

RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES IN INDIANAPOLIS: A Survey

by William A. Mirola

Since 1995, the Polis Center has been engaged in exploring the ways that religious organizations and people of faith shape community life in Indianapolis. In studying seventeen neighborhoods around the metro area, we have collected detailed information about the religious beliefs and practices of residents. There are several important questions that this

project is interested in answering. What do Indianapolis residents think about the role of religion in this community? What do they believe about the priorities of religious groups; about the overall influence of the religious leaders in this city? What role do they see for congregations and religious leaders in making the city a better place to live? How do their religious beliefs affect their personal decisions?

We conducted phone interviews with 806 residents of Marion County between June and September 1999. We made an effort to include minority groups and residents from both the north and south sides of town, with Washington Street as the dividing line. Twenty-two percent of our respondents were African-American. The response of African-Americans and whites to many questions differed significantly. Consequently, in the analyses which follow we report responses for the sample as a whole, and compare responses for African-Americans and whites. It is important to keep in mind that our findings apply to Indianapolis residents *on average*.

RELIGIOUS PRACTICE OF INDIANAPOLIS RESIDENTS

As shown in Figure 1, approximately two-thirds of those interviewed reported belonging to some Protestant denomination. Eighteen percent reported being Roman Catholic, 0.8 percent were Jewish, and 0.5 percent were Muslim. Those reporting no religious preference amounted to 13.2 percent. When we break down the Protestant category by denomination, we find that Baptists represented 28 percent of all Protestants (17 percent of the 806). Methodists comprised 13 percent of all Protestants we surveyed (see Figure 2). This matches the national breakdown of religious traditions in which Roman Catholics are the largest denomination, followed by Baptists and Methodists.

- **African-Americans report themselves as more regular churchgoers than do whites.**

Table 1 reports the percentages of people who attended church in the previous week as well as their typical attendance across the year. Among all 806 residents, almost half did not attend church in the previous week, while over a quarter of people told us they went to religious services once in the previous week. As shown in Table 1, only about a third of African-Americans hadn't been to services compared to more than half of whites, while 44 percent of African-Americans were at services more than once that week compared to 18 percent of whites. This pattern mirrors the reported attendance in our sample taken the previous year.

- **Whites reported giving more money to charitable organizations than African-Americans, and gave somewhat more to religiously affiliated charitable organizations.**

Table 1 also includes the percentage of Marion County residents who gave money to charitable organizations, and the percentage of those who specifically gave to religiously affiliated charitable organizations. Overall, 80 percent of residents reported giving money to charity and, of those, 69 percent contributed to religiously affiliated organizations. Among African-Americans, 70 percent reported giving, with about half giving to religiously affiliated organizations. Among white respondents, 85 percent reported giving money, with 59 percent giving to religiously affiliated charities.

WHAT DO INDIANAPOLIS RESIDENTS BELIEVE?

Rather than asking a comprehensive list of questions about religious beliefs typical of other surveys, our aim was to get a sense of how religious beliefs figured in the lives of our respondents. We did want to know specifically what Christians and non-Christians alike thought about the Bible (so often used as a measure of Christian "orthodoxy" and "fundamentalism") and whether they saw themselves as being an evangelical. We wanted to know the degree to which Indianapolis residents saw themselves as being religious or spiritual, and the role that their religious beliefs played in helping them make important decisions. Table 2 provides the percentages that address these issues.

- **More African-Americans than whites reported being very or somewhat religious or spiritual.**

Overall, more African-Americans reported being *very* or *somewhat* religious or spiritual (91 percent), compared with 85 percent of whites. More than half of African-Americans told us they were *very* religious or spiritual but only about a third of whites did so.

