December, 1997

Dear Colleague:

Thanks to those of you who responded to our last Research Note, "Myths About Urban Congregations." Your ideas and commentary are essential.

The Project on Religion and Urban Culture has been underway for three years now, so at least a few of our partners are beginning to feel over-studied. We appreciate the considerable demands on each of our partner's time, and want to stress that we do not think of your responses as surveys, but as opportunities for you to join us in conversation. It is our intention to provoke conversation. In mid-1998 we will call a conference of Research Notes respondents, to give you a chance to speak directly to one another about the topics—especially the concept of "local" ministry—being addressed in these pages.

In this issue of Research Notes we continue our discussion of "urban congregations as local actors." Our goal, as always, is a better understanding of how faith relates to community in Indianapolis.

Art Farnsley

Indianapolis Religion Briefing Paper Number 4

Urban Congregations as Local Actors:
The Rest of the Story

In the last issue of Research Notes, we discussed some mistaken impressions that persist about the relationship between urban congregations and their local communities. In many neighborhoods, the majority of worshippers and clergy do not live in the area surrounding their church or synagogue. Many congregations do not have formal programs designed to serve the adjacent community, or they don't have the resources to implement such programs.

We are reporting on urban congregations because that has been the primary focus of our research and analysis. These congregations are not being singled out for praise or criticism; research findings are descriptive facts, not moral judgments. There are good reasons to see in these facts both potential assets and vulnerabilities.

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Most Christians, for instance, believe they are called to love and to serve their neighbors. But must "neighbors" be defined as people who live near the sanctuary? In a mobile society, good stewardship may require making choices in which locale is not the overriding consideration. But this may also be a way of avoiding uncomfortable circumstances.

If members do not live in the same neighborhood as their worship site, or even in the same neighborhood as one another, then a traditional "community" *is* more difficult to maintain. But especially in poorer neighborhoods, the fact that financially successful members move away, but still return to the neighborhood to worship, might be seen as cause for celebration.

Significant racial or socioeconomic differences between the members of a congregation and the people who live around their sanctuary make communication and trust more difficult. On the other hand, when people from wealthier neighborhoods worship and serve in poorer neighborhoods, they often bring with them resources — both money and expanded social networks—that the poor neighborhood lacks.

The more we look into questions of local commitment and community building, the more we realize how complex the issues really are. It is no simple matter to say how congregations think and act in their local environment, nor is it easy to assess the kind of impact they have.

Some Indianapolis congregations do not think or act locally nor do they intend to do so. But many congregations do think and act locally, making an impact on the people who live around their place of worship and on the wider metropolitan area. Many more think that they should be acting locally, they are just not sure how to do it.

Local identification, we have found, falls into five different categories. While some congregations may be local thinkers and actors across the board, others will be best described by only one or two of the categories. In any case, the categories help clarify why different congregations have very different programs and activities, with different results, even though many of them share a commitment to local mission.

The Categories

1. Self-Perception

The first category is "self-perception" or "self-description" by the congregation. Does the congregation believe that it does, or should, serve the local community? All congregations reflect both formally and informally on their mission and their histories. They describe themselves, even if sometimes those descriptions are vague. This category emphasizes the degree to which that self-description includes engagement of any sort with the surrounding neighborhood.

Catholic parishes, for instance, automatically think of themselves as local. A parish is a geographical area that defines where members live and where the congregation expects to serve.

This assumption that members live locally is also important. Whether members do in fact live nearby or not, it is important to know whether congregations *think* that their members live near the worship building or at least think that they should live nearby.

Do congregations describe themselves in local terms? Do they aim their outreach activities — whether service or evangelism — at the local neighbors? (Whether those neighbors accept the offer is a matter considered in a different category.) Does the congregation actively recruit from the neighborhood or encourage neighbors who are not members to visit or use facilities such as playgrounds or meeting rooms? Do the members of the congregation feel like they really know the neighbors and understand what those neighbors want and need?

This category is more subjective than the other four, but even here it is possible to think objectively about a congregation's self-image, and it is certainly possible for congregations to reflect on their own opinions and beliefs. We think it is important to ask, "What do *congregations* think they are doing?" before we try to analyze what *we* think they are doing.

Our goal is not to convince congregations that they should have a local mission. Our goal is to find out what those missions are and to determine the impact they have on the surrounding community.

2. *Objective Description*

The reverse of self-perception is plain description, the most objective of the categories. Here one can ask clearly answerable questions such as "do 50 per cent or more of the congregation's members live in the surrounding neighborhood?" As we suggested last time, the honest answer for most urban Indianapolis congregations will be "no." [1]

Other indicators here could be equally objective. Do local neighbors regularly use the congregation's building and other facilities? Are the congregation's members demographically similar to the folks who live around their building? That is, do they share race, class, educational attainment, age, family composition, or any other characteristics? (Hint: if a congregation doesn't know the answer to that question, that is probably a good clue that its orientation is not local). Does the pastor live in the neighborhood near the building?

Taken together, these descriptive facts will say a lot about a congregation's local orientation. But they are not the whole story. Many people assume that the answer to these questions immediately predicts all of the other answers. We have heard repeatedly that "the problem with the churches in this neighborhood is that the pastors don't even live here."

