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Taking Care of Business

How do congregations react when the neighborhood changes? Most congregations don't do anything, according to Hartford Seminary sociologist Nancy Ammerman and her colleagues. They studied 23 congregations in changing communities across the country. Here's what she says about most congregations who find their world shifting:

As environments change...it would seem a simple matter for a congregation to assess the changes, decide on a course of action, and implement new programs and strategies.... That rarely happens. Human organizations of all kinds are not as rational as they are sometimes assumed to be. [T]he weight of habit and tradition maintain familiar patterns. Those familiar patterns often blind congregations to the change.... [T]heir ability to imagine the future is blunted by the weight of the past. And even valiant, imaginative efforts to change are made more difficult by expectations and assumptions long in place. The most common response to change...is to proceed with business as usual.

If you want to read the stories of how congregations respond to changes in their environment, read the profiles of all 23 churches in *Congregation and Community* (Rutgers University Press). Art Farnsley, research director at The Polis Center, and several other Polis staffers collaborated with Ammerman on the study and the book.

News Letters Need More than News

Ask church news letter editors why they publish and most would say, "To inform the congregation about what's coming up." Roger Hawthorne, a Milwaukee pastor, begs to differ. He claims that a newsletter's main purpose is "to create, sustain and improve congregational morale."

Working on the morale front means that the editor has to have a clear idea of the church's attraction, its pull. Once that is clear, then the hard news items should support that purpose. Hawthorne gives an example: "Each year our church turns out more walkers for the CROP Walk than churches three to five times our size." In writing that up, he suggests a little humble boasting: "In our news letter report... we don't merely list the numbers and names of the volunteers. The article subtly and not so subtly says, 'Look at all we accomplished in comparison to other churches.'" It sounds like a good idea to use the news letter to strengthen members' positive feelings about the church. Hawthorne's article is in "Net Results," a monthly publication from Cokesbury.

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A New Partnership Comes to Martindale-Brightwood Neighborhood

Pastors and community leaders from the northeast side of Indianapolis are forming the Martindale-Brightwood Community Resurrection Partnership “to enhance the lives of individuals and families” in the neighborhood. Organizers include 11 churches, National City Bank, Martindale-Brightwood Community Center, and Edna Martin Christian Center. Their first step will be to concentrate on a clean-up of Stuart Street to support new housing planned there. The next step for the organization will be the development of long-range plans. East 91st Street Christian Church is negotiating a partnership with the group. For more information on the Resurrection Partnership, call The Polis Center (317) 274-2455.

Building a Theory of Neighborhoods

Researchers at The Polis Center are working on ways to understand what gives a neighborhood its personality. It’s apparent that quantitative data does not tell all. Neighborhoods with similar income ranges, home ownership, and racial mix have different attitudes toward the world and themselves. They also have different relationships with groups and individuals. How do you account for these differences in character? The Polis Center is exploring categories such as:

1. *Stability.* Are neighborhoods in flux or have they been the same for some time? Are area organizations well-established?
2. *Defining events.* When did the community experience major change? When factories shut down? When major highways cut through? When schools closed?
3. *Dominant nonreligious community organizations.* In some neighborhoods, there is a development organization that penetrates the life of the people; in other cases, it’s a community center, a hospital or school, the school board.
4. *Types of religious organizations.* Some neighborhoods have mainly small religious organizations; some neighborhoods have affluent and poor congregations; some congregations by their size or character influence the outlook of the neighborhood.

You probably can give examples of all four categories. Maybe other categories occur to you. Let us know what you think by calling The Polis Center at (317) 274-2455.

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