

RESEARCH NOTES

Findings from Religion & Urban Culture 2.0

Congregation and Community Revisited



Every congregation is a combination of places: the street address of the house of worship, the neighborhoods where their members live, and the communities—local or global—defined as mission fields, among others.

Sometimes, the Venn diagram of these places shows a lot of overlap. At least a few congregations have sanctuaries where all the members can walk to worship. Orthodox synagogues, represented in Indianapolis by B'nai Torah, are examples of this condition. Some congregations focus their mission efforts on the neighborhood around their building, even if the members themselves do not live there.



Jewish family walking to synagogue.

But increasingly, the overlap among these various places, if any, is less straightforward. At least two congregations in our study—one mainline and one firmly evangelical—now refer to their traditional, contemporary, virtual, and “other site” congregations as separate entities. As one leader notes, “five congregations, one budget.” In such a scenario, what is their community or neighborhood? The rise of digital communication and streaming worship will only make the relationship among these pieces more complicated.

The original Religion and Urban Culture (RUC) project, 1996-2002, focused primarily on the interplay between congregations and the neighborhoods where their buildings sit. But this neighborhood nexus is only one relationship between congregations and communities, although an especially important one. Even before that project, Art Farnsley and David Bodenhamer worked together on Emory University sociologist Nancy Ammerman’s project, *Congregation and Community*, which examined congregations in neighborhoods undergoing major changes. This current *Research Notes* uses learnings from those earlier projects to interpret hundreds of pages of coded field notes and

interviews drawn from the current RUC 2.0 project. Although RUC 2.0's focus is how congregations adapt to changes of all kinds, changes in their connections to the neighborhood around their buildings is one important facet of that adaptation.

Congregations and Social Safety Nets

Congregations fill many gaps in the social safety net. Twenty years ago, University of Pennsylvania sociologist Ram Cnaan documented the remarkable financial value of goods, services, and space congregations provided. Food pantries are the first thing most people think of, and they are right to do so because numerous congregations offer these mission services. The first *Responsive Congregations newsletter* in RUC 2.0 focused on the efforts of Second Presbyterian Church to expand its large food pantry to a variety of other community-based ministries across the area the congregation defined as a primary mission field, Washington Township.

Second Church's decision to stay local raises an important question: ***To what degree do congregations think geographically and why do they do that?*** The Polis Center helped Second Presbyterian learn more about the area surrounding their house of worship, the Washington Township area of Indianapolis. Second's members learned there was more poverty, and a larger immigrant population, than they realized. They decided to act more locally—"in the shadow of their steeple"—in mission outreach because they saw a need they had assumed did not exist in an area with expensive homes and a highly educated population.

The decision to act locally was not inevitable. Despite the documented need in Washington Township, it is not, in fact, where most of Second's members live. It is also not where poverty is highest in Indianapolis. In fact, money spent in Washington Township meant less money spent on Second's longstanding mission outpost of Westminster Presbyterian downtown

Amid many needs, Second Presbyterian chose to act more locally than it had previously. But any decision to focus on the areas around their buildings, which clearly is a defensible and coherent strategy, now confronts a new phenomenon made more evident by the pandemic. How will digital, streaming participation in congregational life affect this model of ministry? It is one thing to "act locally" even when members live far afield. But what if many members no longer come to



Volunteers clean debris from neighborhood.

the building? Is there a point where congregations do not need the expensive, resource-consuming buildings at all?

The focus on the area surrounding the building suggests that many congregations may still rely on a traditional parish model as the norm. For theological traditions that still have parishes, this makes considerable sense. In principle, every area of the city is part of some parish, so everyone is included in this geographical model of ministry. But only Catholics, and to a lesser extent Episcopalians, have a coordinated parish system covering the diocese, which itself is a coherent, bounded unit. Even within these traditions, parish administrators acknowledge that the parish allegiances are much weaker than was true 40 years ago.