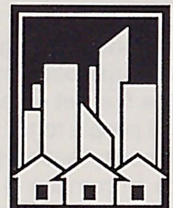
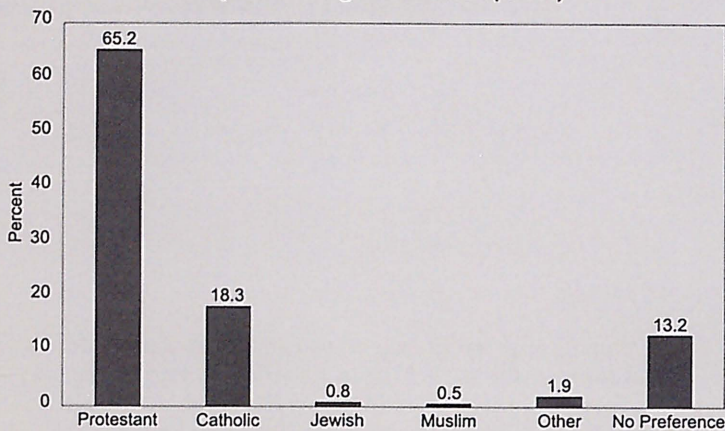


Figure 1
Respondent Religious Affiliation (N=806)



- **Twice as many African-Americans as whites believe the Bible to be the literal Word of God.**

Forty-one percent of respondents believed the Bible to be the Word of God, but that not everything in it was to be taken literally. Thirty-eight percent believed the Bible to be the literal Word of God. A fifth of our respondents understood the Bible to be a collection of legends, history, and moral teachings. Almost two-thirds of African-Americans believed the Bible to be the literal Word of God, compared to less than a third of whites. Almost a quarter of whites believed the Bible to be a collection of legends and moral teachings, compared to 10 percent of African-Americans. Though a significant number of respondents attend churches that are usually categorized as "evangelical," only 17 percent of our sample identified themselves with this label.

- **Religious beliefs play a more important role in making economic and political decisions for African-Americans than for whites.**

Overall, religious beliefs seemed most important for making family-related decisions (93 percent of all respondents.) Religious beliefs played a *very* or *somewhat* important role in making economic and political decisions for African-Americans (83 percent and 76 percent respectively), while those percentages were significantly lower for whites (52 percent and 65 percent respectively.)

WHAT DO PEOPLE THINK ABOUT RELIGION AS A FORCE IN COMMUNITY LIFE?

Table 3 presents responses to questions dealing with the role of religion in shaping community in Indianapolis. In particular, we were interested in people's perceptions of what religious leaders and congregations are doing to make this city a better place, and what they think religious leaders and congregations should be doing.

- **In general, religious leaders rank lower in making Indianapolis better than do other types of leaders.**

The first set of responses is perhaps the most telling. We asked people to tell us what they thought different sets of community leaders were doing to make Indianapolis a better place. In comparing four sets of leaders, religious leaders rank third for those *doing a lot* to make Indianapolis better followed only by local government officials. However, if we add together the perceptions of leaders *doing a lot* with those doing a *moderate amount*, then religious leaders drop to the bottom of

the list with 66 percent, compared to business leaders (80 percent), local government officials (72 percent), and social service organizations (71 percent). When asked if the congregations in their neighborhood were working to make it a better place to live, about 70 percent agreed, with only a small difference in responses between African-Americans and Whites.

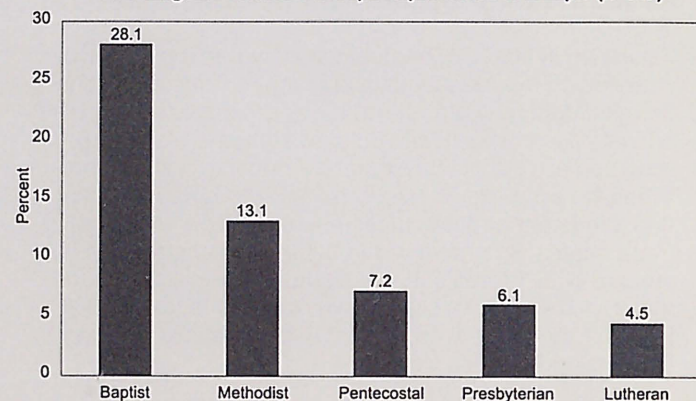
- **Most respondents thought religious leaders have very little influence in civic affairs, but should have more.**

When asked about the influence of religious leaders in civic affairs, more than half said they had *little* or *none at all*. However, almost three-quarters of respondents thought religious leaders *should* have a *lot* or a *moderate amount* of influence in civic affairs. Most African-Americans (90 percent) thought religious leader should have a *lot* or a *moderate amount* of influence, compared to 72 percent of whites.

