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Religion and Mobility in 20th Century Indianapolis

by **Etan Diamond**

It is 8:30 in the morning in Indianapolis. Thousands of individuals and families are finishing breakfast and getting ready to leave their home. Sometimes the husband and wife leave together with their children, other times they go in separate cars to separate destinations. They empty out of their subdivisions and neighborhoods and funnel onto the highways and roads for a 10, 15, maybe 30 minute drive. Soon, they arrive at their destination, park their cars, and go into—a place of worship.

Such is the phenomenon of the Sunday morning religious commuter. Like their weekday counterparts who travel to parts of the metropolis to go to work, religious commuters also leave their neighborhood to attend worship services elsewhere in the city. They come from all parts of the city and all demographic backgrounds. Recent research conducted by The Polis Center confirms this finding:

- Members of ten Protestant congregations (both urban and suburban) lived an average of more than 3 miles from church.
- More than half of 170 churches claimed to have most of their members coming from "outside the neighborhood" to attend worship.
- Fewer than 20 percent of local residents in an inner-city neighborhood, an inner suburban neighborhood, and an outer suburban neighborhood attended worship in their own neighborhood.
- Over 50 percent of clergy commuted more than 3 miles to church (220 clergy surveyed).

This last statistic makes clear the extent of religious commuting, one might have expected clergy to have reasonably close connections to their congregations. Yet even this group was spatially removed from their place of worship.

When confronted with such data, one's initial inclination might be to dismiss it as a product of late-twentieth-century mobility. Yet examples of people living apart from their churches can be found much earlier in this century. A study conducted in Windsor, Connecticut, in the mid-1930s reported that one quarter of the town's Protestants belonged to churches in another town. Another study from 1938 in a neighborhood of Macon, Georgia, discovered that almost three-quarters of the neighborhood's Methodists attended church outside their neighborhood—despite having other two Methodist congregations nearby. This large Methodist out-migration also meant that the two local Methodist churches had an overwhelming proportion (91 percent) of members who drove in from outside the neighborhood.

The trend has persisted throughout the century. In 1957, a study of 23 congregations in Indianapolis reported that almost half of the members lived more than two miles away from their church building. Almost one-fifth of the members lived more than five miles from their place of worship. A survey conducted in 1962 in East

Cleveland, Ohio, found that more than half of the members of the town's Protestant churches came from outside the community. Two-thirds of Protestants living in East Cleveland left their own neighborhood to attend church elsewhere. Clearly, East Cleveland's Protestants saw their religious communities as different from their neighborhood. As the report explained, "not only do a majority of the members of East Cleveland churches live outside the community, but . . . a majority of East Clevelanders who belong to churches belong to churches outside the community."

The mobility of church members was not confined to liberal Protestant denominations, either. In 1975, the Southern Baptist Convention looked at more than 100 churches in four rapidly growing cities. In these congregations, almost half of all members lived at least three miles from their church, included 22 percent of members who lived more than five miles away.

To be sure, the phenomenon of religious commuting varies somewhat by faith tradition. In Orthodox Jewish congregations, for example, members usually live within walking distance of the synagogue because religious observances prohibit the use of a car on the Sabbath. Catholic churches, built around a parish model, also tend to be locally rooted, although since the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, these geographic concentrations have loosened considerably. For most Protestant congregations, however, there are no geographic constraints on members; one finds the highest tendency toward religious commuting among Protestant churches.

In 1947, when Second Presbyterian Church was still located at Vermont and Meridian Streets downtown, most of the church members lived in a narrow corridor along Meridian Street. By 1997, well after the church has relocated to 77th Street, Second Presbyterian drew its membership from across the northside of Marion County as well as from southern Hamilton County.

The phenomenon of religious commuting should not be too surprising, given that Americans commute to work, to shop, and for other activities. According to 1990 census data, the average Indianapolis resident had a 20-minute commute to work. Moreover, from 1970 to 1990, the number of people in the Indianapolis metropolitan area who worked outside their county of residence—let alone their neighborhood—increased in every part of the region. To people who already spend every working day outside their neighborhood, doing the same on a Sunday morning does not seem strange or abnormal. These commuters already "think regionally" and see little problem embarking on a religious commute of several miles.

