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Thinking of Congregations as Community Assets

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Neighborhoods in Indianapolis, as in every city, are concerned about community development. What constitutes "development" depends, of course, on what a community needs, and the needs vary from inner city, to older suburbs, to edge cities. But the desire for economic growth, necessary social services, and residential stability is universal.

Recently, both scholars and policy-makers have turned more of their attention to the role congregations can play in community development. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) now aggressively seeks the assistance of the faith community in rebuilding at-risk communities. In Indianapolis, the Mayor's Office has created The Front Porch Alliance, a program to assist congregations that are trying to improve neighborhood life. National programs such as United Methodists' Shalom Zones or John Perkins's Christian Community Development Association (CCDA)¹ also aim to involve religious congregations more in both economic and social development, especially in the inner city.

In all of this there is an assumption that congregations are important social assets that are not being fully leveraged. The work of John Kretzmann and John McKnight in *Building Communities From The Inside Out*² has raised the profile of asset-based thinking to the point where communities are trying to focus on their strengths rather than on litanies of "needs assessment." In this asset-oriented environment, many are seizing the opportunity to promote congregations as sources of community strength. Programs such as the Philadelphia-based Partners for Sacred Places may take a different approach than HUD or the CCDA, but they, too, emphasize congregations as assets.

Given this evolving interest in congregations as community assets, we are paying particular attention to what Indianapolis communities are saying about the role congregations play in their neighborhood. For the fourth summer, the Project on Religion and Urban Culture sent student researchers into selected neighborhoods to observe, interview, and record in order to understand the role religion plays in civic life there.

As is our practice, we ended the summer's research with a public meeting in each neighborhood so our researchers could present their preliminary findings and the residents could ask questions or offer criticism. Residents in every neighborhood were concerned about many factors related to community development. Clearly, however, they regarded the discussion of these issues and the discussion of congregations' roles in the community as two entirely separate things.

Although the presentations were about the relationship of faith to community, and especially about the place of congregations in the social infrastructure, most people were not inclined to relate the two in their discussions. When people talked about their communities, they did not count congregations as assets or liabilities.

Evidence collected this summer about social service spending by congregations offers one explanation why these residents separate congregations from community development in their thinking. Congregations, on average, spend very little money or time on the development of the neighborhoods around their houses of worship.

To be sure, social service spending is only one indicator of a congregation's connection to its neighborhood. It is important to look at other factors such as involvement in community organizing, volunteered time and facilities, and moral or political leadership by congregations. But social service spending is a traditional mission effort of congregations, and offers clues about the scope of congregational involvement.

We visited 145 congregations in several neighborhoods representing both inner city and suburb. Based on each congregation's own report, the average congregation spends about \$19,000 on social service ministries, both in the local neighborhood and elsewhere. Most congregations estimated that they spent about twice that amount on their neighborhood if all other expenses were factored in.

That \$19,000 figure struck us as high given what else we knew about the congregations. For one thing, the average was well above the median. It certainly did not seem like most congregations could spend anywhere near that much on social services. We also knew that a few very large, very wealthy congregations could badly skew a sample this small.

For the sake of argument, we removed the highest-spending ten percent and the lowest-spending ten percent from the sample. When we did, the average amount of money spent by each congregation on social service ministries dropped to about \$4,500. The top ten percent, as it turns out, represents over eighty percent of all congregational spending on social service ministries. Clearly, these largest congregations are significant assets, but the rest contribute amounts that could be overlooked.

An average of \$4,500 spent by all but the largest congregations may seem like a small amount, but the true average is likely smaller still. If the forty per cent of congregations not answering this question did not spend much on social service ministries—an assumption generally justified by what else we know about those congregations—then the average drops into a range of \$2,000 to \$3,000.

This dichotomy between the richest churches and all others is especially true in the inner city. The raw averages suggest that inner city churches spend more than their suburban counterparts on social services. But a slightly closer reading shows that only ten per cent of the congregations do ninety percent of the spending.

In fact, if one removes only the single highest spending congregation from each neighborhood, then average congregational spending on social services drops somewhere into the \$1000 to \$3000 range. Clearly, social service spending is one area in which averages do not tell us much about what most congregations do.

