Can churches save the city? A look at resources: A look at resources

by Arthur E. Farnsley II in the December 9, 1998 issue

Can churches Save America's cities? That question has been frequently posed in recent months, and the implicit answer has been "yes" or at least "maybe." Newsweek ran a cover story (June 1) on the inner-city ministry of Eugene Rivers in Boston and asked, "Can religion fight crime and save kids?" The article itself was titled "Savior of the Streets." Writing in the New Yorker a year earlier (June 16, 1997), Joe Klein touted Rivers's work in an article headlined "Should Washington let the churches take over the inner cities?" *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* (December 11, 1997) addressed the issue and mused in its headline, "Faith-based charities to the rescue?" And a cover story in *U.S. News and World Report* (September 9, 1996) asked simply, "Can churches save America?"

Though all these articles admit that we don't know what public policy lessons can be drawn from congregation-based ministries, the authors suggest we have lots to learn from the direct, hands-on, self-sacrificing approach of urban congregations and their dynamic pastors.

Meanwhile, experts on urban issues such as Princeton professor John DiIulio and Robert Woodson of the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise have been calling for foundations and governments to channel resources to congregations. Their effort got a boost this year when the Department of Housing and Urban Development established an office to work with faith-based organizations. Although it is not dispensing funds, HUD is providing technical assistance and staff support in what it calls a "new partnership" to "match the real strength of nonprofit and faith-based groups with the needs of America."

In light of all the favorable attention being given to inner-city ministries, we should stop to ask: What do we really know about congregation-based ministries? Are the subjects of these magazine articles representative of larger trends? The number of times Rivers is mentioned by journalists makes one suspect that their information on

inner-city ministries is limited and anecdotal. Rivers is doubtless a fine person with a vibrant ministry, but is his work at the Azusa Christian Community representative of inner-city churches?

A second set of questions arises: What kinds of churches and pastors are involved in community development? If churches are to save America, which ones are capable of doing so and which ones are even trying? *Newsweek* refers to a "new breed of cleric," but its examples do not exactly span the religious spectrum. Most of the pastors cited are young and well educated and serve well-established churches. Does this "new breed" exist equally in Catholic and Protestant circles, in mainline and evangelical congregations, in black and white settings?

A third set of questions concerns the resources available to urban congregations. How many people can they actually reach? Are they really poised to save America's cities?

Some research has been done on congregational resources. A report to Partners for Sacred Places estimated the "net congregational contribution to society" as $144,000 per year for the average congregation in its study. Of that amount, $33,500 was in direct financial support; the remaining contributions took the form of volunteer time, staff time, donated space and in-kind donations. But another survey, taken of churches in the Washington, D.C., area for the Urban Institute, estimated that each congregation spends only $15,000 per year on community services and programs. These two studies used different methods, surveyed different kinds of congregations and involved different cities, so we should not be surprised that the results differ. The discrepancy shows, however, that we have very little solid information about congregational resources.

Recent research by the Polis Center in Indianapolis underscores the problem of generalizing about congregational resources. Our study showed that most congregations aren't spending $15,000, let alone $35,000, on community services.

We studied 100 congregations in six urban neighborhoods, and found their average total budget to be $150,000. The Partners figure of $33,500 in direct financial support to community services would, in that case, amount to over 20 percent of the average congregation's budget. If, figuring in all items, the congregation was spending $144,000, then it would be devoting 95 percent of its total annual budget on community services. Most congregations would be surprised to learn they are

donating that much to the community.

We found that the Partners study focused exclusively on congregations housed in properties of historical and architectural significance. Twenty-five Indianapolis congregations were included in that study. Three-quarters of them were either Catholic or mainline Protestant. But only one-quarter of all Indianapolis congregations are Catholic or mainline, so the sample is not representative of all congregations (in fairness, it was not meant to be).

The Urban Institute's $15,000 figure raises concerns too. In its study, the average congregation had 400 members; in our study, based on door-to-door fieldwork, we found that the average congregation has only 200 members. The institute's study was based on a survey. Many small and even medium-sized congregations do not have enough staff to answer the phone or respond to mail surveys, however. Research that relies only on surveys will be biased toward larger churches.

When the media use these reports, they tend to be quick to generalize. The *Indianapolis Star*, for example, began an editorial about the Partners study with a vignette about Tabernacle Presbyterian Church, an inner-city congregation that is supported by a suburban population. The editorial described the many vital programs at Tabernacle, then went on to say that "on virtually every corner with a religious congregation in Indianapolis, the same kind of activity goes on seven days a week without any public fanfare or recognition." According to the *Star*, this "average" congregation supports at least four permanent programs that serve people in need. Among those who benefit from those programs, the nonmembers outnumber members seven to one. And this congregation spends $144,000 a year to subsidize its community programs.

