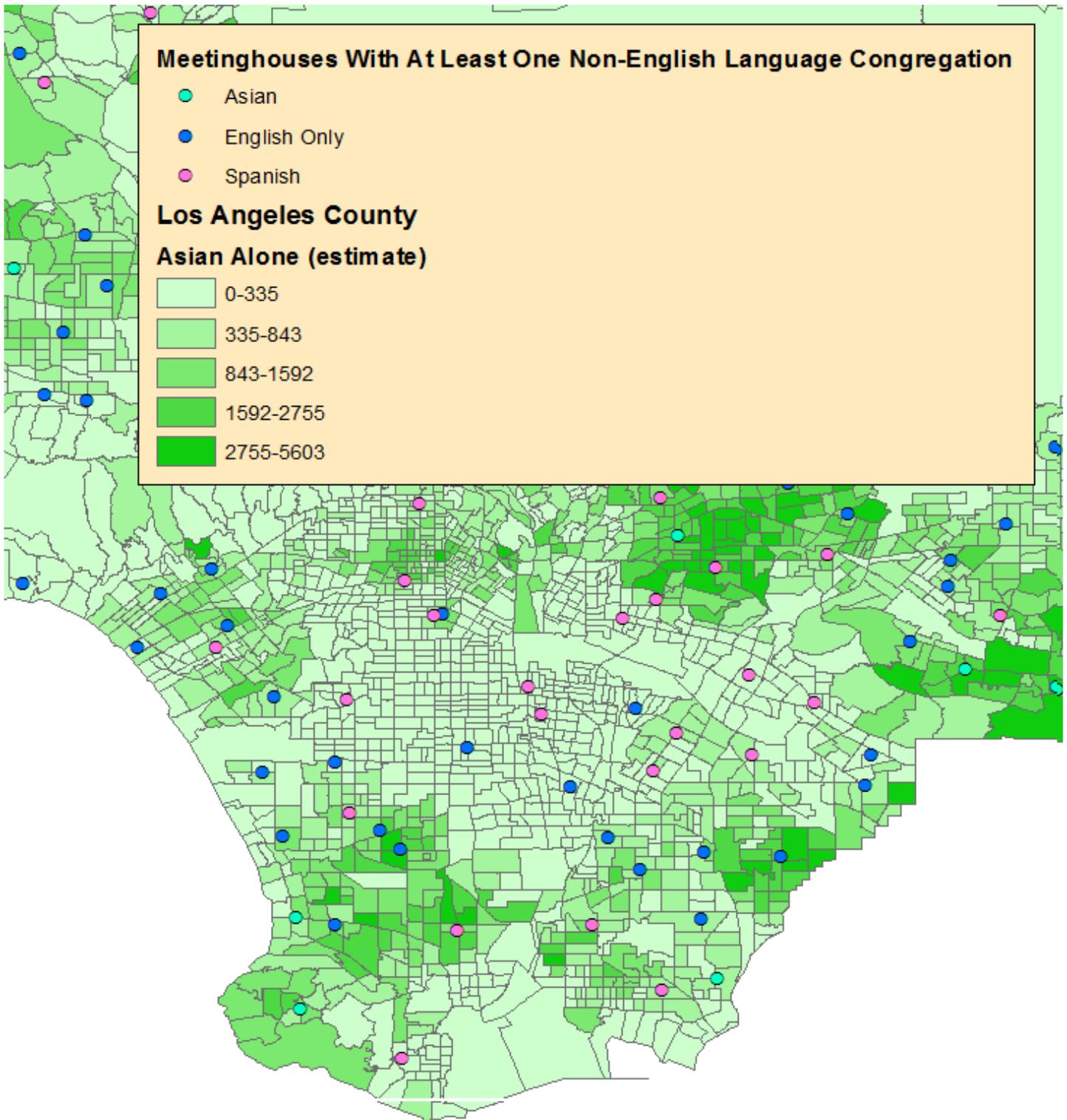**Meetinghouses With At Least One Non-English Language Congregation**

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Los Angeles County

Black or African American alone (Estimate)

- 0-257
- 257-718
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When overlaid with the minority map layers, the meetinghouse distribution becomes even more intriguing. There are many meetinghouses in the more heavily Hispanic/Latino areas of the city. In contrast, the African-American part of Los Angeles has meetinghouses along its periphery, but none in its center!

