



THE POLIS  
CENTER

# RELIGION & COMMUNITY

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A Newsletter of the Project on Religion and Urban Culture

## **Creating Community**

How do we build and sustain community in a large city? Recently, over 400 participants discussed this question in a town and gown symposium hosted by THE POLIS CENTER. Academicians probed the various definitions of community, and local practitioners offered their experiences. Most instructive was the audience response: you can't have community unless people rub shoulders with each other.

The Project on Religion and Urban Culture is discovering how and where religion rubs shoulders to create community in Indianapolis. We are working with neighborhoods to learn how religious institutions and people of faith function in these communities. In some areas, such as Mapleton-Fall Creek, churches work intimately with other institutions on issues of importance to the neighborhood. In other areas, religious organizations are much less visible. What should we make of these differences? With the aid of neighborhood and religious bodies, we are recognizing the dynamic and diverse nature of communities in Indianapolis. Charting the intersection of faith and community also has practical benefits, especially if primary responsibility for human services passes from government to religious and other not-for-profit organizations.

We also are identifying a community composed of people interested in this subject. Cutting across institutional, geographic, and faith lines, the project brings together various groups—academic and public, professional and volunteer, religious and secular—in pursuit of mutual concerns. We all are rubbing shoulders in ways that should increase our common ability to address local issues more effectively.

The community of interest around this project has no fixed size. If you would like to join, please let us know. We welcome your participation.

—David J. Bodenhamer, Director

## POLIS EXPANDS PROJECT ON RELIGION AND URBAN CULTURE

With the aid of a new grant from Lilly Endowment, THE POLIS CENTER is expanding the Project on Religion and Urban Culture. The Faith and Community initiative will examine the role of religion in community development in six additional Indianapolis neighborhoods, while continuing its work in four center-city communities. The role of clergy in these neighborhoods is of special interest, as is the relationship of religion to the city's emerging Hispanic community.

The project also will explore other facets of religion and urban culture. Working with the IUPUI Department of Religious Studies,

POLIS will develop examples from Indianapolis to introduce local students to religion as a window on American and world cultures. The city's fine arts community will offer different perspectives on the experiences and expressions of urban religion. And POLIS will continue its historical research on the development of religion in 20th-century Indianapolis.

In these activities, the project is working to create a university-community inquiry on the relationship between religion and urban culture.

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**In Indianapolis religion and community intersect in complex and creative ways.**

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# RELIGION AND URBAN CULTURE: UPDATE

Since publication of the last issue of *Religion & Community*, POLIS has delved further into two major components of the Religion and Urban Culture project: Religious Education and Faith and Community. Significant results are emerging.

## **Religious Education**

Drawing on its knowledge of the religious history and culture of Indianapolis, POLIS developed educational materials for adult discussions in local congregations and parishes. A video, newspaper, and accompanying text focused on the theme of "Faith and Economic Struggle." These materials illustrate the response over time of local religious individuals and

groups to economic hardship. Participants shared their own stories as part of the curriculum.

In September and October,



Indianapolis images from "Faith and Economic Struggle" video

POLIS tested the materials with 11 congregations from various denominations. A conference at the end of October further explored the use of these materials and the questions they raised. Some interesting findings emerged:

- *The past matters.*

Respondents expressed a strong belief that knowledge of the past is important. It offers lessons that help people confront issues in their own lives.

- *Economic themes can be an important part of religious education.*

Participants saw the materials about economic issues to be relevant for their regular education programming.

- *Storytelling is an effective method for religious education.*

People appreciated opportunities to share their own experiences; they described the storytelling sessions as "meaningful" and "powerful."

- *Local materials make a difference.*

Participants reported that the materials gave them much new information; they were

previously unaware of the extent of continuing economic stress in Indianapolis.

- *University researchers and religious bodies can cooperate effectively.*

Congregations and parishes were pleased that a university-based center would want to work with the religious community to make research findings available to them.

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POLIS will work with other local and national groups to make these and similar materials available for wide distribution. Other models of local education include the possibility of developing a series of videos on religion and culture, especially in Indianapolis, for use in congregations and parishes, classrooms, and elsewhere.



## Faith and Community

Important information is emerging about the role of religion in community development in four center-city Indianapolis neighborhoods. These areas boast a rich diversity of religious activity. In some neighborhoods—Mapleton-Fall Creek is a good example—religion and community intersect in complex and creative ways. In other areas, religion is less visible. Over the next several months, POLIS will seek to understand these differences.