- **White respondents felt that influencing public policies regarding poor and minority concerns should be the top priority for religious groups. African-Americans respondents felt that influencing crime policy should be the top priority for religious groups.**

When asked whether religious groups should be involved in specific areas of public policy development, such as business development or policies regarding the poor, most people, both white and African-American, felt that it was *very* or *somewhat* important. Policies regarding the poor, crime, and minority concerns topped the list. Five of the six policy areas were seen

Figure 2.
Five Largest Protestant Groups Represented in Sample (n=512)



as *very* or *somewhat* important for three-quarters of African-American respondents, while that held true among whites for only three policy areas. Whites were less likely to see economic issues such as raising the minimum wage or business development to be an important priority for religious groups. The opposite was true for African-Americans. Also, African-American respondents were more likely, compared to whites, to see support for gays and lesbians to be a *very* or *somewhat* important policy area for religious groups in the city.

Finally, when asked about how to deal with social problems facing Indianapolis, most respondents (86 percent) felt that

religious groups and local government should enter into partnerships to address problems. However, when asked if religious groups should receive state and federal financial support to develop or extend social programs, only 59 percent agreed, with 75 percent of African-Americans agreeing, compared to 54 percent of whites.

CONCLUSIONS

Marion County residents match fairly closely the denominational breakdown of the country as a whole, with Roman Catholics being the largest religious group, followed by Baptists and Methodists. Indianapolis residents reported attending religious services slightly more frequently than the nation as a whole. Data from the General Social Survey over the last two decades indicates that only about 35 percent of people attend church once a week or more. Among Marion County residents, 40 percent reported attending once a week or more. However, we must remember that people may over-report how often they go to church. While African-Americans reported higher levels of religiosity/spirituality than did whites, both groups reported high levels overall.

When asked what religious leaders and congregations are doing, or should be doing, in their neighborhoods and in the city, Indianapolis residents sensed that religious leaders had relatively little influence in civic affairs, compared to leaders in business, government, and social services. Participants felt strongly that it was *important* for religious groups to be involved in shaping public policies, especially those dealing with the poor, minorities, and crime—and to a lesser degree with economic development, wages, and support for gay and lesbian rights. These perceptions varied significantly by race, with African-Americans being more supportive of religious groups influencing all of these policies, compared to whites. African-Americans were also more likely to support partnerships involving government funding of religious groups to deal with social problems. These findings are consistent with national survey results.

Does the religious involvement of our respondents correspond to what they do in their daily lives? Although the data are not included in this report, exploratory analyses indicate that a majority of those who described themselves as religious reported that they applied religious values in family, political, and economic decision-making. These individuals were also more likely to give a favorable assessment of the influence of religious leaders and congregations in the local community.

Frequent churchgoers were more likely to make charitable donations, especially to religiously affiliated charities, and to be familiar with community programs such as the Front Porch Alliance, Inter-Faith Hospitality Network, and Celebration of Hope. Church attendance correlated strongly with individuals belonging to neighborhood and social service organizations in Indianapolis. However, there did not seem to be a correlation between religious activity and participation in neighborhood, social service, union, or other civic organizations.

Although these are preliminary findings, we have learned a great deal about the role of religion in shaping community life in Indianapolis. We believe there is much more to be learned about the role religion plays in this city, and look forward to talking further with the respondents to our survey.

Table 1. RESPONDENT RELIGIOUS PRACTICE CHARACTERISTICS

	Total	African-Americans	Whites
Church attendance in the past week:			
More than once a week	23.1 %	44.3 %	17.7 %
Once a week	26.8	20.1	28.9
Did not attend	49.9	35.6	53.4
Typical church attendance over the last year:			
More than once a week	19.2 %	39.2 %	13.2 %
Once a week	21.5	18.9	22.8
Several times a month	15.5	16.9	16.1
Once a month or less	28.3	18.9	30.6
Never	15.6	6.1	17.4
Typical attendance at religious education classes, talks, or programs over the last year:			
More than once a week	9.9 %	23.0 %	5.6 %
Once a week	12.0	18.9	10.2
Several times a month	9.9	7.7	14.2
Once a month or less	35.5	26.4	40.9
Never	32.8	17.6	35.8
Percent who gave money to charitable organizations:			
	80.7 %	70.5 %	85.1 %
Percent who gave money to religiously affiliated charities:			
	69.9 %	49.7 %	59.1 %