Curiously, the more heavily Asian parts of this area have only English-speaking congregations – the two Chinese-language congregations are in the southwest of the area, where Asian-speakers are slightly more concentrated, but not so dense compared to other areas of Los Angeles.

East LA County

This part of Los Angeles County has many one-ward meetinghouses, as opposed to other meetinghouses in different parts of the county, which may have three or even four ward sharing a worship space. However, there is still diversity in the congregations: three Spanish wards and one Spanish branch, two YSA wards, one Samoan ward, and one Chinese ward. Economically, the area is relatively affluent, though there are pockets of poverty scattered throughout.
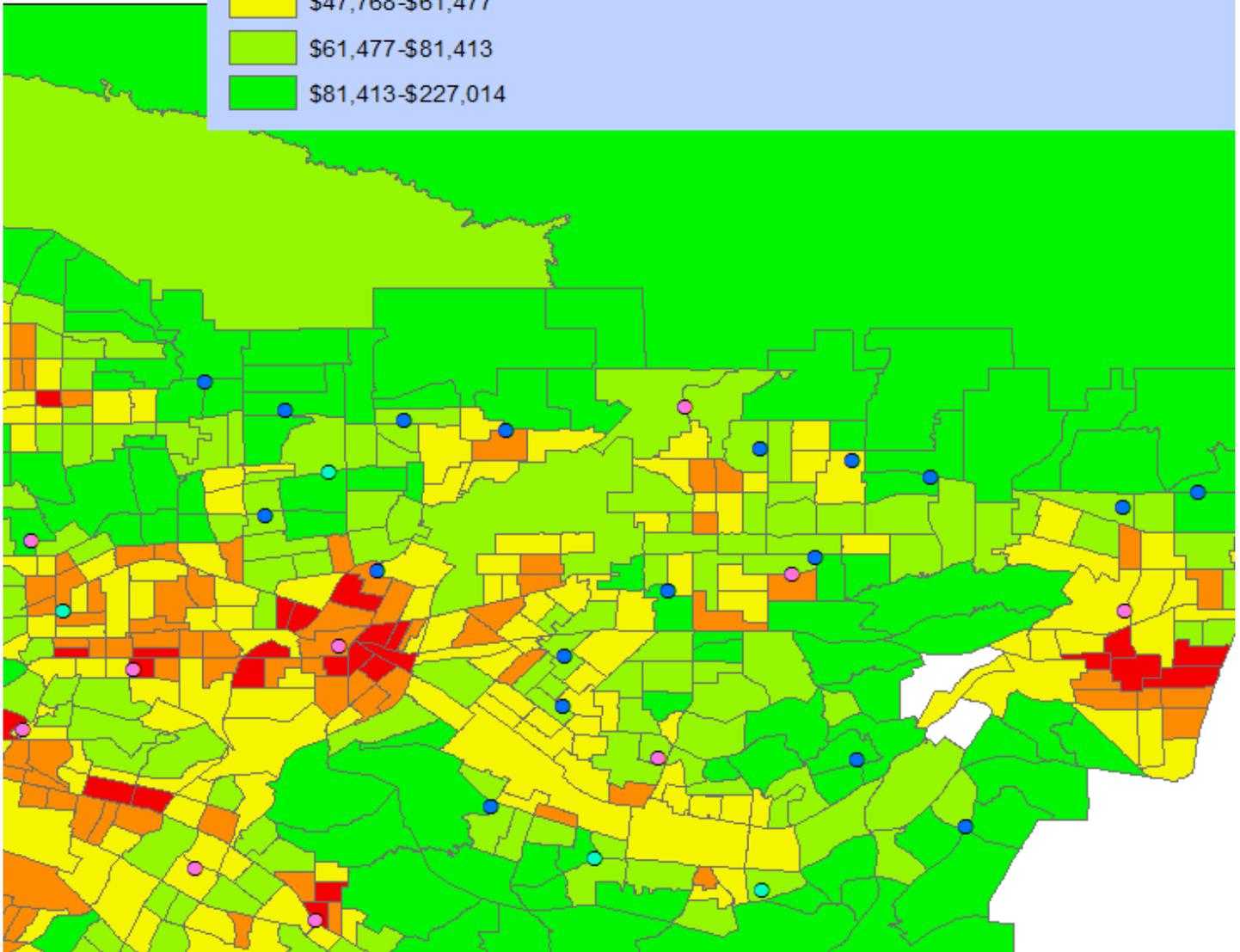
Because the area is somewhat wealthy, there is not as much income disparity to comment on; as with Northern LA County and the San Fernando Valley, the geographic distribution of meetinghouses