

MINISTERIAL ALLIANCES

Problem: Congregations often have little information about the activities and programs of other congregations.

Solution: Ministerial alliances provide clergy with an opportunity to share information and a forum for addressing common concerns.

In December 1999, the Greenwood Ministerial Association approved a set of marriage guidelines stating: "God intends sexual intercourse exclusively for the covenant of marriage; a local church congregation can provide strength and ongoing support to married couples; and preparation for marriage is both essential and beneficial."

The guidelines recommended that engaged couples not live together before marriage; that they go to church regularly; and that they participate in at least three months of pre-marital counseling.

The marriage guidelines elicited wide support among both Protestant and Catholic clergy, and received coverage in the local press, including a front-page story in *The Johnson County Daily Journal*. Both the accord on the issue, as well as the attention it received, were unusual. More remarkable than the guidelines themselves was the fact that clergy were speaking to the public with a unified voice.

A century ago, Protestant ministers routinely made public comment on moral issues. Many ministers were also civic leaders. Their names appeared often in local newspapers, and they played their public role as the guardians of morality with confidence and authority.

The Church Federation of Indianapolis, established in 1912, reflected the strength of the city's Protestant leadership. "Mainstream Protestant churches in Indianapolis had bred in their bones the sense that the city belonged to them," wrote Edwin Becker, author of the Federation's history. "They would be vigilant in their care for the religious and moral life of the city and they took for granted that business and political leaders, most of whom were church members, would acknowledge their right to do so. They created the Church Federation to serve as an arm of that vigilance."

DECLINE OF THE PUBLIC ROLE

The current state of the Church Federation is one of decline. The cause is sometimes attributed to the declining influence of religion in American life. In reality, Americans remain among the most religious people in the world; the rate of religious affiliation has not changed significantly since the early 20th century.

The reigning theology *has* changed. The Church Federation was created during an era of Protestantism distinguished by strong concern for the well-being of society in general. This "social

gospel" movement, as historians call it, had its political equivalent in Progressivism. Both movements aimed to improve the world through concrete reforms accomplished through legislation. Progressive movements such as the temperance and anti-gambling crusades were often sustained by the energy of social gospel advocates.

The social gospel held that the kingdom of God on earth could be established through eradicating vice and poverty. By the second half of the 20th century, religious Americans had largely rejected the premises and goals of the social gospel, in favor of a theology that emphasized individual conversion, not social reform.

The emphasis on saving souls rather than transforming the world sapped much of the energy that once sustained collective campaigns by the clergy. Theologically conservative ministers are often profoundly suspicious of social activism, and see little room for cooperation with their liberal counterparts. Yet cooperative efforts survive, and some ministerial alliances continue to be very active.

A major difference between these alliances and those of the past is their narrow focus. They typically arise in response to neighborhood-level issues, not city-wide concerns. They do not speak with authority for the city's "Protestant establishment," as the Church Federation once did: there no longer exists a clear Protestant establishment, and many contemporary alliances include Catholics.

Because they arise in response to specific issues, alliances are prone to cycles of decline and resurgence. Some alliances exist simply to facilitate conversation and interaction among local ministers. When there is no rallying point or issue to focus the group, it usually declines or folds altogether.

THREE EXAMPLES

All ministerial alliances face the fundamental question of purpose: What is our reason for being? Following are the stories of three alliances that have confronted that question in the past and are now addressing it.

Southside Ministerial Alliance of Perry Township

Public schools have kept the Southside Ministerial Alliance of Perry Township (SMAPT) together in the past. Now, the schools are giving SMAPT new life.

For many years, the Alliance has worked in cooperation with school administrators to place ministers as counselors in Perry Township's elementary, middle, and high schools. Through the 1980s and '90s, when it had no other focus or reason for being, SMAPT survived because its members believed in the importance of the counseling program. Since SMAPT gave the program legitimacy, clergy refused to let the Alliance die.

The Rev. Jeff Buck, pastor of Center United Methodist and the Alliance's current president, says an incident in the schools made him aware that no plan was in place to mobilize ministers on short notice. Further, he realized that the Alliance's members had no training to deal with crises.