We recognize the importance of these descriptive factors, but residence and demographic characteristics such as race or class are only pieces of a larger puzzle. Therefore, we treat these objective descriptors as only one category, albeit a crucial one, in determining a congregation's ability to build and sustain community within urban neighborhoods.

3. *Historical Commitment*

Sometimes congregations are de facto local actors because they occupy such a longstanding place in the neighborhood's history. Congregations may be oriented toward the local neighborhood because their members once lived in that neighborhood, even if that connection is now several generations removed. Knowing how long a congregation has been in a place is a helpful clue in determining local commitment.

Congregations may also have an historic commitment to a place because of their investment in their worship buildings or other facilities. The degree to which a congregation views its facilities as an extension of itself, and the degree to which it sees that building as a vital part of the neighborhood landscape, are important indicators. If other congregational programs — such as schools or day cares — are viewed as resources for the neighborhood that do not benefit only members, that would also implysome ongoing, historical rolewithin the neighborhood.

4. *Neighborhood Networks*

A good measure of a congregation's local involvement is the interaction the group has with other local actors, whether individuals or organizations. Some congregations work with other congregations in their area to address social-service needs or to create venues for socializing and recreation. Some groups work closely with neighborhood associations, community development corporations, economic development corporations, or neighborhood leaders.

When this happens, the congregation clearly views itself as a civic actor, as an organization with responsibility beyond the spiritual care of its own members and even beyond local evangelism. This is different than the category of "self-perception" mentioned above, however, because a congregation could see itself as local but have little interest in cooperative efforts that are civic and secular. Some Indianapolis congregations assume responsibility for a neighborhood's spiritual care and moral education but have little interest in neighborhood associations or housing rehabilitation. Some evangelical groups witness frequently to those who live around the church building but do not promote economic development.

There are many networks, beyond obvious religious ties to denominations or other congregations, within which congregations operate: neighborhood interest groups, non-profit social services, recreational services, and city or local government, to name a few. The degree to which a congregation participates actively in these other networks is one way to identify its commitment to the local community.

5. *Social Service*

This category considers the degree to which congregations focus their social service provision on the local neighbors. If congregations have food pantries and clothing pantries for those who live around them, that is a sign of local commitment and involvement. If their school, day care facility, or other service provision is meant primarily to serve a local clientele beyond their own membership, that is another indicator.

Most congregations do some kind of social service provision, even if their involvement is limited to canned food drives or monetary donations to denominational charities. Many groups offer assistance "in general," or as part of much larger cooperative efforts such as the United Way.

One way to pose this question is to ask whether the congregation views social services to non-members as part of its mission. How much of its budget goes toward such services? Are staff members or volunteers organized to provide services in an ongoing, regular fashion?

Most service provision programs do not have concrete boundaries. In many congregations, services are offered to whomever needs them: sometimes a member or a member's family, wherever they live, sometimes people in the vicinity. But it is still possible to ask how intentionally a group has selected a geographic area on which it focuses its attention.

The degree to which evangelism efforts target the neighborhood near the worship building would also be an indicator on this scale. If a group sees its primary mission as saving souls or creating new members from among the local neighbors, that is another way to imagine this sort of local focus.

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Our goal is not to promote civic involvement by congregations, or to hold up a local focus as an ideal, but to clarify how congregations think and act locally. There is more than one way to express local commitment, and we hope to discover how those differences play themselves out in the everyday lives of real people.

We always welcome your ideas and opinions, and we are especially eager to solicit your views on this issue. Are we on track to be thinking about congregations as local actors? Do these categories of "local" involvement make sense? What differences do you see among congregations that might help us understand more clearly the distinctions suggested here. For instance, does it matter how long a congregation has been in a neighborhood? How important is it that a congregation think of itself as a neighborhood institution?

If you could spare a moment to consider this discussion and share your thoughts with us on the attached sheet, it would be immensely helpful.

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[1] Although we know more about urban congregations than suburban ones, the difference between the two seems to be primarily a matter of degree. While it is true that congregations in Greenwood or Carmel, for instance, draw more of their members from the surrounding area, one must remember just how large and vague those surrounding areas really are. Mapleton-Fall Creek or UNWA, for example, are well defined neighborhoods with explicit boundaries. Greenwood and Carmel, on the other hand, represent cultural definitions that go well beyond any municipal boundaries. As we sometimes say, Greenwood and Carmel are not just towns, they are states of mind.

RESPONSE TO RESEARCH NOTES 3

The responses to Research Note 3 were unanimous. The thirty-six clergy and lay leaders who have responded so far are convinced that congregations must focus their ministry attention on the people who live around their houses of worship. They said that their congregations either had, or were moving toward, such a mission focus whether they had a written mission statement or not.

For the record, twenty-four of the thirty-one respondents who answered the question directly said that their congregation did have a mission statement. Because the large majority of our respondents are Catholic or mainline Protestant, it is not surprising that 75% of them have formal mission statements.

