

RESEARCH NOTES

Findings from Religion & Urban Culture 2.0

The Congregational-Community Nexus: Common Ground or Conflict?

One of the most surprising findings of the initial Project on Religion and Urban Culture (RUC 1.0) was the tenuous connections that existed between congregations and the surrounding neighborhoods. Most people assumed that congregations were intensely local, with strong links to the communities that surrounded them geographically and even with most parishioners living near the place of worship. Public policy rested on such assumptions. Mayor Steven Goldsmith's Front Porch Alliance was an example of a faith-based partnership between local government and congregations because, in the mayor's view, faith-based organizations were uniquely local and invested in what occurred around them.

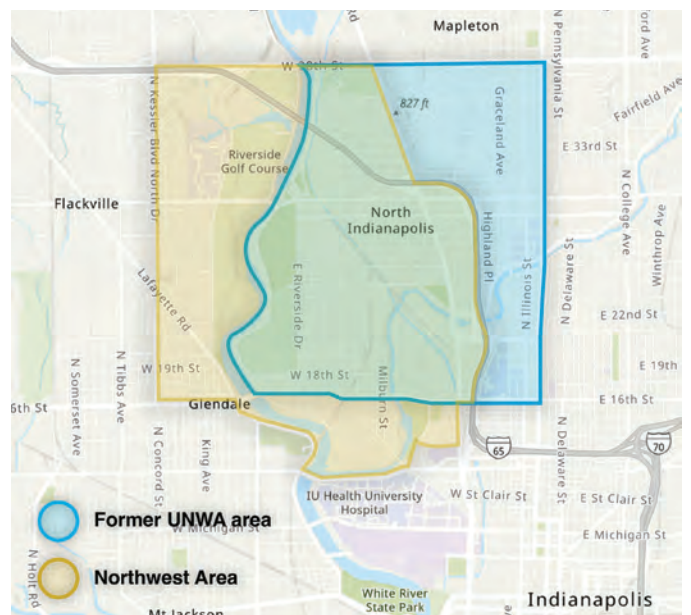
If only it were so. RUC 1.0 discovered that many fewer members lived within a five-mile radius of the church building than most observers had assumed. Even fewer clergy lived in close geographic proximity to the congregations they served. Indianapolis was not unique. In fact, as metropolitan areas assumed the form of a downtown core and suburban peripheries, parishioners moved to new neighborhoods, but buildings remained. Sunday mornings witnessed an influx of worshippers back into the city from their distant homes, at least until a tipping point occurred that prompted the development of new congregational homes for many suburbanites.

Twenty years later, new demographic and residential trends have slowed if not reversed the suburban migration. Now, empty nesters are moving back to the center city, and younger professionals desire the amenities that come with a denser core. RUC 2.0 has witnessed renewed interest in planting new congregations or multi-campus ministries in these rapidly growing areas.

What is not clear is whether a revived congregational-community nexus will emerge from this renewed interest in the central city as an engine of economic and cultural energy. The United Northwest Area (UNWA), located within only a few miles of downtown Indianapolis, offers a case study on how religion and community are influencing one another 20 years after the conclusion of the first RUC project. What we discovered is how little has changed.

Changes and Challenges in the Northwest Area

UNWA was established in 1967 as both a geographic area and an umbrella organization that included many smaller neighborhoods. Its boundaries spanned from 38th Street to the north, the White River to the west, 16th Street to the south, and Meridian Street to the east. UNWA was created by community members to fight crime and poverty and to lobby for improved city



Former UNWA area and Northwest Area.
Source: SAVI Community Information System

services. Such activism became necessary in the once prosperous and vibrant area as midcentury policies concerning economic and community growth began restructuring urban and suburban landscapes in ways that are still impacting the area's communities today.

UNWA's midcentury transition from a stable, predominantly white area to a struggling, predominantly Black area mirrored changes that were taking place in urban communities nationally. At the time, discriminatory housing policies, urban renewal initiatives, and highway construction were targeting and chipping away at the social and physical infrastructures of racially and ethnically diverse urban communities. By the 1950s, UNWA was such a community, and it was identified as a location for a section of a new interstate stretching into downtown Indianapolis.

