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## CONGREGATIONS AS PUBLIC SPACE

**PROBLEM:** Communities need services and meeting spaces, but these may not be locally available.

**SOLUTION:** Congregations respond to community needs by offering programs and opening their facilities to others.

Before Indianapolis had a courthouse, it had a church building. In 1822, First Baptist Church became the first congregation to establish a visible presence in the city. Work on the first Marion County Courthouse was completed two years later. In the subsequent two decades, four congregations--two Presbyterian, one Methodist, and one Episcopal--would build prominent churches on the Circle, in the geographic heart of the city. More than just religious sanctuaries, they had a civic presence, both symbolically and as community meeting places.

Well into the twentieth century, religious institutions contributed the most beautiful and visible buildings to the city's landscape. These buildings, "solid and massive in appearance," as the Encyclopedia of Indianapolis describes them, conveyed "a sense of religion's authority in the community."

By this measure, religious organizations have lost pride of place in Indianapolis. Only one church remains on the Circle, and just a handful of large, mainline Protestant congregations remain downtown. Today, the most visible and impressive buildings on the city's skyline are dedicated to business interests.

Contrary to popular perception, however, religious affiliation has not declined significantly in Indianapolis, or in the nation, for the past 100 years. The buildings may have moved to the suburbs, along with the population. But congregations and their facilities remain an important part of the city--both physically and symbolically.

Congregations exist in a middle ground between the public and the private realms; while they are religious organizations, they have often served their communities in civic roles. Most famously, churches served as town meeting halls in the nation's colonial years, and continue to serve that function in many small New England towns.

In the African-American community, churches have always played a role of special importance. "The white community always had other facilities available to them," said Frank Alexander, pastor of Oasis of Hope Baptist Church. "In the black community, there were a limited number of facilities available, so we depended on the church. It's still the most viable entity that we have."

In Indianapolis, the best known historical example of the dual character of religious institutions was Cadle Tabernacle. For several decades after 1921, the Tabernacle served as "a semi-public institution," in the words of one newspaper account. Located downtown, across from what was then City Hall, the Tabernacle had a 10,000-seat auditorium that hosted numerous gatherings of civic significance--victory rallies after World War I, war-bond rallies during World War II, political party conventions, and speeches by notable politicians. At

the same time, it served as a revival center for the building's founder and owner, an evangelist.

Cadle Tabernacle intermingled the religious and political realms, and helped foster a sense of those communities overlapping. The city now has other facilities to host political functions. But, far from diminishing, the public role of congregations has in many ways increased in modern times.

The Front Porch Alliance, launched by former Mayor Stephen Goldsmith, is attempting to create a partnership between city government and local congregations. Established in 1997, it was conceived as "a cooperative effort among city government, churches, synagogues, mosques, and neighborhood organizations to enhance the 'community-building' work of these entities."

## **PUBLIC ROLES FOR INDIANAPOLIS CONGREGATIONS**

Many of the ways that congregations serve as public space have no connection to government. Congregational buildings are often used as safe and accessible places for a variety of community meetings: neighborhood associations, Boy Scout troops, Alcoholics Anonymous chapters. The stories that follow indicate some of the ways that congregations serve as public space--both in association with government programs and as independent actors.

### **First Baptist-North Indianapolis**

For Kim Flowers's family, membership in First Baptist Church--North Indianapolis is a tradition with deep roots. Her great-grandparents were founding members of the congregation more than 100 years ago. Flowers is director of the church's C.O.U.R.A.G.E. Family Life Center. (The acronym stands for Commitment to Opportunities, Underscoring Respect, Abstinence, Growth, and Education.)

The near-northwest side neighborhood in which it is located, the United Northwest Area (UNWA), is one of the city's poorest neighborhoods, with a largely African-American population.

While many of First Baptist's older members still live in UNWA, many of the younger ones have moved away seeking safer neighborhoods and better schools for their children. Flowers is one of those who has moved away, but she has never lost her concern for the neighborhood. About five years ago, she proposed that the church increase its outreach to the community by using idle space in the large Sunday school building north of the church's sanctuary. With the pastor's agreement, the building soon housed the Family Life Center, and First Baptist has become one of the city's most active inner-city congregations. The Center relies heavily on the work of volunteers; Flowers, the director, is the Center's only paid staff person.

The Family Life Center, open weekdays from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m., is a "safe haven" in the federal government's Weed and Seed program. The designation is given to organizations that provide social services and are open to the public a minimum number of hours each week. It is also a member of the city's Front Porch Alliance.

As an active and visible church in a poor neighborhood, First Baptist attracts a large number of people who come asking for food or money--20 to 30 every day. The Center serves a free lunch daily. Staff members use this contact to direct people to programs that can help them.

