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CONGREGATIONS AND CHILD CARE

PROBLEM:: Since the 1960s, demand for child care has risen sharply.

SOLUTION: Congregations have started child care programs at a remarkable pace, particularly in the past few years.

In 1968, Westside Church of the Nazarene moved from the near west side of Indianapolis to a new building on a 40-acre site six miles further west, at 8610 W. 10th St. The congregation and its head pastor at the time, R. B. Acheson, brought with them the goal of establishing a church that would provide compassionate solutions to the needs of its new neighbors—a "place with a heart," as Rev. Acheson put it.

Eventually, the congregation's ministries would include a retirement home, a counseling center, and an elementary school. But the members' first priority was to establish a child care program.

The land around the new church was sparsely populated in 1968, but Rev. Acheson believed, correctly, that it would develop quickly. He believed, too, that there would be an urgent need in the area for church-based child care.

"The philosophy of the church when it moved from Haughville to the present location was that it would serve people from birth until death," said Patye Bridget, the church's minister of Christian education. "In many homes both parents have to work, or choose to work. That being the case, we decided to establish a place where children could come and be nurtured and loved."

Westside Church of the Nazarene opened its child care center in November 1971. Today, congregation-based child care is commonplace, but the idea was unusual at the time. There was far less demand for child care then, and few religious organizations provided it. But three factors during the past 30 years have increased the demand for—and hence the supply of—congregation-based child care.

CULTURAL AND LEGISLATIVE CHANGES

The first large surge in demand for child care resulted from increased numbers of women entering the workforce. In the 1960s, only about 20 percent of mothers with young children were employed, whether part-time or full-time. By the 1990s, about 60 percent of women with children under the age of six held a job outside the home. And employed women put in long hours: in 1993, more than half of all employed females worked full-time.

The Indiana legislature was another element of change in the mid-1980s. Responding to requests from religious organizations, and seeking to expand the role of congregations in providing child care, the legislature decreed that congregations could establish "registered ministries" rather than licensed day care centers. These registered ministries were restricted from advertising themselves as "centers," but they

were allowed to operate under more relaxed standards than those for licensed centers. For example, centers are required to "carry out a planned, written program designed to take into account the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development needs of the children." No program is required of ministries. Licensed centers must adhere to rigorous staffing ratios; there are no such requirements for registered ministries. And, unlike centers, ministries are not required to meet nutritional standards in their menus.

This legislation opened the door for virtually any congregation to begin a child care ministry, with little oversight by state regulators. Relaxed regulation, combined with increasing demand for child care, caused religiously affiliated child care to flourish. It grew from fewer than three dozen registered ministries in 1986 to 450 in 1998. By contrast, of the 650 licensed child care centers in Indiana, only about 100 are run by congregations.

The most recent increase in need for child care was spurred by federal legislation for welfare reform, which pushed even more women with dependent children to seek work. An average of about 50 new ministries have started each year since passage of welfare reform in 1996.

TWO APPROACHES

Only one of these factors has affected Westside Church of the Nazarene: the general increase in the number of working mothers. The church is inaccessible to most of the former welfare recipients who need child care, and its center came into being before the registered ministry exception was enacted. It is and always has been a licensed center.

Westside accepts children aged 2 and up. Its maximum capacity is about 100, and the center operates near its limit year-round. About half the youngsters in its care are the children of Westside members. The rest are drawn from non-member families from nearby neighborhoods.

Westside's child care program is larger than most, and it draws from the congregation's own membership more heavily than do most. The Polis Center's research indicates that the average congregation-based child care program in Indianapolis serves about 40 children; very few programs draw more than a third of participants from the congregation's families.

Westside's child care center employs 14 full-time and up to eight part-time workers. The program begins at 9 a.m. with a formal learning time; the specific activity varies by grade and according to the teacher. This lasts until about 10:30 a.m. The rest of the day consists of a story, free time, lunch, playtime, and naps.

Staffing poses a continual challenge. Like many centers, Westside's turnover rate is high for part-timers, and the church often posts a "help wanted" sign. The minimum requirements are not stringent: a potential worker must be 18, have at least a GED, and be a Christian who attends church regularly. But the pay is low, and Westside takes into account a number of intangible factors before it offers employment.

Recently, for example, Westside interviewed someone who technically met every requirement and was willing to work an unpopular shift. Yet Karin Carter, the center's assistant director, decided against hiring her: the applicant's references had been basically positive, but Carter thought that she read some hesitation in them.

Other programs also report difficulty in finding and keeping staff. "It is a chronic problem," said Jeannie Stein, early childhood director of the Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation. "We can run an ad and not even get a response." Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation recently decided to increase its fees in order to raise the pay for its staff. Stein hopes this will help the program retain its current staff and attract highly qualified applicants in the future.