But does such a model make sense for theological traditions not organized in this way? If, for instance, a congregation is the only one of its kind in the city, in what sense should its ministries have a neighborhood focus at all? And if a congregation operates as a kind of cathedral, a metro-wide center of activity, can it still work locally in the neighborhood sense?

There is another dynamic that operates in the neighborhood model of ministry, although one that congregations often do not consider, namely, what role do their neighbors want or expect congregations to play in their communities? Even if they do not regard themselves as part of any geographic parish, adjacent communities still expect the people who use this building to be good neighbors. And when there are racial or ethnic or other cultural ties, neighbors' expectations, as well as those of the



.....

ONE ADVANTAGE TO
FOOD MINISTRIES
IS THAT THEY CAN
OFFER FOOD WITHOUT
COMPLEX BUREAUCRACIES
OR LEGAL WRANGLING.

.....

congregations, change too. For instance, many Black church buildings sit in downtown, African American neighborhoods even though the members of those congregations have moved to the suburbs. In these cases, both the congregants and the neighbors have specific expectations about the interaction between congregation and community.

Most Black churches do think of the community around their houses of worship as a specific mission field, but the kind of mission work they do vary. For example, Mt. Zion Baptist has older members and many ministries aimed at older folks such as housing, a credit union, and social programming. They work locally, but with a specific focus.

How do congregations think about their role in the ecology of social service organizations?

Congregational food pantries and similar ministries supplement what government does, but it also reduces pressure for structural change by filling gaps in government programs. It is easy to get people to volunteer time and money for the food safety net, but is food insecurity the biggest public need?

One advantage to food ministries is that they can offer food without complex bureaucracies or legal wrangling. Many congregations—more than we realized—partner with Gleaners and let them manage the administrative work and even the food collection, with the congregations serving as the point of delivery. But this raises a related question: Why are congregations less likely to tackle more complex issues such as housing, job training, or crime prevention with equal energy? Some do this, to be sure, but most do not.

To what degree are service ministries, such as food pantries, a tool for evangelization and how often do clergy or congregants see them that way? This is a clear line of separation for theological conservatives and liberals. Liberals typically do not offer separate explicitly religious messaging as a prerequisite for receiving food or other services. Evangelicals do it routinely. The two main shelters for homeless persons in downtown Indianapolis famously break along these lines with one insisting on prayer and a sermon to get supper and a bed, the other eschewing that altogether. Their funding streams show how their sponsors feel about the two approaches. This distinction has existed for decades.

But the line is not always easy to draw. We can point to an African American congregation in the United Methodist tradition that is liberal on social issues such as economic redistribution but that preaches a message of salvation to those who come to receive food. When a food recipient accepts Jesus, folks in the food pantry office ring a little bell.



Serving food in homeless shelter kitchen.



Congregations have widely diverse ways of thinking about their mission subjects. For some, it is very local—their mission is to the neighborhood around their building. For others, it is broadly local—Indianapolis is their neighborhood.

Who are the recipients and how are they understood? Congregations want to be transformative, not just transactional, as Northside Mission Ministries makes clear. But the definition of transformation is wide open. For some congregations, transformation is about God's salvation. People who are right with God will develop better habits and see the material circumstances of their lives change. For others, transformation is about providing enough resources for recipients to get to a place where they can help themselves. Or transformation may be about systemic change; individuals will get better opportunities when the system corrects inequities. These distinctions are as old as American religion and have evolved throughout the 20th century—and are still evolving two decades into the 21st century.

Congregations have widely diverse ways of thinking about their mission subjects. For some, it is very local—their mission is to the neighborhood around their building. For others, it is broadly local—Indianapolis is their neighborhood. For yet other congregations, it is global. The largest and most affluent congregations may address all these geographies, but even in these congregations a change in mission emphasis or focus creates a ripple effect in the rest of the ecology. A congregation that decides to focus on its local neighborhood will redirect resources from other places they might have been supporting, but even here the decision to go more local may run into changes in the external environment that challenge the original decision. In RUC 1.0, the congregations of Mapleton-Fall Creek were notable because they had many ministries to the African American residents of the neighborhood even though the congregations' members no longer lived there. Now, just twenty years later, Mapleton-Fall Creek is full of young white families. It is too soon to tell how the ministries located there will change, but New Circle Baptist, located in the old building of Our Redeemer Lutheran, offers some clues as it provides ministries aimed at young, urban professionals.

