



**The Polis
Center**

*We bring things
into perspective.*

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COLLEAGUES:

Since the founding of Indianapolis, religious congregations have been providing building space and services to surrounding communities.

During the 19th century, local congregations housed the first public library, the town clock and fire bell, civic assemblies, and public debates. Today, local congregations serve as polling places, meeting spaces, and provide homes to both profit and not-for-profit organizations.

In this issue, you'll read that the average congregation sponsors or houses at least four different community programs. Others argue this "average congregation" scenario (as determined by one national study) is a bit misleading.

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C L E R G Y N O T E S

CONGREGATIONS AS SOCIAL PROVIDERS

The full impact of the 1996 welfare reform act is still uncertain, but the legislation has drawn unprecedented attention to the public role that religious institutions play as community-building organizations.

The reform was premised on the idea that local, faith-based institutions would take on the responsibilities relinquished by government agencies. That assumption has provoked much research and discussion about the role that religious organizations play in the lives of their communities.

A prominent public voice in this exchange has been John DiIulio, professor of political science at Princeton University. DiIulio publishes frequently in major newspapers and was profiled in the New Yorker. He has risen to academic fame in large part for his championing of faith-based solutions to endemic inner-city problems. As Christianity Today recently wrote of him, DiIulio "believes with all his social-scientist heart that the path to effective change in the rotting urban core runs through gospel-centered churches and faith-based ministries."

DiIulio may be convinced that the evidence supports his conclusions. But even he has acknowledged that the evidence in general — on both

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CONGREGATIONS

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sides of the question—is slim, and that “we remain a long way from a definitive body of research evidence on the actual extent and the efficacy of church-anchored and faith-based social programs.”

One recent attempt to quantify the extent (though not the efficacy) of faith-based

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social programs focused in part on Indianapolis. The six-city study enumerated programs sponsored by congregations housed in historic places. Published in 1997, the study was directed by Ram Cnaan, a professor of social work at the University of Pennsylvania.

Twenty-five congregations in Indianapolis participated. Of these, fourteen reported that they sponsor five or more programs. The average per congregation in this city was 4.4 — slightly higher than the average for the 111 congregations that participated nationally.

Indianapolis stood out in the survey in several important respects. One aim of the project was to determine who benefits from these programs: the community at large, or members of the congregation? The report suggested that the community benefits more, by a wide margin. In Indianapolis, each program studied served, on average, 270 people — only 33 of whom were members of the sponsoring congregation. The ratio of non-members to members served in Indianapolis was 7 to 1, the highest for any of the cities studied.

The report also attempted to assess the monetary value to the community of the programs sponsored by congregations. The

average value per program per month was just under \$3,200. In Indianapolis, the average value was nearly \$4,200, the highest among the six cities.

Congregations in Indianapolis also reported the highest level of volunteerism — 220 hours of volunteer labor per program per month, compared to 148 nationally.

Also noted was the fact that, in Indianapolis, individuals or groups within the congregation were more likely to initiate new programs than were clergy.

These findings have not gone uncontested. Some doubt the broader implications of a study that focused on congregations housed in historic buildings.

Art Farnsley, The Polis Center's director of research, responded to Cnaan's report in an article published in *The Christian Century*. The gist of his argument was that the 26 participating congregations are not representative of the broader faith community in Indianapolis. Relatively few congregations have the resources — and many do not have the inclination — to sponsor four programs, the average number reported by Cnaan's subjects. The danger, Farnsley wrote, “is that many needy people will go unserved if we assume that most congregations are doing or could do something that they cannot.”

Both DiIulio and Cnaan concede the limitations of faith-based efforts to build community. They agree that, to succeed, congregations must have a network of governmental and non-profit agencies supporting their work.

Whether such an alliance can “save” the cities remains to be seen. But if the attempt is made, it will be well-documented and closely scrutinized. Religious institutions — “the least studied and least understood actors in contemporary public life,” in Cnaan's estimations — seem poised to receive overdue attention.

