



Indianapolis Religion Briefing Paper Number 1:

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## The Religious Landscape of Indianapolis

by Arthur E. Farnsley II

Most people sense that Indianapolis is a typical, mid-sized American city with traditional values, values presumably drawn from a representative sample of American religious traditions. But how closely does this "Crossroads of America" mirror the religious landscape of the United States?

On one level, Indianapolis is representative. Virtually all major faith traditions in America occupy a place in the city's religious landscape. Catholics are the largest religious group in Indianapolis, as they are throughout the United States as a whole. The traditional mainline Protestant groups--United Methodists, Christian Churches (both Disciples of Christ and United Church of Christ), Presbyterians, Lutherans, Baptists, and Episcopalians--are all well-represented in the city's "tall steeple" churches, as well as in the many neighborhood congregations.

The "Black Church," as scholar Eric Lincoln has called it, is represented by several Baptist denominations and by groups such as Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME), African Methodist Episcopal (AME), and African Methodist Episcopal Zion, in addition to Apostolic churches and the Church of God in Christ. We have many independent Christian churches and several synagogues representing various practices of Judaism. We also have Latter Day Saints, Nazarenes, Church of God (Anderson), Muslims, and others far too numerous to mention.

While the city displays a wide variety of religions, **Indianapolis is not a microcosm** of the United States. No specific city is likely to mirror national averages. But the ways by which Indianapolis diverges from national norms deserve a closer look.

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## Religious Participation in Indianapolis

The Glenmary Research Center in Atlanta, compiles the most comprehensive inventory of religious participation in America. It reports the number of adherents--communicant members plus other participants, derived from a standard formula--for every religious group in the country. Some numbers from that report may surprise you:

**For instance, 55 percent of Americans are members or regular participants in religious congregations. *Indiana, by contrast, has a membership rate of 48 percent. Marion County has a religious membership rate of 45 percent.***

At first glance, this reputable national study suggests that if church membership is a reliable indicator of religious sentiment, then Indianapolis is *not* a very religious place compared to the rest of the United States. This finding struck many of us at THE POLIS CENTER as contrary to what we, along many Indianapolis residents, might have expected. So we decided to dig deeper to find where the divergence between Indianapolis and the rest of the nation was most apparent.

- Catholics are the largest single religious presence in Indianapolis, but not by the same margin as in the rest of the U.S. Nationally, Catholics make up about 40 percent of religious membership and about 20 percent of the total population. *In Indianapolis, Catholics make up about 25 percent of religious membership and about 10 percent of the population.*
- Counted together, Black Baptists are the second largest religious group in the city, representing about 15 percent of religious membership and 7 percent of the total population. *Black Baptists represent about one-third of all African-Americans in Indianapolis.*
- The predominantly white churches that have historically been called “mainline”--Methodists, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Presbyterians, American Baptists, Lutherans (including ELCA and Missouri Synod), Episcopalians and United Church of Christ--make up roughly another 25 percent of religious membership, or just slightly more than 10 percent of the population. *In the metropolitan area, Methodists are by far the biggest Protestant group, with its percentages far outstripping the national averages.*
- Other groups that appear in much greater proportions in Indianapolis than in the nation as a whole include Nazarenes, Churches of Christ, and independent Christian Churches. As in the rest of the Indiana, we also have disproportionate numbers of Mennonites, Brethren, and Friends (Quakers), although these groups are still relatively small.
- By national standards, the most underrepresented religious group in Indianapolis is the Southern Baptist Convention. This group represents about 14 percent of religious adherents nationwide, but less than 3 percent of adherents in Indianapolis.



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- There are about one half as many Jews in Indianapolis as in the nation as a whole, but twice as many as in the rest of the state.
  - Marion County has the second *highest* participation rate in the nine-county metropolitan area, with only Hamilton County being slightly higher. Four metropolitan counties had membership rates below 40 percent.
  - Field research confirms the common wisdom that evangelical and fundamentalist congregations are more prevalent *south* of Washington Street (U.S. 40). In Morgan County, for instance, Southern Baptists approach national averages in membership.

