



Cultivating Communities

## The Shape(s) of Religious Life: Enhancing the Public Witness of Faith Communities

*“The vision was clear. At the heart of both the city and the state, the political and religious establishments were comfortably intertwined. A deeply symbolic symmetry balanced the church alongside the state, the sacred with the secular, the Circle within the Square.” (Farnsley, et. al.)<sup>1</sup>*

In their landmark study, *Sacred Circles, Public Squares: The Multicentering of American Religion*, the history of the Circle in downtown Indianapolis, as described by Farnsley, et. al., serves as a telling parable of the evolving state of religious life in America. Once flanked on all sides by Protestant churches, the Circle housed the governor’s house and was meant to be the civic, religious, and political center by which urban life would ring out in concentric circles.

As time went on however, despite many attempts in the Circle to hold to our national motto, “In God We Trust” (including a failed attempt to revive Easter services in the 1970’s, complete with an old rugged cross), it was the other phraseology on the almighty dollar that held sway: “E Pluribus Unum.” All but one church moved off the Circle and have since been replaced by commercial real estate. And yet, despite what expert sociologists predicted, this was not simply a devolution into a cold secularity. As Peter Berger has highlighted, a more apt description for secularization is pluralism<sup>2</sup>. The movement of religious life in Indianapolis was simultaneously a “de-centering” and a “multi-centering,” but it never went away.

Faith communities may no longer be the anchor institutions of our society, but we suggest that they were never meant to be. Much has been written about the “Constantinianism” of the Christian faith, in particular, in which clergy and their congregations identify themselves as congruent with the shape and character of the political ideologies of their day (regardless of “left” or “right”). In a postmodern and post-secular age, with the voices of our city’s faith communities more diversified and marginalized than ever, many find themselves with a distinct vantage point more in line with the sojourner or the prophet, crying out for justice, peace, and a genuine love for neighbor and the “other.”

While postmodernism has often led the Western mind toward a sleek and simplistic relativism that denies any sort of truth claim whatsoever, the events of the last few years in our nation have, instead, revealed a moral conscience that has always been latent in our culture and society. The experiences of the disenfranchised and oppressed have led to an awakening of a post-colonial mindset, in which the imaginations of persons with a history of collective oppression--African Americans, Latinx, LGBTQIA+, First Nation Peoples, and Muslims--have begun to experience a very real social, cultural, and psychological liberation. Faith communities can encourage these measures, and yet go even further--proclaim and advance a material

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<sup>1</sup> Farnsley II, Arthur E., et. al. *Sacred Circles, Public Squares: The Multicentering of American Religion*. Indiana University Press, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Expounded in many of his works, perhaps most notably in *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age*.

liberation in the spheres of economics, politics, and human geographies designed to address the systemic inequities resulting in a disproportionate allocation of resources.<sup>3</sup>

Indianapolis serves as a microcosm of the recent history and trajectory of religion in America. However, scattering and fragmentation do not have the last word. The Hebrew Scriptures describe a movement towards the renewal of all things through and despite the wandering and scattershot faithfulness of God's people (see the Exodus story, for example). In fact, this wayfaring became the opportunity for the good news of a new creation to take root in new peoples and lands. If faith communities move on the conviction that all people are created and endowed with gifts and abilities that are designed to build one another up for the good of all, then there is tremendous hope. Today's pluralistic landscape is, indeed, a real opportunity to demonstrate how congregations, even when scattered to the four winds, can move beyond mere religiosity towards cultivating healthy communities and becoming the seeds of justice, mercy, equity, liberation, and hope in their respective places.

This opportunity could not be more timely. For the next five years, our city will need to heal. This last year has inflicted deep wounds to neighborhoods, extended families, friendships, and households that are seen and unseen, felt and unfelt; compassion, care, and creativity with regard to new economic opportunities must be cultivated together. Faith communities, rooted in place, care about the whole person and can play a healing role. Bringing congregations together with the best community-based organizations in our city will be a powerful balm as disinvested neighborhoods collectively work toward self-determination and self-sufficiency for persons disproportionately trapped in poverty.