Table 2. RESPONDENT REPORTED BELIEFS AND VALUES

	Total	African-Americans	Whites
Degree respondent sees self as religious or spiritual:			
Very religious/spiritual	40.4 %	52.3 %	37.0 %
Somewhat	46.4	38.9	48.5
Not too	9.1	6.0	9.9
Not at all	4.1	2.7	4.6
Beliefs about the Bible:			
Word of God, to be taken literally	38.6 %	63.5 %	29.6 %
Word of God but not literally	41.1	25.7	46.6
Bible is legends, history, teachings	20.3	10.1	22.7
Respondents identifying as Evangelical:			
	17.4 %	23.6 %	25.2 %
Religious beliefs important in financial decision-making:			
Very important	30.9 %	55.2 %	22.9 %
Somewhat	27.4	28.3	29.5
Not too important	19.5	9.7	22.7
Not at all	22.1	6.9	24.9
Religious beliefs important in political decision-making:			
Very important	29.6 %	39.3 %	25.9 %
Somewhat	38.8	36.6	39.3
Not too important	17.4	14.5	19.4
Not at all	14.1	9.7	15.4
Religious beliefs important in family decision-making:			
Very important	63.6 %	73.8 %	61.1 %
Somewhat	29.8	22.8	31.5
Not too important	3.8	2.8	3.8
Not at all	2.8	0.7	3.6

Table 3. RESPONDENT PERCEPTIONS OF RELIGION AS A FORCE IN COMMUNITY LIFE IN INDIANAPOLIS.

Community leaders working to make Indianapolis a better place:

	Business Leaders	Government Officials	Religious Leaders	Social Service Organizations
Doing a lot	28.7 %	21.0 %	22.5 %	26.6 %
A moderate amount	51.8	51.7	44.0	45.3
A little	17.3	23.3	29.9	24.3
Nothing at all	2.1	4.0	3.6	3.2

Influence of religious leaders in Indianapolis civic affairs:

	How much do they have?			How much should they have?		
	Total	African-Amer.	Whites	Total	African Amer.	Whites
A lot	10.1 %	16.9 %	7.7 %	29.0 %	45.3 %	25.0 %
Moderate amount	38.7	37.2	39.1	47.4	45.3	47.1
A little	46.9	40.5	49.7	17.8	8.1	21.6
Nothing at all	4.4	5.4	3.5	5.7	1.4	6.3

How knowledgeable are religious leaders about the issues and needs of people living in their neighborhoods?

	Total	African-Americans	Whites
Very knowledgeable	27.4 %	35.4 %	25.5 %
Moderately	26.3	20.8	28.1
Not at all	10.0	15.3	6.8

Percent agreeing that congregations doing things to make respondents' neighborhood a better place:

69.9 %	71.9 %	69.2 %
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Percent reporting it is "very" or "somewhat" important for religious groups to influence public policy in Indianapolis regarding:

The poor and disadvantaged	92.9 %	96.0 %	91.8 %
Crime	87.8	98.6	85.0
Racial and ethnic minorities	81.2	94.5	77.6
Raising the minimum wage	62.3	83.9	55.3
Business development in the city	52.8	74.4	45.7
Support for gay and lesbian rights	43.8	50.0	42.4

Percent agreeing that religious groups should partner with local government to deal with social problems:

86.7 %	90.6 %	86.8 %
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Percent agreeing that religious groups should receive state and federal financial support to extend existing social welfare programs or develop new ones:

59.8 %	75.2 %	54.6 %
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ROUNDTABLE

On March 22, Research Notes hosted a roundtable discussion at The Polis Center. Participants had been provided beforehand with the text of this issue of RN, and were invited to respond to the issues raised in the paper. Katherine Tyler Scott is executive director of Trustee Leadership Development, a not-for-profit leadership education center. Mick Smith is director of the field education program at Christian Theological Seminary and associate professor of Christian ministry. Patricia Wittberg is associate professor of sociology at IUPUI. Bill Mirola, assistant professor of sociology at Marian College and a researcher for The Polis Center, conducted the survey of religious attitudes and wrote the paper under discussion. Kevin Armstrong is senior public teacher at The Polis Center. The following is an edited version of their discussion, which was moderated by Armstrong.