Several such programs exist at First Baptist itself. Under the umbrella of its C.O.U.R.A.G.E. Family Life Center, the church offers programs in parenting, in getting and keeping a job, and programs for teens. In addition, First Baptist offers counseling services for a variety of issues: marriage, family, domestic violence, substance abuse, grief, and health. All of these are offered free to the community.

First Baptist also participates in a city-sponsored program that, when the family requests it, allows offenders in the juvenile justice system to receive counseling from a faith-based rather than a secular institution. First Baptist's counselors "use Christian values to teach character building and respect," Flowers said.

### **Abundant Grace Lutheran Church**

Until recently, Abundant Grace Lutheran Church was known as Advent Lutheran Church. In fall 1999, the congregation decided to take a new name as a way of marking the beginning of a new era in its life. There are few obvious changes to distinguish the old congregation from the new one. The pastor is the same. The congregation continues to meet in the same building--though it is in the process of constructing a new church that will be dedicated this spring.

Pastor Mike Conklin calls what has happened at Abundant Grace a "redevelopment" -- a shift in the church's focus and philosophy. The church has abandoned its formal style of worship and adopted one that Conklin considers more accessible and relevant. The organ was replaced with an electronic keyboard, for example. For Conklin, the basic issue was the church's level of openness. Should the church be a shelter from the broader culture, or should it attempt to engage the culture?

"We set the church up as separate from the world, as this little cloistered place where you can go to escape the realities of life," Conklin said. "Over the last 20 or 30 years, the thought behind the way churches are designed is that they're this sanctuary away from 'the world.' Me, I like lots of windows. I like lots of 'the world' in the church."

Greenwood, Abundant Grace's relatively affluent suburban community, has no pressing need for churches to serve as social service providers. But Abundant Grace does open its doors to numerous outside organizations. The Johnson County Youth Services Bureau uses Abundant Grace for two classes: "What about the Children?" and "What about Me?" The first is an educational class imposed by courts on some parents before a divorce is granted to them; the other is for the children of divorcing parents.

The Greenwood Library uses Abundant Grace for a reading program. Take Off Pounds Sensibly, a weight-loss program, meets there, as does a chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous. The local high school band occasionally uses the building as practice space.

"Our general policy is that we open the church up to anyone--particularly if it's a non-profit organization or a community activity--because we feel like an empty building doesn't do anyone any good," Conklin said.

The policy may have cost the congregation some of its membership, which is down to about 90 families. But Conklin believes the effort has been worth the pain. "I'm not into numbers," he said. "Numbers mean nothing. What matters is if you're involved and you participate and you resonate with the community."

## The Old Centrum

Several decades ago, Central Avenue United Methodist was one of the city's most prestigious congregations. Built in 1891 on the north side of downtown, its 1,200-seat sanctuary was regularly filled to capacity.

In the 1950s and '60s when its members began moving to the suburbs, Central Avenue's membership slowly dwindled. It had bottomed out at a few dozen people in the mid-1990s when the building's clarion was struck by lightning. Examining damage to the roof, inspectors found pigeon droppings, which can spread the infectious and deadly disease histoplasmosis.

A newspaper account of the incident estimated that the cost of repairs would be \$15,000 to \$30,000, and that it was uncertain whether the church's insurance policy covered the work. But Central Avenue submitted the claim and--possibly because of the church's historic significance and the press coverage it had received--it was paid.

Even with that hurdle overcome, building the church's membership back to a viable level was not a realistic hope. Instead, the congregation began looking at alternative uses for its building. With the help of a grant from the Indianapolis Foundation, it hired a part-time manager to oversee a reuse and adaptation project. The manager, Marie Beason, said that "what congregants really wanted was the building to become a community center of sorts--a non-profit incubator, a Methodist church, and a public venue for receptions, meetings, and theatrical performances."

The project was incorporated as a non-profit organization called The Old Centrum, which serves as a "supporting organization" for Central Avenue United Methodist Church, the Historic Landmarks Foundation,

the Old Northside Neighborhood Association, and the Indianapolis Foundation. Each of these organizations is represented on The Old Centrum's board of directors.

The reuse plan calls for the United Methodist Church to transfer ownership of the building to The Old Centrum organization, which in turn is responsible for leasing the space. The building can accommodate 13 tenants; it is currently filled to capacity. Tenants include the United Methodist Church, the Interfaith Hospitality Network, the Old Northside Neighborhood Association, and the Indianapolis Peace and Justice Center. The building's space can also be rented for weddings, receptions, and public forums.

The transformation of Central Avenue UMC into The Old Centrum offers a model for congregations that have an old building, a small but loyal membership, and a desire to continue playing a highly public role in their communities.

## **A HIDDEN RESOURCE**

These examples hardly begin to exhaust the many ways that private congregations provide public space and resources in Indianapolis. All across the city, religious buildings and programs are woven into the fabric of civic life. People vote in congregational buildings; learn English as a second language in them; attend lectures, music classes, and concerts in them; and go to them for help with all manner of needs, from food to guidance in tax preparation.

