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Age and Tenure Among Indianapolis Clergy

by **Arthur E. Farnsley II**

Dear Colleague:

You'll notice that we have redesigned Research Notes. We hope you find it more pleasant to read. Once more, a special thanks to those who took the time to respond to the last edition of Research Notes. Your ideas have been very helpful as we think about the congregation's role in the local environment. Our 21 respondents were again primarily male (70%) and from mainline or Catholic traditions (75%). The most compelling feature of the responses is not their ability to represent the city as a whole, but their consistency.

Two-thirds of our respondents rated their congregation's historical commitment to the neighborhood as an 8 or higher on a scale of 1 to 10. Two-thirds also rated their congregations as a 7 or higher for their perception of themselves as committed to local service. But only one-third rated themselves 7 or higher on the descriptive measures members live in the neighborhood, neighbors use the facilities, members know the neighbors well that mark local ministry. It is one thing to be a historical presence in a neighborhood and even to intend to minister there, but it is another thing to make concrete connections to the neighbors.

Our goal is not to judge congregations based on these differences, or even to presume that congregations ought to be focused primarily on their very local setting. Our goal is to understand the role congregations play in building community in the urban environment. We want the categories we develop to be useful both to us and individual congregations.

Most of our respondents said that categories like these helped them. Said one pastor, "If a local church wishes to evangelize or have any kind of outreach, it needs categories for study and planning." Another pastor probably put it best when he said, "This is the beginning to a more involved conversation." If it is indeed that, then we remain hopeful that our continuing dialogue can contribute to a mutually beneficial exchange between local ministry and religious research.

Art Farnsley

The average Indianapolis pastor is a 50-year-old male.

Full-time ministry is usually his second career.

He is currently at his fourth ministerial post.

These are some of the raw facts that emerge from the initial scan of a database that now includes more than 500 clergy in the city. But as we have emphasized before, raw numbers are just data. Analysis and interpretation turn data into information.

Our 1997 summer fieldwork produced thorough information on more than 100 congregations located in 6 Indianapolis neighborhoods. We asked each congregation the age of their senior or lead pastor. The average age was 49.

What if we had asked about all the clergy, including assistants and associates? Would the numbers change appreciably?

One reliable way to find an answer is to look at complete lists of all clergy within a denomination. We have, for instance, a list of 160 United Methodist clergy in the city. Their average age is 48. The average age of American Baptist ministers is 48; for Church of God Anderson ministers the average is 51. For Catholic priests it is 55. For United Church of Christ ministers it is 50. Among those who have responded to Research Notes, the average age is 50. The average age of every minister in our database is 49.5.

We looked back at our numbers from the summer. Forty-nine years is both the mean (the average of all the ages) and the median (the exact middle if the ages were lined up from youngest to eldest). When the median and the mean are the same, you are probably on to something. If anyone ever asks you to guess the age of her pastor, 50 would be a good guess.

Of course, the next question is, "so what?" To understand the significance of age as a variable, we compared clergy to teachers and lawyers. The comparison is not perfect; for example, teachers and lawyers must have certain academic credentials, while educational requirements vary considerably for clergy. But there are some strong similarities among the groups.

According to the Department of Education, the average age of teachers in Indianapolis is 44. The American Bar Association reports that the average age of lawyers in Indiana (separate Indianapolis numbers were unavailable) is 42.

Retirement regulations are likely to be more lax for pastors, so a group of much older clergy could be raising the average. But since 49 is the median as well as the mean, that seems unlikely.

There is a suggestive similarity between the age of clergy and the age of parishioners. Our summer research found that in the average congregation, 33% of members are in the 56+ age range. But 20% of the total Indianapolis population is 56 and above. Similarly, 28% of members in the average congregation are 36-55 years old, although 36-55 year olds make up 21% of the total population.

In short: mature adults are overrepresented by half in the average congregation we studied. Clergy are older, on average, than other "helping" professionals. These two facts together do not prove a correlation, but they certainly suggest one.