ARMSTRONG: Most of us would agree that it is difficult to understand America if we don't have some sense of the religious underpinnings of the culture. There is considerable talk about faith as a factor in American life, but how much attention is actually paid to religious beliefs and attitudes? Bill Mirola conducted the survey of beliefs and attitudes in Indianapolis that we are considering today. What is the picture of religion portrayed in that survey, and how does that compare with your own assumptions about religious life in Indianapolis?

SCOTT: I have lived in Indianapolis for the past 10 years. Prior to that I lived in New York, Chicago and Cincinnati, all of which have a larger percentage of Catholics than Indianapolis does. I am not sure what "difference" it makes, but there is a tone to the religious life of the city that is just different. It would be evident at least to a Catholic who comes here from another part of the country.

MIROLA: Actually, when you break out the Protestant groups, Catholics are the largest denomination. Marion County is 23 percent Roman Catholic. The next biggest group, Baptists, is concentrated predominately in the African American community. About 15 percent are Black Baptist, 2 percent are Southern Baptist, and another 3 percent are American Baptist. The Baptists are kind of neck and neck with the Catholics when you lump them all together, but there is a very significant racial breakdown among the Baptists in the city.

SCOTT: I was interested in the differences between the African American and the Caucasian communities, but you didn't do a break-down in terms of race and religion.

MIROLA: In terms of attitudes? No, not yet.

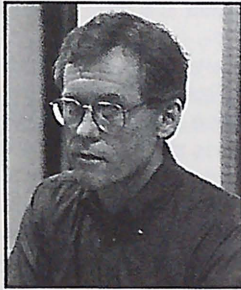
SMITH: I found myself wondering how much the attitudes are a factor of heartland culture, the general conservatism that characterizes a lot of religion in Indianapolis. I have been in Indianapolis for 12 of the last 15 years, and from my observation I would not have expected the Catholic percentage to be as high as it was. I thought that, particularly with some of the suburban fringes of Marion County, the Independent churches would have constituted a larger block.

MIROLA: That is an important point. We don't have in this data anything from beyond the boundaries of Marion County.



Katherine Tyler Scott

Mick Smith



Patricia Wittberg

Bill Mirola



Kevin Armstrong

Photos by Rick Baughn

Bringing in the suburbs, you would have more Independent Protestants represented, and a significantly lower percentage of minorities. I think Katherine is right; race is part of what we are seeing. African American respondents were predominantly coming from the Black Baptist congregations, CME, AME, AME Zion, and the Pentecostal and Holiness traditions. The number of African Americans that are mainline Protestant or Catholic is relatively small, about 800 people.

WITTBURG: Did you combine the Independent churches all together? I don't remember seeing a figure.

MIROLA: I have those numbers available, but didn't break them out for this report.

SCOTT: And non-denominational folks are out there somewhere.

MIROLA: Actually, people gave us the names of specific denominations. No one said only that, "I am a Christian." Nobody claimed to have no affiliation. Most folks gave us the name of a church or the name of a tradition, or they said, "I am technically a member here but I don't go."

SCOTT: But if they said something like Faith Church or Faith Independent Church or something like that, you have to figure out what that is connected with.

MIROLA: Right. Which was a challenge but we basically used the work that has been done by Jan Shipp¹ to break out particular congregations into these larger groupings. At this point, that is about where we are in the analysis.

ARMSTRONG: In Indianapolis, with regard to community life, we often make assumptions about social involvement based on mainline congregations. But one of the things this survey clearly reveals is the growing number of Independent congregations. What are the implications of that for our community life?

SMITH: There is a generalization—that I think is not accurate anymore—that the Independent churches are more evangelical and fundamentalist, and tend to focus on spirituality. The other stereotype is that mainline denominations are more committed to activities on behalf of social justice. But what I am hearing from some of the Independent churches is a fairly high level of concern and active involvement in community outreach—though the motivation may be different than that of the mainline churches.

ARMSTRONG: What does that mean in relationship to this national emphasis on faith-based partnerships? You are sitting in the office of a government administrator or a not-for-profit leader, and the political climate says now is the time for faith-based partnerships. What does this mean?

