

WHAT'S YOUR PLACE IN THE CITY?

Suppose your congregation closed its doors tomorrow and left the neighborhood. Who would notice? "I would!" a long time member might reply. "A lot of us have lived in this neighborhood and been members of this congregation for over 30 years. I can't imagine the neighborhood without this place."

But a younger member might respond, "Many of us don't live around here anymore. In fact, how many of our neighbors do we really know? How many know us?" Maybe the question should be, is the congregation here to serve the neighbors or to serve the members? And who says it has to be one or the other?

ASSUMPTIONS AT WORK

The Polis Center's Project on Religion and Urban Culture has been trying to get at some of the assumptions involved in this kind of conversation. For instance, do religion and religious communities really contribute to the civic life of a neighborhood? Do congregations provide valuable services, and if so, what kind? Are houses of worship gathering places not only for members, but for neighbors? If so, what goes on at these gatherings?

A related question is whether congregations contribute to the spirit of a community. Do congregations provide a sense of identity or belonging to their neighbors as well as to their members? Do they contribute to what has been called the "social capital" of a neighborhood?

The most obvious assumption to make is that place really does matter. Where a congregation is located may be as critical as what its mission is, how it carries out that mission, or who is involved. Surely, congregations and neighborhoods shape one another.

Would you agree? Can you identify ways in which your congregation's presence has shaped the life of the community around it? How about ways your congregation has been shaped by the place and people around it? Do you believe your congregation's location enhances or hinders its mission? Has your congregation ever seriously discussed why it has stayed in its present location or what, if anything, would cause it to move?

Government and civic leaders frequently propose policy based on their assumptions about a congregation's relationship to its neighbors. Increasingly, government agencies have come to regard congregations as among the most efficient providers of social services.

According to Art Farnsley, Director of Research at The Polis Center, programs such as the Mayor's Front Porch Alliance assume that local congregations, because of their proximity to their neighbors, have a greater sensitivity to their needs.

What is your experience? How well do you know the neighbors, outside of your own members? Does your membership live, by and large, in the local neighborhood? Do you know the other pastors in your neighborhood?

QUESTIONS WORTH ANSWERING

As The Polis Center continues to explore these assumptions, I hope you'll participate in the conversation. Tell us what kind of asset you think your congregation is to your community. Tell us what your neighbors think, and what local civic leaders think about you. In short, tell us who your neighbors are, and who they think you are.

I look forward to hearing from you. Let's keep the conversation going.

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