



In Search of Belonging The Hispanic Religious Presence in Indianapolis

Hispanics, the fastest-growing group of immigrants in America, have only recently come to Indianapolis in significant numbers. Even today they may compose no more than two percent of the population and are widely dispersed around the city. These facts have shaped the culture of Hispanics in particular ways, including their patterns of worship.

Last year, The Polis Center's Project on Religion and Urban Culture commissioned three scholars at the University of Indianapolis to conduct a study of the Hispanic religious presence in the city. Their findings are contained in a report entitled "Ethnic Community, Personal Journey, and Religious Space: Reflections on Hispanic Religious Behavior in a Midwestern City." The work builds on the Hispanic Indianapolis Oral History Project, organized by the same scholars in 1990.

As the city's economy has boomed, the Hispanic population has grown from the 8,450 recorded by the 1990 census to "at least twice that number," according to Dan Briere, Associate Professor of Spanish at the University of Indianapolis. "Indianapolis has the reputation of being a place where you can get a job," he says.

Those of Mexican descent constitute the largest identified group of Hispanics in Indianapolis, followed by Puerto Ricans and Cubans. Almost a third of the city's Hispanics fall into the census category called "Other Hispanic," which includes those from Central and South America and from Spain. Congregations serving the Hispanic population have grown accordingly. St. Mary's Catholic Church was the first in the city to offer Spanish-language services, beginning in 1967. Primera Iglesia Bautista Hispana (First Hispanic Baptist Church) was established in 1973 as the city's first Hispanic Protestant congregation. Today there are roughly a dozen congregations in the city with largely Hispanic memberships, including Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, Disciples of Christ, Pentecostal, and Jehovah's Witnesses congregations.

However, the dispersed nature of Indianapolis works against this pattern, making it almost impossible to form communities based on geography. ("Clumps" of Hispanics have been noted on West Washington Street, and in pockets in the North and East Sides.) Hispanics raised in the tradition of the Catholic parish face an entirely new situation here, where their place of worship may have no connection to where they live.

In other ways, Hispanics' traditional allegiance to the Catholic Church is tested by unfamiliar customs. According to the study, Hispanics tend to be "culturally attached" to Catholicism, rather than being formally affiliated with a congregation, with obligations of attendance and tithing. In the U.S., they encounter a parish system that may require them to be a contributing member, in order to send their children to the school operated by the parish. As non-members, they may be required to pay a fee to have the church conduct weddings and other services.

A majority of Hispanic church members in the city are Catholic, but a growing number are drawn to Protestant congregations. Evangelical groups have made particular efforts to reach Hispanics, providing

social support to families, and a strong sense of belonging.

"Religious needs cannot be considered apart from the need for community," says Mary Moore, Associate Professor of Sociology and Dean of Arts and Sciences at the University of Indianapolis. "People can and do move in and out of religious traditions in search of meaningful community."

Community, and continuity, can be especially important to a people displaced from their homeland. The culture that many Hispanics took for granted in the old country must be consciously reinforced in the new country. The Festival of the Virgin of Guadalupe, held annually at St. Patrick Catholic Church, attracts upwards of 1,000. Through mariachi music, feasting, and the wearing of traditional costumes, participants reaffirm their Mexican heritage.

St. Patrick has grown to become the largest Hispanic congregation in Indianapolis. Briere says that perhaps a majority of its parishioners "don't have facility in English." The church offers two Sunday services in Spanish, as well as English services.

Father Tom Fox at St. Pat's is building community," says Moore. "He has done a great job of bringing assimilated, middle class members into positions of leadership. These people have the resources to help the more needy members of the congregation." Moore says that many of St. Patrick's members are "internal immigrants," Mexican-Americans from other parts of the country. (Recently, Fr. Fox was honored with the Hispanic-American Service Award.)

While the majority of Hispanics in the city associate with Hispanic congregations, others have become assimilated into English-speaking Anglo congregations. And there are substantial numbers of semi-migrant workers who, because of their transient situation, are only marginally associated with congregations. Many of these will eventually "settle out" to become permanent residents, according to Dan Briere.

While individuals may express a bond with the larger Hispanic community, to call oneself 'Hispanic,' Moore says, is "a politically useful, but not a personally meaningful identity."

National origin is far more important in determining religious behavior, according to the study. Congregations may try to observe the feast days and national holidays of the various Hispanic groups represented among them, but often members will only participate in the events related to their own culture.

