

# Research Notes from Faith and Community



THE POLIS  
CENTER

Indianapolis Religion Briefing Paper Number 2:

May 1997

## The Changing Face of Indianapolis Religion

by Etan S. Diamond and Arthur E. Farnsley II

We've all looked at photographs of a beautiful landscape, of some place frozen in time by the camera. As lovely as that picture might be, it is limited in one important respect: it does not tell us much about the past. Did that landscape always look so beautiful? How have nature or humans shaped it over time? Only by looking at old photos of the same site at different times can we begin to understand how a place has changed.

Like a photograph, a survey provides a snapshot of people's attitudes or behaviors at a single point in time. It often reveals little about the past and how those attitudes have changed. Only by comparing different surveys from different points in time can we begin to see how attitudes have shifted, how the landscape has been altered.

We know from contemporary surveys of religious affiliation what the religious landscape of contemporary Indianapolis looks like. In the 1990s, Catholics are the single largest religious group, with Black Baptists and Methodists close behind. But how much does the modern lay of the land resemble Indianapolis of earlier decades, a city many of us still remember? How much has religion in our city changed?

The experience of mainline Protestantism is instructive. In 1990, liberal Protestant groups, including Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Disciples of Christ, white Baptists, Lutherans, and United Church of Christ members, accounted for only about 13 to 16 percent of all Marion County residents, depending on exactly which groups one counts as "mainline." This means that together these bodies make up between 25 and 30 percent of all members of religious organizations. Considering Indianapolis's reputation as a mainline Protestant-dominated city, this figure seems low. How low, relative to the past, is confirmed by figure 1. These established Protestant groups have in fact experienced a steady decline since the 1920s, when they accounted for over 20 percent of the city's population and nearly one-half of its church or synagogue membership.

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*Etan S. Diamond is a research associate at The Polis Center and Arthur E. Farnsley II directs the Faith and Community component of The Polis Center Project on Religion and Urban Culture.*



### Mainline Protestant Denominations as Percentage of Marion County Population, 1926-1990

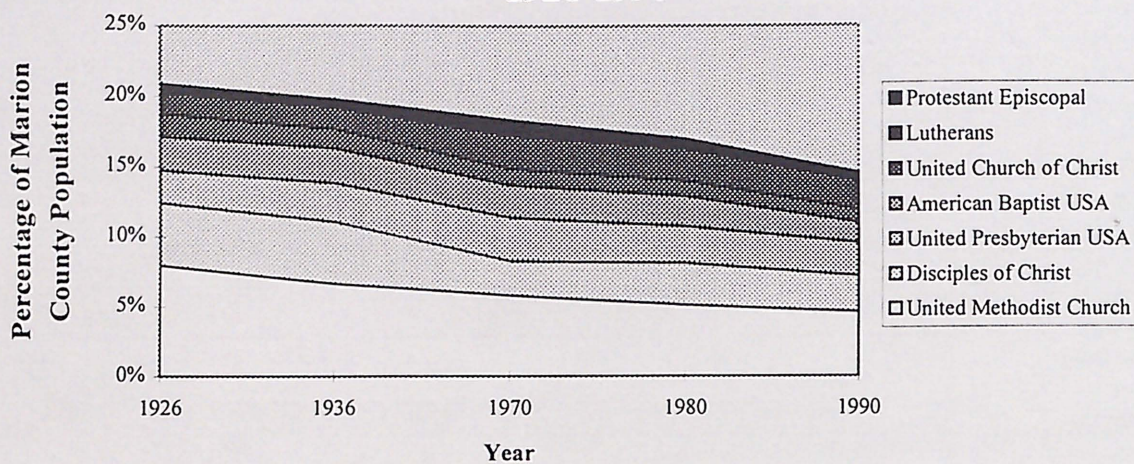


Figure 1

Was this decline simply part of a broader social movement away from religion in Indianapolis? After all, the “snapshot” of religion in 1990 suggests that Indianapolis has a particularly low adherence rate at 45 percent. But as figure 2 reveals, overall affiliation rates in Marion County have *increased* slightly since the 1920s. Mainline Protestant groups declined *despite* a counter trend toward higher membership in general.