But if religious commuting fits into the larger pattern of metropolitan mobility, it seems to run directly counter to traditional notions about the civic importance of "local congregations." In Indianapolis and elsewhere, government leaders seek to improve neighborhoods by working with churches, under the premise that congregations are community resources with members connected intimately to their local environment. National politicians and policy makers, including two frontrunners for the 2000 presidential campaign, consistently cite churches as neighborhood assets. These supposed relationships between congregations and their local community are considered important in strengthening neighborhoods specifically and civil society generally.

Clearly, the vision of a strong congregation-community relationship taps into the pastoral ideal that permeates American culture. Such public rhetoric must be weighed carefully, however. Congregational members have displayed a weak rootedness to the local for much of this century. For members in many congregations, the neighborhood in which their church sits is simply that—a neighborhood in which their church happens to sit. Despite the vision of a tight-knit connection between congregation and community, it may be unreasonable to expect congregations to develop connections to their church neighborhoods when they only gather in that particular place for two or three hours each Sunday morning. In some sense, the church is simply another metropolitan institution, not unlike the workplace or school or grocery store.

But just because religious commuters do not live in the neighborhood around their church does not imply that these people lack a sense of community. To the contrary, religious commuters often display a very strong sense of community, albeit one based on shared interests rather than geographical proximity. For religious commuters, "community" is found within the congregation, among the tens or hundreds of fellow congregants who voluntarily travel to this particular church. They might come because of the specific faith tradition, the pastor, the Sunday school, or even the convenient location. But regardless of why they come, religious commuters make a conscious choice to attend a particular church and to join with others who have done the

same. To be sure, some congregations deliberately seek a link with the community around the church, but these community ministries have always been less important than the development of community within the congregations.

Ironically, the very act of religious commuting, the experience of travelling from one part of the city to another, has clear potential for community building. A white person who drives a white church that sits in a black neighborhood, or a suburban middle-class black who returns to his home church in the old neighborhood, or even a resident of one inner-city neighborhood driving to another inner-city neighborhood, all experience different parts of the metropolis through their commute to church. Even if they do not maintain any connection to the neighborhood around their church, the very act of driving from one place to another means that they experience a "different" environment. Rather than see religious commuters as insulated from the wider community, advocates of stronger connections between congregations and their neighborhoods can point to these kinds of eye-opening experiences made possible by religious commuting.

Religious commuting offers a wonderful comment on the paradox of religion in the modern metropolis. While rhetoric abounds for a strong relationship between churches and their local neighborhoods, few congregants seem to act in ways that build such relationships. People choose the place where they worship as much as they choose where to work or shop. Ironically, perhaps the rhetoric persists because of the behavior. Even as the city becomes more metropolitan, many are unable—or unwilling—to reconcile this reality with the idealized neighborhood of old, particularly because religious congregations are seen as important and traditional symbols of community connectedness.

But within this paradox lies the potential for an even greater understanding of the role of religion in the modern metropolis. The fact that people travel across the city to attend a particular worship service suggests that religion is highly relevant to individual lives. People care about where and with whom they worship. If they did not, the logic of time and distance suggests they would simply go to the nearest church. Though spatially dispersed, congregations house socially connected worshippers and thus serve as important social centers in an otherwise centerless metropolis.

1N.L. Whetten and E.G. Devereaux, Jr., *Studies of Suburbanization in Connecticut*. 1. Windsor (Storrs, Ct.: AES Bulletin 212, 1936), cited in Jacob A. Toews, "Change in Church Participation of Migrants to the Suburb of Roseville" (master's thesis, University of Minnesota, 1954), 8.

2 James D. Reese, "Study of a Religious Census of a Suburban Area with Reference to its Church Needs" (unpublished bachelors thesis, Emory University, 1938), 7-8.

3 Indianapolis Family Life Clinic, *Report of the Study Committee* (Indianapolis: Church Federation of Greater Indianapolis, 1958), 3-4.

4 Lyle Schaller, *The Church in a Changing Suburb: Planning for Protestantism in East Cleveland* (Cleveland: Regional Church Planning Office, 1962), 53.

5 Clay Price, *The Rural-Urban Church on the Metropolitan Fringe* (Inter-Agency Council Southern Baptist Convention, November 1975), Table 10: Church Membership by Distance from Church building for Rural-Urban Fringe Churches, 9.

