

## CONGREGATIONS AND THE ARTS

**PROBLEM:** The role of the private sector in sustaining the arts has become increasingly important as public funding has been cut.

**SOLUTION:** In small but significant ways, religious organizations are reviving their traditional role as patrons of the arts.

In the mid-1990s, the Center for Urban Policy and the Environment at IUPUI set out to measure the economic effect of the arts on Indianapolis. Its report concluded that the annual impact on the city's economy was \$46 million. The arts created more than 1,000 jobs, and "every new dollar spent . . . brought 60 cents in additional business for Indianapolis."

The local arts scene is dominated by a few large secular institutions, each with an annual attendance exceeding 100,000 people. These few account for nearly three-fourths of the total attendance at arts events in the city.

By the gauges of money and attendance, religious organizations play a negligible role in the arts in Indianapolis. Yet that sort of tallying up runs counter to the spirit of the arts. Perhaps the greatest contribution made by congregations to the aesthetic life of the city can't be calculated: namely, the architecture of their sanctuaries. Many of the city's most impressive buildings were constructed by congregations several decades ago. They contribute to the quality of life for all residents of Indianapolis, adding beauty to the landscape and a tangible connection to the past. Yet they show up nowhere in calculations of economic impact.

Today, most congregational arts endeavors are made for the benefit of their membership, or as a gift to the community. Typically, these efforts are voluntary, done on a small scale, and attract little notice; they exist outside the orbit of the formal arts community in Indianapolis.

*Spirit & Place* is an exception to this pattern. This annual city-wide festival invokes art and religion to explore the bonds of community and identity. Coordinated by The Polis Center, and involving over forty local organizations, *Spirit & Place* manages to join both major cultural institutions and individual congregations in the effort to present readings, discussions, dance, music, art exhibits, and other events to a broad public audience. The November 1999 festival features events hosted by several religious organizations, including six Indianapolis congregations.

Historically, the relationship between religion and the arts has waxed and waned from one time and place to another. The Catholic Church was the principal patron of the arts in medieval Europe. The Puritans of colonial New England, by contrast, were generally suspicious of many forms of artistic expression.

The history of Indianapolis reflects the ambivalent nature of the alliance between religion and the arts. The city's artistic life in the nineteenth century flowed largely from religious motivations, centered on religious

themes, and was sustained by religious institutions. The Society for the Cultivation of Church Music was the first local voluntary organization to promote the arts. At the same time, according to the *Encyclopedia of Indianapolis*, some religious adherents criticized the arts "for gratifying the senses, stirring the imagination in secular ways, and representing the decadence of Old World aristocracy."

Today, a number of religious traditions are struggling with questions that relate to their use of the arts. For example, many Christian denominations are attempting to incorporate styles borrowed from secular music into their worship services.

"The traditions governing what you use—or don't use—are being reexamined," said Frank Burch Brown, professor of religion and the arts at Christian Theological Seminary. "Denominations are saying, 'Let's look at all sorts of new media.' High art versus low art—that's a live issue right now. If the church is going to come back to the role of patron of the arts, then to what kind of art will it pay special attention?"

The congregational art festivals that have sprung up in recent years are "part of a renewal movement," Brown said. "We've gone through a period when most professional artists weren't interested in doing art for congregations, and congregations were not doing much with the arts. We've come to this renewed sense that art can be used for sacred purposes."

## **FOUR INDIANAPOLIS EXAMPLES**

Virtually all varieties of art can be found in the arts scene fostered by congregations in Indianapolis. Though relatively quiet and hidden from public view, this "other" arts community is nonetheless a vibrant one, as the following examples show.

### **Fairview Presbyterian Church**

Fairview held its second annual arts festival on a weekend in October, 1999, showcasing the work of more than two dozen local artists. There were free workshops offering instruction in origami and storytelling for children, and oil painting, writing, and quilting for adults.

Fairview has for several years offered a strong musical education program, with lessons that are open to the community and geared to all skill levels. In part because of its reputation in this area, Fairview counts several artists among its 300 members.