On the face of it, the insistence on local orientation is also unsurprising. Who, after all, wants to step forward and say, "Who cares about the people in the neighborhood? We want to associate with people like ourselves no matter where they live."

The unanimity in these responses is no doubt related to the nature of our work. It is only natural that clergy who have a local orientation are also the most likely to be interested in research about faith and community, and so are also most likely to respond to our Research Notes. But if the emphasis on local missions is strong enough that no one bothered to argue against it here, then we must ask why this is so, which was the thrust of our second question.

One Catholic priest offered that "No one congregation can service the whole city in all the ways it needs to be served. But if I can serve the needs of those around me while others are doing the same in their neighborhoods, eventually the whole city does get reached."

This parish orientation was not limited to Catholics. Said a Lutheran minister, "I believe in the 'parish principle'—that we are called to serve the place in which a congregation is located." Said a United Church of Christ pastor, "Congregations need to identify a neighborhood that surrounds their house of worship so that they are not isolated from reality. They need to be 'sharing space' with other congregations and with other residents."

An Episcopal priest put the question in theological focus: "The Christian Church is a historical, incarnational religion. This theology directs and demands that we be in a particular geography and culture. Without connection to the immediate community, a parish is in danger of becoming a closed, spiritual coterie, and can justify 'movement to the suburbs' because there are no ties to their more urban locale. Local ministry depends on the presence, communication, and sensitivity to the neighborhood. The stance has to go beyond openness to active involvement in the concerns of the neighbors."

Those final observations —that the stance must move beyond openness toward active involvement, and that sensitivity and communication are required — were echoed widely in the responses. There was an overwhelming sense among our respondents that congregations risked losing their relevancy if they could not get out into their neighborhoods and learn the concerns of those around

them. Said one Presbyterian minister, "We are seeking to move from being a church that serves the neighborhood to a church that includes and incorporates our neighbors into the life of the church."

But many acknowledged just how difficult that communication and understanding could be. Said one Baptist leader, "This isn't an easy thing when members live in scattered areas and church neighbors aren't well known. How do we get to know our neighbors?"

Knowing one's neighbor is even more difficult because of residential mobility, but at least one Methodist pastor cited this as the reason congregations must think locally: "We are a mobile society and when people move the church needs to invite them into a new church home."

At the recent Faith and Community conference on congregations and community life, Presbyterian minister Phil Thom stressed the importance of getting out into a neighborhood and meeting the neighbors one by one. He said that the question was not, "which of our programs is of interest to you?" or even "what program would you like us to have?" The question, in his view, is, "what do you need?" and that question can be answered only by asking neighbors directly.

We are always thinking about ways that our research can be valuable both to Indianapolis clergy and to other audiences who will benefit from a better understanding of religious life in the city. As we considered these responses to our third Research Note, two points became clear. First, many congregational leaders believe they would benefit from an increased understanding of social conditions in their neighborhood. In our response sheet for Research Notes 4 we ask whether you believe you would benefit from training in surveying, interviewing, or examining available resources such as the U.S. census or the SAVI database.

Second, all of us would benefit from well-informed, critical discussion about what it means to think and act locally. Many cross-pressures (no pun intended) shape urban religion, whether the tension between suburbanization and the social gospel or the difficulty involved in stressing both individual spirituality and social service.

Said one Christian Church minister, "Seems to me the movement among congregations now is strongly toward local manifestations of mission with national (denominational) and world missions receding. We help where we can see the help."

If he is right, and our Research Notes respondents certainly confirm his opinion, then it makes sense for us to think critically about what is at stake in emphasizing local missions. Research Notes 4 is intended as a tool to begin that discussion.

Available Soon From The Polis Center:

Voices of Faith is a book of interviews and photographs, featuring twenty-five people whose community work is deeply rooted in religious faith. The book portrays how private faith translates into efforts for the public good in one American city. The voices represent a rich contribution to the oral history of Indianapolis.

The individual voices speak from five neighborhoods — all urban, all poor. Their opinions, while giving due credit to the many good things happening in the name of religious faith, are clear-eyed. The speakers give one hope, even as they must cope with the stubborn problems that continue to haunt America's urban poor.

Religion as a Window on Culture is a six-part video series, shot in Indianapolis, that focuses on four major themes: Sacred Space, Sacred Time, Sacred Memory, and Sacred Journey. As these concepts are common to a spectrum of religious practices, they allow us to explore the similarities among religions that we often perceive as radically different.

It is the goal of this series to identify the universal elements in diverse religions, and to study specific cultures through the window of their religious traditions. By learning about those around us, we may better understand our own traditions through comparison, and appreciate how the culture of a city is composed of related, yet distinct elements. The videos portray houses of worship, religious services, moments of private devotion, and feature interviews with noted religious leaders.

This video package is available with curriculum guides for use in college classrooms, and for adult discussion groups in congregations.

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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. If you have previously completed one of these questionnaires, we need only your name before you turn to the questions on the back.

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?

Percentage White (non-Hispanic)	%
Percentage Hispanic	%
Percentage African American	%
Percentage Asian	%
Percentage Other	%

(Please turn this page over for more questions.)

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