He is now using SMAPT to create a Ministerial Crisis Response Team. If ministers are needed in a crisis, the Alliance's goal is to have 15 or 20 clergy on the scene within an hour. He plans to invite representatives from the police and fire departments, from medical organizations, and from the schools to address the Alliance's monthly meetings. The Alliance's crisis response team will serve as a backup and support group for the township's crisis response teams, Buck says. He expects that it will take two years for the team to be fully ready.

This new focus has reinvigorated the Alliance. Attendance at meetings has risen from four or five to 20. "The only way we're going to keep the Alliance going is by doing something significant," Buck says.

Buck wants SMAPT to survive in part because he believes in its school counseling program, but his reasons for supporting the Alliance go beyond any specific program. "I believe that as pastors we're called to be in the community," he says, "not just in a pastoral role, but as leaders."

Tuxedo Park Ministerial Association

The Tuxedo Park Ministerial Association is moving from being primarily a fellowship group toward becoming a program-centered group.

The Association, which consists of a handful of churches on the city's near east side, is one of the few neighborhood groups that has survived for long with no programming to give it focus. The ministers involved sponsor joint services on Good Friday and Thanksgiving, but the Association's main activity has been its monthly meeting, where half a dozen clergy gather to eat lunch and have an informal discussion.

Recently, the Association surveyed churches in the Tuxedo Park area, asking about staffing, office hours, recreational facilities, poverty relief programs, and library loan policies. When the Association distributed the survey results to its members, they reacted with enthusiasm. One noted that churches could use the information to stagger the operating hours of their food pantries, eliminating duplication. Another said the survey would help him to know where to refer people in need, when his church couldn't help them.

What is striking is that these clergy began thinking about how their churches fit into the broader scene only after the Association took the initiative to do a survey. That they could serve the area more effectively by working together struck them as a revelation.

The Tuxedo Park Ministerial Association is considering establishing a program similar to one in nearby Irvington—a centralized poverty relief program to which all the member congregations contribute, and to which they can refer people. For now, the fellowship offered by the alliance is sufficient reason for being. The fact that the Association has survived suggests that it meets a felt need.

"We're all going through the same kinds of things in the neighborhood," says Rev. Douglas Barnes, pastor of Wallace Street Presbyterian Church and leader of the Association. "There's a great deal of migration out of this area, especially by young people. We have older congregations for the most part. We've spent hour upon hour sharing our concerns about what's happening, and that's been healthy."

Crooked Creek Clergy

Having belonged to a ministerial alliance while serving as a pastor in Peoria, Ill., the Rev. Ryan Ahlgrim wanted to find one in his new city of Indianapolis. His search turned up nothing in his area. If he wanted to belong to a ministerial alliance, he would have to found one himself—which he did.

Ahlgrim began by driving up and down Michigan Road and noting every church he saw. He phoned the pastors and asked if they would be interested in joining an alliance. Ten showed up for the first meeting.

Himself the pastor of First Mennonite Church, Ahlgrim was initially looking for fellowship. He enjoyed the comradery such groups can offer. But as he learned more about Crooked Creek, he saw that an alliance could serve the neighborhood as well as its members.

Ahlgrim describes Crooked Creek, which stretches from 38th Street to 86th Street on the near northwest side of the city, as a remarkably diverse area, much of it middle class to affluent. But pockets of the neighborhood are marked by blight and high crime rates. It has a large immigrant population in need of language training and other services. A lack of adequate public transportation makes it difficult for residents without cars to find work in the suburbs, where jobs are available.

Crooked Creek Clergy (CCC), the ministerial alliance Ahlgrim formed in 1998, is attempting to address some of the neighborhood's needs. The group's stated mission is "for leaders of the faith communities to work together to better serve the social needs of the Crooked Creek area."

This mission has not translated into any specific programs. Ahlgrim doesn't want to duplicate the services of the Multi-Service Center in Crooked Creek, but to support the Center with volunteers and contributions.

The Alliance has brought in speakers from neighborhood organizations, but members are now assuming a larger role in the meetings. Several have offered to find out more information about a certain topic—for example, which local businesses will work with churches to establish a voucher arrangement—and report to the group at the next meeting. This approach has increased interest in the meetings; attendance has risen from

an average of three or four to 10.