### Religious Adherence Rates in Marion County 1926-1990

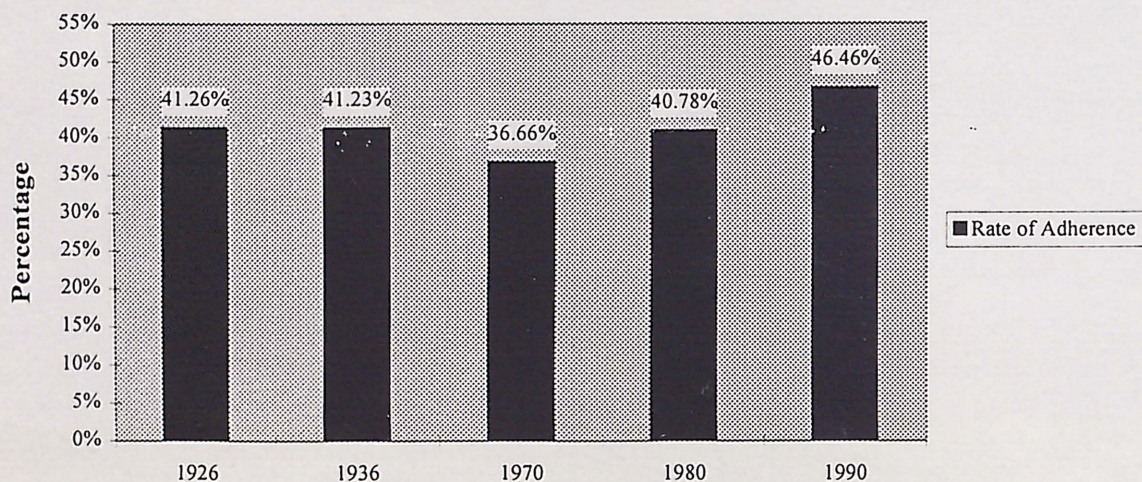


Figure 2



The evidence of mainline Protestant decline in the midst of increasing rates of affiliation leads to a final question: if the population of the county was growing steadily (it doubled from 1926 to 1990), and membership rates of religious organizations other than mainline Protestants were growing (albeit slowly), *then where do all of the new religious adherents come from?*

One answer is that there was growth among Catholics. The present level of Catholic membership is actually more than double what it was in the 1920s and 1930s (Table 1). Catholics literally doubled in numbers between 1936 and 1970, from about 40,000 to somewhere near 80,000, far outpacing the rate of population growth in the county. Interestingly, Catholic membership numbers leveled off after 1970. From 1970 forward, their numbers are as stable--their line on the chart is as flat--as the numbers for mainline Protestants.

The segment labeled "All Other Groups" accounts for most of the growth in religious adherents in the 20th century. Most of the growth in religious membership during this century, and essentially all of the growth since 1970, has been among congregations that include both black and white independents, conservative denominations, and Pentecostals. Together, these groups have more than quadrupled over the past several decades. Although groups other than Christian are included in the "All Other Groups" category, there is no evidence that non-Christian religions have made substantial membership advances in this century. Evidence from cities such as Chicago and Detroit, however, suggests that Indianapolis might expect growth in these groups, especially Islam, early in the next century.

