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Urban Congregations as Local Actors

by **Arthur E. Farnsley II**

Do congregations think and act locally? Does it matter whether congregations are, or intend to be, anchors for the neighborhoods surrounding their houses of worship?

In some instances, location matters by definition. Parishes are meant to be bounded areas. Catholics maintain the best known and most widely observed parishes, but other religious organizations emphasize local geography too. Orthodox Jews, for instance, must live close enough to their synagogue that they can walk to temple on the Sabbath.

Even when boundaries are not so clearly set, many congregations ascribe some significance to their local area. Congregations often think of themselves as community resources, providing services to the folks who live around their house of worship.

In large metropolitan areas, geographic distinctions take on a special importance. No congregation can serve everybody, so each develops a particular audience. Sometimes that audience is set apart by some social characteristic--say, a congregation that serves Spanish-speaking members--but frequently large organizations such as denominations divvy up territory by geography. And in American cities these geographical divisions also mark the boundaries of race and class. Most congregations are relatively homogeneous, but so are the neighborhoods in which they are located.

Whether congregations think of themselves as local actors is not, however, the only important question. Equally important is the fact that other people assume that congregations act and think locally. The best example of this assumption is the current debate about social services. Some policy-makers believe that congregations could best serve the social needs of those who live near them. Many civic leaders assume that congregations are in a better position than secular social workers to know those who live around their facilities. Congregations, so this reasoning goes, not only intend to serve their neighbors, but can do so in a way that imparts values and moral structure in addition to material goods and services.

Whether social services are best handled at the federal, state, or local level is a policy question beyond the scope of this discussion. Whether congregations should be involved in the delivery of social services, in cooperation with public officials or not, is a theological matter also beyond our present reach. But the political question and the theological question both seem to rest on assumptions about religious organizations that can be addressed descriptively. Put most simply, we must know what exists, what is, before we can think about what should be. Even if our theological understanding refuses to be limited by what is presently possible, we often can benefit by knowing how far current reality is from any ideal.

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DISPELLING THE BIG MYTHS

Having studied religious life in Indianapolis for more than two years, we are convinced that there are many misconceptions about urban religious life.

Myth 1: Urban congregations draw most of their members from the surrounding neighborhood.

In Indianapolis, most downtown Protestant congregations draw fewer than one-third of their members from the area surrounding their place of worship. Catholic congregations are more locally-based, as they intend to be, drawing approximately two-thirds of their members from within their parish boundaries. The local attendance rate for Protestant churches varies somewhat by neighborhood. For instance, our recent survey shows that Martindale-Brightwood's churches draw a higher percentage of their members from the neighborhood than churches in Fountain Square, Mapleton-Fall Creek, or the near-westside. Even so, the rough estimate for Protestants of 1/3rd from within and 2/3rds from without is still valid.

Myth 2: Urban pastors live near their congregation's house of worship.

Actually most urban pastors do not live in the neighborhood where their church building is located. Our current estimate is that among Protestant clergy in Indianapolis, about 1/3rd (the same as for members) live in the same neighborhood as their church building. This number is quite different for Catholics, of course, because most priests and nuns live on site in a rectory. Congregations located in the "inner city" seem to have the highest rate of pastors who live elsewhere.

Myth 3: Urban congregations serve their neighbors through programs that provide food, clothing, and shelter.

Most congregations in Indianapolis have no service or outreach programs that operate exclusively in their building or with funding they alone provide. Many congregations participate in collaborative efforts, often within their denomination, to provide these services in some form, but only a minority provide direct services on site. Despite the scarcity of formal programs, many congregations provide ad hoc assistance. As other studies have found, it is very difficult to measure the extent of this piecemeal safety net.

Myth 4: Urban congregations have professional staff to design and administer outreach programs.

Most urban congregations — our research suggests as many as 80 percent in some neighborhoods — have one or fewer full-time staff. A church with regular clerical or custodial help, much less with professional staff other than a pastor, is the exception rather than the rule in urban congregations. In some Indianapolis inner-city neighborhoods, one-quarter to one-half of the congregations do not have even a full-time, paid pastor.

Myth 5: Urban congregations have the resources to address urban problems.

Some urban Indianapolis congregations have multiple resources: money, facilities, volunteer time, moral and political capital, and so forth. But most urban congregations have very limited financial resources and fewer than 150 active members, many of whom are elderly. They often support older buildings that require considerable upkeep. Many urban congregations manage to keep their heads above water only because they have some limited endowment funds or because they receive supplemental support from denominational or diocesan sources.

Myth 6: Urban congregations are more racially integrated.

"More integrated than what?", one might ask. Downtown Indianapolis congregations--such as those in the Mile Square--are, in fact, somewhat more racially integrated than their rural or suburban counterparts. But in 95 percent of urban congregations, 9 out of 10 members are of one race. The homogeneity in most approaches 100 percent. So congregations are, taken together, quite segregated relative to other institutional settings such as local government or public schools.

Myth 7: Urban congregations resemble those who live around their worship site.

This myth is demonstrably false. At some very basic level, it is true that black churches in Indianapolis tend to be in African-American neighborhoods. But it is no truer here than elsewhere that members of these churches share class or educational backgrounds with those who live around the church building. Most congregations are racially homogeneous in urban neighborhoods that are not.

Myth 8: Urban congregations work in partnership with other urban congregations.

Urban clergy are no more likely to know other clergy in their area than are suburban or small-town and rural clergy. We routinely discover long-time clergy in downtown neighborhoods who do not know their counterparts down the street or around the corner. There is reason to believe that some aspects of urban life increase anonymity and isolation despite greater population density. There are, in fact, relatively few examples in Indianapolis of continuing cross-denominational, much less cross-racial, cooperative efforts among congregations in urban neighborhoods.

Myth 9: Urban congregations have been anchors in their neighborhood for a long time.

Some Indianapolis churches have been in their neighborhoods for decades and even centuries, to be sure, but urban church-buildings change hands routinely. On the southeast-side, we know of both Catholic and Methodist churches that have closed or merged into new, synthetic congregations. In UNWA or Martindale-Brightwood, new churches are routinely housed in storefronts or former residences. High turnover among downtown clergy, especially in the smaller churches of the mainline Protestant denominations, also complicates the question of congregational longevity in a neighborhood. In several neighborhoods, the majority of mainline clergy have been at their post for less than 2 years. Also, our research suggests that high turnover in clergy and congregations is a long-standing issue, dating back to the first decades of this century.

Myth 10: Urban congregations are more plugged-in to the local network of neighborhood groups, community development, and non-profit organizations.

Again, some urban congregations are intimately involved with the whole range of community-oriented organizations and groups. But on the whole urban congregations seem to be less engaged with schools, community groups, and the like than their suburban counterparts. Sparse communication among clergy, or between clergy and leadership in other urban community groups (where turnover is also high), suggests that urban groups have no more local connections than rural or suburban congregations.

Most congregations do not play the social role some have imagined for them. But many congregations are local actors that do build community in a variety of ways. Our goal in future Research Notes is to consider how congregations build community and to consider in more detail how those efforts vary from one neighborhood or one type of community to another.

For now it is most important to consider with a clear head the reality about urban congregations, the resources available to them, and the services they seek to provide. Put another way, it is necessary to get the facts straight before deciding what congregations could or should be doing under ideal circumstances.

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