

# RESPONSIVE *Congregations*

## *Case Studies from Religion & Urban Culture 2.0*

### IMPACT CONGREGATIONS

Rev. Andrew Fillmore's arms were tattoo-free before he became pastor of Impact Fairfax Christian Church. Now his left arm is covered in a full sleeve of ink—including drawings of a lion, a crown of thorns, jungle foliage, a tree, a mountain path, and Bible verses.

Fillmore became pastor of Impact Fairfax in the fall of 2018. Fairfax and two other churches—Impact Old Southside and Impact Bethany—are ministries of Mount Pleasant Christian Church (MPCC), a megachurch of about 4,000 people with a campus of more than 80 acres in Greenwood, Indiana, a southern suburb of Indianapolis.

Impact Fairfax and Bethany were well-established churches with more than a century of history in their neighborhoods. Both were declining and on the verge of closing when MPCC and the churches agreed on a friendly “takeover.” As a result, MPCC installed new leadership and made substantial investments in the buildings. Impact Old Southside is a new church that launched in early 2018 and makes its home in a renovated building.

MPCC's main campus supports all three churches financially, and it provides volunteers and other resources to help them establish themselves and grow. The driving idea behind the Impact ministry is for the churches to be tightly woven into the fabric of their neighborhoods—and thus become positive, stabilizing forces in places that have witnessed a lot of decline and upheaval.

Which is how Fillmore's tattoos came about.

A tattoo artist lives across the street from Impact Fairfax, and Fillmore would see him on a regular basis. They talked and soon became friends. One day, Fillmore asked what a tattoo would cost.

“I'm not a tattoo person,” Fillmore says. “I told God that if he ever wants me to get a tattoo, I would have to have a relationship with the person, and it would have to be a great price. And it would have to be someone who doesn't know Jesus.”

Eventually, Fillmore sat in the artist's chair for about two dozen sessions, each lasting more than two hours, to get his full sleeve. The drawings are full of symbols with Christian meanings. And the way the sleeve itself came about is symbolic of the ministry's mission: To integrate into the life of the community, and to build deep, trusting relationships.



Rev. Andrew Fillmore, IMPACT Fairfax Campus Pastor (R)

Impact Fairfax and Old Southside—on the near-west and near-south sides, respectively—are in neighborhoods that have been marked by high rates of poverty. Impact Bethany is situated southeast of downtown, about halfway between the city's center and the southern suburbs.

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“It’s really about giving people that faith back in humanity to say, ‘Wow, there are actually people here that I can trust.’” Fillmore says. “We have cars driving down the street with the widows completely blacked out. And that has been the story for decades on decades in this neighborhood. The idea [behind the Impact ministry] is—look, you don’t have to go down this path of not trusting and not having any community. You can trust people. Sure, we’re humans and we’re going to fail. But it’s about having the grace to say, that’s not who I am as a whole. And I’m sorry and I want to make things right.”

## REIMAGINING CHURCH

The Impact ministry began as a closet-sized food pantry in the 1990s. It eventually moved into a nearby house in Greenwood that MPCC owned. In 2013, the ministry—called the Impact Center—moved into a new, 15,000 square-foot building next to MPCC’s main campus in Greenwood. Pre-Covid, it served about 350 families each week; it now serves about 200.

In the early 2010s, the work of the Impact Center planted a seed in the mind of MPCC’s senior pastor, Rev. Chris Philbeck. He would often visit with the people who came for help with food and clothing. “I would go share from the scriptures and pray with them,” he says, “and I was amazed. I was struck by how big the need was, and how open the people were.”

Those interactions left Philbeck with the conviction that the ministry could—and should—be replicated elsewhere, especially in low-income neighborhoods where people in need could go and find help. It left him with a key insight.

“I remember one day thinking—there’s no set model of what a church looks like anymore,” says Philbeck, whose career began in 1980 with a startup church, followed by a “turnaround” church that was fracturing and in decline. It grew from about 100 to 1,000 members in his roughly 10 years there. Philbeck celebrated his twentieth anniversary as MPCC’s senior pastor last October.

“In the scriptures there are some guidelines,” Philbeck says. “I think about Acts 2:42, and how it says that they devoted themselves to teaching and fellowship and breaking of bread and prayer. And I felt like, if [those elements are present], then you’ve got a church service, regardless of what it looks like. That caused me to reimagine what we were doing.”

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— REV. CHRIS PHILBECK



Megachurches often become “multisite” churches, meaning they launch satellite congregations in other communities. There were roughly 200 multisite churches in the U.S. in 2001, when Philbeck became MPCC’s senior pastor. The trend exploded after the turn of the century, as megachurches (defined as 2,000+ members) expanded their reach and footprint. By 2014, there were an estimated 8,000 multisite churches.

Philbeck had little interest in pursuing the multisite model as it is often implemented—i.e., by launching new sites in places that are nearly identical demographically to the neighborhood of the church’s main campus. “While there were some places where that was really effective, in a lot of places, instead of being fishers of men, it was just rearranging the fish tank,” he says.

