

## WHAT DO YOU KNOW?

Michael Feldman begins each broadcast of his popular radio show with the question, What Do You Know? Suppose this question were posed to you: What do you know about your congregation's neighborhood? What do you know about the city of Indianapolis, and how can you learn more? A goal of the Project on Religion and Urban Culture has been to better understand where clergy get their information, and what they do with it. What do we know?

## LEARNING WHAT YOU KNOW

Many of the religious leaders with whom I speak are apologetic about their inability to "get more involved with the community." I'd like for us to be more involved, but just maintaining the congregation takes most of my time, they say. No question about it. Most congregations prefer their leader's time and energy to be spent caring for the needs of members. For many, involvement in civic affairs ranks low on their list of "most important activities." Without support, a leader may have little incentive to learn more about the larger community.

Ironically, many of these same congregations bemoan their diminished civic involvement and influence on public life. Almost certainly, clergy play a less vital role in civic life than they did in the first half of this century. Contributing factors may include the increasing age, and declining tenure, of clergy. Statistically, the average Indianapolis cleric is a 50-year-old male, usually in his second career, currently at his fourth ministerial post, and likely to serve his current congregation no longer than four years. Even discounting those always-moving Methodists, the four-year average for tenure does not dramatically change. Getting to know one's neighborhood takes time – certainly more than four years.

## NEIGHBORS, NETWORKS, AND NEBULOUS ALLIANCES

Suppose you have the congregation's blessing, and the luxury of time, to move out the front doors. Where can you find the best information about the neighborhood? Windshield and walking tours are a good place to start. Notice where the children go to school and where the grown-ups shop. Are there tricycles in the driveway, or cars with handicapped plates? Are there multiple electric meters on the houses? Are there Neighborhood Watch signs on the streets? You can learn a lot just by paying attention.

Polis has found that clergy who are well-connected to their neighborhood work with other clergy AND with civic groups: community development corporations, social service agencies, and neighborhood organizations. Indianapolis has surprisingly few ministerial associations for a city its size. The Boner Center on the east side, the Christamore House on the west side, and the Edna Martin Center in Martindale-Brightwood

have provided important connections for clergy. Most associations function primarily as support groups. The most active clergy alliances have a strong leader, a focused mission, and a history of ecumenical activity.

## WHERE TO LEARN MORE

The Polis Center has created a database called SAVI (Social Assets and Vulnerabilities Indicators) that is an excellent source of information about demographics and community resources. Basic SAVI data can be found at many public libraries, and at <http://www.savi.org>. The Encyclopedia of Indianapolis is a comprehensive guide to the city. Polis has also prepared histories, timelines, and resource guides for a number of neighborhoods.

As Polis continues to develop resources for clergy and congregations, we'd like to know: What do you know? And what would you like to know?

Let's stay in touch.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kevin".

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