SCOTT: Mark Chaves² is doing a major study on that. And his preliminary findings are that 30 percent of the churches in the country are interested in cooperating with some sort of governmental funding program. However, he found African American churches to be disproportionately willing to accept government monies to fund social programs. Mainline Protestant churches, if I remember correctly, also expressed a relatively high level of interest. But the conservative churches, the fundamentalist churches, were less willing than the average. It is somewhat ironic that this business of funneling governmental monies for social betterment through the churches is being pushed nationally by conservatives. But the denominations that would take advantage of it do not usually support the conservatives politically.

WITTBURG: The danger that I see with Independent churches is their not being able to see the fuller agenda of the community, or the wide range of diversity that a community represents. The way in which religious institutions define community to me is critically important. It gets a little frightening to think that religious institutions will be helping to shape leaders who really cannot see the whole community—who can only see their immediate neighborhood. There can be some advantage to being on the margins; you can see the whole and see it differently, but you also can isolate yourself and be disconnected from a larger reality.

MIROLA: There is another danger that came out of this data. We asked, "Are you familiar with the Charitable Choice provision of the 1996 welfare reform act?" About a third of those we asked said they were familiar with Charitable Choice, but they couldn't tell us what it meant. There are people pressing for more faith-based partnerships, but there is no guarantee that congregations know what the programs are or how they operate.

ARMSTRONG: What does this imply about leadership development, within religious communities but also in the larger community? What advice would you have in light of this data?

MIROLA: One possible danger is that we are going to create a split between those who are in larger congregations or in congregations that are more tied in politically, or at least tied into the social service sector, who are going to know how to work the partnerships. But congregations that are small,

Independent, store fronts, may not even know that money is available because they are not connected. I see it creating a tiered system of people who could potentially reap the benefits, but who may not be the people with the most need.

SCOTT: I don't think there are many religious leaders who are taking any real leadership role in the community. I exempt the Church Federation from this because they do take leadership—that is their mission. In my program at Trinity Episcopal Church, we were talking about what does it mean to be a trustee, what does it mean to be a leader in your community. The people around the table were from social services, education, business, health care, and government. But religion was not represented. If you are going to talk about values-based leadership, the church definitely should have a role in that.

SMITH: There are churches that would not take a stand as an institution but whose members, some of whom are in business or governmental leadership positions, would speak out from a strong faith-based conviction.

SCOTT: I think people are beginning to speak above a whisper about the influence their religious beliefs have on their civic participation and involvement.

MIROLA: It is quite clear from our conversations in Marion County that people are seeing the gap—that the institutional figures are not speaking out. For all that people are using their faith to be more vocal, we still don't have key players from the churches.

SMITH: I have seen several dozen mission statements of congregations. I can only think of two that explicitly identify a commitment to the community beyond their own walls. And I think that is very telling.

ARMSTRONG: But aren't you asking institutional leaders and congregation leaders to do something that contradicts the cultural understanding of religion? Other surveys clearly say that people are drawn to religion because of the personal gratification that comes as a result. If that is the case, are our expectations out of synch?

WITTEBERG: There have been several sea changes in the denominations. One hundred years ago, Catholics were very much working class and under class. So when Catholics engaged in founding orphanages, hospitals, and schools, they were helping their own. Another source of activism is cultural preservation. It no longer matters to Catholics, Lutherans, and others to preserve the language and culture of the old country. We have moved more towards the church as spiritual filling station.

SCOTT: For what purpose are they like a spiritual filling station?

WITTEBERG: To deal with the stresses and strains of daily life. People multitask. You don't just drive, you drive while you are talking on your cell phone. You take your laptop to the beach. You look at two television channels at the same time. The stresses of life have led to the "privatization" of church.

SMITH: Eighty-six percent of people identify themselves as religious, but only 58 percent say their religious belief has a significant bearing on their financial decisions. That is, financial

and political issues belong in the public realm. The encouragement and strength that they draw from their faith is a private matter. That split is a prominent part of what is reflected here.

MIROLA: There is a significant racial difference on those questions. African Americans are much more likely not to segregate these areas of decision making. There is also an interesting class dynamic. The white upper class sees finances as being outside the boundaries of religious commentary. But blue collar, working class folks are more likely to view economics as having a moral component, just as with questions of politics or family.

SMITH: How much of that correlates with the notion that the lower socioeconomic classes have a stronger sense of community generally, that shows up in various kinds of group membership?