"I feel like we're finally on track," Ahlgrim says. "I'll be interested to see what happens over the next year. We're becoming much more concrete. Instead of just speaking theoretically, we're trying to get down to the nuts and bolts of constructing a response. Pastors are more interested in planning how to respond to requests for help, than in listening to a speaker."

TYPES OF PROGRAMMING

Two types of programming are particularly common to ministerial alliances: school counseling and poverty relief. Most existing alliances root their reason for being in at least one of these.

The involvement with public schools reflects the localism of most alliances. The Rev. Kevin Stiles, president of the Suburban Eastside Ministerial Association (SEMA), notes that churches nearby, though in a different township, see no reason to participate in SEMA, since it exists primarily to conduct outreach to Warren Township schools.

Under SEMA's school outreach, called The Listening Post, clergy spend time with children in the schools, listening to them talk about their problems. As with SMAPT's counseling program, those who participate in The Listening Post are strongly committed to it.

"We're convinced that The Listening Post is really making a difference," Stiles says. "If that's the only function of our association, that's fine by me. I don't see any other important reason for us to exist."

If school programs reflect the localism of alliances, poverty relief efforts reflect their reactive nature. Few have an activist agenda for creating better communities. Rev. Ahlgrim of Crooked Creek Clergy says that he was initially hopeful that CCC could help shape the future of Crooked Creek. But ministers who attended meetings were primarily interested in talking about how to provide poverty relief, rather than addressing the root cause of problems.

Often, one or two projects are enough to keep an alliance alive. But the interest and commitment are not strong enough to make ministerial alliances into powerful agents of change.

The Riverside and Kessler Church Alliance includes several congregations in mostly poor, near-northwest side neighborhoods. Theoretically, the Alliance would like to sponsor programming to improve the neighborhoods, according to the Rev. Thomas Kuhn of Wesley United Methodist.

Yet it is "floundering" at the moment. The Alliance sponsors a special Good Friday service, and this year it had a special service for Martin Luther King Day. It also sponsors a six-week luncheon series, featuring discussion of a different spiritual theme each week. But doing anything to address larger neighborhood issues seems an impossible dream.

"I don't see a strong, vital future for the churches generally," Kuhn says. "The churches are open, but I don't see much action. Most of them are oriented toward maintenance and survival. While they recognize the blight in this community, they feel powerless to change it. It seems like an inevitability over which we have no control."

NON-NEIGHBORHOOD-BASED ALLIANCES

The African American community provides a notable exception to the rule that ministerial alliances are local. The group Concerned Clergy regularly attracts two dozen people to its weekly meeting, and they come from all over the city.

According to its purpose statement, Concerned Clergy seeks "to be God's active and vocal instruments" in demanding justice from the city's economic, educational, legal, and political systems. It does this

by demonstrating and advocating on behalf of various causes.

African American ministers have a record of sustained civic activism. While other alliances were declining in strength at mid-century, alliances of black clergy benefited much from the activist ferment of that era. In 1963, for example, a local newspaper reported that "Negro ministers representing 40,000 Negro church members in Metropolitan Indianapolis . . . issued an historic pledge to unify behind all civil rights efforts being promoted in the city and throughout the nation." Pastors involved with the Interdenominational Ministers Alliance, an organization that still meets monthly, "agreed to become 'the religious conscience' of the move toward equal rights for all people."

In the 1990s, Concerned Clergy picked up the mantle of activism. It was a prominent voice of protest in several high-profile controversies—most notably, instances of alleged abuse of power by the police. Probably no other ministerial organization has spoken regularly to such a wide audience since the heyday of the Church Federation.

Concerned Clergy is intentionally narrow in its purpose and representation. It advocates for the city's black community. That identity gives it a sustaining sense of purpose. A similar dynamic holds several other alliances together: they are based on faith, on denomination, or on theology, not neighborhood.

A group of about 10 Jewish rabbis, for example, called the Board of Rabbis meet irregularly—sometimes monthly, sometimes quarterly. The Board occasionally passes rulings related to religious observance, but mainly it gives local rabbis a forum for mutual support.