### **“Health is Membership”: Leveraging the Social Capital of Faith Communities**

*The word "health," in fact, comes from the same Indo-European root as "heal," "whole," and "holy." To be healthy is literally to be whole; to heal is to make whole... If we were lucky enough as children to be surrounded by grown-ups who loved us, then our sense of wholeness is not just the sense of completeness in ourselves but also is the sense of belonging to others and to our place; it is an unconscious awareness of community, of having in common.*

*-Wendell Berry, “Health is Membership”<sup>4</sup>*

The story of Englewood Christian Church (ECC) today is one of belonging. But it's not merely a belonging in the sense of *church* membership, but in the sense that Berry describes above: an organic wholeness and communion with all of creation, which includes non-members and the very land we inhabit. It is the uncommon conviction of a cosmic membership where all are invited into the human story of renewal and reconciliation.

That said, ECC plays a distinct role in the proclamation of this “good news,” which, in the Christian tradition, recognizes that all people are in need of healing and wholeness. What is it about a faith community that makes her unique in her ability to contribute to the health of her place? What we propose is not simply more involvement in religious activity, which can often result in “religion as opiate,” insulating congregants from the world around them, but the cultivation of *genuine friendship, interdependence, and social capital*.

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<sup>3</sup> Much of the foundation for this rationale is based on evidence supplied by the Evaluation Report of the Lilly Endowment entitled *Better Together: Religious Institutions as Partners in Community-Based Development*.

<sup>4</sup> Berry, Wendell. *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, edited by Norman Wirzba. Counterpoint Press, 2002.

Michael Carroll, former Vice President for Community Development for the Lilly Endowment, once pointed to the “conviction that churches and neighborhoods need each other; that churches flourish best when they reach beyond their own walls, and that neighborhoods benefit from the resources and leadership vested in local churches.”<sup>5</sup>

Englewood Christian Church’s 125-year history on the Near Eastside of Indianapolis is one example of how a faith community made the move from civil religion to becoming a real-world social body as neighborhood citizens, practicing what the Christian tradition calls the “ministry of reconciliation” in our place. Once a thriving mega-church that fully benefited from the cultural climate of a consumeristic, privatized religiosity, we also experienced the crushing dissolution of that paradigm when poverty and disinvestment crept into downtown Indy and the immediately surrounding neighborhoods. The congregation was at a crossroads: Do we migrate with the patterns of white flight or do we stay put and commit to being a faithful example of hope and love for one another and neighbors in our place? Although the congregation struggled for several decades to understand the ramifications, we chose the latter.

Over the past 25 years, with a remnant of about 125 congregants, members of the church dug in deep. Many relocated to the Englewood neighborhood, resulting in about 75% of our membership becoming immediate neighbors. We began to invest time, work, and dollars into community infrastructure and initiatives (including community and economic development and childcare), and we began to nurture a friendship and unity with a body of Spanish-speaking Christians, sharing offices and worship space. Now, as *Mano de Amistad*, they are considered the Spanish-speaking expression of ECC.

The fruit of our life and work together on the Near Eastside has resulted in such accomplishments as the development and management of five multi-family low and mixed income apartment buildings, a NAEYC-accredited daycare and infant center, the creation of 800+ jobs, the restoration and redevelopment of the historic PR Mallory campus as an educational facility (housing both Paramount School of Excellence and Purdue Polytechnic High School) and a commercial space (primarily for Uplift Produce, a state-of-the-art hydroponic farm and social enterprise), and the rehabilitation of countless single-family homes.

This story was not simply of a rugged individualism where members encouraged neighbors to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. Rather, our practice is based on a long-term commitment to dialogue, discernment, and demonstration of the commitment to community health that we share as people of faith. This includes admitting that we each need, and indeed, belong to, one another. We also believe that our church belongs to our neighbors around us. The key paradigm shift for Englewood Christian Church was the realization that we do not exist for our own end; rather, we exist to share civic responsibility and be a gift to those we live among.

This is the capacity we hope to nurture in faith communities and the neighborhoods they find themselves city-wide, and with additional funding through Thriving Congregations, across the nation. **Through community-based dialogue, the facilitation of resources, bridge-building, training, and technical assistance, Cultivating Communities is committed to the health of congregations for the purposes of equitable development, cultural reconciliation and neighborhood empowerment.** Regardless of creed, race, doctrine, denomination, and tradition, we ask all congregations to reclaim their heritage as sacred circles around the public square.

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<sup>5</sup> Scheie, David M., et. al. *Better Together: Religious Institutions as Partners in Community-Based Development*. Rainbow Research, 1994.