



Public Teaching and Public Learning

Indianapolis has a rich religious heritage. Various Polis projects have uncovered a wealth of information on the way religion has shaped the city—and how the city has influenced the experience and expression of religion. We want to share this story, and we want to learn more. We also want to involve a broader public, including the city's faith communities, as partners in this process of teaching and learning. This subject is too important to remain solely or even primarily the province of scholars.

One goal of the project on religion and urban culture is to create a greater awareness of the role of religion in shaping community, especially as manifested in Indianapolis. We hope to accomplish this goal in part by working with various audiences to tell the story in ways that they find useful—and in equal measure to encourage these audiences to share what they have learned. Through this process of teaching and learning from each other—public teaching and public learning—we should emerge with a better, richer understanding of the diversity and complexity of religion in Indianapolis, and how it has influenced our culture.

This issue of Religion & Community highlights how Polis has worked with local religious educators. These activities extend our conversation about religion with the city's faith communities. The initial results are encouraging. We have learned much already and are eager to discover more. If you want to know more about these activities or to become involved in this project, please give us a call at 274-2455. We would welcome you as a partner.

—David J. Bodenhamer, Director

MAKING RELIGIOUS EDUCATION LOCAL

What do we mean by "local?" The Polis Center wants to explore whether people are more eager to learn about and discuss the role of religion when they understand it in local terms. What are the experiences and expressions of religion in Indianapolis? An emphasis on "local" in no way excludes the big picture—the universal. Quite the opposite. Polis believes that people can understand that big picture, those universals, better if they first understand them in terms of their own experience.

Indianapolis has a fascinating religious heritage. Its size, location, and circumstances have made it simultaneously unique and representative of other midwestern cities. From earlier projects, Polis accumulated a wealth of material on that religious history.

Polis staff concluded that the story of Indianapolis's religious culture would be of special interest to local congregations of various faiths. Predecessors of those congregations were instrumental in creating the shape the city has assumed.

The story of that growth provides compelling examples of religion in action. The material seemed well suited to religious education discussion groups in churches, synagogues, or other worship places. The goal was to use local history and culture to reflect on today's important issues. The process for doing this—and the results of this phase of the project—are described in this newsletter.

Relating Faith to Everyday Life

Developed with the help of a group of local religious educators, a plan grew for creating some sample materials about the role of religion in Indianapolis. The advisory committee emphasized that today's religious adults want to study and discuss materials that have particular meaning for their own lives. "Faith and Economic Struggle" emerged as a theme relevant for virtually everyone's daily life. This theme also ties together many generations of Indianapolis residents. In some cases economic struggle has meant actual poverty, hunger, or homelessness. But it has also meant varying degrees of economic stress or deprivation that can dominate people's lives and rob them of a sense of well-being.

Polis workers and consultants planned two models—a video and a newspaper—for testing in adult religious education groups. Each format tells stories of various types of economic struggle experienced by people in the city's past, starting with its founding and continuing to the present. Each also tells stories of creative ways in which religious individuals or groups have responded to economic crises, whether their own or those of others.

The result is a virtual mini-history of Indianapolis—so crucial have been the roles played by religious people in moving the city forward from one era to another.

Here are a few examples of the stories told in the video and the newspaper: the founding of St. Vincent Hospital and the Jewish Federation; how synagogues and churches helped refugees and immigrants adjust to new lives; how faith-based social service agencies such as Flanner House trained jobless people for new vocations; ecumenical cooperation during the Great Depression; the role of faith groups in strengthening the inner-city through such work as building and rehabbing housing.

Story to Story

During September and October, local congregations of several faiths tested the video and the newspaper. The testing procedure included participants telling their own stories of economic hardship, or of being involved in helping to relieve economic struggle. At completion of testing, participants responded with comments and suggestions about the effectiveness of the materials. They also could develop projects in their own congregations to help with today's economic stress. One goal was to develop a greater sense of community in the city.

"Making Religious Education Local": A Conference

The culmination of the Religious Education project will be a conference to be held October 31 at the Fatima Retreat House in Indianapolis. Participants will pursue new aspects of "Making Religious Education Local." Religious education leaders, clergy, IUPUI staff, and others will discuss responses to the test materials. They also will offer their own ideas about making religious education local. The goal will be to help congregations enrich their own education programs and to help guide Polis in future phases of its work.

Keynote speaker will be Joseph P. Russell. Recently retired from the staff of the Episcopal Diocese in Cleveland, Father Russell has written several influential books, including *Sharing Our Biblical Story*. He will focus on his particular specialty: using storytelling to shape a sense of identity. Other events will include panel discussions and small groups. A limited number of participant spaces may still be available. Registration is free; please contact Polis at 274-2455.

