



Congregations and Polarization

Listening Tour

THE REGION: JASPER, LAKE, LA PORTE, NEWTON, AND PORTER COUNTIES

Listening Tour Overview

The Congregations and Polarization Project is learning how a climate of political and cultural polarization affects the work of pastors and their congregations. While polarization is never only about politics, the most polarizing issues are highlighted in an election year, especially a national election year. Abortion, human sexuality, guns and crime, climate change, American foreign policy, immigration, and so on—if it's a divisive issue, the 2024 campaigns have probably shined a bright light on it.

The best way to find out how this is affecting pastors and their congregations is to go out and ask them in person—so we are. We are traveling to sites across Indiana. These include: Elkhart County, The Region (the counties nearest Chicago), the Indianapolis suburbs, downtown Indianapolis, Boswell (near the Illinois border), and Ogilville (between Columbus and Seymour). All told, we will share meals with pastors in 10 different events involving a total between 80 and 100 pastors. These meetings are in addition to the dozens of monthly focus groups we hold with our dedicated team of pastors and the dozens of interviews we conduct across the state.

For this Listening Tour, we asked certain pastors to bring together small groups of their peers to create a welcoming, secure environment where people could speak their minds.

What follows is a very brief summary of one of these ten meetings. Our project's analysis will compare and contrast the meetings to describe the situation in its full context, but each of these meetings had value in its own right and deserves its own brief recounting.

Northwest Indiana Pastors Reflect on Poverty

“Many issues you brought out are the offspring of many problems that we don't like to come to grips with: it's division in our country between haves and have-nots. The elephant in the room we don't like to talk about is poverty—it's the mother to all issues.”

It took about 10 minutes for our conversation in Highland, IN, to come around to poverty. When we first asked which issue animated their congregations, one white pastor from a more suburban area said, “It's Trump. He's the lightning rod.” But the Black pastors did not want to talk about Trump. Some would not even say his name. Pretty quickly, the conversation turned to poverty and economic inequality.

This fits with our project's previous discussions about race in Indiana. White pastors, especially white suburban pastors, may talk about Critical Race Theory or some more abstract issue, but Black pastors almost always turn the conversation to jobs, education, healthcare, policing, and economic opportunities.

Although poverty and its associated problems came up again and again, even in this room of 15 people, the conversation was mixed. An Asian-American pastor from a more suburban area said “immigration” motivated her white congregation. And while they were concerned about the effects of open borders, they had in fact accepted a non-white, female, pastor.

But the Black pastors, and the one white pastor who worked in downtown Gary, primarily focused on economic issues and the effects of poverty. Many of their ministries were focused on young people. We heard the same concerns we hear again and again on

that score: Young people do not have hope, they have lost focus, they are too enamored of their phones and their attention is too easily distracted.

We met on September 27th in an event suite owned by Jolly's Fish and Chicken, the attached restaurant in this strip mall next to a busy, four-lane, road.

Since we just held the conversation at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) the day before, it was easy to notice that the pastors at Jolly's cited biblical authority, and quoted scripture, much more often. There is no reason to think they are more religious or even more biblical in their teachings and actions, this is just part of their conversational apparatus. Also, they were among some strangers, at least compared to the Mennonites at AMBS who were pretty familiar with one another and knew what assumptions the others held.

Other issues came up too. Some of the pastors were very concerned about education and one specifically noted that Project 2025 would abolish the Department

of Education. Living in Indiana, the Black pastors saw moving even more responsibility to the state level as risky for their communities.

Human sexuality issues also came up and provided the day's only true disagreement—between two pastors who agreed that scripture forbade same-sex unions. One pastor was adamant that scripture was clear and there was no chance the Holy Spirit told a pastor to perform these weddings. The other pastor agreed about scripture but was concerned about such a degree of certainty. In his view, wars and killings happen because people are positive they are right about something they cannot truly know for sure. It was the most animated moment of any of our listening sessions.

Interestingly, the Israel and Palestine/Gaza issue that had dominated the discussion the day before did not come up at all. We already knew that polarization was specific to people and places, but our first two listening sessions, on two consecutive days, provided ultra-clear confirmation from two groups just about 50 miles apart in northern Indiana.



A group of pastors discusses timely issues regarding cultural division and how it affects their ministries and congregations. September 2024