—Ted Slutz

STRAIGHT FROM THE SOURCE

A CONVERSATION WITH KIM FLOWERS

Advocates of faith-based answers to urban problems pin their hopes on congregations such as **First Baptist Church North**, 880 W. 28th Street. Under the umbrella of its **C.O.U.R.A.G.E. Family Life Center**, First Baptist sponsors outreach programs for the surrounding neighborhood, one of the city's poorest. Its Saturday Academy, open to all children, provides instruction in college preparation, music and art, studying and job skills, the basics of housekeeping, and other fundamental skills.

Kim Flowers, the Center's executive director, estimates that the programs reach 375 children every year on an annual budget of \$500,000. The Center sponsors programs for adults as well. First Baptist started the Center five years ago, and its program offerings continue to expand. Flowers hopes to offer more computer training, and planning is underway to start an alternative school for children who have dropped out or been expelled from the Indianapolis Public Schools. In the following interview, Flowers talks about the challenges of running an inner-city ministry.

Clergy Notes: What are some of the persistent obstacles that you face?

Flowers: People still haven't bought into the concept of churches doing this kind of project. I get a lot of questions like, "What about the separation of church and state?" But our biggest obstacle is that the majority of our funding now comes from grants, and they kind of piecemeal us — a little bit here, a little bit there. It's hard to get an organization to just pick up all our programming and fund it. I'm always writing small grants to keep things going around here.

Clergy Notes: What part did the national push to use religious institutions as social service providers play in the startup or expansion of the Family Life Center?

Flowers: The programs grow out of people's needs. It's not really related to government legislation. For example, we've had to increase the

meals that we serve, because the children come in hungry. In our life-skills training classes, we're teaching parents how to wash clothes, because we found that a lot of kids go to school dirty. We implement new programming because of assessed needs in the community, not because some government entity says we have dollars for you to do this.

Clergy Notes: What have you learned in the past five years?

Flowers: The first thing you learn is that you're going to have opposition from your congregation. A lot of the congregation does not understand why we have to go out and be the savior of the community. That's been the biggest fight—changing attitudes in the congregation to accept these people. Once they see the changes in some of the people, it lightens up. But I don't think you'll ever totally change that.

Clergy Notes: Is the opposition rooted in resentment over the financial burden of carrying the Center?

Flowers: We're not really a financial drain. The main source of support from the church is in-kind contributions, and we're also a small item in the missions budget. It's more the idea that we're bringing these undesirable characters into our building, and they're going to destroy our church. That was a surprise. I was expecting, from a Christian standpoint, more compassion for those out in the world, and it was a rude awakening for me. It was a hurtful learning experience. But it's changing, and we get more people volunteering.

Clergy Notes: What else have you learned?

Flowers: Not to let the community itself wear you thin. I run into people in the community wanting this to be everything to everybody. It's impossible for me to do that. We've had to set some strict guidelines, and we've told other organizations that they're not going to push it all back on us.

COLLEAGUES

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In any case, the general public seems to have a growing expectation that congregations should be more involved in community service.

Which raises some interesting questions for clergy. If you share the expectation that your congregation should be involved in community service, have you met with resistance or encouragement from your members? Is your congregation's mission and organization compatible with the goals of outside groups that may want to collaborate with you? Is your congregation's building adequately equipped to be a public space?

There are a number of local resources available for clergy and lay leadership who want to explore further their role as public places. Some of the experts are in your congregation and others are leading congregations around the corner. We'd like to know how your congregation is responding to the growing sentiment for congregations as public partners and places.

Let's keep in touch.



Kevin

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The full title of the Ram Cnaan report is *Social and Community Involvement of Religious Congregations Housed in Historic Religious Properties: Findings from a Six-City Study*.

Christianity Today profiles John Dilulio in its June 14, 1999, issue; the text of the piece is available online through the magazine's web site: www.christianity.net/ct/current (click on the "past issues" button.)

Several articles of related interest, including one by Dilulio, can be found in the Spring, 1999, issue of the **Brookings Review**. Brookings' home page is www.brook.edu; the web site can be accessed from there.



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