



THE POLIS  
CENTER

# RELIGION & COMMUNITY

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A Newsletter of the Project on Religion and Urban Culture

## **Religion and Social Capital**

In "Bowling Alone," scholar Robert Putnam observes that we moderns are a disconnected lot. Isolation, not community, is the measure of our lives. We bowl alone today, whereas we once bowled in leagues. This change symbolizes the decline of social capital in America. The ties that bind us in community—social capital—are weaker now than in our past.

Evidence from religion in Indianapolis modifies this conclusion. Every week thousands of believers revisit their local churches, synagogues, mosques. This coming together is an act of community for 45 percent of the residents of Marion County. Few institutions of local society serve this function on such a large scale.

Religion fosters community in a variety of other ways. Soup kitchens, clothing closets, mission projects are religious activities in support of community. Religious institutions also create and sustain local community development corporations, job training, youth programs, and daycare. In Greater Indianapolis there are countless connections between faith and community.

Clearly, religion is an important source of social capital in this city. Yet it is not always so. Many churches and synagogues report sporadic attendance. Clergy feel isolated from their neighborhoods and from each other. Many congregations lack resources to serve communities beyond their walls. At times, people of faith also seem to be bowling alone.

POLIS seeks to understand the role of religion in creating social capital in Indianapolis. We also want to develop a conversation, a community of inquiry around this topic. I invite you to join us.

— David J. Bodenhamer, Director

## PROJECT ON RELIGION AND URBAN CULTURE ANNOUNCES NOVEMBER CIVIC FESTIVAL

**W**hat is the relationship among spirituality, place, and creativity? How does the culture of a place influence religion? These questions and others will animate a two-day civic festival, "Spirit and Place: A Gathering of Voices," to be held on November 17 and 18 in a variety of Indianapolis venues.

Headlining the festival is a first-ever public conversation on these issues among nationally known writers John Updike, Kurt Vonnegut, and Dan Wakefield, the latter two from Indianapolis. This event will be held in Clowes Hall on Sunday, November 17, at 5:00 p.m. Other events with these authors will be held throughout the city during both days of the festival. Accomplished Indiana writers also will

participate, with many of them discussing these themes in congregational settings. All events will be free and open to the public. (See the back page for an events calendar.)

Co-sponsoring the festival with THE POLIS CENTER are Butler University, Christian Theological Seminary, Indiana Historical Society, Indiana Humanities Council, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, Indianapolis–Marion County Public Library, Madame Walker Theatre Center, Marian College, Martin University, University of Indianapolis, and 2nd Globe.

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**How does the culture  
of a place influence  
religion?**

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# DOES RELIGION BUILD COMMUNITY?

The neighborhoods POLIS is studying are unique places, each with their own history and specific set of social circumstances. Religious organizations—the churches, synagogues, and mosques—located in these neighborhoods foster internal community. Their own members feel a sense of belonging. *But do these places of worship make the neighborhood itself more of a community?* Does religious practice and belief help create and sustain social capital?

Careful observation of urban neighborhoods suggests that religion plays an integral role in shaping urban communities. The story of how religion plays that role, and how large that role may be in any given case, is as complex and varied as the neighborhoods themselves.

## **Religion creates and enhances community networks.**

In many Indianapolis neighborhoods, religious organizations are part of a network of activity that provides emotional and material support to residents. Alliances like the Mid-North Church Council in Mapleton-Fall Creek or the Near Eastside Church and Communities Ministries Project have created support networks of their own. They also paved the way for still broader cooperative efforts that include secular partners. Other local initiatives such as Faith and Families or the Interfaith Hospitality Network provide needed services and nurture interpersonal relationships beyond their local neighborhoods.