"We had a good reputation already as a center for music," said Pastor John Koppitch. "It seemed to me the next logical step would be to move into other areas of artistic expression, beginning with our strong base of talent."

A majority of the artists who exhibit work are not members of Fairview; neither do most of them create art with an explicitly religious message or theme. "The content or topic of a piece doesn't have to be purely religious for it to be celebratory or useful to God," Koppitch said.

"In the Presbyterian tradition, everything focuses on the word, the sermon. But God has given us many other languages with which to communicate. Music and the visual arts and dance are very powerful means of self-expression that we have neglected, to our detriment. To the degree that we can help individuals follow their own calling in the arts, to the degree that we can help to develop their ability—that, in general, is a good thing."

### **Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation**

Every other year since 1990 the Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation has hosted a Festival of Jewish Cultural Arts. About 2,000 people attend the day-long event, where artists display and sell jewelry, stained glass, pottery, ceramics, wood carvings, and paintings. The festival also features performers—storytellers, puppeteers, musicians, dancers.

The majority of the art displayed is required to have an explicit connection to Judaism. That requirement is rooted in the organizers' intent that the festival serve a specific purpose.

"Our focus is the culture of the Jewish people," said IHC's Cantor Janice Roger, "as opposed to a more broad-based cultural series. There are many organizations in Indianapolis that host plays and concerts and arts exhibits that have no relation to Jewish culture. Our congregation has a fairly narrow mission: to teach about our religion and religious practices and worldview."

There are relatively few Jewish congregations in Indianapolis, and the festival serves as a primary bridge between the Jewish community and the broader city. At the same time, it gives the city's Jews an opportunity to celebrate their tradition. "Our mission with the Festival goes along with the mission of this congregation to be a Jewish organization," Roger said.

The festival is self-supporting, with costs covered by the price of admission and the congregation's share of what the artists sell. The congregation plans to keep the festival a bi-annual event, with the next one scheduled for February, 2000. A committee of 15 plans the festival, and about 150 members of the congregation are involved in executing it. "In order to get that kind of energy going, we can't have it as an annual event," Cantor said. "That would burn out the congregation very quickly."

## Pilgrim Lutheran Church

Pilgrim Lutheran inaugurated its annual Fine Arts Series in 1995 with a season that included two chorale performances and two plays. The purpose of the series, as the mission statement drafted by Pilgrim described it, was "to develop an ongoing dialog with the people of the city's northside, and to create possibilities for ecumenical interchange using music, drama, dance, and the visual arts."

The 1999-2000 season includes six performances, and the offerings have been expanded to include sacred dance. Pilgrim's Fine Arts series has created numerous opportunities for "ecumenical interchange." Only one performance in the series is held at Pilgrim; the other five are hosted by, and done in partnership with, other religious organizations.

"The thing I love most about this series is that we have been able to work with people outside our little church here on Meridian Street," said Chris Cherwien, chairwoman of the planning committee. "It's a cooperative effort that hasn't been financially driven at all." The series is funded through admission fees, grants from local foundations, and private donations.

One year, Pilgrim sponsored a play based on the biblical story of Sarah and Hagar. After the performance there was a panel discussion involving Christians, Muslims, and Jews "talking about the insights and commonalities that could be gleaned from the play," Cherwien said. "If we can do this and get to know people with other beliefs, then I think it's worthy of the effort."

## Trinity Episcopal Church

Trinity's primary offering, the "Music at Trinity" series, was established in the mid-1980s. This season will feature 16 performances, with most of the artists coming from outside the church. Trinity also supports two in-house "residencies": a baroque ensemble, and a tenor. Each gives three concerts annually.

This season, Pilgrim Lutheran and Trinity Episcopal will co-sponsor a performance by the Concordia Choir. The concert is unusual in that tickets will cost \$15. Because Trinity's sizeable endowment subsidizes "Music at Trinity," most of its concerts are free.

