

This is a theme issue. The topic: What influences the relation between congregations and their neighborhoods? You'll find you end up with a handful of questions. But good questions are more interesting than pat answers. So read on.

LEARNING FROM STUDENTS

Tammy Perkins, a Purdue senior, and Winter Troxel, an Anderson University senior, are among 25 college and graduate students The Polis Center recruited to survey neighborhoods and interview community leaders this summer. Their conversations with pastors and church members turned up some items worth thinking about. For instance:

In one neighborhood, church members have moved away but drive back to church, while in a similar neighborhood most members walk to church. Winter Troxel found in the United Northwest Area (UNWA) almost no members of the congregations he studied who live nearby. UNWA is bounded by 38th Street, Meridian, 16th Street and I-65. In the 1950s and '60s these parishioners lived near their churches, but with rising affluence they moved out.

However, in the Barrington area of the Southeast side (which is bounded by Washington Street, Meridian, I-465 South and Sherman Drive), Tammy Perkins found that about 90 percent of the church members live in the neighborhood. This too is a needy area, with both white and African-American congregations. One can speculate that members chose to stay partly because in the '70s community organization was strong. The PRIDE association, for example, advocated for the fire house and better streets and helped create a sense of community. This history of investment in the area probably encouraged long-term commitment.

It's harder to connect with the neighborhood when members are scattered. UNWA pastors find that neighborhood concerns are not pressing for people who drive back to church. They can't enlist volunteers to canvass the neighborhood to find new members. It's hard to raise money for neighborhood ministries. And it's more difficult to fashion interchurch connections.

In both neighborhoods, interest in community service is low. Why? The researchers point to the history and affluence mentioned above. In addition, there is the individualism of Generation X and the burden of single-parent families. Each neighborhood also has its own history of failed past attempts to start neighborhood ministries, which has lowered enthusiasm for new ventures.

These young researchers are finding that to understand the church-community connection you have to dig into the people's hopes and needs and the congregation's history.

WELFARE TO WORK: NOT ALWAYS AN EASY TRIP

On the surface, welfare reform seems to be working. Welfare rolls have dropped 24 percent in the past three years. Some corporations have set up programs to help people on welfare get into the work force. Marriott Hotels, for one, set up its "Pathways to Independence." At first they recruited people with the fewest problems. This program was very successful; 77 percent of the participants were still in steady jobs a year after graduation.

Then Marriott decided it could take on the most difficult cases: homeless people, recent drug addicts, victims of abuse. The New Republic (8/4/97) reported on the first class: "Charlene (the class leader) got a job with Marriott and lost it for poor attendance; she was given a second chance, and lost that job, too. She has returned to the man whose blows landed her in the battered women's shelter. Another group member resumed his drug addiction and flunked a drug test after Marriott offered him a job. One participant dropped out and got pregnant, while yet another quit her job interviews and now works a few hours a week in fast food, still using her welfare check to support five children. . . . Late last year, the Marriott program called off the hard-case experiment and returned to focus on the more likely successes." They now salt a few tough cases into each class.

Corporations say they are constrained by the bottom line. If the hard cases don't soon reach the place where they contribute more than they cost, the corporation cuts them loose. Of course the ethic of religious communities doesn't have that cut-off point. This long-term commitment to people living at the margins of life elicits the admiration of Princeton criminologist John Dilulio. In a recent New Yorker piece (6/16/97), he noted, "When you look at the gut-bucket stuff, the everyday, in-your-face working with troubled kids in these neighborhoods across the country, almost all of it is being done by people who are churched."

The same article comments, "Churches have always ministered to the poor. They have run shelters and soup kitchens and basketball leagues, as well as schools and drug-counseling and job-training programs. But in recent years as the federal commitment to the poor has waned, there has been a new interest in 'faith based' social programs. 'There is definitely something happening out there,' says one foundation president. 'There has been an explosion of creativity in the churches in the nineties, particularly the black churches. But this is not about trendiness, it is about staying power.'"

There is no need to see religious communities and corporations in competition. Both are trying to reach the same community. Both are needed.