These numbers paint an interesting portrait of our city, a picture that seems consonant with what we are learning through field research, but one that runs counter to some common sense assumptions about Indianapolis. We know, however, that numbers are just data, and data only becomes *information* once we know what it means. We would like to suggest some interpretations for your consideration and then ask you to respond with your own interpretations based on your particular experience of religious life in the city.

First, we would suggest that the city does indeed have a “mainline” religious core that is part of its middle-class, traditional culture. Taken together, Catholics and mainline Protestants make up about one-half of religious membership. If we add the Black mainline churches--and we believe that many of these churches are central to the city’s African-American middle class--and the Jewish groups whose members are civic and business leaders, we have a picture of a city where perhaps 60 percent or more of religious membership is in groups that are part of traditional, middle-American life.

Second, the fact that Catholics, Jews, and historically Black churches can be so easily identified with the Protestant mainline core suggests that Indianapolis is not a city that emphasizes or promotes religious or ethnic difference. During a conversation with local clergy, we once commented that Catholics were the largest single group, to which a priest in the group remarked, “it sure doesn’t feel like it.” Indianapolis is a city where the Archbishop seldom takes a vocal stance against public policy and where the election of a Jewish mayor in a city with barely more than 6,000 Jews seems unworthy of comment.

These two findings--that Indianapolis has a solidly middle-class cultural core and that the city is not a hotbed for ethnic and cultural difference--do not seem very radical. But they may tell us something important about the kind of city we live in. If religious diversity is *not* a divisive issue in a city that is *very* religiously diverse--the largest group, Catholics, accounts for only about 10 percent of the population--*then why not?* If there really is a solid cultural core made up of many different elements, what holds that core together? And finally, does the notion of a core suggest a periphery of groups that are excluded? If it does, then who is left outside?

*What has been your experience of religious life in Indianapolis?* Do you think there is a religious and cultural core? Who is included in or excluded from that core? Let us know what you think about these and other questions by completing the enclosed survey form and returning it to THE POLIS CENTER. We will share your responses in a future version of this publication.



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## Largest Religious Bodies in Marion County, 1990

<i>Church/Denomination</i>	<i># Churches</i>	<i># Members</i>	<i># Adherents</i>
<b>Catholic Churches</b>	43	N.A.	84,033
<b>Black Baptist, misc.</b>	N.A.	44,584	56,403
<b>United Methodist</b>	64	29,445	37,027
<b>Christian Churches and Churches of Christ</b>	35	18,160	22,836
<b>Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)</b>	30	14,071	20,596
<b>Presbyterian Church (USA)</b>	23	14,306	17,990
<b>American Baptist USA</b>	29	9,132	11,483
<b>AME Zion</b>	6	7,945	10,328
<b>Assembly of God</b>	13	4,384	10,229
<b>Southern Baptist Convention</b>	25	7,438	9,353

**Note:** The Glenmary Research Center collects this information once every ten years. "Members" are defined as individuals with full membership status. "Adherents" include all full members, their children, and estimated number of other regular participants who are not considered communicants, confirmed, or full members.

Statistics from Martin B. Bradley, Norman M. Green, Jr., Dale E. Jones, Mac Lynn, Lou McNeil, *Churches and Church Membership in the United States: 1990: An Enumeration by Region, State and County Based on Data Reported for 133 Church Groupings*, Glenmary Research Center, Atlanta, Georgia, 1992

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## Research Notes From Faith and Community: Questionnaire

*Please take a few moments to answer the following questions. We will share a compilation of your responses in a later edition of this publication.*

Your name?

Your age?

Your gender?

Your religious organization's name?

Organization's address?

Denominational affiliation, confession, or tradition of practice?

Ethnic or racial make-up of your congregation?

<i>Percentage White (non-Hispanic)</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Percentage Hispanic</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Percentage African-American</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Percentage Asian</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Percentage Other</i>	<i>%</i>

*(Please turn this page over for more questions.)*

Think of your experiences of religious life in Indianapolis. If you had to distill those experiences, what would you say characterizes religion in Indianapolis and why?

Does your experience in Indianapolis suggest that there is, in fact, a religious and cultural core? If so, who is included in that core? Who is excluded?

Have you found this first edition of *Indianapolis Religion Briefing* informative? What sorts of issues would you like to see included in future *Briefings*?

When completed, please return this questionnaire to:  
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