It's important to note that the congregations in the Partners study really are like the one described above. But one cannot move from these congregations to a claim about what is happening on "virtually every corner."

Many people in Indianapolis, as in other cities, are serious about helping congregations to provide more community service. The city has an office that does locally what HUD's new office does nationally. It has a juvenile court judge who is contracting with congregations to provide case workers for youthful offenders. And the Coalition for Homelessness Intervention and Prevention recently received $500,000 to support partnerships with congregations. It would be disastrous if these

groups were to operate under the assumption that the typical congregation annually spends $140,000 (including in-kind contributions) on community services.

Public policy initiatives are proceeding on other suspect assumptions. In 1996 former HUD chief Henry Cisneros praised the Mid-North Church Council of Indianapolis, an ecumenical coalition, for its social services to the Mapleton-Fall Creek neighborhood, a poor, primarily black area in the inner city. He held up churches in the council as role models for urban ministry. But Cisneros failed to recognize that there is not another neighborhood in the city with similar circumstances.

The congregations of Mapleton-Fall Creek are many times larger than average urban congregations. Their members are largely middle-class people who live primarily in the suburbs. These are white churches in a black neighborhood and wealthy churches in a poor neighborhood. Their activities are admirable, but do we really want to tell other poor neighborhoods that what they need are some big, wealthy, mainline churches full of suburbanites?

What about the "new breed of clerics"? While some of the inner-city pastors seem to be young, the average pastor in Indianapolis is 50 years old. Does this matter? What about the absence in churches of bureaucratic control? This is widely touted as a virtue for churches, yet the Catholic Church and the Salvation Army are two rigorously bureaucratic groups that continue to lead social service efforts. And what about location? While many Protestant churches are turning toward a parish model that emphasizes the importance of location, Catholic parishes are beginning to loosen their geographic boundaries. How tightly are congregations linked to their neighborhoods, and how tightly should they be linked in the 21st-century city?

Perhaps the most important distinction of all is between those congregations that see social service as part of their mission and those that do not. Of the 1,200 congregations in Indianapolis, only a small fraction have any established community programs other than an ad hoc food pantry. Most small churches simply do not engage in social service. Anyone estimating the capacity of congregations to provide such services must take into account the readiness of those congregations.

Other congregations are deeply concerned about their neighborhood but dislike the "social service" metaphor. Some activist congregations are more interested in community empowerment that is linked to neighborhood organizing à la Saul Alinsky and the Industrial Areas Foundation; they are less interested in alternative welfare

programs. Are these the groups that policy-makers hope to enlist to save the inner city?

Our research at the Polis Center leads us to be suspicious of much of what we hear about available resources or the kinds of churches doing urban ministry. Perhaps more than anything else, it has taught us to be wary of anecdotes about inner-city saviors.

Indianapolis has its own Eugene Rivers: Shedrick Madison, a maverick Pentecostal pastor with a mission to save young boys. A physically imposing man, Madison wrestled professionally for several years to support his ministry. Known locally as Big Red, the Wrestling Preacher, Madison is taken very seriously by local media, clergy, city hall and many young men.

Big Red's ministry is established. Civic and business leaders who work with him sing his praises. Yet there is no way to measure Big Red's accomplishments. His programs are haphazardly timed and his record-keeping is nearly nonexistent. Is Big Red the hope for the inner city? He may be, but will governments, large foundations and individuals really give bundles of money to urban pastors who find it difficult and cumbersome to write effective grant proposals or conduct program evaluations?

The methods of men like Rivers and Madison are ad hoc and deeply personal. A local program evaluator was aghast when she learned that some of the boys in Big Red's flock sleep at his church and at his house. In a visit to Indianapolis, Rivers revealed that people have voiced similar suspicions about him--as though only a pedophile could care so much about these street children. His brand of tough love may be precisely what is required, but are institutions prepared to take the required risks?

In any case, Big Red Madison is one of a kind. There are a few others in Indianapolis who might qualify as the "new breed of cleric," but only a few. It is unfair and unwise to make these men stand as examples of a new generation of leaders.

Congregations *are* making important contributions to their communities. Secular organizations do have much to learn from men like Rivers and Madison about how personal, intense interaction based on core beliefs changes lives, especially the lives of at-risk children.

But the people who are pushing for congregations to shoulder more of the burden of urban development need to be honest about church realities and capacities. In the long run, congregations could be damaged by shifting too much attention to

community development and away from their many other ministries, both internal and external. The more immediate danger is that many needy people will go unserved if we assume that most congregations are doing or could do something that they cannot.