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Complex Relationships

What is the relationship of churches, synagogues, and mosques to their neighborhoods? The Polis Center's interest in this question is more than academic. What we learn has important implications for public policy. Consider welfare reform. Is it true, as some people assume, that religious institutions are closely linked to their neighborhoods, thus allowing them to serve local human needs more effectively?

Not necessarily, if the experience of Indianapolis neighborhoods is any guide. Over the past two years, researchers from our Project on Religion and Urban Culture have charted the relationships between faith and community in twelve neighborhoods. In none of the neighborhoods does the relationship of religious institutions and their communities look the same. This is true even in neighborhoods that are remarkably similar.

The neighborhoods of Martindale-Brightwood and Mapleton-Fall Creek offer a case in point. These two communities, located one-half mile apart, are much alike in their demographic and socio-economic character, yet much different in the role churches play in each community. Mapleton-Fall Creek churches have attracted national attention for their outreach programs, while most Martindale-Brightwood churches have few community programs. Are Mapleton-Fall Creek churches more tightly linked to their neighborhood? Perhaps not. In Martindale-Brightwood far more residents attend church in the community than do residents in Mapleton-Fall Creek. Martindale-Brightwood churches, in this sense, are more locally based than the ones in Mapleton-Fall Creek.

With the help of people who live in these neighborhoods, we are discovering much about the complex and dynamic relationship between religion and community in Indianapolis. If you are interested in learning more about this subject, please contact us. We welcome your participation in our public conversations.

— David J. Bodenhamer, Director

VIDEO PROJECTS NEAR COMPLETION

Over the course of the summer two video projects of The Polis Center will end. Since last September crews from Nineteenth Star, Inc., have been videotaping religious events and sites around Indianapolis for a six-part series, "Sacred Space, Sacred Time, Sacred Memory, and Sacred Journey."

The video explores the meaning and practice of religion locally, using examples from all faith traditions. The IUPUI Department of Religious Studies will use the video in its courses. The Polis Center is developing a curriculum to support the video's use in congregations and civic groups.

In another project, Spellbound Productions is working with Park Tudor students to create a video diary of their study of religion in Broad Ripple. These students have participated in the Faith and Community initiative of the Project on Religion and Urban Culture. The Polis Center will make the video available to religious and civic groups who want to learn more about how young people view their world.

The video explores local religion, with examples from all faith traditions.

CONGREGATIONS IN URBAN COMMUNITIES

Congregations are often regarded as collections of individuals that occupy a particular building and worship according to a particular tradition. Questions about congregations focus on issues like “what do the members believe?” and “what do they imagine their mission to be?”

These questions are important. Congregations have beliefs and missions that stem from their experiences and shared history. But beliefs and mission are just two pieces in a much larger puzzle. Congregations do not exist in a vacuum any more than other organizations do. What they believe and what they intend to do must be understood in the context of the world around them.

A Tale of Two Neighborhoods

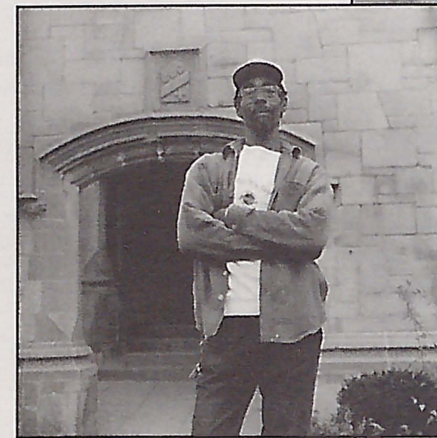
Consider two downtown Indianapolis neighborhoods: Mapleton-Fall Creek and Martindale-Brightwood. By many measures, these two neighborhoods look alike. For instance, the residents are predominantly African-American, median income is half of the Indianapolis average, a third of the residents live in poverty, and half of all births occur to single mothers.

But congregations in these neighborhoods operate in very different ways. Mapleton-Fall Creek’s Mid-North Church Council is frequently cited as a model for urban ministry. Former HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros praised it in his essay, *Higher Ground: Faith Communities and Community Building*. Mid-North Council congregations provide health services, food, clothing, and recreational opportunities through well-organized, well-funded programs. This coalition of congregations also helped establish the local housing and economic development corporations.

In Martindale-Brightwood, by contrast, congregations have until recently offered relatively little in the way of social services or community development. They have been able to manage only small efforts with little tangible effect on their neighborhood.

The Importance of Context

Why do the congregations in these neighborhoods seem to behave so differently? Is it simply because they have differ-



ent beliefs and intentions, that the Mid-North churches want to do something that the Martindale-Brightwood churches do not?