WITTEBERG: That is not true.

SCOTT: No, it is not true. Upper-middle class people are much more joiners of groups than lower and working class, who tend to be atomized. Elfriede Wedam from The Polis Center was talking to my class about Mars Hill, and the extreme lack of community organizations there. We have to be careful not to romanticize the old-fashioned immigrant ethnic working class neighborhood. Group membership goes up with social class.

MIROLA: In part, the history of that is rooted in a time when people worked 6 or 7 day work weeks. Only people who had the luxury of time could join groups.

SCOTT: Did class distinctions have an effect on your finding that two-thirds of African Americans believe in the Bible being the literal word of God? Was there an educational factor there as well? That is twice the average in the whole study.

MIROLA: Blacks in Indianapolis tend to be Baptist and Pentecostal, and probably 80 to 90 percent of those surveyed were coming out of poorer neighborhoods. So it is all of these things working together. That is what makes it so complicated.

WITTEBERG: Something else that seemed extraordinary to me, or contradictory, was to find that Bible literalists were more supportive of gays and lesbians. I thought that was odd.

MIROLA: There has been an assumption about the conservative Protestant churches who seem at some level to be social conservatives. When you bring those folks into a conversation about economic issues, they start looking exactly like the left wing of the mainline Protestants regarding the battles over raising the minimum wage or living wage campaigns. And often you get this ironic mix of the rank and file of the social conservatives and these mainline liberal clergy. The rank and file of the mainline Protestants are not in those campaigns, nor are the leadership of social conservative Christian groups. It really speaks to the cultural assumption in the media—but what leaders pronounce and what the rank and file actually does—

SCOTT: We probably should take what people say about all sorts of things with several grains of salt.

MIROLA: That is why I think the class stuff is so interesting. It is one thing to say, "Oh yes, Christians should help the poor."

It is less intuitive to say, “Christians should fight to raise the minimum wage.”

SCOTT: Americans have absorbed the rhetoric of the segregation of church and state. And what we think that means is not necessarily what it really means, according to the Supreme Court. That is an iron wall, and ministers can talk about helping the poor, but if they talk about race and minimum wage, it’s a political issue. My guess is that African Americans do not have this inhibition. But I don’t know.

WITTBERG: When you are directly affected by injustice, and the church is the sole institution for everything in your community, then of course it is going to respond differently.

MIROLA: I think the bigger line that thou shalt not violate is the separation of church and economy.

SCOTT: I am African American and I am Episcopalian so I certainly can’t speak for the whole black church, but I do know that when I go to civic group or community meetings the boundaries are very fuzzy. People feel like they have a right to talk about the minimum wage, about civil rights. They feel they have a right to talk about anything in the church. I have actually been to black churches in which the minister told people who they should vote for. That never would happen at Trinity. They would never even say, “Go vote.”

SMITH: There is such a powerful weave of factors in American civil religion. Social location, whether it be determined by race, ethnicity, or class so powerfully shapes our perception of what is or isn’t appropriate for conversation within the church. So in the middle and upper-middle class churches, to talk about public policy that pertains to economics or housing or minimum wage is beyond the perimeter of the acceptable. It just doesn’t fit there.

ARMSTRONG: In the remaining time I would like to sharpen an issue that we have brought up here. What roles should we reasonably expect congregations to play in civic life, given what we have said about individual beliefs and attitudes and institutional expectations?

SCOTT: I think it depends on where the congregation is located. I mean that both physically and socially. In many inner city areas the churches are the last institution left. I think the church would quite readily serve as a spokesman for people for whom there are few other institutional voices. I would hope that the Catholic Church continues to be a vocal opponent of capital punishment in this state. And what can you expect churches to do in the suburbs? I honestly don’t know. Because if some priest or minister gets up there on a Sunday and starts talking about the redistribution of income—

SMITH: That would be his last Sunday.

SCOTT: Yeah.

SMITH: On the way out the door.

WITTBERG: Well you know, that gets to me. I have an idealistic view of what churches should be and should be doing. I think there are some universal things that the church should take on as an institution. First of all it is responsible for articulating and convening people around a community of

beliefs and values. When there is social injustice the church is suppose to be the leader in helping people to read the larger reality, and to move mountains. All of us have boundaries, all of us have self-interest, but we have a larger responsibility to each other. To me, the church is the instrument to shape that dialogue and that kind of community. As idealistic as it may sound, I think every single church in Marion County could do that.

