



THE POLIS  
CENTER

# RELIGION & COMMUNITY

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A Newsletter of the Project on Religion and Urban Culture

## **A Word About Polis**

The word "polis" is Greek for "city." We at Polis focus primarily on doing work in, with, and about this city (and what that may say about other cities). You may recognize us as the creators of the recently published 1600-page *Encyclopedia of Indianapolis*, which includes numerous entries on religion.

Or you may know us through other projects, such as a religious history of Indianapolis in the early 20th century, or a history of race relations in the city. Perhaps you have heard of our joint project with the United Way of Central Indiana and its Community Service Council to establish a computer database on current Social Assets and Vulnerability Indicators (SAVI) in Marion County.

Organized in 1989, Polis is a 20-person multidisciplinary unit at IUPUI that takes the university into the community, and the community into the university. To do this, we work in partnership with a wide range of community groups, governmental agencies, businesses, and other organizations and individuals.

We try to reach a wide diversity of publics with the results of our work. Sometimes, a book—like the *Encyclopedia*—helps us achieve this goal. We also create exhibits, such as "Discovering Indianapolis: Three Generations of a Community's History," at The Children's Museum, or the 60-foot Wall of History at Goodwill Industries headquarters. And we work with teachers and students in elementary and secondary schools to develop a better understanding of our city. Our purpose in every project is to share what we are learning with the Indianapolis community.

—David J. Bodenhamer, Director

## POLIS ANNOUNCES NEW PROJECT

**W**hat will Indianapolis look like—and feel like—in the rapidly approaching 21st century? In pondering this question, POLIS researchers and partners have been focusing on what once characterized most American towns, large and small: a sense of community. Perhaps more than any other trait, this shared feeling of identity and belonging often seems missing from today's cities.

One type of institution has often served as the anchor of a neighborhood: a house of worship. Many early neighborhoods grew up around a church or synagogue. As inner cities have crumbled, their populations changed, and other institutions such as schools have closed, religious institutions have frequently provided important anchors holding urban communities together.

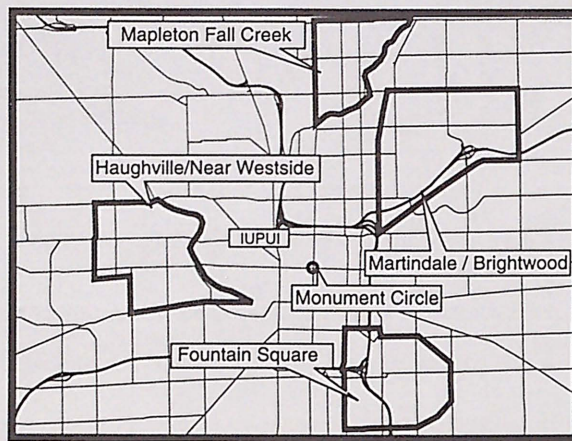
In an effort to understand how religious institutions and the religious faith of individuals helped shape the city, POLIS in 1994 initiated the Project on Religion and Urban Culture. As in previous projects, POLIS is working with various community partners. The overall goal of the project is to encourage efforts to invigorate a sense of community in the city. Funded by a grant from Lilly Endowment, Inc., the project has several components. This issue of the newsletter will focus on the "Faith and Community" part of the larger project. Future newsletters will look at others.

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## Four Changing Neighborhoods

**R**esidents in four city neighborhoods that have undergone major change were interested in learning about their communities' backgrounds and culture. The four areas are: Martindale-Brightwood, Fountain Square, Mapleton-Fall Creek, and the Near-Westside. These areas have all experienced racial and economic change, along with results of urbanization such as disruption by new highways, loss of housing, and new types of crime.

Talks with community representatives convinced POLIS that a focus on religion would provide important insights into how city neighborhoods work. Says Lamont Hulse, POLIS assistant director, "We didn't have to go very far before discovering a religious connection in shaping the city—either the force of a religious body or institution, or individuals' faith leading them to initiate improvements." These four neighborhoods are serving as case studies; it is very likely their conclusions will apply to other city areas as well.

How does one shape a sense of neighborhood or community identity? Sometimes by stepping back and looking from the outside in. Shirley Webster is the Neighborhood Coordinator in Martindale-Brightwood, working in partnership with POLIS. She relates a story illustrating how her organization became interested in knowing more about its own past and heritage.

"I vividly remember once visiting Union Station with some guests," she says; "there was a big display, a portion of which showed Martindale-Brightwood's important connection with the station. In Brightwood, there used to be a turnaround for all the trains. I grew up in this area, and I didn't know about that." Later Webster visited the old turn-

**"We don't have to go very far before discovering a religious connection in shaping the city."**

**—Lamont Hulse,  
The Polis Center.**

around. These and other incidents made Webster aware of how little she really knew about Martindale-Brightwood.

Others in the area had had similar experiences of discovery. "This convinced us that we needed to put together a really thorough picture," Webster explains, "to help the people who live here—as well as those who don't—learn more about our heritage." Part of what will build a complete picture in Martindale-Brightwood, says Webster, is its identity as a bi-racial neighborhood. "We want to learn both groups' views," she said. Research will disclose what makes each of the four neighborhoods unique—and also what makes them similar to each other and to other areas in the city.

