



The Polis Center  
*We bring things into perspective.*

# CLERGY NOTES

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*from the Project on Religion and Urban Culture*

*Mr. John Whitway (not his real name) was considered a generous and gentle member of the first church I ever served. His parents were founding members, he had served in every major office, and it was common knowledge that "Mr. John" was the largest financial contributor to this small parish. People listened when he spoke. And the first words he ever said to me were, "Preacher, you ought to know there are two things that don't go over in this church – Sunday evening services and a [black man] in the pulpit." After eighteen months had passed – during which time Mr. John and I shared many conversations – the resident Bishop, who was African-American, spoke at a Sunday night worship service. Mr. John and I sat together in the pew.*

## **What – Me a Racist?**

The young white congregant with whom I recently shared that story was appalled at the old man's racism. "Actually, he was the one who taught me about my racism," I responded. She left the conversation unconvinced and not a little put off that I would label myself a racist.

What I meant to say was that by talking to Mr. John I discovered the more carefully nuanced and hidden racism of my own beliefs. My "separate but equal" upbringing had encouraged politeness to my black neighbors across town, while ignoring, in fact, the question of equity.

For many, racism is defined by the crimes committed by a few, misguided individuals; racists are the exception in an otherwise equitable system of justice and fairness. "Real racists" commit sensational acts such as the men in Jasper, Texas who chained James Byrd Jr. to the back of a pickup truck and dragged him to death. The police shooting of an unarmed African immigrant in New York City, or the ridiculous response to a Lauryn Hill song by white disk jockey "Greaseman," are considered anomalies rather than symptoms of a deeper racial problem.

While there are hopeful examples of congregations trying to address systemic racial injustices, the reality remains that racist attitudes exist even in those organizations which historically have advanced the cause of racial integration. Most Indianapolis congregations are overwhelmingly composed of one race – in itself an obstacle to interracial dialogue and acceptance.

## **Religion and Race in Indianapolis**

In a Polis Center survey of 224 congregations, researchers found that in 91% of the congregations at least nine of ten worshippers were of the same race, either predominately white or predominately black. The majority of congregations surveyed were *exclusively* of one race. In short, Dr. King's adage that the worship hour is the most segregated hour of the week remains true.

To be sure, racism cannot be judged simply on the basis of demographics. And yet, this indisputable segregation by race in our churches deserves fuller attention. People of faith – prominent in both the abolitionist and civil rights movements – have a better track record in combating institutional racism than in dealing with the more complicated racism of individuals, including their own members.

### **Lingering and Lasting Efforts**

How do clergy and congregations begin to talk to one another about these perceptions and attitudes? How does one even begin a conversation that implies the extent to which racist attitudes still prevail among well-meaning and well-educated white people who genuinely believe they are not prejudiced?

Interracial pulpit exchanges such as those sponsored by Celebration of Hope offer one opportunity. Ministerial associations might be reinvigorated by fostering conversations on race-related community issues. Some clergy members, black and white, are having dinner at each other's homes or attending cultural events together – simple, yet important beginnings to building one-on-one relationships and understanding. New youth groups created among congregations, rather than within them, can be catalysts for bridge building. There are no quick solutions; the answers will come only when committed people are willing to linger with the spoken and unspoken questions posed by racism.

There are historical and socio-economic reasons why people form voluntary associations, and not all of these reasons are a consequence of race. And yet, segregation in religious organizations is most troubling because it contradicts the claims of religion to universality and inclusiveness. How have you and your congregation dealt with racial exclusion and embrace? I'd like to hear your stories, so ... let's keep in touch.



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