

RESPONSIVE *Congregations*

Case Studies from Religion & Urban Culture 2.0

BUILDING COMMUNITY FAITHFULLY

Chapter six of the Gospel of John starts with a story about Jesus feeding a large crowd of people with five loaves of bread and two fishes. It ends with many of Jesus's disciples leaving him, after he claimed that a person who eats his flesh and drinks his blood "abides in me, and I in him." Some of the disciples responded that "this is a hard saying. Who can hear it?" Many of them then left and "walked no more with him."

Like many congregations, Englewood Christian Church in Indianapolis strives to honor, understand, and live by the hard sayings of Jesus. The church sometimes calls this following "the way of Jesus." Unlike many congregations, however, Englewood does not define this way in terms of political flashpoints like abortion rights and same-sex marriage, nor in terms of dividing the redeemed from the unredeemed.

For Englewood, the way of Jesus is summed up in the events described in John 6 before the disciples began to abandon him. A boy shared his loaves of bread and fishes, which then became a meal for the multitude. Then Jesus engaged his disciples and a host of other people in a series of back-and-forth dialogues.

Core principles

Demonstrating love. Sharing resources. Having genuine conversations. The way of Jesus comes down to these core principles at Englewood. The church is an experiment in what it looks like for one congregation to follow that path in one place. The experiment puts it directly and radically at odds with many congregational norms, as well as much of contemporary American culture.

It is a surprising turn for Englewood, which is nothing like the congregation that it was during its first century—from its founding in 1895 to the mid-1990s. The church is far smaller, for starters. Attendance has declined by roughly 90 percent since the high point



in the 1960s. Even before the pandemic changed everything, the building's spacious sanctuary—where more than 1,000 people once met regularly for worship services—was sparsely filled on Sundays.

The current congregation also has a different understanding of the Christian message. It realizes that the hard sayings of Jesus drove away many of his disciples, yet the band that remained had a global impact. And that kind of inversion appears repeatedly in the gospels: The meek will inherit the earth. The last will be first. Death is the beginning of life.

Similarly, Englewood Christian believes that its small experiment in the way of Jesus contains the seeds of a broader transformation. It may be that the church's near-death and rebirth—as a different kind of church—offers insights for reimagining the life and role of congregations in American society more broadly.

RACIAL COMPOSITION OF ENGLEWOOD COMMUNITY 1970-2020

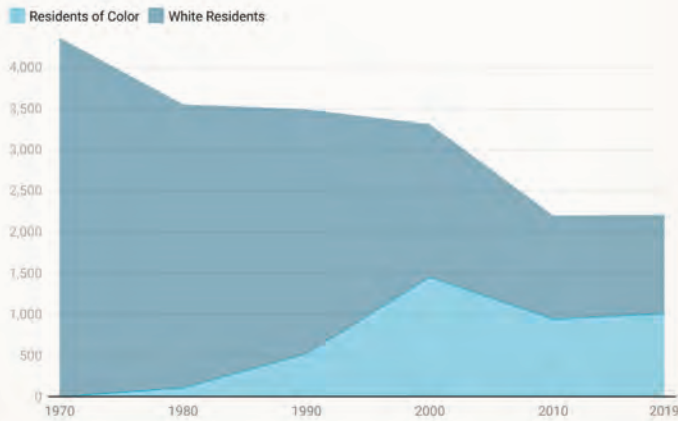


Chart: The Polis Center • Source: U.S. Census, American Community Survey • Created with Datawrapper

The exodus

Englewood's story is a familiar one in many ways.

Situated on Rural Street in what is now the near eastside of Indianapolis, it was on the outskirts of the city through the first half of the twentieth century. Much of its membership lived nearby and worked at one of the local companies that supported the neighborhood's vibrant economy. The community was home to the Mallory and Company headquarters, for example, where metallurgists developed dry cell batteries, including the Duracell brand. And RCA had a local plant, where it manufactured electronics and pressed records.