This sort of civic involvement is not well documented. There have been few attempts to quantify the programming that congregations offer. Political science professor John Dilulio of Princeton University has written that "we remain a long way from a definitive body of research evidence on the actual extent and the efficacy of church-anchored and faith-based social programs."

Locally, the most exhaustive attempt to catalog congregational programs has been conducted by The Polis Center. Since 1995, the Center has been constructing a database that documents the programmatic activity of more than 300 congregations in 17 Indianapolis-area neighborhoods. The data from this elaborate five-year effort are still being entered and analyzed. One finding so far is that congregational programming is exceedingly difficult to pin down and quantify: programs come and go rapidly, and they defy easy categorization.

The effectiveness of faith-based programming is also an unanswered question. For example, The Polis Center's research shows that about 10 percent of the city's 1,200 congregations sponsor a youth program designed to benefit children beyond the congregation's membership. But evaluation measures are virtually non-existent for the majority of these programs.

## **PROS AND CONS**

Some congregations sponsor no programming and have little other involvement with the public because of limited resources. For example, University Heights United Methodist Church owns a relatively large physical structure, but it is located next to the campus of the University of Indianapolis. The lack of parking space in the area is a perpetual problem that has limited what the church does programmatically (though plans are now in place to add more space).

Other congregations choose to restrict their level of openness because of their religious doctrine. Greenwood's Northern Park Baptist Church, for example, refuses all requests by non-members for the use of its building in weddings. Pastor Allen Pierce said that this policy results primarily from a desire to keep alcohol off the premises. Nor does Northern Park serve as a meeting space for any community organizations. Pierce said that he is not necessarily hostile to that idea, but he would have to be certain that the organization did not endorse ideas that conflict with the church's own beliefs.

Fear of damage to the building is also a source of resistance. "In about any church I've ever served, it goes back to a feeling of wanting to protect the facility," said Todd Outcalt, pastor of University Heights UMC. "People don't want anything to happen to that sacred space; they become more interested in bricks and mortar than in people."

Other congregations see it as part of their civic responsibility to serve as public space. Paul Swartz, senior pastor at King of Glory Lutheran in Carmel, points to the benefits that congregations receive as non-profit, untaxed institutions. In seminary, Swartz did research on the subsidies that churches receive in the form of free public services such as fire and police protection. He concluded that they should be taxed for their fair share of these services. In the absence of such taxation, he said, they should at least make their space available as a resource for public use.

Typically, though, a congregation that is open to the community bases its policy on spiritual rather than secular considerations. "It's a matter of hospitality," said Fr. Thomas Murphy of St. John Catholic Church, one of downtown's most visible congregations. "It comes from a desire to respond to the admonition of Jesus that all may be one."

Similarly, Pastor Conklin of Abundant Grace Lutheran Church said that having an open church community is what makes religion "real" for him. "It makes Christianity approachable," he said. "I want people to come here and feel they can just be themselves. We just accept them for who they are. That's why we have the divorcing parents program here. That's why we have the Alcoholics Anonymous group here. That's why we open it up. We don't want people to see us as separate from the community that we serve."

## **POINTS TO REMEMBER:**

- Congregational buildings were among the first erected in Indianapolis and in other cities; from the beginning they have served a dual role as religious and public spaces.
- The architectural presence of congregations has declined in the central city, but their buildings continue to serve important public functions.
- Congregations serve their neighborhoods both by sponsoring outreach programs, and by allowing other organizations to use their space.
- There are viable options for congregations with shrinking memberships to continue playing a public role in their communities.
- Theological considerations often determine whether a congregation has a closed-door or open-door policy.

## **CONTACTS & RESOURCES:**

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C.O.U.R.A.G.E. Family Life Center  
First Baptist Church-North Indianapolis  
880 W. 28th St.  
Indianapolis, IN 46208  
(317) 927-0230

Front Porch Alliance  
Office of the Mayor  
City-County Building  
200 E. Washington St.  
Indianapolis, IN 46204  
(317) 327-1372

The Old Centrum  
520 E. 12th St.  
Indianapolis, IN 46202  
(317) 637-4408

## Publications

Ram Cnaan of the University of Pennsylvania conducted a study of more than 100 congregations in six urban areas, including information on their programmatic activity. The title of the report is Social and Community Involvement of Religious Congregations Housed in Historic Religious Properties: Findings from a Six-City Study.

The Polis Center's former director of research, Arthur Farnsley, has written prolifically about the public role of congregations. See his essay, "What Do You Mean By Average?" in the forthcoming issue of Research Notes; also see "Thinking of Congregations as Community Assets" in the Fall 1998 Research Notes.

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