

Research Notes from Faith and Community



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A Report on the 1997 Summer Research Effort

by Arthur E. Farnsley II

The summer of 1997 has been a hectic but exciting time for the Project on Religion and Urban Culture. We employed 33 high school, college, and graduate school students to help us learn about religion's role in shaping Indianapolis.

The students come from throughout central Indiana. The undergraduate and graduate students represent a wide variety of experiences and institutions. They come from Indiana University-Bloomington, Purdue University, Butler University, University of Indianapolis, Martin University, Anderson University, Depauw University, Wabash College, and Christian Theological Seminary. The majority of them have spent their summer as part of a research team assigned to a particular Indianapolis neighborhood. Others have been part of two separate analysis teams: one dedicated to searching for themes from our neighborhood research, both past and present, and the other pursuing individual projects on religion's role in Indianapolis history. Four students from Park Tudor High School are studying the role faith plays in Broad Ripple, the neighborhood just south of their school, in a project they began with The Polis Center last year.

As part of the project, the students have extended our data-gathering work. They have visited more than 150 congregations and many other kinds of community organizations and meetings, collecting the specific bits of information that are the bread-and-butter of all we do at The Polis Center. They have conducted scores of interviews, both formally and informally. But data gathering has been only one part of their jobs, as it is only one part of our mission. In seminars, team meetings, and written assignments, they have helped us digest and process the data they collect. They know, as we do, that data becomes *information* only when it is analyzed and interpreted.

Perhaps most importantly, they also have participated in our mission to return to each neighborhood with our observations and interpretations and to solicit the ideas and advice of the residents. Each team held an introductory open house and a summer-ending review session in their neighborhoods to share their findings.

Where we've been and what we did

This summer we studied the intersection of faith and community in the neighborhoods of Broad Ripple, Butler-Tarkington, the Greater Southeastside, Greenwood, Irvington, and the United Northwest Area (UNWA). As many *Research Notes* readers know, these neighborhoods were added to our initial research areas that include Carmel, Crooked Creek, the Near Eastside (NESCO), Fountain Square, Mapleton-Fall Creek, Martindale-Brightwood, and the Near Westside (WESCO).

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In each of these neighborhoods, thirteen so far, we have done site observations, interviews, and the sort of statistical analysis provided by our SAVI database system. In our original four neighborhoods—Fountain Square, Mapleton-Fall Creek, Martindale-Brightwood, and WESCO—we conducted a detailed survey of residents earlier this spring. That survey provides unprecedented insight into the relationship between religious ideas, religious organizations, and the sense of community in urban neighborhoods. You'll be hearing much more about the survey in future Research Notes and other publications of The Polis Center.

What we are learning

Because we take seriously our responsibility to collect and manage accurate information, our summer researchers gathered many numbers and statistics, which we have only begun, to process. But even at this early stage some things are evident: many congregations have fewer than 100 members; on average, about one third of a congregation's membership live in the neighborhood where the church is located; most urban congregations have only one (if even one) full-time staff member.

As we process this summer's data, we will understand the details of the story better. But the observations and experiences of our researchers are important data too. We sent them out with the broad mission to answer the big questions that drive our research:

- ***Does place matter?***

Are urban neighborhoods really as similar as they are often portrayed, or do we find meaningful differences that should inform both our understanding and our activities in those areas?

- ***Does religion build social capital in a neighborhood?***

Some neighborhoods have a strong sense of themselves and high levels of communication and cooperation. When they have those assets, have religious organizations or people of faith helped to create and sustain them?

- ***How do congregations fit into a neighborhood's infrastructure?***

Every neighborhood has a particular combination of government agencies, businesses, schools, non-profit organizations, and congregations, the organizations through which people act together to shape their lives. What role do congregations play in this interaction and, as in the first question, how different is this role from place to place?

The researchers provided a wealth of ideas and analysis in answer to these questions, not all of which could possibly be recounted here. But some major themes emerged that are important enough to share.

1. Each urban neighborhood is unique.

At first this observation seems a truism. Of course each neighborhood is unique. Each has different people, different houses, and different businesses. But the distinctions go much deeper than that. Each neighborhood has a history and a culture that has produced specific key individuals and organizations. What people like about their neighborhood, and what they would change if they could, varies tremendously from place to place.

Butler-Tarkington and UNWA, for instance, are separated spatially only by 38th Street. But the two neighborhoods are worlds apart when they think about their problems and what they expect both from the city and from their fellow neighbors. The area usually called "the south side" of Indianapolis is the subject of a prevalent stereotype: Appalachian, working class, white, perhaps even "simple." Many residents use

some of these terms to describe themselves. But the four neighborhoods that our researchers studied within the south side were very different. Any planned activity—whether public policy or social service delivery or mission strategy—is likely to go astray if it treats even the south side, much less the downtown area, as a whole.