Despite efforts to stop it, construction of I-65 dealt a significant blow to UNWA. The interstate that sliced through the area created dead-end streets and sidewalks and demolished homes and commercial buildings, displacing residents and businesses. Such forced displacement began as early as 1960, when state officials began the work of purchasing homes, businesses, and other buildings and obtaining the highway right-of-way. Even before 1960, however, many residents—most of them white households—fled to other parts of the city and to the burgeoning suburbs in anticipation of the disruption the highway would bring. The Black residents who stayed, either because they were unable to move or did not choose to leave their homes and communities, were left to cope with not only residential losses, but also commercial losses, institutional neglect, and decreases in tax dollars.

Community members in Indianapolis' near northwest side neighborhoods have long struggled to overcome the impacts of these systemic harms. Decaying infrastructure, poverty, food deserts, and increased crime have challenged the area. In recent years, high housing vacancy, combined with speculative and predatory housing investment from individuals and firms that are not part of the community, have sparked concerns among many community members that neighborhood changes in the forms of gentrification and displacement are looming. However, the sense of agency and activism that motivated community members to establish UNWA a half-century ago has been a consistent source of strength in the area's social foundation, supporting continued advocacy among community members for their neighborhoods.

Over the years, different community and economic development initiatives have been guided by varying individual and institutional actors and have redrawn the boundaries that encompass the UNWA territory. In a 2008 United Northwest Neighborhood Plan, the Crown Hill and Near North neighborhoods, which comprised the blocks east of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Street and I-65 between 38th and 16th Streets, are recognized as separate neighborhoods, as the interstate had in effect created two separate communities. The eastern neighborhoods had become distinct geographies for which residents had created their own neighborhood plans that no longer aligned with the challenges and goals that UNWA community members were trying to meet.

Near Northwest Area Quality of Life Plan

A 2014 neighborhood planning process resulted in a community and economic development strategy known as a quality-of-life plan and redubbed the remaining UNWA geography to simply "Northwest Area," with expanded boundaries to Kessler Boulevard on the west and 10th Street on the south (still excluding the Crown Hill and Near North neighborhoods east of the highway). By 2019, many community members began referring to this geographic area as the Near Northwest Area (NNW), an area that includes Riverside Park and Marian University.



Children participating in Riverside Park youth program.

The NNW Quality of Life (QOL) Plan ushered in a new phase of civic activity. The plan's development resulted in goals that were established by community members, including residents, representatives from nonprofit organizations in the area, and other stakeholders. Participants defined these goals during a series of meetings throughout 2014. Out of the QOL Plan came a committee structure in which residents and

others affiliated with community-based organizations and institutions have become involved with and embraced leadership roles in efforts to address some of the area's most acute challenges and build on some of the area's key strengths.

While community efforts largely have been geared toward facilitating community and economic development to attract residents and businesses to the area, there are clear emphases on creating those changes in equitable and inclusive ways that will not gentrify and displace the area's existing communities or their proud legacies. This goal challenges the widespread socioeconomic disparities that too often result from local, state, and national policies

Church, Community, and Development

RUC 2.0 investigated churches' involvement in economic and community development efforts, as defined by the NNW Quality of Life Plan. We sought perspectives on churches' involvement from two groups: leaders at churches in the area and community members who were residents and/or leaders in some of the area's civic and nonreligious nonprofit organizations.

Our interviews revealed differing perspectives on the role that churches were playing in the area's economic and community development. Most community members we interviewed perceived that churches were not involved actively enough in community-based efforts to address area challenges, build on area strengths, and enhance quality of life. They also believed congregations were often silent about or inactive in combating economic forces threatening to usher in gentrification and displacement.

