

# What *Would* Jesus Do?

*Two Indiana pastors make the case for love—and conversations*

By Theodore M. Anderson

Allisonville Christian Church and State Street Community Church are bridge-building churches. They not only bridge different worlds because of their physical locations, but spiritual bridge-building is their overriding mission and greatest challenge.

Allisonville Christian is located on the far north side of Indianapolis, near the border between Hamilton and Marion counties. Some of the metro area’s most affluent neighborhoods are a short drive to the north; some of its most distressed neighborhoods are just to the south.

State Street Community Church is located on the edge of downtown La Porte, Indiana. With a population of about 22,000 people, La Porte has a distinctly small-town vibe. Its main street is lined with diners and antique stores, a jeweler, a florist, and a classic red sandstone county courthouse building, completed in 1894. But La Porte also sits well within the orbit of metro Chicago, about an hour to the west. The town’s between-worlds position is mirrored in the area’s purple voting patterns. Barack Obama won La Porte County by 22 points in 2008 and 13 points in 2012. Donald Trump won the county by 6 points in 2016, 7 points in 2020, and 14 points in 2024.

## **Apart from partisan**

For both State Street and Allisonville Christian, this mission of bridge-building has become much more challenging over the past decade. Calls for unity and “celebrating differences” are, it turns out, one of the great drivers of division in contemporary America.

“There was a time when we could figure out how to solve issues in a way that benefited the most people,”

State Street’s pastor, Nate Loucks, says. “We were going to disagree on the route to get there, but we could agree that there was a path to get to this place. Now, we just deny that we’re even going the same way—that there’s a potential path we could go on. If you say the sky is blue, I have to say the sky is green. That didn’t exist 20 years ago. And it seems to exist more and more now.”

As a way to push back against this entrenchment, State Street launched a new program, “Discussions Over Dinner,” in the wake of the 2014 killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. For one of the first “Discussions,” State Street invited three panelists to talk about the Black experience in La Porte County. The church’s pastor (Loucks) moderated a conversation with the panelists for about half an hour, followed by questions from participants in person and via the livestream. About 80 people took part in person, and a few more watched the live stream. It became one of State Street’s signature programs and was hosted five or six times annually from 2015 to 2020.

“We don’t want to be a congregation that forms opinions without actually informing ourselves of the truth,” Loucks says of the program’s origins. “Our calling as people of faith is not to convert across the partisan divide. It’s to inform ourselves and to learn to love each other in spite of our differences and to celebrate our differences.” State Street paused the program during the COVID pandemic but plans to revive it soon.

While churches like State Street are pushing back against division, political polarization magnifies its acute pain



points in churches across Indiana. Allisonville Christian's pastor, Beau Underwood, believes that churches of all stripes are stereotyped based on the loudest and most provocative voices in the culture wars that rage on social media channels and traditional media outlets alike.

"There's an increasing skepticism in our society about who Christians are and what church is about," he says. "And so people think, well, if being a Christian means I have to be against science, or being a Christian means I have to vote a certain way, or I can't love the gay couple that moved in next to me—I don't want anything to do with that.

"There is a lot more suspicion and skepticism toward churches than there used to be. So we're trying to do some things to help people realize there's a different way of being Christian than they might think. That's what we're trying to do here."

## Common ground(s)

Loucks grew up in a town of about 200 people near La Porte. He attended a small Christian school—Bethel University in Mishawaka, Indiana—and earned a degree in biblical literature in 2005. He earned a master's in ministry degree, also from Bethel, in 2012.

While in college, Loucks accepted an invitation to serve as the youth pastor of a United Methodist congregation located a few miles outside of La Porte. Founded in 1838, the church had dwindled to just a few dozen people by the early 2000s. His uncle was its bi-vocational lead pastor.

Seven years later, the church was doing well, nearly reaching its 300-person capacity on many Sundays. But Loucks felt compelled to branch out and start a church that would serve downtown La Porte. So he and about 50 others launched the nondenominational State Street Community Church, leasing a space that was owned (but no longer used) by the Salvation Army.

They held the first service on Easter Sunday in 2010 and bought the building three years later. They continue to worship there every Sunday. It is situated in the poorest census tract in the county, and Loucks describes it as "very utilitarian" facility with a strong 1960s vibe. "But

it's a good building for us," he says. In the mid-2000s, State Street invested in a renovation that included a new wing for its children's ministries.