Through the early twentieth-century decades, Englewood Christian shaped both the life of the city and the culture of Christian churches nationally. In the 1920s, it became entangled in a public controversy over the Ku Klux Klan's initiatives to recruit members at the church. The pastor who resisted the Klan was ultimately ousted. In the same decade, an Englewood pastor founded the North American Christian Convention, a summer meeting that featured a wide range of well-known speakers and writers. It was held annually and supported by institutions nationwide until 2018.

The church's peak membership in the 1960s and early 70s coincided with the development that transformed it into an "inner-city" church: The interstate highway system, which created a ring of suburban communities around near-downtown neighborhoods like Englewood.

As residents moved out for bigger houses, spacious lawns, and cheaper prices, the neighborhood's housing stock—built mostly in the 1910s and 1920s—

deteriorated. By the 1970s, much of the industrial core that once sustained the local economy had vanished. The pastor who had led Englewood during its megachurch phase of the 1960s left in the early 1970s. Much of the membership followed his lead.

Subsequent pastors experimented with church-growth trends and strategies through the late 1970s and the 1980s, with little success. The people who continued to attend the church typically lived elsewhere and drove in from their suburban homes on Sundays. Traces of the area's heyday were scarce. By 2018, the median household income in the Englewood neighborhood was just \$16,000 (versus \$59,000 in the metropolitan area). Only two new houses had been built in the neighborhood since the 1960s. The population was 60 percent white, 21 percent Hispanic, and 17 percent Black.

The rebound

This history loomed large in the church's identity in the 1990s. There was a strong sense of what it had once been. But its future was deeply uncertain.

In 1996, the church initiated the Englewood Community Development Corporation (ECDC) and the DayStar child-care center. Those were the most tangible manifestations of a process of reimagining that was taking root within Englewood. The process continues into the present.

The development corporation's imprint is now all over the Englewood neighborhood and nearby communities. For example, ECDC partnered in the renovation of the former Mallory building into Purdue Polytechnic High School, which uses a collaborative, project-based approach to train students for high-tech fields and STEM-related college programs.



Oxford Place Senior Apartments is an affordable housing project of Englewood Development Corporation, an outgrowth of Englewood Christian Church.



Uplift Produce owns and operates the indoor farm in a 60,000 sq. ft. building for Englewood Community Development Corporation.

And the ECDC has developed and manages a multitude of affordable-housing projects. They include two buildings with 32 apartments each; one with 15 apartments; a senior-living facility with 30 apartments; and dozens of local homes that have been renovated. Its projects often incorporate cutting-edge sustainability practices. For example, the senior-living building has 500 solar panels, solar-heated siding, and rain gardens. It is the first building in Indiana that generates enough power to be self-sufficient.

The ECDC has also supported numerous other initiatives beyond childcare and housing. These include a wide variety of services—lawn care, bookkeeping, PC-repair, home repair, commercial cleaning—as well as a bookstore. Most recently, the ECDC launched at 30,000 square-foot indoor farm, Uplift, that grows six different products and sells them to grocery stores as far away as Atlanta, Georgia.

But the extent and visibility of the ECDC's work can be deceptive. It is easy to think of that work as the sum and substance of Englewood Christian Church's transformation, and to read this as a story of a church that decided to help its neighborhood by creating poverty-relief programs—albeit on a vastly more ambitious scale than most congregations will ever attempt.

In truth, though, Englewood's transformation has very little to do with those programs. They are the outgrowth of the transformation, not the root of it. The irony of Englewood is that those very traditional economic initiatives follow from its very non-traditional interpretation of the way of Jesus.



One conversation at a time

The root of Englewood's radicalism can be found in a practice that it instituted about two decades ago, when it was in the early stages of reimagining its identity. The church replaced the traditional Sunday evening service, in which the pastor delivers a sermon, with a conversation that everyone was invited to take part in. The practice continues into the present, although the conversation now follows the Sunday-morning service. In normal times, roughly 50 people participate each week.

The topics vary over time, and there is no fixed end point: The congregation might wrestle with a single topic for a week or a few months. Longer conversations stretching over several weeks or months are more common than short ones. The first topic was the Bible. Recent topics have included the Holy Spirit and guilt and shame.