Hispanic identity is based in large measure on the Spanish language, and this is a source of both cohesion and divisiveness. Fluency or lack of fluency in English leads to divisions within the community based on age; these are reflected in the congregations that serve Hispanics, with some serving an older group that speaks only Spanish, while others serve a younger group comfortable with English services. One pastor, who tried to bring both groups together by instituting bilingual services, came to the conclusion that "it didn't work out." Others congregations, however, find that bilingual services attract young people seeking to reconnect with their culture.

Charles Guthrie, Associate Professor of History at the University of Indianapolis, says that "the sense of Hispanics discovering other Hispanics" dates to the '60s and '70s, beginning with the designation of St. Mary's as an Hispanic congregation. He says there has been a particular rise in Hispanic consciousness in this decade, as their numbers have increased and immigration patterns have changed.

"Many of the people coming in the '90s are from rural villages in Mexico, who arrive here without a lot of cultural transition," says Guthrie. Another significant group comes from California, he says, but "many don't speak English, even though they have been here for three generations." He mentions an informal poll taken at St. Patrick's, where only 15 out of the 200 people present said that they spoke English fluently.

Guthrie says there is a general trend for Hispanics to join Protestant congregations, but he sees this not as a rejection of Catholicism, but an affirmation of the sense of community offered by these congregations. "St. Pat's is doing great - their numbers are way up there," he says. "Hispanics are going to respond to a responsive community, period."

Hispanic Congregations in Indianapolis

This list of the known Hispanic congregations in Indianapolis was compiled by Dan Briere and Charles Guthrie of the University of Indianapolis. They stress that these congregations are in flux, and the list is therefore incomplete.

Baptist

Primera Iglesia Bautista Hispana
625 South Division Street
266-8980

Catholic

St. Philip Neri Church
550 North Rural Avenue
631-8746

St. Patrick Church

950 Prospect Street
631-5824

St. Mary's Catholic Church

317 North New Jersey Street
637-3983

Disciples of Christ

Iglesia Hermandad Cristiana
4550 Central Avenue, Room 307
923-2141

Jehovah's Witnesses

Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses
6811 East 21st Street
357-6375

United Methodist

Iglesia Vida Nueva
2601 East New York Street
636-2819

Pentecostal

Iglesia Cuadrangular Hispana
1634 East Minnesota Street

Iglesia La Nueva Esperanza

840 East Cottage Avenue

Templo Betel

1741 Luther Street
787-8160

Nondenominational

Indianapolis Restoration Church
2114 East Washington Street
633-2935

Congregations & Immigrant Communities

Indianapolis has hosted succeeding groups of immigrants, who brought with them their language, culture, and religious practices, which they sought to maintain even as they undertook the hard work of assimilating into a new culture. For most of these groups, forming a religious congregation was a priority. The congregation sustained their core values, beliefs, and identity in a

Country that was often indifferent to their difference. In time, as their "otherness" wore off, they blended into the culture surrounding them, their habits became American, and their language English. At some point, inevitably, they would cease to conduct religious services in the old tongue, and would offer praise in words similar to those used by their neighbors. The faith carried from the old land would take root in the new, having sheltered them all the while as they, too, were transplanted.

A Sampling of Immigrant Congregations Founded in Indianapolis

German
St. Paul Lutheran Church,
founded 1842.

St. Mary's Catholic Church,
founded 1856.

German Jewish
Indianapolis Hebrew
Congregation, organized 1856.

Danish
Trinity Evangelical Danish
Lutheran Church, founded 1872.

Irish
St. Bridget Catholic Church,
organized 1879.

Hungarian Jewish
Ohev Zedeck Temple,
established 1884.

Greek
Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox
Church, founded 1900.

Slovene
Holy Trinity Catholic Church,
Organized 1906.

Macedonian & Bulgarian
St. Stephen's Bulgarian Orthodox Church,
Established 1907.

Italian
Holy Rosary Catholic Church,
Established 1909.

Romanian

Polis Researchers Study Neighborhoods & Congregations

This summer a team from The Polis Center's Project on Religion and Urban Culture conducted research in several Greater Indianapolis neighborhoods. With the help of 26 interns, most of them college students, Polis researchers visited every congregation in the neighborhoods, observing, attending services, and interviewing clergy. They also visited neighborhood social service organizations. The results of this summer's research project (the third conducted by The Polis Center) are being compiled and analyzed, and will find their way into a full report at some later date. In the meantime, here are a few preliminary findings.