2. Community means different things to different people.

Another possible truism, this finding is more of a warning than a conclusion. Anyone who wants to stimulate community, perhaps by increasing communication with the police or organizing neighbors for some civic purpose, should understand that *the meaning of place varies tremendously, even within similar areas of the city*. Place is not always easy to define. The term “Broad Ripple” probably means something to everyone who reads this. But it means something very different depending on whether you own a business there, patronize the local entertainment venues, or live in the quiet residential area just south of the strip.

Whether residents of UNWA think of their neighborhood as a place with meaning and value may depend a great deal on their ages and their status. There is a substantial separation between young and old, just as there is between homeowners and renters (and the two lines often intersect). Any religious or governmental activity meant to enhance community must consider what community means to the people involved.

Is that community created and nurtured through the congregations? It is, but in genuinely different ways. Congregations are located in some place, but they are not always part of the neighborhood community where they are located. We know from our survey that the kinds of social networks people build through their congregations vary both by type of congregation and, to many people’s surprise, by the neighborhood in which they are located.

3. Neighborhoods have different combinations of congregations.

When most people think of congregations, they define them in terms of beliefs. What it means to be Catholic or Baptist is usually defined by theology and styles of worship. But what a congregation means to do, and certainly what it can do, is significantly shaped by its social environment. One very important, and frequently overlooked, component of that environment is the other congregations that exist in the neighborhood.

UNWA is a neighborhood with more than seventy congregations, many of which are small. Butler-Tarkington and Irvington each have fewer than twenty congregations. It’s hard to find a church in the area most people define as Broad Ripple unless you know where to look.

The range of community needs and the range of resources available to meet those needs are both determined to some degree by the kind of congregations. A neighborhood full of big congregations with many resources is different than a neighborhood full of small, often storefront, congregations. A neighborhood full of congregations dedicated to social ministry is different from one full of churches committed to evangelism and “soul-winning.” A neighborhood with congregations whose members live nearby is different than a neighborhood with congregations whose members commute from elsewhere.

4. Neighborhoods have different infrastructures.

This observation is related to but more complicated than the one above. Each neighborhood, each place, has a combination of organizations through which people live their lives together. The role played by congregations as a whole and by any particular congregation is shaped by the other pieces of that infrastructure.

For instance, a neighborhood with thriving local schools has an outlet for youth activities and a catalyst for community spirit. But when those schools close or change character drastically, congregations are often called upon to pick up the slack on both counts. In Irvington, for instance, the congregations feel an even greater urgency to promote the neighborhood’s sense of itself. Moreover, Our Lady of Lourdes

parochial school has become even more of a community organization since the closing of Howe High School.

Other elements of the neighborhood's infrastructure shape the congregational landscape. In Garfield Park, one of the southeast side neighborhoods, the park itself serves as a rallying point for the community and shapes the role of the congregations that sit on its perimeter by creating a sense of community pride and identification that other neighborhoods often lack. In University Heights and in Butler-Tarkington, the presence of the University of Indianapolis and Butler University, respectively, influence what kind of neighbors move nearby and what kind of congregations choose to locate there. In both instances, we know of congregations that chose their sites specifically to be near the campus. The same is true of residents who chose, and can afford, to live there.

These are merely examples of a much larger point: what is needed by a neighborhood and what is possible for a congregation to do is shaped by what else exists. A neighborhood with a successful YMCA may need something different than a neighborhood with strong housing development but no youth programs.

5. Place Matters: Congregations must be understood in social context.

Too often congregations are treated as solitary organizations that can be defined by what they believe and by the socio-economic character of their membership. Those variables are important, but so too is the social and cultural context in which the congregation acts.

This insight probably ranks somewhere below $E=mc^2$ in the grand scheme of things, but it is too often missing from public thinking—both political and theological—about the role of congregations in the urban environment. The point is not that people do not know that context matters; they do. But what they often do not realize is that context matters at a very local level, that it is not enough to separate the inner city from the suburbs or the older suburbs from the new edge cities.

Understanding religion's role in a complex urban environment requires complex (but not necessarily complicated) thinking. When considering an interpretation of or an action in the urban environment, we must take the time to reflect on which variables—which component pieces of the world—are crucial to what we want to know or do. We must then try to understand how those pieces work in the context of the other significant pieces with which they interact.

It is possible to think so long about something that nothing ever gets done, but it is also possible to do too much too quickly and without sufficient thought. The Polis Center is working hard to ensure that the essential information about the social context of congregations and other organizations exists. With your help, and with the help of young scholars like those who joined us this summer, we hope to use that information to improve understanding about and activity in the urban arena.

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