Discovering information about these neighborhoods is not just a fun trivia game. It helps people develop a sense of the importance and character of their communities.

Al Polin is the Neighborhood Coordinator of Mapleton-Fall Creek. "Often," he says, "sources on the city don't tell the whole story, like the story of how the people in our neighborhood donated their time and sweat labor to build homes." The Faith and Community project "is an opportunity for the people who have actually been involved in the neighborhoods to tell their story."

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# TEAM-BUILDING

## **Neighborhood Research Teams**

An important part of the Faith and Community project is the involvement of neighborhood residents in the research. To recruit team members, POLIS sent announcements to churches, educational, and other organizations. Currently underway is team training in oral history and other research techniques.

Intergenerational teams (ages 15 to 40) will conduct several types of activities, including story-telling interviews with longtime neighborhood residents, community leaders, and religious leaders. Researchers will also study community and religious organizations, visiting local institutions as participant-observers.

Shirley Webster has learned that many fascinating stories are out there. In Martindale-Brightwood, "One woman has told us about a black orphanage that we didn't know existed," she said; "another resident has described what used to be a thriving commercial area that is now all residential. We want to get their complete stories, along with others."

## **Renewing Old Ties**

Often, even when people move out of city neighborhoods, they continue to return for worship. In Martindale-Brightwood, for example, 80% of church members no longer live in the area. One of the Faith and Community project's goals is to bring together the people currently living in an area with former residents who continue to worship there. Both have a strong stake in the community's identity.

The same is true in Mapleton-Fall Creek, says Al Polin, who has lived in that community since 1965. Recognizing this, churches in the community formed the Mid-North Church Council. The Council "has been active in everything from a food pantry to counseling to donating money to the neighborhood association," according to Polin.

## **Teaching and Learning**

Nicole Kearney will be one of the team leaders for neighborhood research in the Martindale-Brightwood area. Kearney, a social worker, is currently program coordinator for the Martindale-Brightwood Community Development Corporation. She is excited about what she will learn. "I had a particular interest in finding a project like this," she explains. In the fall, Kearney will be returning to college to study African-American history, which she then hopes to teach. The research she will conduct this summer should help prepare her for that goal.

A member of a small Baptist congregation, Kearney is active in ministry and religious education among young people. In black neighborhoods, especially, "churches are always crucial to how things happen. I want to know how people have viewed the church as a community catalyst," she says. "The churches in our community are really coming together now," she continues, "but we can't go forward without knowing the past."

## **Commuting Consultant**

Working as a consultant with all the teams will be Richard Pierce, currently a doctoral student at IU, Bloomington. He is writing a dissertation on the African-American community of Indianapolis. Pierce will help train the teams for their neighborhood work, especially in oral history techniques. He will later help the teams evaluate their interviews and determine what kind of follow-up is appropriate.

Pierce is especially interested in the diverse roles churches have played in different Indianapolis neighborhoods. "Especially in black neighborhoods, churches have taken on a much wider role," he says. "In some cases, they have been most active in social service work; in other cases, they have played leading roles in the political arena."

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**An important part of the Faith and Community project is the involvement of neighborhood residents in the research.**

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# MEANWHILE...

While some POLIS staff are involved in the Faith and Community work, other parts of the Religion and Urban Culture project are going forward.

## **Research and Religious Education**

In previous projects, such as the *Encyclopedia of Indianapolis*, POLIS staff and outside researchers/writers uncovered a wealth of fascinating historical and cultural material on religion in Indianapolis. An exciting idea emerged: to consider whether faith groups might want to incorporate this material into their religious education programs.

**One goal is to make research materials available to the city's religious communities.**

This idea prompted several intriguing questions:

- (1) Are there ways to use research-generated material to enrich religious education?
- (2) Can religious education be local? More specifically, can it use local stories to understand important religious questions?
- (3) Can religious education material reflect the diverse histories and cultures of faith groups in Indianapolis?

An advisory committee of religious leaders and educators from around the city is helping POLIS get at ways of answering these questions. One goal is to make research materials available to local congregations and to share the results with the city's religious communities.

## **Teaching Religious History in the Schools**

Too often, schools have shied away from teaching religious history for fear of teaching religion itself, thereby infringing on the Constitution's separation of religion and state.

Working with such partners as the Indiana Humanities Council and the Indianapolis Religious History Association, POLIS hopes to develop a set of community-based models for teaching religious history and culture in schools. This would be a ground-breaking effort, as few such programs exist anywhere in the nation.

## **New Interpretations**

While the Faith and Community, Religious Education, and Religious History in the Schools projects are developing new research, POLIS continues to interpret previously gathered material. In an earlier project on the religious history of Indianapolis 1908-1922, fascinating insights emerged about how religion helped shape this city. Two books are underway to tell this story to a broad public.

IUPUI professor emeritus of religion and history Jan Shipp is preparing a book for both a scholarly and lay audience. She asks such compelling questions as why some congregations remained in the city while others moved to the suburbs. How did these presences and absences shape the city? Shipp will work with an advisory team of national scholars to focus on how the Indianapolis experience fits with the broader picture.

At the same time, a group of local experts is preparing a book of essays on people of faith and religious institutions in early 20th century Indianapolis. Editing the book is Robert M. Taylor of the Indiana Historical Society.

These projects will receive detailed attention in future editions of the newsletter.