



The Polis Center
We bring things into perspective.

CLERGY NOTES

from the Project on Religion and Urban Culture

I remember when religion was the backbone of this community. Behind every hospital, school, orphanage, homeless shelter, or soup kitchen you would find a group of dedicated congregations. Methodist Hospital, Lutherwood, Catholic Charities, Hooverwood – they were all started by religious organizations! You just don't find that kind of religious influence today. What happened to the commitment of the religious community?

Call It “Declension”...

Scholars use the term *declension* to describe the deterioration or declining influence of an organization or institution. For example, many historians claim that religion's role in social welfare has declined from its influential position at the beginning of this century. Mary Mapes, a historian at The Polis Center, finds this claim misleading. Mapes contends that:

The theme of declension... encourages the tendency to pay more attention to what religion is *not doing* and what it *used to do* rather than to what it *is doing* and *continues to do*.

Her argument is not that we should ignore evidence of religion's declining role; rather, she says, this is not the only story to tell about religious influence and social welfare.

... Or Staying Power

It is true that Indianapolis Methodists no longer are building hospitals, Catholics are not constructing orphanages, and the number of faith-based homeless shelters is about the same today as it was twenty years ago. What should not be overlooked, however, is the fact that these institutions have persevered over the years.

Even today, at least seven of the city's institutions serving the homeless have religious affiliations. The two largest hospitals in Indianapolis both are church-related and are nearly one hundred years old. The old Catholic Charities organization continues its efforts through the Catholic Social Services office.

The financial dependence of these institutions on their faith-based organizers is significantly less than it once was, but a review of their governing boards reveals that religious influence is still present in the boardrooms. Moreover, the cadres of volunteers who keep these organizations going often come from local congregations.

A Different Presence

Few religious colleges or universities have been created in the last twenty years, but the rise in faith-based pre-schools, elementary schools, and high schools has been dramatic. The Juvenile Court no longer assigns custody of all the city's dependent Catholic children to Catholic Charities as they did in 1950, but the court recently has renewed its efforts to offer families a faith-based alternative to public social welfare agencies. While the Department of Public Welfare no longer makes referrals to the "Room for Weary Mothers" operated by a local congregation earlier in this century, that same congregation now provides a daycare for mothers moving from welfare to work and accepts state "Daybreak" funding for that program.

In their partnerships with faith-based organizations, public agencies that once emphasized the care of the child now emphasize the "village" in which that child is raised. They see a growing role for congregations as agents for community development.

The role of religious institutions in the delivery of social welfare services has certainly changed, but that doesn't mean the role is less meaningful or important. Sometimes, stepping outside of the assumptions of "declension" help us see the stories we might otherwise miss.

Take a look around ... and let's keep in touch.



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