Ages	% in average congregation	% in average Indianapolis congregation
0-12	14	20
13-19	9	10
20-35	17	29
36-55	28	21
56+	33	20

It occurred to us that the age difference might be a phenomenon of Indianapolis's importance as a central city. Perhaps the mainline churches here drew the most senior pastors to these high-profile posts.

Greenwood does not have many high-profile pulpits that are likely to draw senior clergy. The area has developed most recently of the neighborhoods we have studied and so is likely to have young families and newer congregations. Finally, Greenwood has many independent congregations, especially Baptists. One might expect that entrepreneurial, start-up congregations would have younger pastors because these pastors have not had to climb the ecclesiastical ladder.

The average age for pastors in Greenwood was 44. That suggests a difference among urban and suburban areas that we will test this summer as we study congregations in Lawrence, Cumberland, and Plainfield.

Based on age plus years of service, we can infer that full-time ministry is a second career for the average pastor.

The average age of pastors is 50. They have been in their current position for six years and have held, on average, 3 previous jobs for 3.5 years each. So they entered the ministry at about age 34. We are assuming that someone entering full-time ministry at that age is making a career shift. Our interviews and other qualitative data confirm that interpretation.

This is not a big surprise. A Duke University Divinity School study reported that from 1974 to 1993, the average age for male clergy at ordination rose from 28 to 36. The average for female pastors rose from 28 to 41. The Christian Theological Seminary reports that the average age of their Master of Divinity students is 40 years old.

The average pastor has been at his current job for 6 years (for women it is 4 years). He has had three previous jobs of shorter duration, about 3.5 years each. The numbers from our summer research and from our denominational database both show that the average minister has been ordained for 16 years.

Indianapolis has a lot of United Methodists, who routinely reassign clergy to new congregational charges. Among the denominational groups for which we have information, United Methodist pastors have had the most previous positions and the shortest tenure per position, so Indianapolis may show greater ministerial turnover because of the large number of Methodists.

Downtown congregations in some neighborhoods have a high rate of turnover. We learned this summer, however, that we need to be very careful in identifying who is leaving and who is staying. In some inner-city neighborhoods, whether predominantly white or black, the pastors of mainline congregations do have a high turnover rate. For that matter, so do the leaders of the social service and non-profit organizations in those same neighborhoods. The exception would be a neighborhood like Mapleton-Fall Creek, with large, high-status congregations.

But pastors at churches with congregational polities (such as Baptists, many Pentecostals, and all independents by definition) stay longer. The high number of pastoral changes on the Near East Side or in the Mile Square is not the norm for pastors, especially black pastors, in other inner-city neighborhoods.

We are just beginning to filter through these facts, so we pose our interpretations as questions to you. What does it mean that pastors are older, on average, than lawyers or teachers? What difference might it make that pastors begin at 34 years of age, switching from some other career path?

Some practical implications seem obvious. Denominations with generous retirement or pension benefits could get squeezed. A recent newspaper article asserted that Episcopalians are making an effort to recruit younger clergy because the denomination sees a coming problem in supporting so many retirees.

Related to retirement costs are insurance costs. The older the insured pool, the more expensive is group coverage for life or health. Self-insured groups face a special risk as they age.

Nothing in these numbers suggests a clergy shortage. To predict a shortfall, one would have to know both the rates of people entering the ministry and the rates of church growth and decline. But the difference between the average age of clergy and that of teachers and lawyers suggests at least that the question will there be a problem in 10-15 years? merits further study.

But there are deeper, more subtle questions. Many people are calling on inner-city congregations to provide more services and programs for youth, especially for young men. But are organizations that are considerably older and more female than the norm best suited to that task? Are 50-year-old pastors likely mentors and role models for troubled teenaged boys?

More subtle still is the question of civic involvement and influence on public moral life. Some have argued that clergy play a less vital role in civic life than they did in the first half of this century. Is this in any way related to the fact that senior clergy, those near 50 and above, are really at mid-career in terms of experience? Will the current generation of 20-35 year olds become church members as they pass into middle age? If they do, will a generation of ministers who themselves started around age 35 be able to guide them?

We do not pretend to know the answers to these questions. There is enough even in our preliminary data to suggest that they are worthy of reflection and discussion. As always, we welcome your thoughts and opinions.

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