is relatively uniform. However, there is only one meetinghouse in the southeast corner of the area, leading one to wonder if some of the forces that keep LDS meetinghouses out of urban Los Angeles are at work there as well.
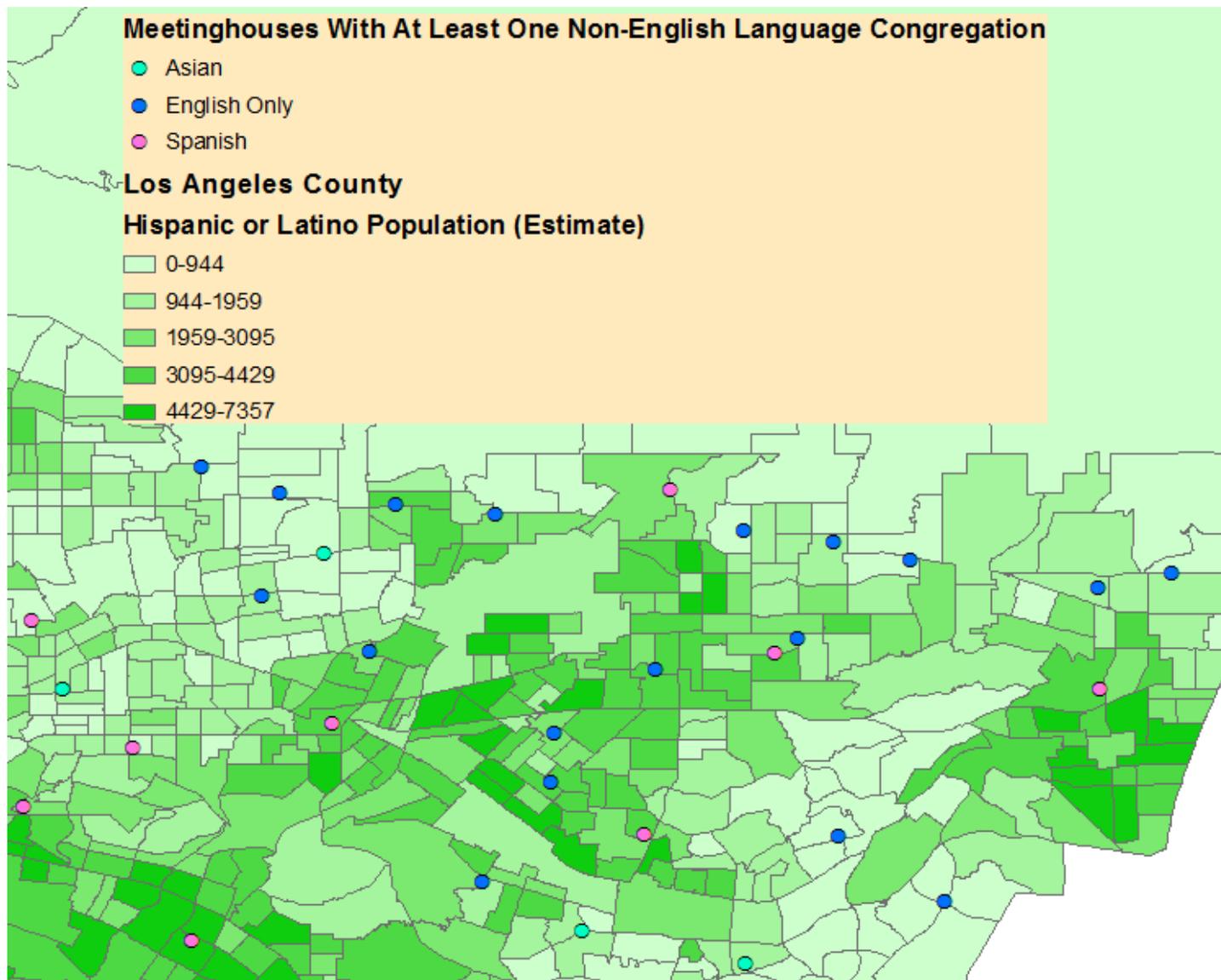
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Meetinghouses With At Least One Non-English Language Congregation
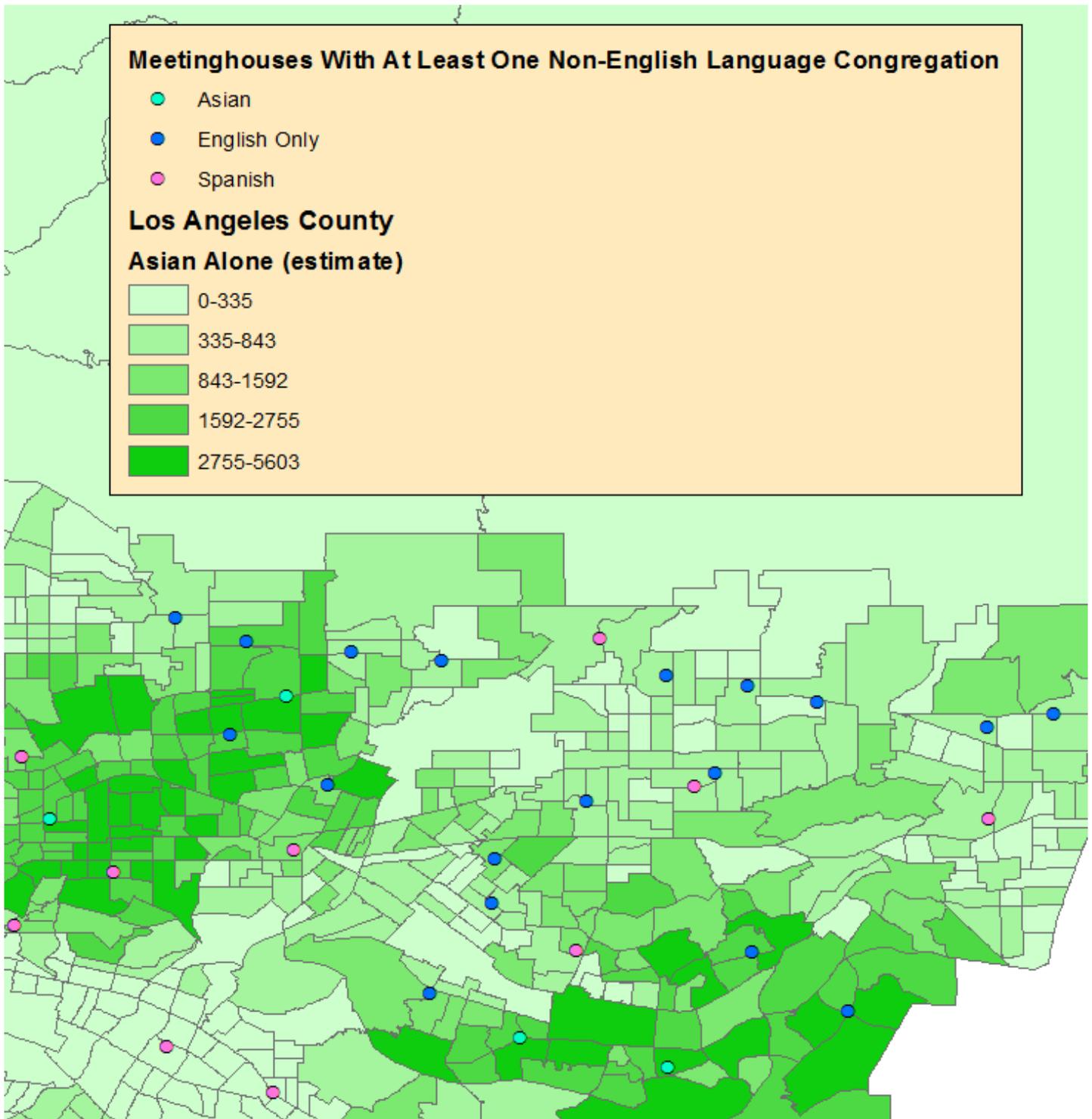
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- 2597-6094