## **Religion provides a spirit of community.**

Most religious organizations are not active participants in neighborhood networks. Even when they do not seem actively involved, however, they are often cited by residents as

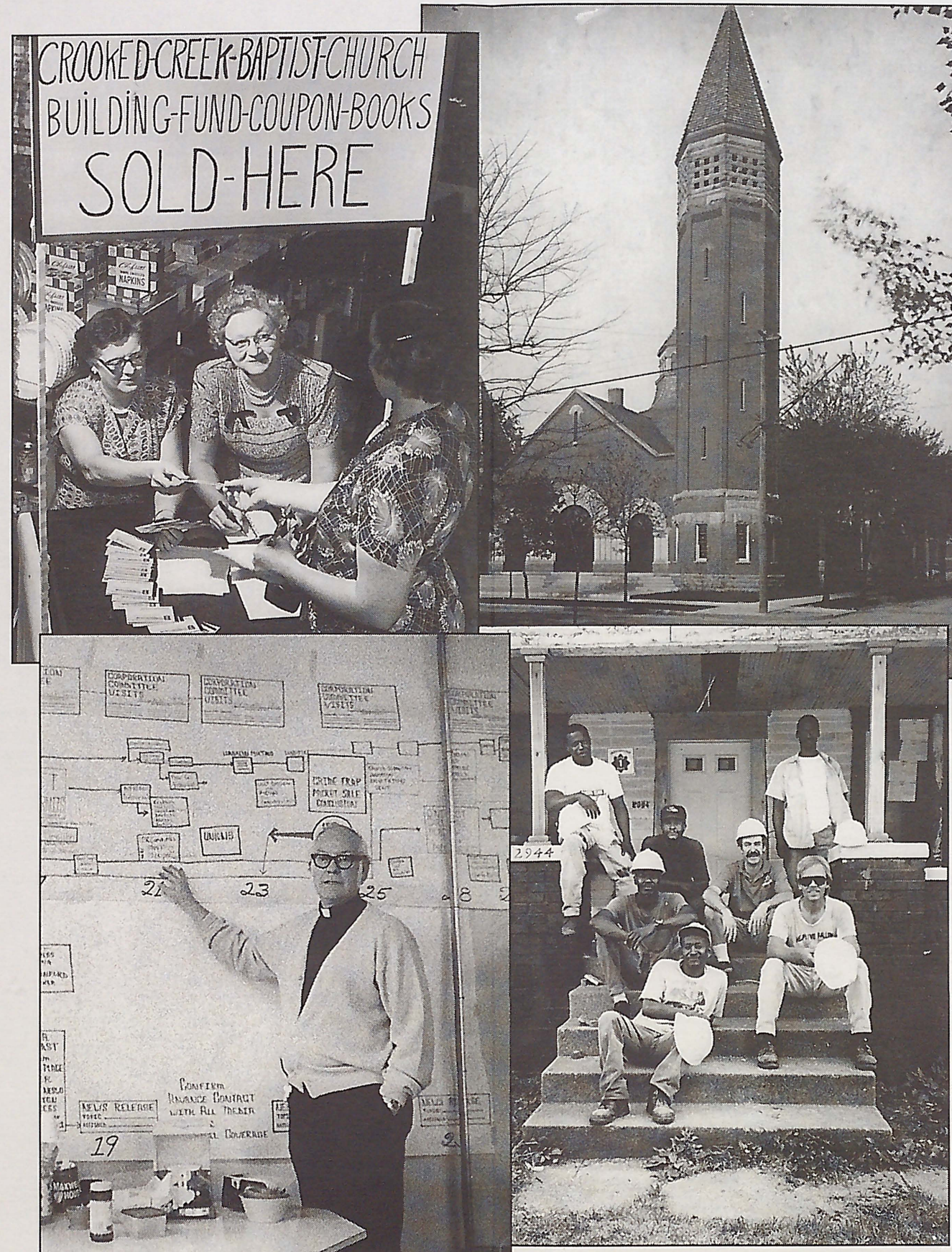
sources of community strength. In distressed neighborhoods, many small churches use virtually all of their resources simply to support their pastor and their members' immediate needs. But these groups represent a sense of decency and order in neighborhoods. As many residents have told us, "if you think those churches don't do anything, imagine what this place would look like without them."

## **Religion permeates the memory of a community.**

Each neighborhood we have studied has a unique history; previous generations and events have defined it. Frequently, those who have moved out of an urban neighborhood return to worship there. This is as true in the mainline churches of Mapleton-Fall Creek as it is in the westside Orthodox churches of Eastern European ancestry. In many cases, these religious roots are the only social connection suburbanites maintain with the inner city.