ROUND TABLE

The response portion of this issue of Research Notes is presented here in somewhat different form than usual, because of a technical problem with the recording of the roundtable discussion. Fortunately, three of the participants at that discussion graciously consented to be interviewed individually. Jim Lewis is a religious historian and executive director of the Louisville Institute, a center for research and leadership education on American religion. Isaac Randolph is director of the Front Porch Alliance, an initiative of the City of Indianapolis to support the community building work of churches, neighborhood associations, and other institutions. Fr. William Munshower has served as pastor of St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church in Indianapolis since 1994. The following is an edited version of their remarks.

Increasingly, religion is a matter of choice rather than of inherited practice or social expectations. It is perfectly all right these days not to go to church or synagogue. One makes a choice depending on a variety of factors, and neighborhood proximity is among the least important. Is it convenient? Do they have lots of parking? Is there a good youth program for the kids? Do I like the quality of the preaching? Is the music satisfactory? In some sense it becomes a consumer decision. Choosing a church is not like choosing a sport coat, but there are some rough analogies.

The fact that people in large numbers choose to drive clear across town in order to participate suggests that religion is important to them. When people commute to church, there are really two neighborhoods involved: the neighborhood of residence, and the neighborhood of the religious institution. Neighborhood is a contested issue these days. In our earlier conversation someone remarked about the lack of apparent neighborhood loyalty today, especially in suburbs. Congregations may sense some responsibility to their immediate area, but when a large part of the congregation commutes in there is not going to be as much concern for the neighborhood.

I studied two downtown churches in Gary, Indiana, for my dissertation. As membership moved away from downtown, many people did return to their old church for a number of years. But that became less and less so over time. These were principally white congregations. Eventually, one of them closed and the other one is on the verge of it. I have been intrigued to learn that for many downtown African-American churches commuting considerable distances is fairly common also. I was under the misapprehension that black churches tended to be more drawn from the neighborhood. I don't know what that suggests in terms of loyalty. My hunch is that blacks might have more residual loyalty for the old neighborhood, but I simply don't know.

There are also differences among religious groups. Roman Catholics have the local parish model and the tendency is for the congregation and the neighborhood to be more closely related. Protestants seem to find it relatively easy to get up and move. If they commute back in, there is often a sense of guilt and perhaps obligation to the neighborhood. Etan pointed out that Jewish synagogues may move without the sense of guilt because there's not the assumption that African-Americans or Hispanics or whoever migrates into the old neighborhood will convert to Judaism. So there's an interesting difference between Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant situations.

Protestantism once emphasized very strongly the obligation of congregations to their local communities. It really flourished between the late 19th century and the mid 20th Century. I think that tradition, although its heyday was long ago, persists in the sense of obligation to the broader social order.

The situation of a church in a wealthy neighborhood is an interesting one: for example, Second Presbyterian in Indianapolis. I suspect that its social outreach is much more directed towards the East side or downtown than it is to the area immediately surrounding the church's physical plant on North Meridian. In some cases an obligation to the social order does not mean obligation to the immediate neighborhood, which may not have obvious needs. The nature of the service is different too. Whereas a poor area might require a food pantry and clothing supply, a more affluent area might need marriage counseling and substance abuse counseling.

There's not been a lot of study done on suburbanization and religion. Gibson Winter wrote a famous book in the 60s called *Suburban Captivity of the Churches*, in which he basically condemned suburban congregations and said that they were abandoning their responsibility to their fellow human beings. That became a standard criticism of suburban churches. Winter's study was kind of political and I'm not aware of more objective, analytical studies. The suburb that I live in seems so incredibly isolated. There just doesn't seem to be any sense of community whatsoever and I'm afraid that's characteristic of an awful lot of American suburban developments.

It would be wonderful if religious institutions would think more carefully about what it means to live in an American society. What does it mean to live in Indianapolis? What is the relationship between the suburb where you live and the greater metropolitan area? What is the common good? What areas of life could be enriched by greater participation of religious people and institutions? It's not so much that people should go to church within 5 minutes of their house – maybe, maybe not. Oftentimes churches are too focused on matters of individual religious adjustments and don't help people to think seriously about living in a community. What does

it mean for Geist and Butler-Tarkington to be in the same karma?

I'm a liberal-leaning sort of Protestant. But although our theology is progressive and concerned with the broader social order, theology does not make as much difference as it ought to. It's the old business about walking the walk while talking the talk.

Etan's paper had some figures from the 60's that showed more than forty percent of people driving two miles or more to church. So this has been going on for a long time. Certainly the pace of suburbanization is not abating. The suburbs are getting humongous in some places, such as Atlanta. When does a quantitative difference become a qualitative difference? A metropolitan area is a different beast altogether, when instead of a central city with some surrounding suburbs, it becomes a conglomeration like L.A. Is suburbanization entering a new phase? I simply don't know. It's certainly the case that mobility and religion is not a brand new issue.

