



The Polis  
Center

*We bring things  
into perspective.*

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## COLLEAGUES:

*Congregations often describe the ideal clergy person in paradoxical terms: experienced, but youthful; charismatic, and unpretentious; hard-working, yet family-oriented; challenging, while non-controversial; creative, and yet conventional.*

*And what do those in the community expect your role to be? Would folks in your neighborhood support your efforts to run for public office—or would they suggest you stick to your flock? Would they encourage you to speak publicly on local issues, or advise you to keep a low profile? And how do you see your public role?*

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# CLERGY NOTES

## CHANGING EXPECTATIONS FOR CLERGY AS ACTIVISTS

Recently, The Polis Center invited several long-time local clergy to take part in a roundtable conversation on the topic: "What has the congregation demanded from you as a member of the clergy, and has that changed during your tenure?"

The consensus of the group was that congregational expectations have changed dramatically in three decades. Up to the late 1960s, congregations expected clergy to play an active part in the life of the community, and they did. This activism was not limited to local neighborhoods, but extended to civic life in general.

Over the past 30 years, they said, the expectation of activism has disappeared. Congregations expect clergy to focus primarily on ministering to their own parishioners. The demands of tending to their congregations leave clergy little time or energy to address civic concerns.

There is considerable historical evidence to support this perception of a changing role for clergy. The Church Federation, founded in 1912, provided the city's Protestant leaders with a public forum for wag-

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## ACTIVISTS

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ing campaigns against alcohol and prostitution. The Church Federation engaged in public showdowns with two Indianapolis mayors over the enforcement of vice laws, and in both subtle and overt ways forced city officials to take action.

It is difficult to imagine the city's clergy mounting a similar display of power at century's end. There is no one group that represents the voice of a unified Protestant community. Clergy opinions on civic matters are neither sought nor readily offered.

While clergy no longer speak with a single public voice, clergy activism in Indianapolis has not disappeared, but has taken other forms.

For example: the efforts of Catholic Archbishop Daniel Buechlein to promote Catholic education in the city. Buechlein's \$20 million fundraising drive, the focus of extensive local press

coverage, has restored the health of the city's urban Catholic schools at a time when many such schools are closing nationwide.

Through alliances like Concerned Clergy, the city's African-American clergy have been as outspoken in community affairs in the past decade as the Church Federation was in its heyday. The public activism of black ministers has been driven in large part by instances of perceived racism.

Since the civil-rights and anti-war demonstrations of the 1960s, no similar causes have galvanized the city's white clergy to act and speak in concert. Activism on the part of these clergy does continue, but it takes place on the neighborhood level, and generally at the initiative of individuals rather than organizations.

Sue Crawford's *Clergy at Work in the Secular City*, a study of Protestant clergy in Indianapolis, reports that about half of the ministers who responded to her survey felt an obligation "to be involved in activities outside of religious education, worship, and building maintenance."

The most common form of activism, with about 60 percent of clergy indicating participation, was assistance to the poor. Crawford classified poverty relief, youth programs, and the like as *gap-filling* activity. She used the term *advocacy* for attempts to "influence rules, practices, or beliefs" of government bodies. Less than one-tenth of reported

clergy activism was classified as advocacy.

Crawford reports that liberal Protestant clergy are more likely than others to be social activists. Full-time clergy are more likely to engage in activism than part-

timers. The expectations of the congregation is also an important factor.

The unified public voice and city-focused activism of Indianapolis clergy may have diminished, but have not entirely disappeared. It is even possible that locally based, individual activism has actually increased. Clergy continue to care about the welfare of the broader community, but to act on those concerns they must often do so on their own initiative.