*State Street Community Church in La Porte, IN*

As part of the renovation, State Street also created space for a small coffee shop just off the main entrance. It has a sofa and fireplace, several tables and chairs, and a space behind the counter to prepare the several varieties of coffee that are on offer each Sunday. People wander in, fill their cups from airpots, and chat before and after services, held at 8:30 and 10:30 a.m. On weekdays, a variety of local organizations use the space for their meetings.

As a hub for conversations of all kinds, State Street's coffee shop reflects Loucks' vision for the church and his role as a facilitator of conversations, even beyond the church's walls. From 2020 to 2023, he hosted a call-in program, "Sound Off," that aired twice a week on a local radio station. The subjects mostly involved local officeholders discussing—and taking questions about—the nuts and bolts of policymaking. In early 2024, Loucks began hosting the podcast "Plugged in La Porte," which is supported by a local economic-development organization and features conversations with local entrepreneurs, elected officials, and other leaders.

In these roles, Loucks has engaged with people from a wide variety of backgrounds and political commitments. "Sometimes people would call in [with an opinion] and I would say, 'That's a great point,'" he says of his experience as a radio host. "I wouldn't agree with them, but they made a cogent point."

Maintaining the same above-the-fray neutrality in his pastoral work has been a challenge.

"Our congregation has been engaged in political

conversations, and hasn't been afraid of them, for a long time," he says. "The problem is that people want me to take a side. I'm comfortable being political but not partisan. Because I know that in my congregation there are people on both sides of the partisan divide. And people vote in complicated ways. They've got their worldview, and I might not fully agree with it. But they have good hearts and that's where their values are.

"So we've tried to talk about how our calling, as people of faith, is not to convert across the partisan divide. It's to inform ourselves and learn to love each other in spite of our differences. People like that message in non-political times. When it becomes political, it's a harder message to swallow."

### Discovering fire (again)

Like Loucks, Beau Underwood grew up in a small town—Princeton, Illinois—and attended a small Christian college not far from home. The Disciples of Christ founded his alma mater, Eureka College, in central Illinois in 1855. Abraham Lincoln spoke there the following year. Eureka's founders were abolitionists, and it was among the first colleges in the US to enroll women on an equal basis with men.

Also like Loucks, Underwood felt called to the ministry while in college. After Eureka, he went on to earn two master's degrees from the University of Chicago—one in public policy, the other in divinity—in 2010. Then he spent several years in Washington, D.C., working on political campaigns and on the communications team for a Christian nonprofit, Sojourners.

In 2015, he accepted the position as lead pastor of a Disciples church in Missouri's state capital, Jefferson City, about two blocks from the capitol building. Most of its members had a connection to state government. In his first few years, their common faith usually trumped their political differences. But by the late 2010s, "pressures pulling us apart in the larger society" began creeping in. "It was becoming more difficult to bridge those divides that existed between congregation members, and those differences were increasingly being brought into the church," Underwood says. "People were no longer willing to sit down and engage each other inside the church."

Underwood enrolled in the University of Missouri's doctoral program in public policy while serving at the church. (He has completed the coursework and is now in the dissertation stage.) Meantime, in late 2022, Allisonville Christian offered him the position of lead pastor. He accepted and has served in that role since January 2023.

The church, founded in 1896, has been in its current location since 1957. Like State Street, it worships about 200 people each Sunday across two services—mostly in-person, with 20 to 30 people usually watching the livestream in real time.



*Allisonville Christian Church in Indianapolis, IN*

The Disciples emerged in the 1830s from attempts to unify Christians at a time when proliferating sects roiled US religious life. Disciples aimed to foster unity by rejecting creeds and holding up New Testament churches as the model for congregational practice. Today, the denomination's website describes the Disciples as "a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world."

For Allisonville Christian, the path to overcoming divisions is by practicing love. When the church published a booklet honoring its coming centennial in the early 1990s, it chose a quote from the Catholic theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin for the epigram: "Someday, after we have mastered the winds, the waves, the tides of gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love. Then for the second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire."

One way Allisonville Christian cuts against the grain, in the context of current US politics, is that it believes in a sharp separation of religious and political domains. The "fire" of Christian love might heal and transform

the world, but Christians have no business harnessing the cross to the flag to bring about that result.

Underwood and a co-author, Brian Kaylor, made this case forcefully in *Baptizing America: How Mainline Protestants Helped Build Christian Nationalism*, published in early 2024 by Chalice Press. They argue that, although Christian nationalism is often associated with right-wing politics and conservative evangelicals, mainline churches and progressive Christians have too often accepted its premises and engaged in its practices.