One important finding from the current research is that it matters greatly whether congregants see themselves as privileged, and thus the provider of services, or see themselves as representative of groups who need services. If the latter, they are much more likely to be interested in systemic change. It also matters, as mentioned above, whether the congregation shares other kinds of ties with the neighbors around their building who might require assistance. The link is likely to be stronger when congregations share ethnic, racial, or cultural ties with their immediate neighbors.

Grappling with a Theory of Change

One of the most important variables in the relationship between congregation and community is the congregation's theory of change. Put most simply: What do members mean to accomplish with their mission efforts? Do they want to convert people to their system of beliefs? Do they want to give assistance to those who need it? Do they want to keep the neighborhood's character intact? Do they want to change the way government, education, or the marketplace shapes the lives of their mission subjects? These examples are not mutually exclusive, but a congregation's activities will reflect what it sees as most critical.

How do congregations decide where to put their time and treasure? In some cases, the link is historic or traditional. Members do things the way they have always done. In other cases, a single member, a small group, or a pastor demonstrate a passion and commitment that lead the congregation in a direction it had not foreseen. Many variables shape whether a congregation's outreach focuses on individual or systemic change.

If the goal is systemic change, there are diverse ways to go at it. The most obvious is lobbying government, at whatever level, to provide better materials or services. Here, the congregation becomes a bully pulpit and tries



Volunteers building a home through Habitat for Humanity.

to use its organizational strength and moral force to achieve its goals.

But this is not the only option. A few congregations have created Community Development Corporations (CDCs). Englewood Christian Church, the topic of the most recent *Responsive Congregations*, has a CDC with multiple mission goals. They mean to make decent housing affordable to their neighbors, thus preserving their neighborhood and providing people a place to live, but they also rent some of their property at “market rates” as a means of funding their ongoing activities. They rent to small businesses to spur economic development. They helped develop the Purdue Polytechnic High School in their neighborhood to stimulate economic growth, train local kids for job opportunities, and encourage young families to move into the neighborhood for their children’s schooling.

There are other non-profit opportunities for mission work beyond CDCs. Some congregations work with Habitat for Humanity. Others work with health care or provide services to young mothers. Many sponsor schools or day care at below-market prices. All of these are ways to correct gaps in the outcomes created

by the government or the marketplace that leave vulnerable people exposed. The difficulty involved in delivering services also plays a role. Nursing and health programs may be less frequent than they were 20 years ago, but vaccination sites were common among study congregations. The risks of litigation may play a role in these decisions.

These activities can be “local” in the geographic sense, and often they are. But they do not have to be. Congregations can be involved in metro-wide, national, or even global ministries. It all depends on what they think missions are meant to do, how they define need, how they believe change occurs, and how tied their members are to an external environment. And even if they are local, the meaning of “local” is hard to pin down. Some congregations see themselves as metropolitan actors rather than neighborhood actors. History and culture, as well as theology and demography, play a role in determining the strength of connections.

Written by Arthur E. Farnsley II

Research Notes is a publication of the Project on Religion and Urban Culture 2.0, a joint initiative of the IU School of Liberal Arts and Polis Center, both at IUPUI. RUC 2.0 examines how Indianapolis-area congregations have adapted to rapid social and technological changes since 2000, using findings from an earlier project (RUC 1.0) as a baseline. Both projects have been supported by a grant from Lilly Endowment, Inc. Subscribe to future research highlights [here](#). Read past issues [here](#). For more information, contact polis@iupui.edu.