In the near term, Philbeck decided instead to add half an hour of teaching and fellowship to the Center’s food and clothing distribution. In the longer term, Philbeck conceived and implemented the model that became the Impact Bethany, Fairfax, and Old Southside congregations.

The model focuses on taking churches that are declining and/or located in low-income neighborhoods and providing them with resources to sustain and expand their programming. Instead of aiming to create



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— REV. JED FULLER

a mirror image of the main campus, it looks to plant roots in places that are demographically a world apart from the home church's neighborhood.

The median-household income within a one-mile radius of Impact Fairfax, for example, is about \$37,500, and 61 percent of residents are people of color. In the one-mile radius around Old Southside and Bethany, the median household income is \$48,500 and \$50,000, respectively. The percentage of people of color is 28.5 percent in Old Southside and 16 percent in Bethany's surrounding community. In the community around MPCC's main campus in Greenwood, by contrast, the median household income is more than \$107,000, and only 8 percent of residents are people of color.

## TAKING THE "INCARNATIONAL" APPROACH

The Impact congregations share a three-part philosophy that Philbeck has articulated and emphasized from the very beginning: Live, learn, and love. That is, live in the community, learn its stories, and love its people.

Philbeck notes that it would have been easy to live-stream the MPCC sermons in each of the Impact congregations. "But we're talking about people who might be wary of a big church," he says. "So, I believed we needed to have an incarnational approach on those campuses, and we needed to have pastors who could share the message themselves." Each week, he prepares a sermon outline and sends it to the pastors by midweek, with notes about which points are essential and which ones can be tweaked to fit their unique situations.

The learning and loving elements of the philosophy follow from living and working among the people the churches serve. "By living here in the community, we

best learn how to love the community," says Rev. Jed Fuller, pastor of the Impact Old Southside. "And the biggest part of learning is listening, and not thinking that we know [everything]. Creating space for relationships to develop deepens the community and creates a stronger, more vibrant community.

"What happens is that people say, hey, I'm willing to live in a neighborhood like that. And then it's hard to actually go past that. It's hard not to just stay in your house. It's hard to actually get to know people and to get involved. So, we want to create a vehicle for that."

## BUILDING ON WHAT WORKS

Much of the potential power of the Impact model lies in creating synergies.

The Impact Center, adjacent to the MPCC main campus, is a force multiplier for the entire ministry. It not only serves people at its Greenwood location (who come from all over Central Indiana) but coordinates with the three Impact churches, supplying them with food and clothes for their pantries. The Impact Center has its own pastor, Steve Saunders, as well as a warehouse manager and a part-time assistant. Roughly 150 MPCC volunteers help keep it running smoothly.

Meanwhile, the three congregations experiment with their own approaches to ministry in their own neighborhoods. Some of what works will be unique to a particular site and situation, but some of it will be replicable at other sites. To cultivate those synergies, the Impact church pastors meet each Monday with Saunders at the MPCC main campus to compare notes and share insights. Sometimes Philbeck joins them.

At Impact Old Southside, the freedom to experiment means it to has "dinner church" on Sunday evenings.



Old Southside organizes a Saturday-morning work program for boys who earn credits for doing yard work and other low-skills jobs in the neighborhood.

The service takes place around tables, over a meal prepared by the church.

Impact Old Southside is also using holiday traditions like Halloween trick-or-treating to experiment with planting roots in the neighborhood. Last fall, for example, instead of simply handing out candy at the church, it organized the “Great Candy Adventure.” Kids were provided a map marked with four homes. When they found the home, they got candy and a stamp on their map. If they brought the stamped map back to the church’s youth night the following week, they got a special prize.

“It created some energy and excitement,” says Fuller. “That’s a sign of vibrancy—kids out on the street, trick or treating on Halloween night. That’s a good sign of a healthy neighborhood. And I think that’s something our neighborhood hasn’t seen for a while. So, we were excited to be part of that. And neighbors said that next year, they want to be part of it.”

**BEING THE CHANGE**

Broadly, all the churches are heavily invested in youth outreaches. Old Southside organizes a Saturday-morning work program for boys, who earn credits for doing yard work and other low-skills jobs in the neighborhood. Then they can then redeem the credits for Amazon purchases through the church. On Monday evenings, Impact Old Southside is open to middle-school and high-school students for a time of organized games. And on Tuesdays, young people from a nearby homeless shelter come over to do laundry, eat a meal, and play video games.

Pastor Don Thie at Impact Bethany, meanwhile, has developed close relationships with three nearby

schools, and with some of the families who live in the five apartment complexes that are within easy walking distance of the church. Bethany offers youth nights like those of Impact Old Southside. In early 2022, it will launch a structured, low-cost after-school program running from 3 to 6 p.m. each weekday. Two recently hired, part-time staff people will oversee the program, which will launch with 20 children and will include a time for recreation, homework, snacks, and a Bible lesson.

Impact Fairfax, for its part, aims to help stabilize its neighborhood with its own youth outreaches and by entering the local housing market. Members of MPCC have purchased three houses in the neighborhood so far. They rent two of them out at below-market rates, and volunteers from MPCC do the upkeep.