Isaac Randolph

To ask why people don't go to church in their neighborhood assumes that religion is separate from the economic, racial, and cultural issues that have transformed our urban centers. The highways built in the 50s and 60s allowed for mobility; while the civil rights movement lowered racial boundaries and allowed minorities to live, for the most part, where they would like to live. Folks were saying, okay, I can still go to this church but also I can begin to live the American dream. I want my 40 acres and a mule.

There must be very strong ties to their church, to return to a neighborhood where they don't want to live. Even as they migrate away from the inner city they are still drawn back to their church.

I don't think people really make the connection of their church being part of their neighborhood. I'm just going to church. I'm going to get in my car from the suburbs or another neighborhood, drive to my church, engage in worship and then get in my car and leave again. And there is no connection. People of faith are not engaged in the neighborhoods that need it the most.

In a free society you can't mandate where people live or go to church. We are asking them to build upon the investment they have made in their neighborhoods and take that same energy into the neighborhoods where their churches are, especially if the need is there. There's a biblical mandate that says the church should be in the business to repair, restore, and rebuild the city. And I think that churches are beginning to follow that mandate here in Indianapolis.

We hold congregations to a different standard than businesses or other institutions. The business community is not bound by spiritual constraints. Their bible is the bottom line. The church has a different relationship to the community and is, at its core, conservative in nature. I give credit to the churches for being able to maintain some stability even as businesses have changed, school systems have changed, our government has changed. The churches are still there.

Churches are giving something that no other entity can deliver, and that is faith. Government can't inspire folks to do better. We can throw money at social situations but we cannot deliver the concept of faith that says, I can do better if I only believe. One thing that churches do especially in the inner city is provide for the needs of the poor and those who have fallen through the net. Churches can't handle all the social issues. But think about the cost, about how much government would have to deliver if these churches were removed from the playing field. Churches offer a lot of support to neighborhoods, whether it's after school programs, food pantries, clothing pantries, safe havens for the neighborhood, places of engagement and social activity. Some of those things you can't put a dollar amount on.

The perception is that in the inner city, smaller churches are doing more or better work than suburban churches. Some of these larger suburban churches are doing a lot of work that we fail to perceive. They are tapping into their strength, which may be raising dollars, with their more affluent congregations. We need to praise them for their efforts and encourage urban-suburban partnerships as a way for both congregations to benefit. The inner city churches have a grass-roots feel of what the real problems are. Whereas the suburban churches have the networking and the financial and informational resources to make the job a lot easier.

Front Porch Alliance has no formal relationship with the Charitable Choice Initiative, but we do provide

churches with information about it. As a government agency we do three things well. We have the ability to convene folks who would not or could not come together on their own. We have the ability to leverage appropriate resources and funding; for every dollar the government has put on the table through Front Porch Alliance, it has attracted three dollars from outside sources. Finally, we have the ability to highlight good activities that are going on in our neighborhoods and across our state and nation. We can bring folks together to see Charitable Choice as a resource and then leverage that information with other resources.

People say churches used to be more neighborhood-based, but the good old days were not necessarily the good old days. It depended on who you were and where you were. There were artificial barriers in place that forced some folks to live in the neighborhoods where their churches were. Red-lining meant that people of color could not live in certain areas. The faith community gave an inner strength to the African American community, yes; it was very important to us. It kept our families together. But if you look at the outside forces that were against us, it was a necessity that our churches resided close to us.

The highways broke up the old neighborhoods. If you look at any urban center, whether Chicago, Philly, or Indianapolis, the highways cut through the most impoverished neighborhoods and typically those neighborhoods were African American. You cannot really deny that a major highway disrupts a neighborhood. You begin to see the disintegration of the civic society and civic pride.

Hopefully it's something we can turn around. We are looking at two things: what is driving folks out and what is bringing them back, and how do we put the two together? What drives folks out of the inner city is taxes, race, education, and crime — what we call TREC. The one element bringing folks back into the neighborhood is the church. Now how do we marry the church and neighborhood, to address these issues?

FR. WILLIAM MUNSHOWER

People keep driving back to St. Thomas from the suburbs because the old church is still more attractive to them. Old friends are still here. That's an emotional thing, but there are ideological differences that affect people's choices. Some churches are more socially engaged than others; the priorities are different.