SMITH: I agree with that whole-heartedly as an ideal. But if your social location is in the suburbs and in the middle to upper-middle class, then to nurture your own spirit and private piety is good enough. If you are far enough away physically and relationally from those whose lives are constantly oppressed, you can say, “Hey, I am a faithful church member, and this is fine.”

SCOTT: But that is exactly where the leader has to be located, between the ideal and the reality. The minister of a suburban church, especially one that has a congregational polity, might be reluctant to speak out bluntly or to lead forcefully for fear of getting fired.

WITTBERG: You can’t move too fast. If you are trying to help people change and move to a new place you can’t out-lead them, or you will lose them.

MIROLA: If there is a prophetic voice in the community, I think people expect the institutional church to play that role.

SCOTT: Don’t you think we need to move away from clericalism? When I said church I was just thinking of a minister enabling other people to speak. Your survey shows that symbolically and practically religious leaders are not at all influential in the city.

MIROLA: They are not influential but they should be. I think that is the issue—that they are not.

SCOTT: There are three spheres of influence. When Reverend X says something about an issue, does the Mayor listen? Do the people in the pews pay attention? On the third level, what stance is the corporate church going to take on capital punishment, on poverty? Whatever the issue, it is the clergy that the denomination is going to listen to first. What worries me is an increasing conservatism among the clergy.

WITTBERG: Isn’t that historically true, though?

SCOTT: Traditionally, in many denominations clergy have been more liberal than their flocks. But today, the students coming into the seminaries have a totally different idea of what the faith is about. The faculty work overtime trying to get these people to be more socially involved. If this continues, we will end up with a clergy who won’t take the lead even when asked.

SMITH: I just finished reading 100 essays by kids who think they want to go into seminary. The seminaries are going to be full but these kids aren’t going to go to the local church. They see a ministry beyond the congregation and they have great zeal, great passion. Many of them would fit your description, but these folks are not going to go to the parish.

ARMSTRONG: Let’s go around and have some last words.

MIROLA: I think there is an educational issue for clergy—a revisiting of the historical precedents. We are more comfortable in the Episcopal Church talking about Henry VIII than about what the Church was doing at the end of the 19th Century in American cities—to say, “You have a prophetic voice and here is what it was just a few years ago.” I also think that clergy don’t comprehend how the global economy is shaping the local neighborhood. Everybody is scrambling to put Band-Aids on issues that are going out of control. Providing social services is a way of doing that without understanding the causes.

WITTEBERG: Well, part of it is an ignorance about our history. In the 1960s our bishop really did go out on the limb for social justice and economic issues. He was not particularly liked by his colleagues, but he did what he thought was right.

SCOTT: I am doing some focus groups with women and they still have a very strong commitment, on the national level, to social leadership on various issues. And the group that was talking to me last night was really proud that United Methodist women had given \$90,000 to the church capital fund drive. They had a very keen vision of the power that gave them in the local church.

WITTEBERG: I do believe there is a critical role for seminaries to play. The development and deployment of new leadership is going to be critical to these questions we are exploring.

SMITH: The extent to which seminaries will be the primary locus of shaping new leadership is up for question. There are strong movements afoot that have local congregations growing their own, nurturing their own. In summary of my thoughts on this conversation: my hope is that out of the polarized perspectives of the post-’60s activism on the part of church leadership, and the ’80s backlash of conservatism toward a privatized view of faith, there will emerge a rich new holism that will refute those polarities. Instead we will say, “We don’t have to choose between social activism and concern for the poor, and personal piety and growth in faith. There must be both.”

SCOTT: Well said.

ARMSTRONG: We will end on that word looking to the future. Thank you.

¹ Jan Shipps, professor emeritus of history and religious studies at IUPUI and senior research fellow at The Polis Center, devised categories for analyzing types of American religious congregations: Mainline Protestant, Traditional Non-Mainline, Fundamentalist/Evangelical/Pentecostal, Catholic, Jewish, Latter-day Saints.

² Mark Chaves, associate professor of sociology at the University of Arizona.

RESEARCH NOTES

from the Project on Religion and Urban Culture



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