*Table 1*  
*Number of Adherents by Period*

<b>Denomination</b>	<b>1926</b>	<b>1936</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1990</b>
Catholic	39,418	40,783	91,820	84,935	84,033
United Methodist Church	31,277	29,859	46,124	39,431	37,027
Disciples of Christ	17,614	19,703	19,563	22,874	20,596
United Presbyterian Church in the USA	9,060	12,222	24,348	20,074	17,990
American Baptist USA	9,482	11,090	18,354	16,446	11,483
Lutherans	5,891	6,978	18,666	17,291	15,378
United Church of Christ	6,315	6,072	9,204	8,297	7,477
Protestant Episcopal Church	2,572	2,460	8,882	5,648	4,630
All Other Religious Groups	46,407	61,690	72,143	114,353	177,956

As these various graphs and table suggest, Indianapolis's contemporary religious landscape did not suddenly emerge in 1997. This complex landscape has been continually evolving, as religious groups have experienced different trajectories of growth and decline. We cannot tell the story of religion Indianapolis based solely on what we see around us today, because what we see has been shaped and conditioned by what came before.



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## Response to *Research Notes from Faith and Community*

Indianapolis Religion Briefing Paper Number 1: The Religious Landscape of Indianapolis

May, 1997

### Who has joined (and not joined) the conversation

Sincere thanks to all who read and responded to the first *Research Notes from Faith and Community* about "The Religious Landscape of Indianapolis." As we write this, more than 60 of you have sent us your ideas and opinions. We are especially gratified that our respondents represent a wide slice of religious participation in our city. We had at least three or more responses from the Baptist, Catholic, Christian Church (Disciples), Lutheran, Methodist, and United Church of Christ traditions. Other respondents came from congregations that are Episcopal, Nazarene, Full Gospel, Church of God (Anderson), Friends, Mennonite, Bahai, Unitarian and the Salvation Army. We received several responses from independent congregations too. A few statistical summaries of our respondents will give you some idea of who is participating:

Average Age (50)

Male/Female (88%/12%)

Congregations > 90% white (85%)

Congregations > 90% black (12%)

Congregations with > 10% from two or more races (3%)

Congregations from religions other than Christianity (1%)

These responses do not constitute a scientific sample of Indianapolis, nor were they intended to. Nonetheless, the "average" respondent fits the profile we have found repeatedly in our field research: a 50 year old Christian male who serves a congregation in which at least 90 percent of the members are of one race.

The fact that our respondents fit this profile makes us more, not less, determined to increase the scope of our conversation so that it includes women, ethnic minorities, and religions other than Christianity. Our intent is to engage anyone who wishes to join in a public conversation about the role religion plays in our society. So again, thanks to those of you who have joined us and a sincere invitation to those who have not yet participated.

### What you thought

#### How do you characterize Indianapolis religion?

Respondents characterized religion in Indianapolis in a broad variety of ways. Common was the suggestion that religion in our city is divided racially, economically, historically, and theologically or denominationally. The most outspoken proponent of that view said that religion in Indianapolis



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is, “skin deep and a mile wide, parochial, petty, competitive, and suspicious.” (Next time please tell us what you really think.) Another said that religious life here “bordered on an enclave.”

Perhaps these divisions have something to do with individualism. Of the many ways that respondents described religious life in the city, “individualistic” was identified almost twice as often as “conservative,” the next most common response. In fact, “individualistic” and “conservative” together accounted for half of the men’s responses. Interestingly, only one female described religious life here as “individualistic,” while only one other said “conservative.” Females were three times as likely, however, to describe religious life as “diverse.” Exactly one man and one woman characterized religion in Indianapolis as “united.” The remainder of the answers focused on racial, economic, or geographic division more specifically.

Age seems to have little to do with how individuals characterize Indianapolis religion. There was no discernible pattern that separated respondents in their 30s from those in their 60s. Although we had many fewer African-American respondents, they were neither more nor less likely to describe religion in Indianapolis as conservative and individualistic.

In general, denominational differences made little difference. Groups as diverse as Unitarians, United Methodists, Nazarenes, and Missouri Synod Lutherans called the city’s religious life conservative. A range of people from Bahais to Catholics to Episcopalians called religion here individualistic. In fact, as many Catholics said that “family values” were central to religious life in our city as said that it was individualistic, so no obvious patterns emerged.