Perhaps the neighborhood church is not engaging them emotionally or intellectually. But does that say anything about the neighborhood as such? I think it says that there is no sense of value to neighborhood other than material convenience and safety.

We're asking people to come with a sense of intentional involvement with a community—to find community, as such, attractive. This neighborhood, Butler-Tarkington, Meridian-Kessler, is one where there's actually a sense that this is a neat and exciting place. The churches are the stimuli. Tabernacle Presbyterian, North Methodist, as well as St. Thomas, just for example, are engaging the neighborhood now.

In the main, I think people should attend their neighborhood church. Obviously there are exceptions. A great service is made when people sink or swim, so to speak, with the neighborhood church, and incidentally that means commitment to the neighborhood.

Churches provide the neighborhood with services that are maybe taken for granted but are essential: from pre-school to being there for the frail elderly. The city neighborhood offers probably the last best chance to meet the whole human race rather than just our kind. People who commit themselves to the old neighborhood or move into a traditional neighborhood are bringing about a coming together that wouldn't happen in a homogeneous neighborhood where people of the same culture and income are building their suburban paradise. Quite frankly, I do think many people are looking for a safe, sanitary, non-engaging neighborhood.

The Catholic Church has accepted the reality of people being more mobile, but the parish boundaries are still on the books. If a person lives within my boundaries here, they have a right to my services even if they belong to another church. An exception would be marriage; people would have to celebrate their marriage in their own parish. It's a legal system, as well as a pastoral system. Parochial schools, especially, reinforce church boundaries—just as at one time public school boundaries created or reinforced a community.

Congregations are different from other institutions or businesses in that their product, if you will, is human community. The faith of the biblical tradition emphasizes that humans grow and mature best in

loving community. The proximity then of humans to humans is going to be a condition for creating a loving community. I suppose you could have a loving community at Kroger or Standard Oil. I don't think that's what they are about, though. It would take a highly motivated religious person to go in there and say, since we're working together let's love one another. But how often does that happen?

People are supposed to belong to synagogues and parishes because, yes, they have love for one another. This is the ultimate purpose of congregating, and geographical proximity may be a condition for that. The more people are together, the better. Human interaction is the grounds for human charity.

We get people moving here because of the kind of neighborhood it is, but the houses around here are terribly expensive. We don't have a whole lot of young folk coming in. Our efforts to be an integrated parish are not as successful as they were 20 or 30 years ago, when we had an influx of young black families and reasonably priced homes. People wanted their kids in our school because of its racial diversity. There were of course white folks who didn't want that kind of neighborhood and moved out. There was a concerted effort by Butler-Tarkington and the churches to create an intentionally integrated neighborhood. It worked. It was magnificent. We compared ourselves to Shaker Heights in Cleveland, in those days.

But then this parish became a cool place to worship. Young Catholics, mostly white, what you might call carefully liberal, came from all over town, and that was encouraged by the administration here. So we lost a certain neighborhood focus and our liturgy became contemporary, no longer traditional. Many of our black Catholics were attracted to traditional Catholic liturgical expression and found this unacceptable. A downtown parish might have been a more appropriate place to engage in church reformation. St. Thomas became pretty ideological, pretty avant-garde, and wasn't neighborhood-focused as such.

Religious congregations use to be organized around ethnicity. Today, you just don't have the reinforcement of the national character of the religion. That still carries on in Catholicism to some extent, and who know what the future holds with the Hispanic influx into the Catholic community here. That doesn't mean new parishes will be organized, but certainly they have churches to which they gravitate: St. Patrick's in Fountain Square, for example.

It is very interesting, by the way, that Hispanics have their own mass, in Spanish, in churches that have English mass for Anglos. So there isn't much mixing going on with the Hispanics in many parishes. Now, will they will get together in the future? Hopefully, hopefully. But as of right now there isn't that much going on.

Community could be created by resourceful people, I suppose, anywhere and everywhere. It is hard to imagine effective community in some human situations: a sweat-shop, a diamond mine in South Africa, a concentration camp. But can we create community outside the congregation? One hopes that religious people would go out and create community wherever they work or play.

The nostalgia that comes with holidays and other good memories sustain us, yet the other side of nostalgia is a detachment from reality and resistance to change. We can't be worshipping the past. That's an idolatry, isn't it. There has to be continuity with our past,