Its endowment permits Trinity more latitude in programming than the typical church. "We're not in anybody's clutches," said Trinity's director of music, Michael Messina. "There's a certain freedom in that. But I can't program whatever I want. It's no fun to offer things that no one wants to come hear, so we certainly are shaped by the public's taste to some degree."

Messina sees it as Trinity's mission to program music that "people are not going to find at Hilbert Circle Theater or Clowes Hall." The church plays an important role in preserving and promoting traditional religious music at a time when public funding for the arts is under attack.

"We can offer something to the cultural community that says we believe in the arts' power to move the

human spirit," Messina said. "As we've seen churches from other traditions largely abandon 1,000 years of church culture, it's a luxury to keep even a small part of it alive—whether in a concert or a worship setting."

## SECULAR AND SACRED: BUILDINGS BRIDGES

Congregations can play an important role in preserving religious art that is typically overlooked by secular organizations. But what about the role of congregations in fostering and presenting secular art? Is there an intrinsically spiritual quality to art, even when its content is secular?

The majority of congregations—the kind that do arts festivals, at any rate—appear to be open to secular art. "Some art that isn't explicitly religious speaks from the depth of human experience," said CTS's Brown. "It might be art that deals with human suffering. It might be art that sheds light on the social conditions of our time. It might be art that simply gives shape and form to something beautiful. That can be blessed, from a religious standpoint."

The arts can build bridges both within and between congregations, and with the public. At Pilgrim Lutheran, support from the broader community has been strong. And the church's Fine Arts Series has energized and drawn together the planning committee members.

"The committee really believes it is providing something important," Cherwien said. "As they've seen what it can be, the enthusiasm has grown. They believe that they're making a difference for the community and that it's important work."

"The biggest thing that we've struggled with is fear," she said. "Fear that it's going to fall on its face, fear that you're not going to have people show up for concerts. Some concerts, you don't have a large attendance. But if there are twenty people that really benefit from that offering, then that's twenty people."

John Koppitch offered a similar assessment of Fairview's experience. "The first year, the committee agonized over these huge strategic questions, because they wanted to get it just right. I said, 'Let's just do it and get one under our belt and see what happens.' That was liberating when we said, there's not a right or wrong way to do it."

The risk of failure can be reduced by working in cooperation with other congregations. Several such partnerships already exist, and there are many opportunities for more. "Look to other churches who might want to join in partnership with you," said Pilgrim Lutheran's Cherwien, whose congregation is perhaps the most experienced in the city at cooperative artistic ventures.

The organizer of Fairview Presbyterian's arts festival this year, Kathy Cunningham, said she would like to see it expand into a month-long, multi-congregation event. If several churches combine their efforts, the festival could feature more artists, offer more classes, and probably draw a much larger crowd.

"Artists were once commissioned by the church," Cunningham said. "We've kind of gotten away from the idea. I think getting back to it would get people involved in other areas."

## A SAMPLING OF OTHER PROGRAMS

The following list is partial, but it indicates the wide range of arts-related programming sponsored by religious organizations in Indianapolis.

All Souls Unitarian Church  
5805 E. 56<sup>th</sup> St.  
(317) 545-6005

Each month, All Souls uses some of the church's open space to display the work of a local artist. The church's share of the proceeds from sales of artworks is put toward funding the church library, sponsoring concerts, or purchasing items to improve the church building.

East 91<sup>st</sup> Street Christian Church  
6049 E. 91<sup>st</sup> Street  
(317) 576-6127, ext. 330.

East 91<sup>st</sup> Street's School of Fine Arts offers instruction in drama, music, visual art, and sacred dance to students of all ages, under the direction of professional faculty.

Fatima Retreat House  
5353 E. 56<sup>th</sup> Street  
(317) 545-7681  
fatima@archindy.org.

The Fatima Retreat House offers a quiet, secluded facility in an urban location where groups can hold retreats, and individuals can reflect on works of art. "The key is getting away," said director Kevin DePrey. "This is intended to provide relief from the hurry-hurry of the culture."

