

Project Rationale

Why Are We Doing the Congregations and Polarization Project?



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The **Congregations and Polarization Project** grew out of the Religion and Urban Culture 2.0 project (2020–2023), dedicated to understanding how congregations adapt to social and technological change. That project grew out of the original Religion and Urban Culture Project (1996–2002), which itself grew from the Congregations and Changing Communities Project led by Nancy Ammerman (1990–1994). These projects were all grounded in the belief that a crucial part of observing and analyzing congregations is creating a dialogue between researchers and their subjects and, eventually, among the subjects themselves. Progress comes not just from analysis, but from engagement.

The Changing Nature of Community

Congregations *are* communities. They provide mutual support, education, and encouragement. Congregations also *serve* communities. Usually the communities they serve are larger—sometimes much larger—than the boundaries of their membership. They can be local, like neighborhoods, or they can be global. Clearly a lot hinges on what the word “community” means.

Our long journey with congregations, communities, and change over the past 35 years led us to an inescapable conclusion: ***The nature of community has changed radically in the 21st century, and the frustration—even pain—congregations feel in trying to create and sustain community is directly related to their need to grasp and to adapt to this change.*** Unfortunately, understanding change and adapting to it are much easier to name than to accomplish. But every effort must begin somewhere.

What kinds of change did we note in Religion and Urban Culture 2.0? For one thing, more activities

of all kinds now take place online, including work, education, and even worship, at least for some people. Fewer people join leagues or clubs, as Robert Putnam pointed out in his seminal article, *Bowling Alone*, twenty-four years ago. People argue with strangers on social media about intimate topics in a way they would never do face-to-face. Guardrails on what one may say in public conversation have been removed. What it means to be a communicating person—and to be part of a community—has undergone a seismic shift.

The nature of membership in organizations has changed too. Any pastor will tell you that even 25 years ago a “regular” member attended at least three, and probably four, times per month. Most pastors now count once a month as regular attendance. The act of “passing the plate” has been replaced by digital giving, often done through direct withdrawal. People who would never have called a clergyperson or fellow church member at 3 a.m. think nothing of sending a text at that hour and expecting a reply first thing in the morning.

Disagreement and confusion about the nature of community happened at the macro as well as at the micro level. Even large nations debate the meaning of citizenship and belonging. Is the future about globalization, multiculturalism, and inclusion, or is it about ethnic solidarity, nationalism, and exclusion? Is it about promoting more individual choice or about the need for deeper agreed-upon norms and shared values? These debates continue not only in the U.S., but in such different places as Turkey and India.

It is now cliché to say that the pandemic of 2020 did not cause these changes, it only highlighted or accelerated them. But the cliché is still true. We observed congregations in 2020 as the pandemic accelerated community change

and challenged many established routines. More people than ever before now participate in work, school, civic associations, and worship from home. They play online games and participate in online discussion groups. They regularly associate with people much like themselves and are rarely required to interact with people who are very different.

(Mis)Managing Difference in the Digital Age

In face-to-face public spaces such as traditional workplaces, schools, churches, synagogues, and mosques, people must learn to manage difference. In a virtual world that emphasizes individual choice and consumer preference, people are increasingly able to choose their communities and sidestep differences. Clearly this applies to better off, better educated people more consistently than to others. If you have a laptop job, you can work from home more in a way you cannot if you are a bus driver or nurse. But the relative change happened to everyone: People stay home more and expect greater choice in what they watch, hear, eat, and do. Even for those with the fewest choices, their ability to curate their experience—online, on tv, in worship, whatever—from home has broadened. Most people choose to spend the bulk of their time with others largely like themselves.

Everyone recognizes the echo chambers and silos these new forms of community produce. It is common to lay this problem at the feet of “social media,” but in fact talk radio and cable news channels separated audiences into distinct groups with shared values long before Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram.

Congregations have followed this general pattern even though most would have said they did not want to. In a word, they have “sorted.” Theological and political progressives gather with other progressives; conservatives do the same. Over time, congregations have become more homogenous internally, but as a field of organizations, their differences have become more pronounced. It is easier to guess correctly which “side” a congregation is on today than ever before. The days when American Baptists and Southern Baptists seemed much alike, or ELCA Lutherans and Missouri Synod Lutherans seemed similar, are behind us.