Another house, located behind Impact Fairfax, was a blighted and abandoned “drug house,” according to Fillmore. The police were called there routinely, and people frequently overdosed. Now it has been renovated and will be used by an organization called the Isaiah 1:17 Project, based on the biblical injunction to take up the cause of the fatherless. The project works with the Indiana Department of Children Services to help children who are transitioning to foster homes. “We knew that God is in the business of restoration,” Fillmore says. “A house used for death is going to be used for life.”

**REFRAMING VALUE**

Housing, in fact, poses one of the most perplexing challenges for the neighborhoods that the Impact ministry serves.

That is especially true of Impact Fairfax and Old Southside. Fairfax is in the early stages of gentrification.



The Old Southside is already well into the process. Renovation projects from the neighborhood are featured regularly on *Good Bones*, a weekly show on HGTV that debuted in 2016. It features a mother/daughter team—doing business as “Two

Chicks and a Hammer”—who buy, renovate, and then resell houses. Two Chicks has office on East Street in the Old Southside.

The publicity has attracted flocks of relatively affluent home buyers and is driving up home prices. As a result, the Old Southside has become a curious mix of people who bought or inherited a house years ago—when prices were low, and the neighborhood was marked by poverty and disinvestment—and people who have paid higher prices and expect that the neighborhood will continue its gentrifying path.

The challenge for the Impact churches is to find their role in these two clashing worlds. The churches expected to serve one kind of neighborhood. Now, they serve neighborhoods that are rapidly evolving. And the churches are helping drive that evolution.

“The reality is that when you say you’re willing to move to a low-income neighborhood—and you fix up your house, and occupy a boarded up house—you are the gentrifier,” says Fuller. “That’s not the intention. But by default, that’s what ends up happening.”

The upside of gentrification is that it helps bring the kind of stability that the Impact ministry hopes to establish in these neighborhoods. The challenge is that it threatens to make housing unaffordable for the people who have lived there for years. Being the gentrifier—the outside force elevating the “value” of the neighborhood—can work against the fundamentals of the Impact ministry’s model of living, learning, and loving.

That model, after all, measures value by metrics that are not primarily economic. And its conception of a good neighborhood has more to do with Jesus’s story of the Good Samaritan than with property values.

“I grew up in the suburbs, in a middle-class way with middle-class sentiments,” Fuller says. “And that can be

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a barrier. And that is what we work with, with our friends down in Greenwood—to be willing to set aside some of the things that we think are so important because of the way we were raised. There’s nothing wrong with being low-income or living in generational poverty. Money is amoral. Whether you have a lot or a little means nothing about your worth.

“If somebody doesn’t want the things you want, we sometimes think there’s something wrong with them. But there are a lot of people who maybe don’t want the middle-class way. So, a lot of work has to be put in—in shifting paradigms—for doing this kind of work.”

## **EXPANDING HORIZONS**

The Impact ministry is less than five years old and still in its infancy. Each church currently serves a few dozen adults in worship services and an equal number of youth across various programs. How it will evolve remains to be seen.

The youth outreaches will likely continue to expand. And Fairfax and Old Southside are interested in finding ways to support and expand the affordable housing options in their neighborhoods. Cross-congregational collaborations are another promising possibility.

Collaboration is built into the Impact model, of course, since the congregations not only share resources and ideas but depend on financial (and other) support from the main MPCC campus. But the ministry has recently expanded its collaborative efforts by reaching out to an African American church, Pilgrim Missionary Baptist, located a few minutes from Impact Fairfax.



“When the George Floyd killing happened, we felt like: We serve the African American community, so it’s an issue affecting us now,” Saunders says. “We’re not just a white suburban church that can dismiss it. So, we felt that it was important to start a dialogue and take some steps to have a better understanding of the response [to the the Floyd murder].”

The pandemic has prevented the churches from doing any in-person events so far. But Saunders, Fillmore, and other people from the Impact ministry meet occasionally with members of Pilgrim MBC, via video calls. Those chats are laying the groundwork for long-term friendships and collaborations. “As we serve these communities and learn and grow, that is going to continue to be part of what we want to do—to connect across cultural and ethnic lines, and to work together,” Saunders says.

The Impact ministry’s model suggests that, for congregations of all faiths and denominations, growth—like value—has more than one meaning. Congregations often measure success in numbers and attendance. But creating connections, being a good neighbor, and

moving beyond one’s comfort zone are indicators of growth as well.

“Investing yourself in the lives of other people and having a greater understanding of who they are, where they are, and why they are where they are, has been eye opening,” Saunders says. “It’s humbling in a lot of ways. Because there are things that, going into it, I thought I had figured out. And I couldn’t have been further from the truth.

“It really is affirming that people are people. We all have our own issues. And we can all relate to one another on some level. No matter what our socio-economic, cultural background is—there’s a commonality of people wanting to feel connected in some way. That’s at the foundation of what we’re wanting to do.”

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*Written by Theodore M. Anderson*