Keeping full-time staff is less a problem, particularly for Westside—partly because of the higher pay but also because many of the full-time staff members have children in the child care or in the church's elementary school. Full-time employees receive a tuition discount, and this benefit keeps their turnover rate low.

Emmanuel Christian Fellowship Center is in the relatively poor neighborhood of Fountain Square, and its child care is a registered ministry rather than a licensed center. It opened in the fall of 1997, largely

in response to welfare reform. Most of its clients are single parents.

The congregation meets in a converted Boys Club at 1400 English Ave. Emmanuel moved from its west-side location to the renovated building on the near southeast side in 1997.

The building offered more space than the facility that the church had been using, and the pastor, Tommy Glenn, wanted to expand the church's ministries. He hoped to begin a day care, a youth program, a food and clothes pantry, and possibly a school. The Boys Club, with a basketball court at its center, met the church's needs perfectly. The gym could serve as the church sanctuary and then, after the chairs and the pulpit were cleared away, it could double as the recreational space for youth programs and other activities. Church members invested \$40,000 and several weeks of labor in renovating the facility.

Before opening the child care program, Glenn's wife, Janet, attended a one-day training session sponsored by the Indiana Division of Family and Children. The state conducts sessions once a month for prospective child care providers, covering regulations and giving out applications for registering as a ministry. "I just wanted to make sure I was doing everything right," said Janet, who serves as the ministry's director. In November 1997, Emmanuel opened its child care program, called Guardian Angels, as a registered ministry.

Registered ministries are inspected quarterly. (Licensed centers are inspected a minimum of once annually by several different state agencies.) Emmanuel failed its second- and third-quarter inspections in 1998. These failures resulted less from glaring problems than from an accumulation of minor violations: insufficient cots for the children, missing screens on the windows, no thermometer in the refrigerator.

After failing a second inspection, Tommy and Janet Glenn met with Division of Family and Children officials and presented them with a list of actions that they had taken to bring the ministry into compliance. Guardian Angels passed its fourth-quarter inspection, and it remains open. The ministry has cared for as many as 30 and as few as 14 children, from infants to teens. Janet, the full-time director, is assisted by four workers—one full-time and three part-time.

Emmanuel appears sincere in its desire to meet the state's requirements; in a sense, the church has staked its reputation on providing good child care. Rev. Glenn said that when the extent of the church's violations were made known to him, Emmanuel addressed the problems immediately.

"We're not just trying to herd a bunch of kids in here to make a profit," Rev. Glenn said. "We want to provide child care with a Christian emphasis. First and foremost, it's a ministry. Our approach is based on Christian principles—loving one another, respecting one another, and doing to others as we would have done to us."

Though no structured program is required of ministries, Emmanuel has an hour and a half scheduled for instruction in basic language and mathematical skills. The staff also tries to incorporate biblical lessons into its interaction with the children throughout the day.

Yet, despite its sense of purpose, Emmanuel provided child care that the state determined to be sub-standard—even by the relaxed standards for registered ministries—for two consecutive quarters. More egregious violations may exist in other ministries but go undetected by state regulators. The Division of Family and Children is under-staffed, and its workload only increases as registered ministries in Indiana multiply.

Despite their encounters with the state, the Glens do not feel overburdened by regulation—nor does Westside, which reports no problems with its inspections. Rev. Glenn said that what he has learned from the experience is to "follow the rules and don't try to take shortcuts. Sometimes it'll seem like they're being strict on you, and you'll get frustrated. We've gotten frustrated. But those people are doing their job and they're interested in the same thing you should be interested in—that is, providing quality child care. I have a granddaughter here, and I want her to be in a safe environment. So why shouldn't the others be in a safe environment?"

PROS AND CONS

The registered ministry exception is good news for congregations uninterested in, or opposed to, state

licensing. And it is good news for many working families. The new ministries that have been started as a result of this opportunity have helped meet the demand for easily accessible child care.

But to some observers, the exemptions granted to congregational-based child care ministries in Indiana have created a problem waiting to happen. Officials of the state's Family and Social Services Administration, who are responsible for what regulation does take place, worry that it will be only a matter of time before an unfortunate incident focuses attention on the fact that the state has two sets of rules—one for religious organizations and one for everyone else.

For now, a registered ministry is a legitimate option for congregations interested in launching a child care facility. But maintaining high standards of care despite pressure to cut costs is a challenge facing all congregation-based child care providers, whether the facility is licensed or not.