## **Religion incorporates new neighbors into the community.**

Boundaries can be social as well as geographic. They can encourage inclusion or exclusion. On the southeast side, for example, the people who live around Holy Rosary Catholic Church call their neighborhood "Holy Rosary" no matter what city planners or civic umbrella groups might call it. Sister Jeanne-Marie Cleveland at St. Patrick's Catholic Church in Fountain Square has learned to speak Spanish, and the church has incorporated Spanish-language Masses into its calendar to respond to a growing Hispanic population there. St. Patrick's does this not because it has resources to spare, but because the need has arisen in its parish.



For further information on THE POLIS CENTER or the Project on Religion and Urban Culture, contact:  
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Photographs, clockwise from top right.

The historic Central Avenue United Methodist Church (built in 1891) houses a number of urban ministries on the Near Northside. *Bass Photo Collection, Indiana Historical Society Library, Number 838.*

Graduates of the 1995 construction skills program celebrate a housing rehabilitation project in Mapleton-Fall Creek. *Mapleton-Fall Creek Development Corporation.*

Father James F. Byrne, a founder of the Near Eastside Community Organization in the 1970s, conducts a neighborhood planning session. *Near Eastside Community Organization.*

Around 1950, members of the Crooked Creek Baptist Church raised money for a new building by selling coupon books. *Gary Yohler/Fredrick Vollrath, Tiffany Studios, Indianapolis Times Collection.*



# SPIRIT AND PLACE: A GATHERING OF VOICES

**WHAT:** A civic festival on spirituality and the sense of place, featuring a public conversation with writers Kurt Vonnegut, John Updike, Dan Wakefield, and a variety of Indiana authors.

**WHEN:** Sunday, November 17 - Monday, November 18, 1996.

**WHERE:** At several venues in Indianapolis.

## **SCHEDULE OF EVENTS:**

*Sunday, November 17*

2:00 - 3:00 P.M. *Writing Spiritual Autobiography: Dan Wakefield.* Marian College, Stokley Mansion, 3200 Cold Spring Road.

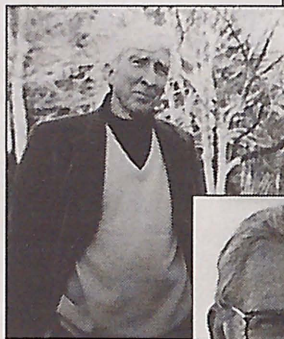
2:00 - 4:00 P.M. *A Gathering of Voices...At the Library: Barbara Shoup and Rabbi Sandy Sasso.* Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library, Cropsey Auditorium, 40 E. St. Clair Street.

5:00 - 6:30 P.M. *A Public Conversation: John Updike, Kurt Vonnegut, Dan Wakefield.* Butler University, Clowes Hall Auditorium, 4600 Sunset Boulevard.

*Monday, November 18*

11:00 A.M.- 12:30 P.M. *Spirituality and Children's Literature: Rabbi Sandy Sasso.* Christian Theological Seminary, Shelton Auditorium, 1000 W. 42nd Street.

1:00 - 2:00 P.M. *Writing Locally: Spirit and Place in Indiana: Michael Martone and Scott Russell Sanders.* Indiana University-



Updike



Vonnegut



Wakefield

Purdue University Indianapolis, University Library Auditorium, 755 W. Michigan

3:00 - 4:30 P.M. *Spirituality and Creativity: An Open Conversation*

*with John Updike and Dan Wakefield.* University of Indianapolis, DeHaan Fine Arts Center, 1400 E. Hanna Avenue.

5:00 - 7:00 P.M. *Indiana Writers Gathering featuring Michael Martone, Susan Neville, Scott Russell Sanders, and David Hoppe.* Indiana State Library Building, First Floor Auditorium, 315 W. Ohio Street.

7:30 - 9:00 P.M. *Visiting Writer: Novelist and Poet John Updike.* Butler University, Clowes Hall, Krannert Room, 4600 Sunset Boulevard.

For more information about *Spirit and Place: A Gathering of Voices*, contact THE POLIS CENTER, (317) 274-2455.

**All events are free and open to the public. Seating is first come, first served.**

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