For the first time, researchers encountered a community where religion was a source of conflict. At a meeting where Polis researchers presented their findings to the Plainfield community, one member of the audience angrily questioned the motives of the Polis team, while another expressed mistrust of other religious groups in the community. Plainfield is home to an eclectic assortment of congregations, including significant numbers of Muslims from Southeast Asia, Friends, Jehovah's Witnesses, and various Christian congregations. The discussion grew so heated that the story was reported in local newspapers, and was picked up by the Associated Press.

In Mars Hill, the research team encountered a community where religion seems to play no significant role in forming ties of community, though Mars Hill is home to several congregations. They heard of one congregation that threw a barbeque for the residents of a neighboring trailer park, and no one came. When a church in the community burned down, no other congregation offered to help. The Mars Hill presentation was attended by not a single member of the community, but for two local clergy, and representatives of community service organizations.

In Speedway, researchers found a neighborhood hemmed in by its municipal boundaries and facing the pressures of change. Speedway has a typical Indianapolis mix of mainline congregations, including a huge Catholic Church with 6,000 members about half the estimated population of the neighborhood. Clergy in these congregations have an unusually long tenure, on average, reflecting the aging of the population. Compared to thirty years ago, Speedway has three times as many people over 65, and only one-third the number under 19.

Polis researchers are also following up on some neighborhoods studied in previous summers. The 1997 presentation meeting for the United Northwest Area (UNWA) neighborhood had proved a lively one, reflecting what one Polis researcher described as the neighborhood's "turf wars" among community organizations. One participant felt moved to admit the lack of intersection among groups, and out of this discussion came the formation of the UNWA Ministerial Alliance. This group subsequently tried to launch an "adopt a block" program, only to abandon the idea as unworkable. They are now considering a more egalitarian, partnership-based approach to addressing problems in the community. Researchers have found a general feeling in UNWA that many of their community's problems date to construction of the Interstate highway that cut through the neighborhood. But as one long-time resident observed, "Every neighborhood has its tradition of who to blame."

Carmel has several congregation- involved in urban/suburban partnerships. One researcher characterized them as having a sense of noblesse oblige toward downtown congregations. At the same time Carmel is moving toward being more self-contained, as shopping malls and services come to this bedroom community. Carmel is characterized by large congregations that tend to be active in civic and social issues. The town has two very different Catholic churches; one a "post- Vatican II" liberal congregation, the other a traditional congregation involved in right-to-life issues. There is a palpable sense of Carmel being a transitional community, with people moving in and out because of their jobs, and this is reflected in a high turnover rate in congregational membership. Members seem less devoted than usual to particular denominations, and are driven by child and adolescent issues, including being drawn to congregations with day care programs.

Art Farnsley, Director of Research at The Polis Center, and Elfriede Wedam, Project Leader, offered these further observations about what they learned this summer:

- Nobody has a handle on how to incorporate youth into congregations and religious traditions. Youth are viewed as threatening; sometimes literally; sometimes as representing unwanted change.
- There is a universal sense of disconnection felt between people's personal values and modern society.
- In the suburbs, the question for congregations is how to respond to growth. In the inner city, the question is how to attract growth.
- Every community seems to think that they are, or once were, or should be, a small town. They express nostalgia for the past; in the present, "everything has gone awry." Researchers found this attitude in both the suburbs and the inner city.
- Most congregations tend to describe themselves in the same terms, using family metaphors. We're friendly, they say, we're a tight-knit group, we're like a family here. Frequently they seem to think they are unique or unusual in this regard.
- Congregations may become involved in social services and other community activities. But when they do, the civic activities are kept strictly nonsectarian.
- Very few people express a metropolitan focus. They think parochially.

FRESH CURRENTS

Jireh Sports

With this issue we inaugurate a new feature of the Religion & Community newsletter. "Fresh Currents" will offer case studies of emerging developments in Indianapolis congregations and neighborhoods. Our focus in this issue is the trend toward partnerships between urban and suburban congregations.