Congregations that choose not to license their child care programs do so for a number of reasons—some based on fact, some on misperception. According to Dorothy Broad of the FSSA's Division of Family and Children, many congregations want the freedom to spank children in their care, but believe state regulations forbid it. This is true for licensed centers; the regulations explicitly state that "no child of any age shall ever be shaken, hit, or spanked." The state exempts registered ministries from this restriction.

Some congregations believe that being licensed will restrict what they can teach. They want the freedom to impart religious instruction but fear that state regulators will shut them down for doing so. This is not true. Religious instruction is neither required nor forbidden. Program guidelines for licensed centers do not interfere with—or even touch on—religious teaching.

If a religious element were not permitted, Westside Church of the Nazarene would not have opened its center. Its very purpose is "to reach the children for Jesus," said Patye Bridget. "The point is not to get them to this church. It's to introduce them to Jesus and give them loving care." Bridget reported that in nearly three decades of pursuing that goal, the church has never encountered any interference from state regulators.

A MINISTRY OR A BUSINESS?

Congregation-based child care is growing in part because parents seem to trust religious organizations more than they do for-profit child care providers. Not all parents, however. Jeannie Stein, of the Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation, said that some prospective customers investigate "to the point of the ridiculous," returning eight or nine times before coming to a decision. But "10 percent of the people make 90 percent of the inquiries," she said. The Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation has the largest Jewish child care program in the city, with 32 staff members serving 180 children.

In most cases, when congregations choose to offer child care, they are responding to the needs in their communities—as a ministry. A few are driven by a profit motive, and some by a mix of the two.

Motives do not necessarily correlate to the quality of care a congregation provides; many for-profit child care services offer excellent care. But in the case of registered ministries, the situation is complicated by the lack of regulation. If profit is the motive and labor the primary cost, it might be a temptation to skimp on staff, if regulations permit.

The situation is complicated, too, by a high set of expectations. Faith-based child care providers are often asked to go beyond what is asked of a for-profit center. Westside's Karin Carter tries to get to know each child and family, and is often called on to help in stressful family situations. Such requests would not seem appropriate at most for-profit centers.

"The needs of the children need to be put ahead of the financial side," said Sarah Maple, director of Southport Presbyterian's child care, which began as a registered ministry in the fall of 1997. She said that when she interviewed for the position, "The first question I asked was, 'Are you planning a ministry or a business?' If it's approached as a Christian ministry, we're providing an outreach to families—counseling, food support, tuition support. I don't think you will find that in a business setting."

But even not-for-profits must remain solvent. The ideal is to find a proper balance between operating as

a business and remaining true to a deeper purpose. "The whole staff go a step beyond," said Patye Bridget, Westside's minister of Christian education. "Karin Carter takes a personal interest in children whose families are dysfunctional, or are having problems, and takes them to heart. I have confidence that she goes home and prays for them. I think some child care centers might ask families to leave because of the stress they bring with them. But they're begging us to hang in with them. And we are, because they need us. We need to make ends meet, but the bottom line is not the dollar. We try not to be run over and abused, but we'll go as far as we can possibly go."

POINTS TO REMEMBER:

- A congregation-based child care program designated as a "registered ministry" is exempt from many of the regulations imposed on licensed centers.
- The relative lack of regulation can pose a temptation to skimp on standards.
- Finding suitable staff is a persistent problem for child care programs.
- Licensed centers are forbidden to impose corporal punishment on children; registered ministries are not.
- Being licensed imposes no restrictions on the religious content of a center's educational program.
- Clients expect more personal attention and involvement from faith-based programs than they expect from secular programs.

CONTACTS & RESOURCES:

Emmanuel Christian Fellowship Center
1400 English Ave.
Indianapolis, IN 46203
(317) 955-9533

Westside Church of the Nazarene
8610 W. 10th St.
Indianapolis, IN 46234
(317) 271-7609

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

Southport Presbyterian Church
Welcome Place Day Care
1427 Southview Dr.
Indianapolis, IN 46227
(317) 788-5935

The first Wednesday of each month, the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration's Division of Family and Children holds a one-day training session. State employees cover the basics of what is required from child care providers and distribute applications for certification. For information call:
(317) 233-5414

For those interested in improving their skill at working with young children, Ivy Tech State College offers certification as a Child Development Associate. For information call:
(317) 921-4303

Scholastic, a children's publisher, offers an online version of its magazine Early Childhood Today and other publications of interest to child care providers.
<http://www.scholastic.com/magazines>.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children claims as its goals "improving professional practice and working conditions in early childhood education and building public understanding and support for high quality early childhood programs." The web site includes information about conferences and resources available through NAEYC. For information call:
1-800-424-2460
www.naeyc.org

The National Child Care Information Center web site offers extensive information and links. See especially the list of "Publications and Other Resources."
<http://nccic.org>

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