Notably absent from the responses were adjectives such as “vibrant” or “dominant” or even “strong.” There were no suggestions that religious ideas or individuals of faith shape Indianapolis through leadership or moral vision. With the exception of the two responses that described religious life as “united,” none emphasized cohesion or community. Even the ones that focused on diversity tended to designate this as a description rather than as a value.

### **Does Indianapolis have a religious and cultural core?**

About 20 percent of our respondents said that there was no “core,” that congregations operated independently of one another and relatively free of any mainline Protestant tradition. A few of these suggested that there were smaller blocs, perhaps among black churches, but the general sense of this one-fifth was that religious life in Indianapolis was pretty diffuse.

The remaining 80 percent identified two kinds of cores. Some suggested that there was a general religious mainstream that was fairly inclusive, something akin to Will Herberg’s famous description of American religion as “Protestant, Catholic, Jew.” These respondents thought that there was a religious fringe, but generally described it as small and self-limited.

Others, however, described different kinds of cores. Although no one suggested anti-Semitism or anti-Catholicism (and the absence of any such response is itself remarkable), there was some sense that a white, Protestant-oriented, conservative core still held sway. Some felt that African Americans were excluded. Others thought Catholics were, though not in an overt way.



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Despite the fact that there are more Catholics in Indianapolis than members of any single Protestant group, one respondent noted, “this is the least Catholic place I’ve ever lived.”

Virtually all respondents said that the inclusion/exclusion distinction is largely a matter of race, ethnicity, economic, and information. Literally no one suggested that the core revolved around theological or ideological purity. As with the earlier question, there was virtually no suggestion that a religious core, if it existed, was powerful or growing or domineering. Even if there is some religious “center,” it is not viewed as a major social asset or liability. Viewed qualitatively, there is little in the responses to suggest that this religious core is a matter of deep concern one way or the other.

### **What you’d like to see more of**

Suggestions for future Research Notes topics fell into two general categories: programmatic and informational. Programmatic suggestions included topics such as models of ministry, lists of model programs, strategies for change and inclusivity, strategies for worship, and programmatic material on day care, nursing homes, food pantries, and the like.

Some of this programmatic material we are seeking to provide. Another part of our Project on Religion and Urban Culture, the Information and Resources Network, is actively disseminating information about what programs exist and how they operate.

As a unit of Indiana University, we are not in the business of making suggestions about models of ministry or strategies for worship. However, we are involved in a developing partnership with the new Indianapolis Center for Congregations. This Center will have precisely those sorts of interests, so we will certainly pass your concerns, as well as a lot of other information, on to its new leadership.

The other suggestions for topics focused on specific kinds of information: cooperative efforts or likely barriers between black and white congregations; comparison of religious opinion and broader public opinion on bio-ethical matters; emphasis on understanding evangelical and fundamentalist congregations; religious demographics such as age, race, and gender; comparisons between Indianapolis and similar cities; records of interdenominational cooperation.

We will do our best to cover many of these topics as we continue our inquiry into religion’s role in our lives together. We also hope to bring our respondents together this fall for a group discussion of issues that interest them.

Thanks once again to all who read our *Research Notes*, and special thanks to those who responded. Please always feel free to contact us with questions or comments about our ongoing efforts both to describe religious life in our city and to create a forum for public conversation about it.



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## What is the Project on Religion and Urban Culture?

The Project on Religion and Urban culture seeks to nurture public inquiry and civic conversation about the role of religion in the creation and re-creation of urban community in one American city, and, by implication, in other American cities. It seeks community-based partnerships to explore the ways people of faith have acted (or failed to act) to define, sustain, and transform community in the 20th-century city. These partnerships also examine the reciprocal impact of the urban culture on the practices and expression of religion in Indianapolis.