A major discovery has been not facts, but people. These neighborhoods claim a large number of caring individuals who put their faith to work in their communities. Following are sketches of a few such special people.

*Shedrick Madison*, “Big Red the Wrestling Preacher,” is founder of the Faith Teaching Church of Deliverance and an accompanying youth center, both in Mapleton-Fall Creek. To support these ministries, he wrestles professionally. At 6’5” and 490 pounds, “Big Red” comes by his nickname honestly. An Indianapolis native, Madison sees his wrestling persona as symbolic of what religious faith is all about. He is a “good guy” battling the forces of evil represented by the characters of other wrestlers. In his ministry, Madison considers himself “at war with the drug man” who preys on inner-city youth.



In the Haughville neighborhood, another dual ministry takes place at Tate Barber Shop, beneath a plaque with praying hands and a Bible verse. Owner *Douglas Tate, Jr.*, a Baptist pastor, regularly discusses religion as he cuts hair. Like Madison, Tate particularly sees the need for strong youth ministry in urban communities. Tate is following in the footsteps of his father, Douglas Tate, Sr., who established the barbershop, and who now is senior pastor at Psalms Missionary Baptist Church.



Plagued with their own problems, not many inner-city churches engage in foreign missions. An exception is Oasis of Hope Baptist Church in Martindale-Brightwood. Not only is the church an integral part of its neighborhood, Oasis supports Missions to Rural Africa, an independent organization that the Rev. *Frank Alexander* helped to found. Alexander takes the mission work on site, having traveled to Africa a number of times in recent years.



Ministry is not always from the pulpit and not always from ordained clergy. A good example is *Helen Fehr*, whose religious beliefs have guided a long career of volunteer activism. In her youth, she adopted a life-long motto: “A need known, with an ability to meet that need, is a call.” After years as a missionary overseas, Fehr returned to her birthplace in Fountain Square, a place much changed from her childhood. Among other things, she inspired a housing project, Church and Community, to reclaim abandoned houses in the neighborhood.



After a career taking her around the midwest, *Sue Ann Yovanovich* came back to her home parish in Haughville, Holy Trinity Roman Catholic, to direct the daycare center it sponsors. Throughout her life, her models had been the nuns who taught her there as a young person.



Yovanovich has worked to improve learning opportunities at the center and to encourage parish members to become more involved with children.



# IN BRIEF. . .

**D**evelopments are happening elsewhere in the Religion and Urban Culture Project. The past several months have been a time of reflection and checking back with partners.

## ***The Role of Clergy in the Community***

In this new initiative, clergy are interviewing clergy to find out what roles they play in the community and what resources they have to do their jobs. Ministers from Fountain Square and Mapleton-Fall Creek met recently with POLIS staff to discuss themes that emerged

from an initial round of interviews. In general, clergy reported few strong bases of support outside their congregations and often do not know each other. They lack access to reliable information about their neighborhoods and at

times feel isolated from civic issues. Over the next two years POLIS will learn more about clergy activities in Indianapolis and make community information available to them.

## ***Religion in the City***

In March, national experts on religion met with another recognized authority, IUPUI professor emeritus Jan Shipps, to discuss her book-in-progress on religion in American cities. Shipps' goal is to fashion a book that will engage the general public and spur civic dialogue on this important subject. The book will be available next year.

## ***Religion in the Public Schools***

The Indiana Humanities Council, with help from POLIS staff, hosted a day-long seminar at IUPUI in March to explore how public schools can address the role religion has played in local and national history. Educators from across the state responded to a sample curriculum resource developed by POLIS.

Keynote speaker Charles C. Haynes, co-author of *Finding Common Ground — A First Amendment Guide to Religion and Public Education*, explained that church-state separation does not prohibit schools from mentioning religion. Avoiding the subject, he noted, does children a disservice by presenting a view of history and culture devoid of religious motivations and differences. For more information, contact THE POLIS CENTER.

## ***Artistic Expressions of Religion***

Indianapolis writers and photographers will have a prominent voice in the Religion and Urban Culture Project. J. Kent Calder, managing editor of *Traces*, and Susan Neville, professor at Butler University and nationally-acclaimed author, are enlisting local writers for essays on religion in contemporary Indianapolis. Kim Charles Ferrill, a local photographer who focuses on religion, is working with other artists to contribute images for a book and public exhibit. Also, dramatist Claude McNeal is developing a production, "Give Me That New Time Religion," on Indianapolis religious history for a March, 1997, premiere at American Cabaret Theatre.

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**One goal is to discover what roles clergy play in their communities.**

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