And yet, most Christian congregations still share a set of universal, underlying beliefs and practices. They read from the same playbook, they just do not run the same plays.

Studying Polarization in Congregations

The Congregations and Polarization Project is trying to describe accurately the field of congregations and the manner in which each congregation is engaging the new types of community in which we all live. We are looking for key differences among congregations, but also for key overlap. Congregations do not have to join the culture wars, but they cannot avoid living and serving in a world defined by cultural and political division.

We picked “polarization” as the lens through which we’d observe congregations for obvious reasons. For one thing, 2024 presented a singular chance to observe congregations operating in the midst of a highly contentious national election. There may be other contentious elections in the future, but we will never again have this vantage point from which to view them.

For another, the cultural divide between progressives and conservatives leaves its fingerprints on everything. Abortion, gender identity, same-sex marriage, immigration, gun policy, foreign policy, parenting, public schools, worship styles—cultural and political polarization set the terms for all of these, and you can see which side is which with only a glance. Because congregations are so “sorted,” we have all developed a vocabulary to discuss differences in beliefs and behaviors.

Key Assumptions

Like the several projects leading up to it, the Congregations and Polarization Project is grounded in several key assumptions. These are convictions, the baseline for everything we do:

First, we assume congregations are important social actors and studying them provides a public benefit. It is useful to study congregations from a theological point of view, but it is also important to study them from different, secular points of view. This is an Indiana University-based project, so our research is grounded in fields such as sociology, history, and community studies, never in theology itself. Congregations are social actors much like schools or fraternal and service organizations, and we mean to analyze them in that context. Studying congregations only in terms of theology and beliefs misses a lot about them and we hope to fill in those gaps.

Second, we assume the best way to study congregations is not only to observe them but to include in those observations as much dialogue and exchange as we reasonably can. This project, like all our previous projects, is designed to be interactive. We conduct interviews, but we also host focus groups and other kinds of public conversations. We ask religious leaders to help us understand key concepts and to help us analyze and understand.

Third, we assume congregations themselves will benefit from research and analysis about their activities, but we also assume others will benefit from this knowledge as well. Government and philanthropic groups as well as social service providers are part of the same community ecology of service and support alongside congregations. Leaders in those different groups benefit from understanding the role played by congregations in that ecology.

Fourth, we assume the current environment of political and cultural polarization in America makes honest discussion and debate increasingly more difficult. It is not necessary to argue that it is the worst it has ever been. The late 1960s were especially difficult and the 1860s featured secession and civil war. But political party positions and policy discussions are currently further apart than they were in the last few decades of the 1900s. Congregations either find themselves on one side or the other of the cultural divide or they spend an enormous amount of effort trying to remain in the middle. This is worth studying.

Fifth, and finally, we assume better information can lead to better mutual understanding, even to *empathy*, and that both congregations and the wider society benefit from this too. We are not merely describing differences of opinion, we are actively engaging pastors and congregational leaders in discussions about why others act differently than they do. Maybe our assumptions about empathy are overly optimistic, but we approach our work in the hope of building better dialogue through better information about what is really happening. We do not accept that the only way

forward is to denigrate, and ultimately vanquish, the other side (whichever side that may be).

Because our work is based in Indiana, we have another overarching hypothesis that informs all our work—namely, that urban, suburban, and rural environments are culturally and politically quite different from one another and congregations are shaped to a very large degree by the context in which they work. This is not quite a conviction in the same way—it is a hypothesis we are testing. So much of the cultural and political divide in Indiana is rooted in differences among places that we would be remiss not to talk about it. And in this, Indiana, once again, has some of the key characteristics of America as a nation. We lack some of the diversity seen elsewhere, but we have the same urban, suburban, and rural divisions as America as a whole.

Elsewhere we will discuss our methods. We are always open to questions and comments about *how* we approach the research. This essay is meant to explain *why* we do it. Why is this project worth the efforts of our research team, the precious hours of pastors' time, and the roughly \$2 million being spent on it? The answer is that congregations have been a key component of community life for all of American history. The nature of community has changed and, simultaneously, cultural and political divisions have deepened. Congregations mean to create communities and to serve communities, but right now they are trying to discern the best path forward. We mean to be part of that discussion.