By drawing members of the academy, the city's religious institutions, and local community organizations together into common discussions and activities the project seeks to create a civic arena for public teaching and public learning about religious and community issues. We will share what we learn with local and national audiences through a variety of means: video productions; curriculum materials; books, articles, and presentations for academic and public audiences; community and congregational resource materials; publicly accessible electronic databases linked to broader datasets and distributed widely; local and national conferences; workshops and courses in traditional and non-traditional forms and venues.

With such expansive goals, the Project on Religion and Urban Culture is necessarily a large and complex endeavor. The major components of the project are:

*Faith and Community* -- Local high school, college, and graduate student researchers and community advisors are conducting field research in a variety of urban and suburban areas. Among the communities we are studying are: Mapleton-Fall Creek, Martindale-Brightwood, Meridian-Kessler, Crooked Creek, South-East Side, Carmel, Fishers, Greenleaf, and the United Northwest Area. We will add other communities in the future. Adjunct efforts focus on interest groups such as local clergy and the Indianapolis Hispanic communities.

*Information and Resources Network* -- This arm of the project aims to foster better city-wide communication about local activities, particularly among local clergy and religious professionals and active lay leaders. Through regular newsletters, a website, special reports, focus group meetings, and an interactive data base, we hope to share programmatic information, build upon existing successful initiatives, stimulate new conversations and partnerships, and serve as a critical resource for planning and evaluation.

*Understanding Religion* -- Religious educators representing a variety of faiths are working on creating materials to showcase the local experience of religion and spirituality. The information gathered will be presented in print and video formats for local congregations, college religion courses, and high school social studies classes.



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*History of Religion in 20th-century Indianapolis* — We are writing two books about religion in the city, which will be based on scholarly research but written for a general audience. The first deals with the changing experience of religion in American cities, while the other explores the stories of religious people, organizations, and civic culture in Indianapolis. Current and future research will add to our understanding about the trends and events in the city's religious history up through the present.

*Religion and the Creative Arts* — Local artists are contributing their perspectives on experiences of religion and spirituality through creative writing, photography, and drama. A collaboration between The Polis Center and the Indianapolis-based American Cabaret Theater produced a play, based on the experiences and expression of religion in Indianapolis. Creative writers and photographers are exploring contemporary Indianapolis religious experiences and spiritual meanings in and about Indianapolis for a book and exhibit. The Polis Center also is a key organizer of a series of festivals for the entire community to learn about and express themselves creatively about religion and spirituality in today's society.

We encourage the local community not only to be involved in this exciting and stimulating project, but to help us expand it. To become involved or express your interest in the project, contact us at the address shown below.

*For More Information Contact:*

The Polis Center  
Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis  
425 University Boulevard, CA 301  
Indianapolis, IN 46202-5140  
317/274-2455  
Fax: 317/278-1830

Internet: [polis@iupui.edu](mailto:polis@iupui.edu)  
Home Page: <http://www.polis.iupui.edu/>



## Research Notes From Faith and Community: Questionnaire

*Please take a few moments to answer the following questions. We will share a compilation of your responses in a later edition of this publication. If you have previously completed one of these questionnaires, we need only your name before you turn to the questions on the back.*

Your name?

Your age?

Your gender?

Your religious organization's name?

Organization's address?

Denominational affiliation, confession, or tradition of practice?

Ethnic or racial make-up of your congregation?

<i>Percentage White (non-Hispanic)</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Percentage Hispanic</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Percentage African American</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Percentage Asian</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Percentage Other</i>	<i>%</i>

*(Please turn this page over for more questions.)*



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*Attach additional sheets, if necessary*

In what year did you begin your ministry in Indianapolis? In how many ministerial positions have you served (and for how long in each)?

In the time since you began serving in Indianapolis, what changes in the city's religious life are most obvious to you?

In general, would you say the changes have been positive, negative, or simply different? In your opinion, what factors have most shaped those changes?

When completed, please return this questionnaire to:  
The Polis Center  
425 University Boulevard, CA 301  
Indianapolis, IN 46202-5140  
317.274.2455

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