Community members attributed this perceived lack of involvement to a disinterestedness and disconnectedness that stemmed from the non-resident character of much congregational membership. Many community members characterized churches as uncollaborative silos that were operating in their own interests. The disinterestedness and disconnectedness that these interviewees felt prompted them to see the churches as an imposition on the area, rather than an asset to it. A lifelong resident in the area said of church leaders and members, "they're not part of our community...[church members] drive in and they drive out...they're not connected to us whatsoever."



Church leaders confirmed that most of their members commuted into the Near Northwest Area, but they did not perceive this circumstance negatively. Instead, they interpreted their ability to draw congregants from across the city and region to be a testament to the strength of their ministries, the broad reach of their mission and message, and the commitment of members. One pastor told us that she thanked one of her members after realizing how far the woman traveled from her home to get to the church, passing many other churches along the way.

Church leaders spoke with pride about the many charitable services and programs they offered to people in need, highlighting these as vital and valuable contributions to the area's residents and communities. They noted that their services and programs were available to anyone, regardless of whether they were members at their churches or even lived in the area. The programs included distribution of food, clothing, and other personal and household items to low-income and homeless individuals, both at the church facilities and at off-site locations across the city; community events where churches connected attendees with resources for social services, mental and physical health, financial literacy, and employment; health fairs that included flu shot clinics and COVID testing; events that hosted free tax services and help with voter registration; community clean-up events; and community gardens. At least two leaders explained that their buildings were open for community use, not only on Sundays but other days of the week, too.

Church leaders conveyed acute awareness of and concern for the community's challenges with poverty, food access, public safety, and housing. They characterized their ministries and programs as means of fulfilling their spiritual mandates to be good stewards of the Christian faith, and they also talked about their ministries and programs as being valid and valuable responses to persistent socioeconomic



Northside New Era Church members help neighbors in need of assistance with some maintenance work.

issues. Indeed, two interviewees characterized their own churches as “anchors” in their respective neighborhoods because of the investments they have made into their facilities and the services they provide, such as programming for youth, young adults and families, and resources, such as food assistance, for people in need.

Most community members acknowledged these services and resources but still wanted to see more active engagement from and collaboration with the area’s faith communities, especially to address the systemic socioeconomic disparities that affected their community. They described what they perceived to be a significant amount of untapped potential resting within faith communities. A police officer said, “if [the churches] just partnered together, we could do a lot more” to improve quality of life in the area.

Community residents noted area churches hold a significant amount of property, giving them a vested interest in the area’s community and economic development. More importantly, they comprise a large population of people who could make great contributions toward lobbying for solutions to the area’s socioeconomic challenges. Taking a lesson from the collective action of the Civil Rights Movement, one resident said, “Our greatest weapon [in the Black community] has been our churches.”

Different Visions?

What community members want from churches may be different from what many church leaders and congregation members are prepared to provide. Although some church leaders shared their concerns about gentrification and displacement, saying they hoped economic investment and growth in the area would happen in equitable and inclusive ways that would not displace the area’s existing residents, they did not express any plans for becoming actively involved in lobbying for these goals. Nor did they intend to lead congregation members against systemic disparities that lead to gentrification and displacement. Instead, their concerns focused on the communities immediately surrounding their church facilities and the individuals that came to their churches for its ministries and programs. One pastor explained that he felt the socioeconomic contexts of the various communities across the Near Northwest Area were so different that he did not feel it was even necessary to get the various civic associations and nonprofit entities aligned in their visions and goals.

Civic associations and nonprofit organizations in the Near Northwest Area undoubtedly will continue in their efforts to catalyze economic and community development, but likely without active participation from the area’s faith communities. Of course, lack of widespread engagement begs several questions: Should congregations become engaged in an area’s economic and community development? How do congregations navigate the tension between involvement in the world and their mission to reclaim and nurture individual faith lives? What obligations does a church have to the community in which it is located, and are those obligations different, or even greater, for churches located in communities facing longstanding systemic inequities? How congregations answer these questions will influence how neighbors perceive them and what the nature of the congregational-community connection will be.

Written by Abbey L. Chambers