

THE OTHER SIDE OF PROSPERITY

All the economic signs say the country is prospering. Unemployment is down, profits are up, and governments are getting more tax dollars than they expected.

But there may be another side to this rosy picture. Many churches say they receive more calls for food, clothing, and cash than they did a year ago. Directors in a handful of food pantries show that prosperity does not go all through the population. For instance, Richard Corbin of Westminster Presbyterian Church on the Near Eastside, reports that in 1995 their food pantry served an average of 26 people a week. This year, an average of 44 people ask for food each week. More people have work, he believes, but their wages are not enough to make ends meet.

The feeding service at the downtown Cathedral of SS Peter and Paul has 100 people for breakfast each day, up from about 20 a year ago. But Lucia Corcoran, who directs the breakfast project, says the picture is complex. Last year they served coffee and doughnuts to senior citizens. This year they serve a hot breakfast to a wider clientele. She says many people are getting their lives together and drop by infrequently. However, she is seeing an increasing number of mothers and children. She also sees more people with mental health problems who need sheltered jobs.

The One Way Apostolic Church at 5840 E. 16th Street has a food pantry open five days a week which is used by about 75-80 people a week. Cleola Holloway, the minister working with the food pantry, says they get more requests for help but have fewer donations of food than previously. On July 27, the church will give "Care Packages" of clothes and personal items to homeless people.

The Rev. Shedrick Madison of the Faith Teaching Church of Deliverance at 323 West 28th Street says that people coming for food "has more than doubled" since last year. Sister Jean Marie Cleveland of St. Patrick's Catholic Church in Fountain Square says, "We are receiving five or six calls a day for food and furniture, more than we used to get."

This sample from a few congregations suggests a couple of realities. Among the poorest, there is still hunger. And there is no decrease in requests for help reported by the congregations.

IS THERE A CLERGY CULTURE?

To the popular mind, clergy fit a type. But the stereotype can lead to a more interesting question: Is there such a thing as a clergy culture? Are people of the cloth in a tribal network? According to Prof. David Roozen of the Hartford (Connecticut) Seminary, all clergy probably share a sense of vocation. We have certain expectations of clergy, such as concern for ethical behavior, interest in the spiritual life, and respect for the scriptures.

Once you get beyond a few core concepts, the notion of a common culture breaks apart. Sub-sets of clergy have more common attributes. Clergy in the same denomination know the same leaders and often attend the same institutions, like schools. The education of clergy introduces them to academic disciplines and a way of life. In the words of a Catholic who attended a diocesan seminary, "My time there was not so much to give me religious knowledge as to induct me into the priests' culture." Examining clergy culture, therefore, can be an important lens into the life of congregations.

The Polis Center will continue to pursue the question of clergy culture in Indianapolis, not to add to the stereotype but, as a way of understanding the role of clergy in congregations and in the community. To share your thoughts on this topic, please call The Polis Center at (317)274-2455.

IS A RELIGIOUS POW-WOW POSSIBLE IN CYBERSPACE?

The Disciples of Christ have launched an attempt to create a big family talk-fest for everyone in that communion who has a computer and modem. The General Minister of the denomination, Richard Hamm, is giving leadership. The Rev. Martha Grace Reece keeps things on track. This is more than a chat room. The aim is to probe ways to revitalize Disciple congregations. There are conversations on the spiritual life, music, urban ministry and how to pray. Conference ministers from eight regions write letters on what they are doing and thinking, not (so far) about programs they are pushing. It's an interesting experiment. The denomination isn't using the site to get out the word on the comings and goings of leaders or touting educational materials. You can listen in at <http://www.Bethanyproject.org>.