Religious Education Advisory Committee

Frank Alexander, Oasis of Hope Baptist Church

Kenneth Bedell, Editor, *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches*, Dayton Ohio

Maria Blake, Religious Education Team, Holy Angels Catholic Church

Billie Bridges, Assistant to the Pastor, Light of the World Christian Church

Peggy Crawford, Catholic Education, Archdiocese of Indianapolis

James Divita, Department of History, Marian College

Mary Ann Moman, Wesley United Methodist Church

Amanda Porterfield, Department of Religious Studies, IUPUI

Sue Reid, Episcopal Diocese

Sandy Sasso, Beth-El Zedeck Temple

George Schelter, Pilgrim Lutheran Church

Mary Anna Speller, United Church of Christ, Shelbyville, Indiana

Betty Ruth Stephens, Director, Board of Christian Education, Phillips Temple C.M.E

Jack Sullivan, Jr., African-American Educational Ministries, Disciples of Christ

John VanValen, Free Methodist Church of North America

Richard Willowby, Church of God (Anderson) Headquarters, Anderson, Indiana

Caitlin Anderson, The Polis Center

Linda-Marie Delloff, The Polis Center

Meet Three Advisory Committee Members

The Rev. Dr. Jack Sullivan, Jr., chair of the advisory committee, is Associate for African-American Educational Ministries, Division of Homeland Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), which is headquartered in Indianapolis. In his work, Sullivan visits many congregations around the country.

It is in the nation's cities, he emphasizes, where the need for a sense of community is especially urgent. The Polis project, says Sullivan, is an example of "working through congregations to bring about transformation in urban areas."

Sullivan often preaches and conducts workshops on how African-Americans can shape a sense of identity within the church. He uses some of the storytelling and cultural models the Polis project is pursuing. Groups with a sense of their own identity are generally more anxious to share with a wide variety of other groups. "We already have lots of models for brokenness," says Sullivan; "people of faith need to model unity."

Mary Anna Speller has served as both an advisory committee member and a consultant to the project. For many years she was Religious Education Consultant to the Indiana-Kentucky Conference of the United Church of Christ. She has had experience in both rural and urban congregations, and has planned education programs for all ages. She often works in ecumenical settings.

Speller sees the Polis project as having an important goal: "trying to integrate heritage and culture to enhance our religious faith journey." Looking at the culture and heritage of a shared city of residence "makes us realize that we have a lot in common. When we see a commonality in our heritage, it helps us move a little closer together and see the commonality in our faith, too."

The Rev. Richard Willowby is Director of Product Development and Sales for the Church Ministries Division of Warner Press, the publishing house of the Church of God (Anderson). In his view, "the educational ministry of the church is the greatest need right now." He sees this project as a way for a national denomination to encourage local congregations, especially in urban areas, to frame educational experiences in terms of their local circumstances. "Learning connections to their past also connects them to the future," he says.

Willowby also views the project as a way for faith groups and denominations of various backgrounds to come together. The Church of God (Anderson) is a denomination in the Holiness tradition. (It is one of three Holiness churches with headquarters in the area; the other two are the Wesleyans and the Free Methodists. Indianapolis is also headquarters for several Pentecostal denominations.)

Willowby appreciates the fact that the Polis project has involved mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish and Unitarian Universalist faith groups. "In a world that has far too much bad news, this project is good news," Willowby says.

UPDATE ON FAITH AND COMMUNITY

"Hotter than usual" described the Indianapolis weather this past summer. It also described the pace of another important part of the Religion and Urban Culture Project: "Faith and Community." Designed to help four neighborhoods tell their stories and bring together diverse community members, the initiative has just completed an intensive period of research in Martindale-Brightwood, Fountain Square, Mapleton-Fall Creek, and Haughville-Near Westside.

The experiment has trained multi-generational researchers in oral history techniques. High-school students, young adults, and seniors have worked side-by-side developing new skills. They have completed nearly 100 interviews with church and community leaders, and with neighborhood residents, to learn their stories and to trace the role of religion in urban communities. The researchers have attended many events in the neighborhoods, and have established networks of information-gatherers and communicators.

The students have now returned to classes, but several of the college-level researchers are continuing their work through the end of the year. Goals include:

- completing a "census" to identify all houses of worship in the four neighborhoods and publish these lists as resources for the neighborhoods
- conducting case studies with several congregations to learn more about their missions and communities
- documenting with photographs and other materials the activities of the neighborhoods

Polis will continue to consult with neighborhood groups to confirm the accuracy and usefulness of this public research initiative. Future issues of the newsletter will report on the progress of this effort.