Meetinghouses With At Least One Non-English Language Congregation

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- ● English Only
- ● Spanish

Los Angeles County

Asian Alone (estimate)

	0-335
	335-843
	843-1592
	1592-2755
	2755-5603
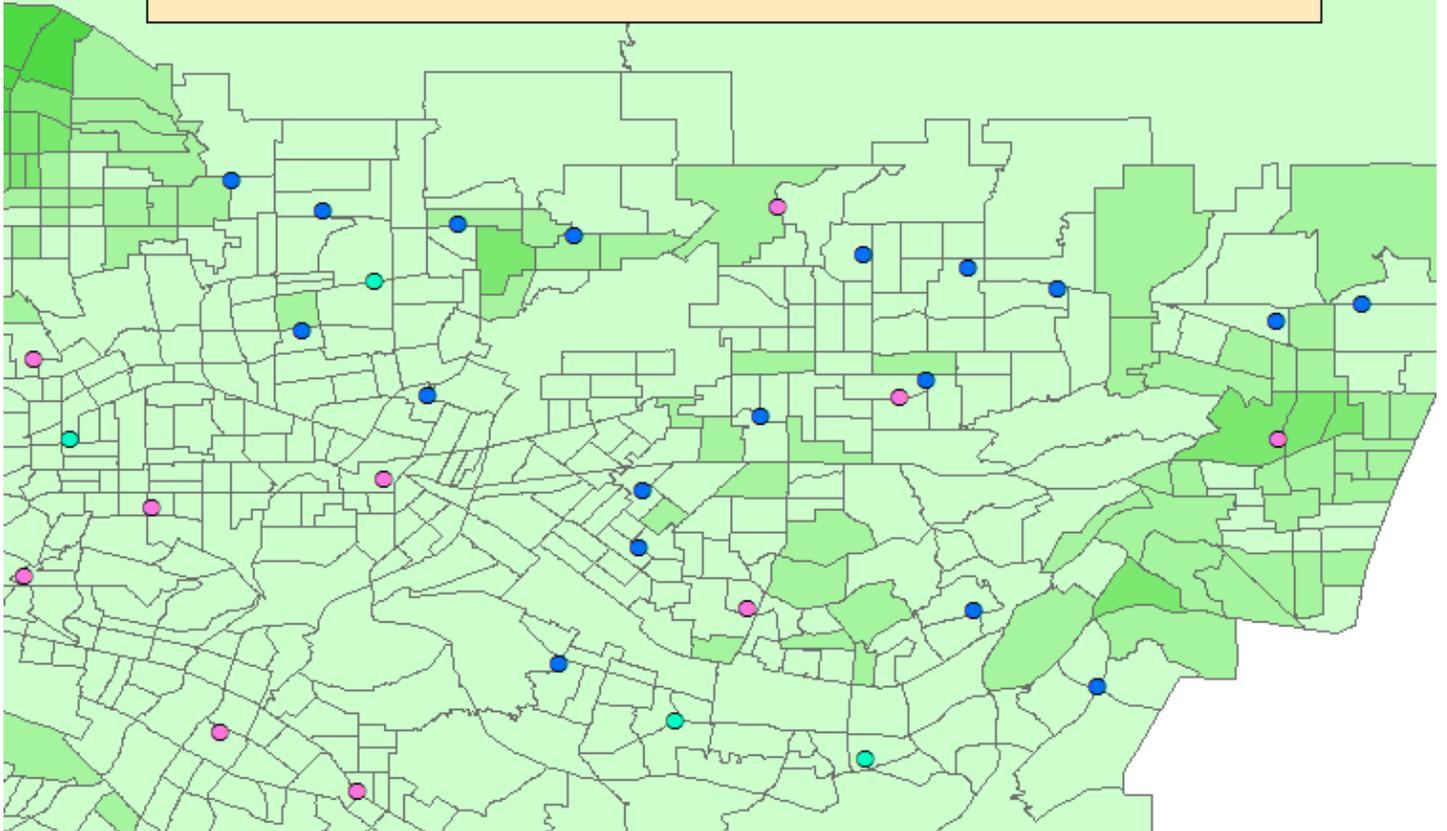
As can be seen, the data is rather ambivalent on whether meetinghouses are evenly distributed in Hispanic/Latino areas, and there is simply not enough of an African-American population to decide one way or the other. The Church does seem to be making inroads with the Asian population.