For example, they note that in 1952 the mainline National Council of Churches gave President Harry Truman the first copy of its new translation of the Bible. Truman responded with a letter of thanks, speculating that “if people understood the contents of this book from cover to cover, and we could get a complete understanding of it behind the Iron Curtain, there would be but one thing in this world: peace for all mankind. Maybe we can accomplish that sometime.”

Religious people “should be talking about their values and why they believe the things they believe,” Underwood says. “They should be explaining their hopes and dreams, including some that are rooted in religious beliefs. What they shouldn’t be trying to do is take over the reigns of power so they can privilege their beliefs and force their beliefs on others.

“Separation of church and state isn’t about keeping religious people out of public life. It’s about protecting these institutions from each other, so that the church can be the church and the state can be the state.”



The altar at Allisonville Christian Church — Photo courtesy of Beau Underwood

## Love wins?

In the summer of 2024, one of State Street’s founding couples told Loucks that they planned to find a church that “takes sin more seriously” and would be moving on. Loucks pressed them on what it means to take sin seriously. They declined to discuss it.

In part, Loucks sees their departure as evidence of how religious commitment has shifted in recent decades. He contrasts the current, consumer mindset with the devotion of people in the rural Methodist church where he began his ministry. Many of them had been members 60 or 70 years and had “outlasted every pastor who served there,” he says. “They were committed to each other. They helped bury each others’ spouses. They cooked dinner for each other.” They were a family. Now, members of churches like State Street are pulled in more directions. They have looser attachments to their communities, and they’re prepared to cut ties and move on without much regret.

But the loss of that couple underscores an even deeper dilemma. Local churches are navigating a national political culture that fosters division and wall-building—driven in large part by media figures and outlets that profit by prodding their audiences to fear and despise opponents. In that context, some members want leaders to take an aggressive stance against the perceived sins and flaws of the enemy—i.e., “to take sin more seriously.” So leaders feel pressured to be aggressive and outspoken in taking sides in order to keep the attendance numbers up and the offerings coming in.

For example, Loucks notes that State Street feeds up to 800 people each month through its Pax Center. “You lose a donor or two and it makes a big difference,” he says. “So there’s a lot of stress there. It would be much easier for me to not be theologically and culturally honest and just lean one way because I know I can make those people happy if I do that. But it’s not what they need and not what I need. I think we need to be challenged out of our own partisan blinders and to understand that our faith can still unite us in spite of what can seem like large differences.

“If we can’t figure this out together and learn to live with our differences, where do we go and what are we going

to do? If the church can't lead in that, who's going to? If the people committed to being like Jesus can't love everyone like Jesus did, what are we going to do?"

But what "being like Jesus" actually means has always been a fiercely contested question. The Jesus of the gospels says that the sum of the law is to love one's neighbor. He also says that he came to bring not peace but a sword and to divide families against one another. The gospels, in short, provide support for practicing love as well as building walls.

That tension is as old as Christianity itself. What is unusual about the current moment is how thoroughly the tension shapes our political life and how much hinges on how it plays out. As in the decades that gave birth to the Disciples' quest for unity and harmony—nearly two centuries ago—the stakes appear to be not only the future of Christianity but the prospect for the American experiment itself.

"We can do some really good work if we let our own story as Christians triumph over the stories we're being told by political leaders and partisan media outlets," Underwood says. "The Christian story is that we make sacrifices so that others can find life. What is the cross? It's Jesus giving himself away so that others can live. That is the heart of the Christian story.

"We know that when we choose to live and look like Jesus, it actually becomes very compelling. People say, 'Wow, they really believe that. What an inspiring way to live.' And it's attractive. So if the church could remind its members of the story and how to live out the story in ways that make it visible, we can become part of the healing of the nation. I think we have some really deep resources for overcoming this divide. But we have too many people more focused on power than on actually living like Jesus."



Group gathering at Allisonville Christian Church — Photo courtesy of Beau Underwood

The Congregations and Polarization Project is an effort to learn how congregations in Indiana are dealing with the current climate of cultural and political division. It is looking at the ways religious congregations approach many difficult topics such as racism, immigration, abortion, gender identity, gun ownership, and economic inequality. It involves pastors and congregations from across Indiana. This research is supported by a generous grant from the Lilly Endowment but the findings and conclusions are the sole responsibility of the project's researchers and may not represent the opinions of the Lilly Endowment or Indiana University.