The sessions can be contentious. They were especially challenging in the early months, when everyone was new to the practice. "The Bible, as it turned out, was something few of us had ever thought about, but about which we all had strong opinions,"

Rev. Mike Bowling and three co-authors wrote in an essay about the early days. Bowling became Englewood's pastor in 1993.



Rev. Mike Bowling



Englewood Church daycare children and teachers.

“Around fifty of us, from diverse backgrounds, came together and discussed questions like: ‘If scripture identifies Jesus as the ‘word of God,’ then what is scripture?’ We talked together and we yelled, questioned, disagreed, and generally were stunned by the disparity of thought and feeling among those who called themselves one.”

The point of the Sunday conversations is not to come to a consensus or change minds. Disagreement can actually be an indicator of success, since it means that a person is engaged enough to care and contribute. And the back and forth—with no agenda other than to have genuine, meaningful conversations—is the point.

The conversations have little discernible impact from week to week, but they gradually shape and define the church’s core mission, outreaches, and identity.

“Sometimes you leave the conversation and say, ‘I’m really not sure what we got out of that,’ Bowling says. “There are no takeaways. People will come in, and they’re formed in that takeaway mentality, and they get really frustrated. It seems like a useless practice. And if you looked at, say, a three-month window, you could probably make a case for it being useless. But those of us who’ve been in it for some time can see the ways in which those conversations shape the congregation in so many different ways.”

Love wins

One effect of the conversations is that people either learn to respectfully consider other points of view—or they leave. For those who remain, the conversations build a foundation for love and fellowship that transcends tension over any particular issue.

“One thing that worked 28 years ago and still works today is—when people have differing views, political or

theological—if you can say, ‘Let’s talk about it,’” Bowling says. “I’ve been wrong so many times in my life that one more time isn’t going to matter that much. So, I’m happy to be wrong. But let’s talk about it.”

He tells the story of one longtime Englewood member who, in the early years of the church’s transformation, was distressed by the path the church was going down.

“In his mind, what we were doing didn’t make any sense. He said, ‘I would leave, but I’ve never been in a church where people love each other like this.’ And that has been mostly the message here—that we can get a bunch of stuff wrong, but what we can’t get wrong is loving each other. We can’t get that wrong. And we’ve gotten that right enough times that it’s given grace for some of the other stuff.”

Moving in

Englewood’s prioritizing of conversation makes it peculiar. What is even more peculiar, in the context of congregational trends over the past half century, is the fact that many of its members live near the church.

Englewood’s current incarnation is the inverse of its heyday. A megachurch whose members moved away has become a small church whose members have moved in—from the suburbs—and created an intentional community in a low-income neighborhood. Many of their homes were rehabilitated by the church itself.

“For the last 25 years or so, we’ve worked really hard to continue to figure out where we live—this neighborhood—and to realize that our major calling is to live with our neighbors here,” Bowling says.

Living in the community harmonizes with Englewood’s emphasis on conversation. Both are strong expressions

of Englewood's deepest values and commitments. And they attract people who are willing to dedicate themselves wholly to a radical vision of the way of Jesus.

When Rev. Katy Lines and her husband moved from California to Indianapolis in 2017, for example, they needed to find a new church home. Englewood was the obvious choice. The couple had served in Kenya for a decade in the early 2000s before moving back to the U.S.

"Within the Christian churches, there aren't a lot of opportunities for the gifts of the Spirit that are in women to be given to the church," says Lines, who is now Englewood's co-pastor. "And I was done with that. So, I said, This is the one church here that I know that is fully embracing of the gifts of all people, and is also on the ground doing the work of the church in their place—which, as former missionaries, was really important to us.

"And so, I made the decision before we even moved here that this is where we were going to be. I had no idea if there was going to be a paid role for me here, but that was really secondary. Being in the community was more important than that I had a paid position."

Lines and her husband now live in a home next door to Bowling—and across from his son, Joe Bowling, the ECDC's executive director—a couple of blocks over from the church.