Interpretations

What can be concluded from the wealth of data collected in this GIS map? Three conclusions spring to mind. First, the LDS Church is generally doing a good job of reaching out to minorities. While the individual congregation data was not featured on the map, the general data does indicate that there are many worship

options available for non-English-speakers. Many meetinghouses can be found in strongly Hispanic areas, and the African-American population of Lancaster is well-served by easy-to-access congregations.

Second, the church has established more of a presence in the county's suburban areas than urban areas. Possible explanations could be that there is a mismatch in the church's core values and the more liberal ideals of many urban dwellers, or that the church does not invest as much missionary activity in urban areas due to real or perceived dangers from criminal activity. Another explanation could be that church leaders do expend great effort in outreach to urban areas, but that meetinghouses are mostly kept out of urban areas due to high cost of land or other issues. The issue is made more interesting by the fact that the Lancaster area has several areas with low household median income that are still close to meetinghouses. It may be that whatever urban problems Los Angeles has are minimized by Lancaster's smaller size.

An additional point to make here is that the data strongly indicates that Spanish-speaking congregations are located in poorer areas of Los Angeles. While this is, perhaps, nothing new to policy-makers in Los Angeles, it is nevertheless instructive as a commentary on Los Angeles demographics.

Third, the church has not made significant inroads into predominantly African-American areas of the county. Lancaster does have a high black population compared to other parts of the county, and there is a strong LDS presence there. But in Los Angeles itself, there are not many meetinghouses in largely African-American areas. The reasons for this likely mirror the reasons for the church's lack of presence in the urban core of Los Angeles.

Conclusions

Limitations

I found two major limitations when working on this project. First, the LDS Church does not publish data about individual congregation boundaries online. If this were done, it would have allowed me to pinpoint more fully where non-English-speaking congregations resided. Additionally, the church does not publish demographic data of its members, making it difficult to establish whether there are actually more African-American members than the data indicates.

Second, I was unable to find a way to effectively visualize multiple races on one map, which would have made it easier to demonstrate how the church interacts with Hispanics/Latinos, African-Americans, and Asians. However, I did mitigate this limitation by color-coding meetinghouses to denote which had non-English-language-speaking congregations.

Future Research

Further inquiry into this topic should follow three paths. First, why are there relatively few meetinghouses in urban Los Angeles? An answer to this question could help define whether the church's message is resonating with urban dwellers or not. Second, does the church have a definite plan for where it builds its meetinghouses, or is it mainly dictated by the exigencies of growth? And third, where does the church forecast the most membership growth in Los Angeles? Answering these two questions could provide interesting data on how and why religions expand or not.

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https://www.lds.org/maps/?lang=eng