First Baptist Church of Plainfield  
1012 Stafford Road, Plainfield  
(317) 839-8163

First Baptist offers youth instruction in drama, liturgical dance, music, and more. "The only thing structured about it," said director Susan Parsley, "is that I have high expectations of them."

Meridian Street United Methodist Church  
5500 N. Meridian Street  
(317) 253-3237

Meridian Street's building, a large colonial-style structure, is a work of art in itself. The church distributes a brochure in the lobby of the main entrance, giving an overview of the building's history and features. The church also sponsors an annual jazz festival.

St. Paul's Episcopal Church  
Meridian at 61<sup>st</sup> Street  
(317) 253-1277

The "Concerts at St. Paul's" series features a variety of musical offerings given by the church's staff and by outside performers. A highlight of this year's series is the Bach Festival, including a performance by the Indianapolis Baroque Orchestra and an organ concert.

Light of the World Christian Church  
5640 E. 38<sup>th</sup> Street  
(317) 547-2273

Light of the World sponsors two dance troupes, one for adults and one for youth. The adult group regularly performs sacred dance routines in the church's Sunday worship services; the younger group performs primarily for special events. The adult group is actively seeking to establish partnerships with other congregations.

Christian Theological Seminary  
1000 W. 42<sup>nd</sup> Street  
(317) 924-1331

CTS offers programming and courses that explore the connection between religion and the arts. Upcoming events include a reading by Kathleen Norris, and the annual holiday music performance given by CTS choirs.

The school's "religion and the arts" calendar is posted on its web site, [www.cts.edu](http://www.cts.edu).

## **POINTS TO REMEMBER:**

- Indianapolis congregations sponsor a wide variety of arts programs, though many of them take place out of the public spotlight.
- Congregations learn by doing; those considering an arts program shouldn't get bogged down worrying about strategic issues.
- Many congregations embrace the use or display of secular art, but the issue can generate strong disagreement.
- Arts programming creates opportunities to forge stronger bonds of community—both within and between congregations.
- Risk can be reduced by partnering with other congregations that have experience at sponsoring arts-related endeavors.

## **CONTACTS & RESOURCES:**

Fairview Presbyterian Church  
4609 N. Capitol Ave.  
Indianapolis, IN 46208-3596  
(317) 251-2245

Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation  
6501 N. Meridian St.  
Indianapolis, IN 46260  
(317) 255-6647

Pilgrim Lutheran Church  
10202 N. Meridian  
Indianapolis, IN 46290  
(317) 846-2221

Trinity Episcopal Church  
3243 N. Meridian Street  
Indianapolis, IN 46208  
(317) 926-1346

Spirit & Place Festival  
The Polis Center  
1200 Waterway Boulevard  
Indianapolis, IN 46202  
(317) 274-2455

Arts Council of Indianapolis  
47 S. Pennsylvania Street, Suite 303  
Indianapolis, IN 46204  
(317) 631-3301  
[www.indyarts.org](http://www.indyarts.org)

The Arts Council publishes an Arts Organization Directory and an Artist Directory. The Arts Council also awards grants, and helps organizations with planning and marketing.

Indiana Arts Commission

402 W. Washington Street, Room 72  
Indianapolis, IN 46204  
(317) 232-1268  
[www.ai.org/iac](http://www.ai.org/iac)

The Arts Commission awards grants, and provides assistance to organizations with grant writing and management of arts programming.

Indiana Humanities Council  
1500 N. Delaware Street  
Indianapolis, IN 46202  
(317) 638-1500, [www.ihc4u.org](http://www.ihc4u.org)

The Humanities Council provides grants to not-for-profit organizations whose projects "support the public's use of the humanities to enrich personal and civic life throughout Indiana." Application guidelines are available on the web site.

#### Publications

The February, 1998, issue of *The Lutheran* has two pieces on establishing a fine arts committee and initiating a fine arts ministry. The April, 1999, issue includes two articles on sponsoring an art festival. These and related articles can be found in the magazine's online version at [www.thelutheran.org](http://www.thelutheran.org).

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