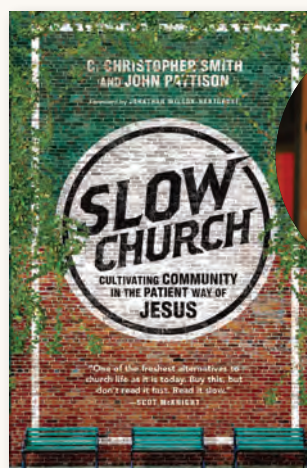
True abundance

Englewood Christian belongs to a long tradition of churches that have sought to recover the core truth of the gospels from the supposed distortions of organized religion. Dating to the early nineteenth century, the Christian churches of the Restorationist movement have rejected denominational structures and formalized creeds in favor of a direct relationship between believers, scriptures, and the divine. Each congregation has the freedom to operate by its own lights and understanding of scriptures.

True to that tradition, Englewood is an awkward fit with the labels that are often used to pigeonhole churches and denominations. Its membership includes both conservatives and progressives, theologically and politically. It is an evangelical church in the broadest sense, in that is committed to sharing truths that cut against the grain of mainstream culture. But Englewood is far from evangelical in the sense of that term's meaning in current U.S. politics.

"So many churches feel like they have to have the definitive stance on issues—on gay marriage, on peace and violence, on whatever," says Joe Bowling. "But there ought to be a recognition that we're all different. We've all been raised differently. We all think different things. We're going to be right about a lot of things. We're going to be wrong about a lot of things. But that's what community is."

As with labels, the metrics that churches often use to measure success—like people in the pews on Sunday, and churches planted—have little or no meaning for Englewood. It has a transformational vision but a very long time horizon—with no hope or expectation of immediate results.



Christian Smith, Editor of *Englewood Review of Books* and co-author of *Slow Church*.

"We see in Jesus' description of new wine and old wineskins in Mark 2 that it is the nature of the gospel to burst old paradigms," Christopher Smith and John Pattinson wrote in their book *Slow Church: Cultivating Community in the Patient Way of Jesus*. Smith is a member of Englewood Christian and edits its *Review of Books*, a quarterly print publication with an online presence. "Jesus's description of the kingdom of God as being like yeast and a mustard seed imply a framework for growth that is organic, often invisible to the naked eye and ultimately mysterious."

Slow Church is widely read among people and churches that are reimagining congregational life and pushing back against what Smith and Pattinson call the "McDonaldization" of Christianity—meaning its infatuation with quantification, predictability, replicability, and control. The "slow church" idea posits that the visible symbols of success that many congregations obsess over are foreign to the way of



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— CHRISTOPHER SMITH, author of *Slow Church*

Jesus. And it argues that being deeply rooted in a place—and being in relationship with its people—create the path to true abundance. The way of Jesus is found more in sharing oneself with another person than in giving a thousand people the spiritual equivalent of a Happy Meal.

“Any mainstream economic system is rooted in the assumption that there’s not enough resources to go around,” Smith says. “In the language of economists, there must be competition for scarce means. But theologically, that’s not the way we see the world. We believe out of the love that God has for creation, there’s more than enough resources for people to live well and have flourishing lives.”

Narrow is the way

Although *Slow Church* has gained a wide audience, it is an open question how broad the influence of its vision of the way of Jesus will be. It can be a hard, painful process to establish trust and create dialogue across divides. Demonizing and dividing people is easy in the current politicized landscape.

But Jesus never claimed his way would be easy. Strait is the gate and narrow is the way that leads to life, he said, and few will find it. Even so, the path toward life is clear for Englewood Christian. It is found in being with and abiding with its neighbors.

“Along the way there’s some meaningful work to do, and you hope you’re doing that meaningful work in a way that represents the way of Jesus. But you’re not trying to fix anything,” Bowling says.

“We live here as a particular kind of imagination for the way that we believe God wants the world to be. And it really isn’t much more complex than that. A real community—where you care about where people live, what they eat, what they wear. How they are meaningfully employed and cared for. All those things. What does that look like? I think we’ve done a great job of scratching the surface. I think we’re well on our way to get into some of the meat of it.”

Written by Theodore M. Anderson

Responsive Congregations 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.



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