Beliefs and intentions do vary. Different denominations are represented in each of these neighborhoods. But historical, cultural, and demographic factors are also at work. Mapleton-Fall Creek was an affluent, white neighborhood well into this century. Its western boundary on Meridian Street is still a prestigious address, home to institutions such as the Indianapolis Children’s Museum and Lilly Endowment.

Churches in this neighborhood are virtual cathedrals built by the mainline Protestant denominations. There are only 19 congregations in this neigh-



borhood of approximately 16,000 residents; the congregations average over 500 members; and many have considerable financial resources. White, middle-class folk still attend these churches, although few live in this neighborhood.

The neighborhoods of Martindale and Brightwood, with about 11,000 residents, have at least 105 churches. Their average size is about 95. The neighborhoods have always been working-class:

Martindale, historically African-American; and Brightwood, white. Now predominantly black, the communities have few church buildings that resemble the ones seen in Mapleton-Fall Creek.

The differences between the role of congregations in these two neighborhoods are not limited to size of membership, resources, race, or even services offered. In surveys of the residents of each neighborhood, more than four-fifths of residents say they worship regularly. But while about one-half of Martindale-Brightwood’s residents said that they worshipped in their neighborhood, only thirty percent of Mapleton-Fall Creek’s residents worship there.

In neither neighborhood are the congregations completely neighborhood-based. But the churches of Martindale-Brightwood draw many more of their members from the neighborhood, and the others who drive in to worship are more similar, by race and class, to the residents who live around their church building. The range of services offered does not indicate how plugged in the congregations are to their neighbors.

Understanding the Role of Urban Congregations

The very different role of congregations in these two urban communities suggests caution. It is difficult to generalize or to talk about best practices without fully considering the social context in which those practices occur. What congregations believe and what they intend their mission to be are only pieces of a bigger puzzle that includes other pieces outside of the congregation, many of which may be beyond their control. As congregations reflect on their missions, and as all of us think of them as actors on the urban stage, it is important to remember the complex environment in which they act.

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Photographs, clockwise from top right.

This late 1950s Brightwood street scene shows the 2300 block of Station Street north of Roosevelt Avenue.

Known for its recreation program, Tabernacle Presbyterian Church offers many outreach services in Mapleton-Fall Creek.

Cliff Hatcher, custodian at Broadway United Methodist Church, also serves as a mentor to neighborhood youth in Mapleton-Fall Creek.

IN BRIEF

"Give Me That New Time Religion" Debuts

During the month of March, almost 3,000 people attended the eight presentations of the American Cabaret Theatre's original production, "Give Me That New Time Religion." ACT director Claude McNeal interwove song, dance, and video interviews into a narrative about Western Civilization's search for spiritual meaning. Critics for the Indianapolis *Star* and *Nuvo* praised the production, citing both its originality and its evocative power.

Although it made no attempt to shape the content, The Polis Center funded script development through the Project on Religion and Urban Culture. The production fit the project's aims to enlist the perspectives of creative artists in public discussion about the role of religion in modern society.

Student Researchers Join Faith and Community Project

Twenty-five student researchers gathered at The Polis Center in late May to continue fieldwork on the relationship between faith and community in Indianapolis neighborhoods. This summer the project examines five new areas: UNWA, Butler-Tarkington, Irvington, Greater Southeastside, Greenwood. Fieldwork also continues in Carmel, Broad Ripple, and the Near Eastside.

The students will be conducting formal observations of religious and community organizations, interviewing clergy and civic leaders, constructing an inventory of community-based programs, and charting the relationships between congregations and their neighborhoods. Neighborhood open houses, community directories and timelines, research

reports, and public presentations are among the activities planned for the summer.

New Publications Launched

Over the past few months, The Polis Center has created two new periodical publications to disseminate findings from the Project on

Religion and Urban Culture. *Clergy Notes*, one-page monthly newsletter, addresses issues of interest to clergy. Articles are short and place information from Indianapolis in a wider context through references to professional literature.

Research Notes from Faith and Community, published bi-monthly, is a four-page newsletter that seeks to create a conversation between its readers and The Polis Center, specifically around research from the Center's neighborhood fieldwork. Each issue focuses on a major theme in the complex relationship of faith and community in Indianapolis.

To receive either publication, contact Denys Pittman at The Polis Center (274-2455).



A growing interest in the presence of angels is but one of the contemporary religious themes addressed in the American Cabaret Theatre's production *Give Me That New Time Religion*.
Photo courtesy of American Cabaret Theatre.