—Ted Slutz

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VOICE AND CITY-FOCUSED  
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## STRAIGHT FROM THE SOURCE

A CONVERSATION WITH WILLIAM NOVAK

**William Novak has been pastor of Bethlehem Lutheran Church**, located at 526 E. 52<sup>nd</sup> St., since 1977. Founded in 1923, Bethlehem Lutheran at mid-century was caught between downtown and the emerging suburbs. It faced a decision: to relocate nearer its members, or stay, and work to maintain the neighborhood. Having chosen to stay, Bethlehem has declined from a peak of more than 1,000 members in the 1960s. Today, attendance at Sunday services averages about 200. But the congregation's role in maintaining and improving the neighborhood is greater than its size.

Novak has described himself as "part pastor, part community activist, and part academician." In the mid-1980s, he worked primarily through the Meridian-Kessler Neighborhood Association to effect change. In the late 1980s, he became president of the Meridian-Kessler Development Corporation, the "bricks and mortar arm" of the neighborhood association, and has remained its president ever since. His activism is now channeled primarily through that entity. The Development Corporation has rehabilitated several local houses, helped to close down a crack house, and was instrumental in the establishment of a police station, fire station, and library in the area. Here, Novak talks about his philosophy of community activism.

**Clergy Notes:** *How do you envision your role and your church's role in the neighborhood?*

**Novak:** Our primary task is to be an active, creative presence in the Meridian-Kessler/Butler-Tarkington/Keystone-Monon area to ensure that all of the neighborhood is maintained. That is not code for saying the area has to remain lily-white. But we expect crime to be under control, garbage to be picked up, and people to feel good about living here.

Our biggest failure is that we have not had a significant impact on public education. That's the big thing Indianapolis has to solve.

Our mandate is to function as a community. We know that the God we worship tells us to help our neighbors in need. The same unconditional love that we've received from God, we've now got to show to other people. I don't think my mandate as pastor is to go out and get as many people into the church as possible, but to get my parishioners to see that they are literally the body of Christ in the world. The thing we have to ask ourselves is, "How do we learn to adopt a sacrificial mode of existence?"

**Clergy Notes:** *What motivates or informs your desire to participate in the life of your community?*

**Novak:** Faith is a belief that empowers a trust, which generates a vision of what can be. And faith provides the energy and courage to act on that vision. We have been one of many catalysts in this neighborhood. We've housed the neighborhood association for 35 years, and we've led the development corporation. We meet regularly with all the community leaders and are in constant dialogue with City Hall about services. We just kind of grew into this. I don't want to claim that this is the only way, or even the right way to do it. The hardest thing for a pastor to convey to his people is that there are other ways to God; it's not that we're right and everyone else is wrong. It should be that we're so attracted to this loving, energizing God that we stop thinking of ourselves as alone in the garden with God. We live in community.



## COLLEAGUES

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In this issue, we explore how the public role of clergy has changed over this century. Sometimes that change has been shaped by congregations who expect their clergy to be hands-on managers and leaders. Community building often is regarded as an internal, rather than external, activity.

Changing expectations also reflect a shift in the city's religious center. Opinion makers whose constituency once included a large number of so-called liberal Protestants often sought the advice or consent of representative clergy leaders. Today, mainline Protestants are no longer the predominant group in the city—and a significant percentage of the population is not affiliated with any religious congregation.

Perhaps today's religious leaders are as publicly involved as their predecessors, but their involvement is more localized in a neighborhood or more focused on one particular issue. It's hard to say. What expectations do you and your congregation have of clergy?

Let's keep in touch.



Kevin

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## RESOURCES

The complete text of Sue Crawford's dissertation, *Clergy at Work in the Secular City* (Indiana University, 1995), is available at the IUPUI library. A condensed version is also available.

A number of The Polis Center's *Research Notes* deal with themes discussed in this issue. See in particular volume 1, issues 6 and 7 (Spring and Fall, 1998). *Research Notes* is available online at The Polis Center's web site ([www.thepoliscenter.iupui.edu](http://www.thepoliscenter.iupui.edu)). Go to the "TOC" page. Printed versions can be obtained by calling Polis at 274-2455.

William Novak (see related interview) cites theologian Douglas John Hall as influential in shaping his outlook. Hall's books include *Confessing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Fortress Press, 1996) and *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Eerdmans, 1986).



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