Catholic archdioceses are divided into deaneries. There are four in Indianapolis. Each month, the parish priests in each deanery meet to discuss issues relevant to the Catholic community. Deanery meetings sometimes become forums for sharing information about social or moral issues—say, capital punishment or abortion. Because the deaneries are scattered over wide geographical areas, however, neighborhood-specific issues are rarely addressed.

Southern Baptist ministers get together quarterly in a meeting organized by the Metropolitan Baptist Association. Ministers connected with the Association typically do not feel comfortable in neighborhood-based alliances, according to Douglas Simpson, the Association's director of missions. Those alliances are often too liberal for Southern Baptists, he says. Association meetings can be simply for fellowship, such as the Christmas party; or the Association may invite special speakers or conduct training sessions.

Ministerial alliances rarely survive without a clearly defined, programmatic purpose. But when they provide practical information to ministers in a specific neighborhood, or give clergy a sense of common purpose, often they will find a niche.

"Sometimes we get secluded," says the Rev. Jack Stout, pastor of South Sherman Drive Church of God and president of the Beech Grove Ministerial Association. Stout's association sponsors an ecumenical Good Friday service and works with Beech Grove High School to provide a speaker at its annual baccalaureate service. Stout hopes to use the Association to sponsor a community-wide vacation Bible school someday.

"We have to ask ourselves, as an association, what is it possible for us to do?" Stout says. "Instead of doing individual vacation Bible schools, is it possible for us to put together a large one that would invite kids who don't normally go to church? Denominational lines are a barrier we try to erase and say, 'Hey, we're all in this together.' We don't have to let doctrinal differences get in the way of our trying to better our community."

POINTS TO REMEMBER:

- Clergy alliances do not speak with the public authority they once had, but many survive, and have an influence within neighborhoods.
- Fellowship is not enough to keep most alliances together; without concrete, clearly defined programs, they tend to dissolve rapidly.

- Most neighborhood alliances have an outreach to local schools or a poverty relief program.
- These alliances usually sponsor programs that react to community needs, rather than shape or reform the community.
- The African American community is an exception to the generalization that alliances are neighborhood-based and not activist in purpose.
- In addition to neighborhood clergy alliances, there are denomination-based alliances that exist primarily for the purpose of fellowship.

CONTACTS & RESOURCES:

The alliances below are headed by the leaders of the listed congregations, with the exception of the Riverside and Kessler Church Alliance, which is currently without a leader.

Beech Grove Ministerial Association
 South Sherman Church of God
 3650 S. Sherman Dr.
 Beech Grove, IN 46107
 (317) 783-3771

Board of Rabbis
 Congregation Beth El Zedeck
 600 W. 70th St.
 Indianapolis, IN 46260
 (317) 253-3441

Concerned Clergy
 Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church
 3801 Forest Manor
 Indianapolis, IN 46226
 (317) 545-8253

Crooked Creek Clergy
 First Mennonite Church
 4601 Knollton Rd.
 Indianapolis, IN 46228
 (317) 251-1980

Greenwood Ministerial Association
 Community Church of Greenwood
 1477 W. Main St.
 Greenwood, IN 46142
 (317) 888-6024

Riverside and Kessler Church Alliance
 Wesley United Methodist Church
 3425 W. 30th St.
 Indianapolis, IN 46222
 (317) 926-4414

Southside Ministerial Alliance of Perry Township
 Center United Methodist Church
 5445 Bluff Rd.

Indianapolis, IN 46217
(317) 784-1101

Suburban Eastside Ministerial Association
Cumberland United Methodist Church
219 N. Muessing St.
Indianapolis, IN 46229
(317) 894-3454

Tuxedo Park Ministerial Association
Wallace Street Presbyterian Church
4805 E. 10th St.
Indianapolis, IN 46201
(317) 357-1012

Other:

Metropolitan Baptist Association
952 N. Pennsylvania
Indianapolis, IN 46204
(317) 636-6728

Church Federation of Greater Indianapolis
1100 W. 42nd St., Suite 345
Indianapolis, IN 46208
(317) 926-5371

The Church Federation publishes a directory of congregations and ministers listing all the known ministerial alliances in the Indianapolis area. Edwin Becker's history of the Federation is titled *From Sovereign to Servant: The Church Federation of Greater Indianapolis, 1912-1987*. It is available at the Federation and at local libraries.

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