If you ask Minister Tim Streett why the Jehovah Jireh Sports Club exists, he might point to the bouncing boy on the trampoline doing back-handsprings and front-tucks. Jehovah Jireh means, "the Lord provides." Jireh Sports aims to provide youth with an after-school fitness and recreation program "committed to Christian character development."

Jireh Sports is a ministry of the Community Resurrection Partnership (CRP), working in partnership with 91st Street Christian Church, where Tim Streett is Director of Urban Ministries. CRP is an alliance of churches in Martindale-Brightwood, an inner-city neighborhood on the East side. 91st Street Christian is located in a suburban neighborhood on the Northeast side.

Jireh Sports is housed in an old warehouse, located at 22nd and Ralston Streets, that stood abandoned for 10 years. Now renovated, it boasts gymnastics equipment, a climbing wall, study rooms, and family gathering spaces. Children of all ages are welcome at the gym, but the program concentrates on kids in the pivotal 8-14 year old group. Experienced gymnastics coaches work with the kids. Volunteers proctor study halls and tutor children in between gymnastics lessons. There is a short Bible lesson at each meeting. For adults, the club offers a Praisercize Aerobics program — aerobic exercise with a Christian bent.

The Polis Center played a part in where Jireh Sports came to be located. In December 1996, Tim Streett met with field researchers at Polis to gather information on city neighborhoods where his church might pursue urban ministry projects. The Polis Center provided him with briefings on neighborhoods, and with introductions to pastors in Martindale-Brightwood. Out of these meetings came a formal alliance between the Community Resurrection Partnership and East 91st Street Christian Church, with a commitment to create a sports club for neighborhood youth.

Renovations began at the club in August 1997, with volunteers, many of them youths, doing most of the work. Other individuals donated money and equipment. They cut, planed, and padded balance beams and set a trampoline into the floor. They erected parallel bars with enough clearance to literally swing between the rafters. The climbing wall extends floor to ceiling. A tumbling track runs half the length of the building. On the walls there are banners with daily Christian devotions.

Street says that Oasis of Hope Baptist Church deserves particular praise for the role its members played in making Jireh Sports a reality. A neighborhood business donated food for the opening day ceremonies,

which were held in January 1998.

Gymnastics tends to be expensive because it is both equipment and coaching intensive. Ordinarily, this puts the sport out of reach for youth in poor neighborhoods. Two former Junior Olympic gymnasts, Paul and Carol Canada, developed the gymnastics program at Jireh Sports, where Paul also serves as Executive Director.

Jireh Sports hopes to offer at least five other sports, most of them rare in the inner city. "We want to use the tool of these unique sports to bring kids in," says Streett. The immediate goal is to build an indoor pool. The club is working to acquire land around the building to provide space for expansion.

A low student-teacher ratio is an important element of the program, allowing coaches to focus on individuals and follow up if an athlete misses a meeting. Students pay a fee for participation in the programs, but scholarships are available for those in need. Oasis of Hope has raised money to provide ten scholarships per session. A city teacher has volunteered to teach the kids how to use the twelve new computers that are being donated to the center.

"We hope to expand Jireh Sports to a full-fledged after-school program," says Street. "At present most kids get 1-2 hours per week. There are perhaps a dozen who get 4-5 hours per week. There are a handful who are becoming involved to the point of tutoring and coaching other kids.

"Our goal is to serve 200-300 kids for fifteen hours a week, three hours per weeknight," says Street. "Our ideal would be to have kids start here as sixth-graders. On Monday, they would come to Jireh Sports for gymnastics. Then they would have a light snack, a Bible lesson, and a proctored study hall.

"Tuesday the sport is swimming, with the same schedule afterwards. Wednesday it's wrestling. And so on. That way the kids won't get bored doing one sport over and over. Our target is kids who don't have anything to do after school, and perhaps don't have parental supervision until the dinner hour. We want to fill their lives with constructive, creative play and study."

Streett is fully committed to this ministry. This summer, he and his wife moved to Martindale-Brightwood and now live next-door to Jireh Sports. They are expecting their first child in November.

"The success story we aim for is not the 14 year old who says, Jireh Sports turned my life around," Street says, "but the 22 year old who will say, ten years ago I found a place that gave me some guidance and structure in my life, and today I'm a college graduate. Now I'm back to contribute to the neighborhood."

If you would like to learn more about urban/suburban partnerships, contact The Polis Center at (317) 274-2455. The number for Jireh Sports is 650-8792.