



Congregations and Polarization

Listening Tour

KINGSWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH — AVON, INDIANA

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.

Restorationist Pastors Ponder Suburban Ministry

We held three listening sessions in Avon, Indiana, a suburb on Indianapolis's west side. These sessions drew pastors from all over central Indiana. Most, but not quite all, were somewhere in the Restorationist tradition of independent Christian churches.

For those who do not know, the Restoration Movement began in the early 1800s and is associated with the leaders Barton Stone plus Thomas and Alexander Campbell. Its goal was to bridge gaps among American religious denominations and traditions by unifying under one banner. In short, it wanted to “restore” the one true church with “no creed but Christ.” Over time, the movement separated into three distinct wings. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is a mainline, largely progressive, movement headquartered in Indianapolis. The independent Christian churches are a second wing, and the Church of Christ, which is primarily southern, is a third. Those unfamiliar with Restorationists sometimes assume that all the big, independent, Christian churches in Indiana are totally self-contained and unaffiliated, but in fact, the majority of them share pastors with similar views, trained at the same colleges.

The issues that most animate their congregations would not be a surprise to anyone studying suburban evangelicals. Abortion is high on the list and there's considerable agreement, though there is some resistance among younger female members. Sexuality is another common issue. Many who have left the United Methodist Church over its acceptance of homosexuality have moved to the Restorationist churches. The debate over homeschooling, state-funded vouchers, and budgets for public education was also a concern.

Many families in these churches choose private education or homeschooling.

Although this tradition is primarily composed of white people, especially throughout its history, the listening tour pastors named deep concerns about racism and see themselves as guides to their congregations. Their concerns about immigration run deeper than stereotypes about white, suburban, evangelical Christians might suggest. Many of the larger Restoration churches have members from more recent immigrant communities, including Latino, West African, and Southeast Asian populations. The pastors also see themselves as checks on the worst impulses of some members when it comes to demonizing immigrants or not making clear distinctions between concerns about the law and concerns about others who need help and support. These suburban pastors see things very differently from their rural counterparts when it comes to diversity.

In Indiana, suburban pastors are often torn between two worlds. While the suburbs have grown through what is often called “white flight” from the cities, they have also grown through migration from the countryside and small towns toward the city. They literally sit in between.

This comes through clearly on a topic like immigration, where the pastors work in mostly-white communities that are gradually changing through immigration, especially since most of that immigration is from countries where the citizens are Christian. But the “in between” status is seen most clearly in the issue of guns and crime. More urban suburbanites associate guns with violence; more rural suburbanites associate guns with hunting and, more abstractly, with individual freedom. This is one issue suburban pastors steer clear of because there is no obvious biblical mandate and conflict is inevitable.

Most striking about the suburban, Restorationist pastors is how poorly they fit the fire-and-brimstone stereotype of white, evangelical, pastors. Like mainline pastors, they are therapists for their flocks. They mean for their congregations to be havens, communities of welcome and acceptance in a fragmented society. They hold fast to doctrines but do not see themselves as enforcers. They are more tolerant of gender and sexual diversity, as a group, than many would expect, though most would still not perform a same-sex marriage. They are also much more interested in ethnic and racial diversity than is often pictured.



A group of Central Indiana pastors gathers to talk about the most animating issues their congregations face. Photo taken as part of a CAP Listening Tour Session at Kingsway Christian Church in October 2024.



CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF Religion & American Culture

Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture
425 University Blvd. Room 417, Indianapolis, IN 46202-5140
caproj@iu.edu | raac@iu.edu

raac.indianapolis.iu.edu/cap