



The Polis Center  
*We bring things into perspective.\**

# CLERGY NOTES

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*from the Project on Religion and Urban Culture*

## **Cities on a Journey**

As a child, I was brought up with Bible maps that plotted in huge squiggles Abraham's wanderings through the ancient Near East. The community which Abraham and Sarah drew around them seems a model for our contemporary experience of rootlessness, and aspiration for community: for a place where blessings are shared, strangers welcomed, faith is passed on, hope takes root, and relationships are tested.

Recently, I sat with a group of Indianapolis folk as they mapped their congregation's journey from the Circle, to a small chapel a few blocks away, to a larger building further north. These modern pilgrims told of risks taken, of expectations raised and of misunderstandings. Themes of migration, of being the outsider, of the search for "home" are a regular feature in our life together as congregations.

Sometimes it seems the entire metropolis is moving about to find its bearings, its identity, and a way of life that can be called home. Cities journey. They evolve, some parts decaying as other parts regenerate. One of the encouraging findings of Polis Center research is that many Indianapolis communities, religious and civic, are committed to taking an active part in shaping this journey.

But what is often lacking is the vision to see the metropolis as a whole rather than a collection of parts. For example, there are thriving suburban congregations whose members play significant roles in the city. And yet these congregations often neglect their potential for influence. With their well-positioned and informed members, these congregations could take their critique to the city and put it into action. There are struggling center-city congregations, with few members who exercise any decisive role in city business or government, who nonetheless raise a loud critical voice from the midst of largely overlooked communities.

Is it possible for people who share a city to share a common vision? Art Farnsley, director of research at The Polis Center, describes it this way: *The question is not how to get people to move back downtown, but rather how to get people to understand that the fate of the center city, and inner suburbs, and outlying counties are permanently linked. And the answer is not to promote this linkage as an abstract concept, but to get hard information about how specific decisions about policing, education, social services, and the rest affect the entire metropolis no matter where or by whom they are made.*

## What Makes A Good City?

The ancients' view of the city ranged from horror to delight. To some, Heaven itself was a city. Others regarded the city as ritually unclean and corrupt. But most faith traditions today see the city as a place where exiled people can make their homes in hope and where the Creator's message is joyfully proclaimed. British writer John Vincent argues the city is both an image of divine presence in creation and also the epitome of human ambition, vanity and greed. It is at once the product of human creativity, and the result of an abuse of resources, people, and relationships. Vincent writes: *There are constant tensions between what the city could be and what it is, between the dream and the reality.*

So what makes a good city? That's one of the questions this newsletter will be posing of you and your congregation in the year ahead. Be thinking about what resources your faith tradition brings to the journey, and what ideas you have for making this city a good home.

Let's keep in touch.

*Kevin*

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