

RESEARCH NOTES

Findings from Religion & Urban Culture 2.0

Congregations and their Neighborhoods

In 1922, Methodist Bishop for Indiana, Frederick Leete, met with leaders of Meridian Street Methodist Church to explore it to purchase more land near its St. Clair Street location. Having recently celebrated both its centennial and the dedication of a new church building, the city's oldest Methodist congregation was torn between its bishop's vision of the congregation as a downtown anchor and the growing reality that their neighborhood was changing. Not only was the city growing outward, the nearby construction of the new American Legion national headquarters and the Indiana War Memorial was prompting residents to move.



In Indianapolis, congregations have wrestled with a desire to remain and a need to move many times in the city's 200-year history, as Meridian Street's record demonstrates. When Bishop Leete made his plea, the congregation had already moved five times.

Meridian Street's story raises questions about the relationship between congregations and their local communities, especially whether and how they can be anchors for both members and neighborhoods.

1. How do congregations weigh the push and pull between the impulse to stay and the pressure to move?
2. What does community mean to congregations—shared interests among members or connection to a geographic area, some combination of the two, or something else entirely? Are these notions of community mutually exclusive? Is one more important than the other?
3. When congregations move, do members have any responsibility to their former neighborhoods? How long does this responsibility last?

Movement is the norm historically for Indianapolis, a city that has grown out rather than up. At times, congregational relocation occurs because existing properties cannot accommodate growth. More often, congregations move to stay close to current or potential members. In fact, Meridian Street itself was no longer a neighborhood church in 1922, at least in the sense that congregants lived nearby. This pattern persists. The Project on Religion and Urban Culture 1.0 (1996-2002) found that, generally, fewer than one-third of the members among its 500 study congregations lived in reasonable geographic proximity to the meeting site.

Congregations often move when enough of their members move. For Indianapolis, upward mobility has often meant a move northward. This action suggests

that many people still consider the proximity of their worship building to membership to be an important anchor of their religious community. Of course, a mobile population is an American trait, and moving with members comes with its own risk. Within a few years a carefully sited building may no longer be at the heart of its membership community. When Second Presbyterian Church made its move to its present location, its members lived within a short distance from the building. Now, much of its membership lives in an adjacent county.

Of course, a congregation may define itself geographically even though its members live far from its service area. Examples include Tabernacle Presbyterian's youth sports programs or Bethel AME's urban ministries—both were congregations that stayed put long after their members had moved elsewhere (Bethel AME very recently moved northward too). The tension of building a community of members or serving as part of a neighborhood ecology is very real.



The Recreation Ministry of Tabernacle Presbyterian Church includes soccer games for youth age 12-14.

Moving into a new area comes with questions all its own. Congregations may believe their presence is good for communities, yet their arrival in a new neighborhood is at times met with lawsuits over zoning. Shortly after World War II, Meridian Street Methodist announced that it was leaving downtown for a location further north in the growing

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neighborhood of Meridian Hills. The announcement echoed existing congregations, including St. Paul's Episcopal, First Baptist, Second Presbyterian, and the Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation, who also planned to join them in an exodus of religious organizations that had started even before the war. This movement included the creation of new congregations of various denominations and matched the city's suburban growth patterns. But along with the construction came litigation, as nearly every congregation faced neighborhood pushback, regardless of the religious tradition. Protestants, Catholics, and Jews all faced opposition.

Opposition was lodged against St. Luke Catholic Church, for example, even though the diocese had purchased the land and announced its plans before most home construction began within the parish boundaries. In the case of Meridian Street Methodist, Meridian Hill's residents admitted that the congregation was likely full of nice people, but that the land they had purchased at 5500 North Meridian Street would be better as either a neighborhood dump or garden—which it had been in years prior—than having outsiders driving into the area on Sunday mornings.

Such tensions are not relegated to the past. When Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox sought to move from Pennsylvania Street in Indianapolis to 106th Street in Carmel earlier this century, it faced zoning opposition. It opened in 2008. Ten years later, Al Salam Foundation met stringent opposition to its plans to open a mosque and school in Carmel. The Jewish community at the turn of this century also experienced turmoil about proposed plans to relocate one of the city's synagogues to the far northside. In 2007, Shaarey Tefilla made that move.

Overcoming neighborhood opposition takes time. Most congregations rarely if ever achieve the status of “neighborhood church.” They can, however, become a part of their neighborhoods. One way is by promoting



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youth activities, which in Indianapolis has often meant youth sports. First Baptist launched a massive baseball (and later soccer) program on the fields of the former farm the congregation purchased when it moved from downtown to 86th Street and College Avenue. Meridian Street also tapped into America's pastime, creating a ball diamond and playground that became part of the Butler-Tarkington neighborhood.

when the building became home to residential condominiums. For many years, such reuse was hardly the norm, as historic congregations were more apt to face the wrecking ball than find a new purpose.

At times, a new congregation finds a home in an old congregation's house of worship. Consider the case of University Park Christian Church. Formed in 1930, as the result of the merging of two predecessor churches, University Park made its home at 29th and Kenwood. The congregation moved to 46th and Illinois in 1948. The church building at Kenwood became the new home to Second Christian Church, which later renamed themselves Light of the World Christian Church. After over thirty years, Light of the World prepared to move to a new location and its building became home to yet another congregation, New Liberty Missionary Baptist Church.



The Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church of Indianapolis hosts an annual family-oriented, festival celebrating the Orthodox faith and Hellenic culture with the community. Photo Credit: greek-festivals.org

The relocation of congregations also presents questions about what will become of the old buildings left behind. In Meridian Street Methodist's case, Indiana Business College took over the old St. Clair Street church, until the early twenty-first century

Indianapolis is also home to stories of congregations that remained in their historic locales and did not move, attempting to also remain as anchors to communities in transition rather than seeking either new fields or to follow their members elsewhere. Christ Church Cathedral Episcopal, Roberts Park Methodist, and Central Christian are examples of historic congregations that did not attempt to follow their members out of downtown. How long they will continue to do so is an important question, as pull factors and the allure of being able to start over is strong. But there is also a call to meet the faith needs of residents, which has prompted the launching of new congregations in historic parts of the city as well.

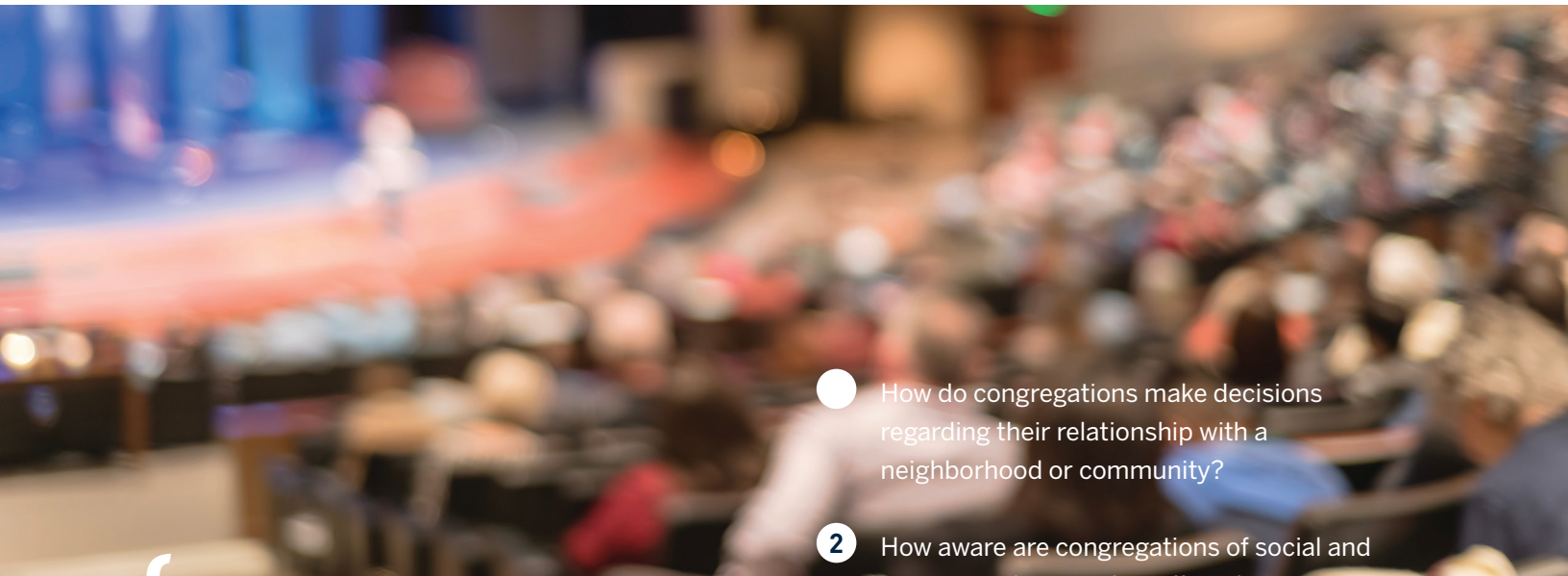
Congregations that choose not to move face different community tensions. At times, community members may not consider the congregation an asset. Some are concerned that congregations own too much property that is used too infrequently, thus creating empty spaces that might have other commercial or social

uses. RUC 2.0 is closely studying such a case and will report on it in a future *Research Notes*.

Congregations usually view community involvement as an important goal, but this raises an important question; what kind of community and for whom? In a nation and city in which mobility is not simply the norm but often a marker of success, how can congregations embrace both the community within and the community beyond its walls?

However we answer questions about congregations and their communities, it is useful to remember the long view: communities change and congregations move. A host of variables—immigration, tax policy, perceptions of school quality, and many others—create community change. Congregations seek to serve their members and to serve their communities, but the relationship between these two desires is fluid and dynamic. How congregations resolve this tension is what is important for us to understand.

Written by Jason Lantzer



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- 1 How do congregations make decisions regarding their relationship with a neighborhood or community?
- 2 How aware are congregations of social and economic changes that affect decisions to move or stay?
- 3 How important to a congregation's mission and purpose is a relationship with its geographic community?
- 4 Do congregations use the long-view of historical perspective to think about their relationship to their neighborhood and the ways this evolves over time?