Whether in urban areas or in the suburbs, congregations' contributions to their communities cannot be reduced to money spent on social services. University of Pennsylvania researcher Ram Cnaan's study of congregations and social work, conducted in Indianapolis and elsewhere on behalf of Partners for Sacred Places, found that direct financial support made up only a portion of the "assessed monetary value" of a program. A variety of other factors—in-kind support, clergy salaries, staff time, volunteer time, and the use value of space—all go into the equation, though they are notoriously difficult to measure accurately.

But social-service spending provides a useful benchmark for measuring magnitude when thinking of congregations as assets. Even making allowance for in-kind expenditures, it is clear enough that most congregations are not major economic factors in their neighborhoods. Given the broad scope of community development needs and the relatively small financial contributions of most congregations, it is understandable that residents discount the role of religion in community development.

There are other reasons why community residents might not think of congregations as community assets. Most of the neighbors see churches and synagogues as private organizations that are simply located in their neighborhood. Some faith-based groups do provide services to the neighbors. But unlike government services, congregations can stop their programs at any time or simply leave the neighborhood if they choose. Despite the alienation many people feel toward government programs, there is still a real sense in which residents "own" public initiatives, or at least feel that they have a right to them. They have no such rights or ownership in churches or synagogues. Congregations are in the community and some serve it, but none belong to the whole community. The neighbors regard congregations as neutral entities that serve particular populations in selective ways.

In fact, most congregations do not imagine themselves to be "civic actors" with a primary responsibility to do community development or to provide social services. They may do these things as secondary priorities associated with their public mission, but for the most part they define themselves in terms of the spiritual and moral development of members and their children. When congregations list their needs and priorities, they almost always list internal needs drawn straight from textbooks on business management: growth, conflict resolution, lay leadership, finances, and the like.

When congregations do look outside, they do so with a variety of perspectives that span the range of social ministry. Some want simply to serve, to provide food or clothing that will meet immediate needs. Others want to spur community development by bringing investment, both political and financial, into the neighborhood from outside. A third group wants to advocate to the powers-that-be on behalf of the community. Still others, though these are a small minority in Indianapolis, want to empower the community to advocate for itself.

The question of whether congregations are community assets is not idle, academic banter. Couched in the recent moves toward welfare reform is the assumption that most Americans do not need welfare to get by; that the resources needed for self-sufficiency can be found in a multitude of places: in an expanding economy, in local government, in the non-profit sector, including the faith community, and in the abilities of welfare recipients themselves.

A similar argument is sometimes made about community development. Communities have within themselves many of the resources they need, so this argument goes. They should focus on their assets rather than fret about their liabilities.

A recent wealth of studies about congregations have emphasized their many strengths to the point that some policy decision makers may badly overestimate what congregations can do. It is undoubtedly true that congregations provide help and support in some fashion. Virtually all seek to empower their own members and a few, at least, seek to empower others in the community.

Most congregations also provide some sort of social service to non-members, though again these efforts are often small. Perhaps most importantly, congregations help shape virtuous citizens with civic skills and secure support networks. All of these things improve the community, even if the effects are sometimes subtle.

But while congregations may be seen as social resources in aggregate, it is telling that their own neighborhoods do not view them as assets from which the whole community benefits. Neighbors regard congregations as private, not public. Everyone knows that, in most cases, congregations are tied more to the needs of specific members or to the denomination than to the neighborhood. Decisions about relocating congregations are more often based on members' needs or broad demographic trends than on specific neighborhood needs.

Whatever congregations' other strengths and social contributions, we must all be cautious about describing them as existing assets on which the community, especially the poor, can draw. In the process of welfare reform and in the effort to rebuild communities, some congregations can help. But civic and political leaders should think of congregations as volunteers who help in specific, even idiosyncratic, ways rather than as hard assets providing collateral to troubled communities.

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1 The Christian Community Development Association was organized by John Perkins in 1989 as a vehicle for empowering individuals and churches to improve the economic, social, and spiritual well-being of inner city communities. Perkins has worked for decades to build social capital in poor neighborhoods. Shalom Zones, created in 1992 in response to the Rodney King riots, is a social ministry of the United Methodist Church. Both programs do much of their work through neighborhood-based community organizing.

2 Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Northwestern University, Chicago, IL, 1993

