COLLEAGUES:

After reviewing census material obtained from the national office, the regional development officer pointed to a map on the wall: "This is where we need to be building congregations. There's a growing number of young men and women moving into this area." Another participant in the meeting, familiar with the area in question, smiled wryly. "You're right," he said, "those are the people we need to reach. But save your money on a building project. Half of those newcomers are attending college and the other half are in the state penitentiary."

Every good carpenter knows to measure twice before cutting. Thoughtful clergy and strategic planning leaders know to evaluate their research at least twice before beginning any new project.

In this issue of Clergy Notes, we introduce you to some of the measurements that local clergy are using to evaluate their neighborhood and community. Some turn to the information eager to attract new members. Others consider the data helpful in planning neighborhood outreach.

We all are searching for reliable and accessible information. Today, huge amounts of statistical and other data are available, usually for free, if you know where to look. Making sense of the information, however, can be tricky. It's good to keep in mind these three rules when confronted with demographic data: 1) Be clear about why you want or need this information. 2) Consider the source, age, and completeness of the data. 3) Consider data a starting point and not a destination.

Remember, how you frame the question determines the answer you get. In the example above, asking simply "Where are the young people moving to?" yielded a misleading answer, for the development officer's purposes.

What measurements do you use for reaching out, building up, getting started, and keeping informed? I'd be interested to know your sources of information and strategies for learning about the neighborhood and community.

Let's keep in touch.

Kevin

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GOOD INFORMATION, SOUND DECISIONS

Rev. Ira Peak, pastor of Downey Avenue Christian Church in Irvington, was writing a column for his church's newsletter and wanted to make a point about giving. He thought he could show that the church would meet its budget if all 102 of the congregation's "giving units" were to tithe.

To make this argument, Peak needed some idea of the income of the giving units, i.e., families and single members. He called the Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce and asked for census information regarding the average income of households in the church's zip code. Calculating from that number ($32,274), he was able to show that faithful tithing would generate $100,000 in excess of the church's $250,000 annual budget.

This is a good example of how statistics can be used to bolster one's case. To have made the claim without the backing of the income data, Peak could have been accused of wishful thinking. In fact, he wouldn't have known himself whether the claim was close to the truth or not.

Statistical and demographic information can be used for planning new programs as well. Say, for example, your congregation is thinking of starting a daycare center that will serve members and the surrounding neighborhood. You can survey your membership to determine their level of interest and likely participation. But how do you find out about the neighborhood? How many children in the target age group are there in the area? What are the existing programs? How much can parents likely afford to pay for daycare?

You won't find an easy answer to the last question, but chances are you can learn the number of children in the neighborhood, what programs exist to serve them, and average family income in the area. Knowing the numbers will take some of the guesswork out of the decision-making process, and will arm you with credibility when you try to make your case to others.

Where do you get this kind of information? First perhaps you need to answer: Who are we? What are our priorities? Is your first priority evangelization, or social outreach? A congregation's mission will determine which organizations and what kind of information will be of most use to them.

For example, a congregation concerned with evangelization and growth might benefit from the work of Percept, a California-based marketing company that specializes in church growth. Percept offers a variety of tools to describe—and predict the behavior of—people in particular geographic areas. From Percept, a congregation can get exhaustive information about the values and lifestyles of its neighbors, including suggestions on what methods of evangelization and styles of worship will be most effective in attracting them. Percept also offers surveys that can measure the degree of compatibility (or incompatibility) between the values of a congregation and the values of the surrounding neighborhood.

There are other information sources that congregations can turn to that are locally based, and free, in most cases. SAVI, a joint database project of United Way of Central Indiana/Community Service Council and The Polis Center, contains detailed demographic information about Greater Indianapolis. SAVI (for Social Assets and Vulnerabilities Indicators) pulls together in one place census data, crime, health, economic, and other data, together with data on community assets—including religious congregations. The information in SAVI can be accessed at a number of locations, including some public libraries. SAVI has its own web site as well, and is moving toward making much of the information in the database available over the web. As well as being a repository of data, SAVI provides tools for analyzing the data in sophisticated ways.

The information in SAVI can help congregations decide what type of program would be appropriate or beneficial in a particular neighborhood; it can also be useful if they decide to pursue funding opportunities.

Information is also available through the web site of the City of Indianapolis. Its online services include, for example, a matching service that links volunteer opportunities with people interested in volunteering. The site also includes a comprehensive list of, and information about, city services and programs.

Finding information, and learning to use it, require some initial effort. But the information you and your congregation need in order to make sound decisions does exist. Being informed at the beginning can

save much wasted effort down the line.

STRAIGHT FROM THE SOURCE

A CONVERSATION WITH JOHN HAY

As executive director of the Central Indiana Regional Citizens League (CIRCL), John Hay, Jr. oversees an elaborate effort to gauge the quality of life in central Indiana. The initial phase of the project, now underway, involves gathering the opinions of local residents about what they believe to be the most important quality of life indicators. CIRCL will then gather data to track these indicators. In other words, citizens' perceptions of their quality of life will be set against the statistical reality.

The first report of findings from this effort, called the Central Indiana Quality of Life Index, is scheduled for release sometime in the summer of 2000. In addition to publishing a report, CIRCL plans to set up a searchable database that citizens can use to retrieve information. The project will be ongoing, with new survey results and updated statistical data released each year. Ideally, the Index will come to serve as a benchmark, indicating where central Indiana excels, where it falls short, where it is improving, and where it is deteriorating. Hay hopes that this highly public "grade card" will help the region plan wisely for its future by attracting attention to crucial quality of life issues.

One of Hay's central concerns is that citizens participate in the Quality of Life Index. He is particularly interested in enlisting the involvement of clergy. In the following interview, Hay, himself a former pastor, explains the role that clergy can play in CIRCL's future and how his own faith commitment informs the project.

Clergy Notes: What relevance does a quality of life index have for local clergy?

Hay: The Quality of Life Index challenges everyone all across central Indiana to think about the question, "How does what we do contribute or detract from a greater sense of community or the quality of life in the region?" For clergy, it gets down to how they view their role and the role of the congregation in the community. Is it to serve the immediate congregation? Is it to get converts? Is it to offer community services? What is our mission?

How congregations express their citizenship in their community and their relationship to other communities is a burning question for me. I recognize the churches of central Indiana as significant contributors to, and definers of, citizen participation. About one-third of the residents of central Indiana express their citizenship in the community primarily through a congregation. I know people who won't get involved in the community in certain ways because their church has said they shouldn't get involved in certain ways. The church is not only an expression of community for them, but it also sets some boundaries for what their relationship to the community should be, to the point that some pull completely away from the community. They live entirely inside the church. Everything they do is mediated by or through the church. On the other hand, there are churches that see their mission as serving the community.

Clergy Notes: How is your work with CIRCL integrated with your personal religious beliefs?

Hay: For me, the commandment or invitation to love your neighbor as yourself is the most challenging call facing all of us. How we answer the question "Who is my neighbor?" determines our focus or emphasis in life. Answering the question helps me think about my faith relationship to individuals, to neighbors, to communities, and to our social and economic systems. That's why CIRCL makes sense to me, and why I think it makes sense for citizens. We're looking at broad-ranging challenges and inviting citizens to let their voice be heard.

RESOURCES

City of Indianapolis
(317) 327-4622

This page links to the city's "volunteer matching" service. The complete list of city programs and services is available at www.indygov.org/directory.

Central Indiana Regional Citizens League
(317) 920-3460
www.circl.org

Percept Group, Inc.
(800) 442-6277
www.perceptnet.com